

Sony WF-1000XM5 review: smaller, better-fitting earbuds are no longer outright best

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Sony's latest top-end Bluetooth earbuds are smaller, lighter and more comfortable, promising class-leading noise cancelling and quality sound – but that is no longer enough to stand out from the crowd. The WF-1000XM5 cost £259 (\$299.99/A\$419) and are the fifth generation of the firm's standard-setting earbuds, replacing the excellent XM4s from a couple of years ago. The new model is 25% smaller and 20% lighter than the last pair, making them more comfortable and easier to fit in your ear. The foam earbud tips provide a good seal in day-to-day life but a lack of stabilising wings to anchor them in place makes them less ideal for exercise. Despite the smaller size, the earbuds are rated for eight hours of playback with noise-cancelling between charges, although in testing they lasted far longer. The top of the earbud is touch-sensitive for playback and noise-cancelling controls, allowing one, two, three or four taps, plus tap and hold gestures. They also have head nodding and shaking gestures for answering or rejecting calls, and automatically pause the music when you remove them. The controls work well but you can't customise the function of each individual gesture – unlike the best rivals. Future proofed The earbuds have instant Bluetooth pairing for Android and Windows, with a button on the case for connecting to Apple and other devices. They can connect to two devices simultaneously – handy for juggling calls and watching video – and support the standard SBC and AAC audio formats with all devices. For Android, they also work with the high-quality LDAC and the new LC3 audio formats if your device supports them. Though of little use at the moment, LC3 promises to greatly improve the Bluetooth experience in the near future with compatible phones, reducing latency and improving quality, making the earbuds future-proofed. The Sonys also support hands-free Google Assistant and Amazon Alexa for voice control, and access to Spotify and a few other music apps through a gesture on the earbuds to quickly start the music. Specifications Water resistance: IPX4 (sweat) Connectivity: Bluetooth 5.3 (SBC, AAC, LDAC, LC3) Battery life: 8 hours with ANC (up to 24 hours with case) Earbud weight: 5.9g Driver size: 8.4mm Charging case weight: 39g Charging case dimensions: 64.6 x 40 x 26.5mm Case charging: USB-C, Qi wireless charging Good sound and Android spatial audio Sony's top earbuds have always been some of the best-sounding on the market. The XM5 still sound really good, with well-balanced, detailed audio and plenty of thump when required. But they are no longer leagues ahead of the competition, and are beaten by Sennheiser in some aspects. On an iPhone, they do a good job with most music genres but can lack a little energy and dynamism in some places. A few tweaks of the full equaliser in the Headphones Connect app made them a little more lively. However, they sound their best when playing music from an Android phone supporting the LDAC audio format, producing music that's a bit fuller and richer overall. A new trick for the XM5 is advanced spatial audio support with head tracking when using an Android phone,

such as a Google Pixel. It makes movies sound more realistic and immersive by putting you in the middle of the action. Sadly, the XM5 do not support Apple's version of spatial audio, so you're limited to stereo when watching videos on an iPhone. But they do support Sony's similar 360 reality audio system with compatible streaming apps such as Tidal and Amazon Music Unlimited. Very effective noise cancelling The XM5 also offer very good noise removal, quietening the outside world to a similar level much like their predecessors. However, they can't quite match the market leaders, Bose QC Earbuds 2, allowing slightly more background chatter through. They still beat most other rivals but are no longer miles ahead of Apple's AirPods Pro or Sennheiser's Momentum True Wireless 3. The transparency mode is decent, if a little bit echoey in enclosed spaces. You can tap and hold one of the earbuds to temporarily allow the outside world in, which is an excellent feature for listening out for announcements. The speak-to-chat function will pause the music and turn on transparency when the earbuds detect you are speaking. The Headphones Connect app can automatically switch between modes based on your activities and location, learning when you change things manually, such as turning on noise-cancelling when you step out the door. Sustainability Sony does not provide an expected lifespan for the batteries but they should last in excess of 500 full-charge cycles with at least 80% of original capacity. However, the earbuds are not repairable and the battery is not replaceable by Sony, ultimately making them disposable. The earbuds and case are made with recycled plastic. Sony does not operate trade-in or recycling schemes in the UK, nor does it publish environmental impact reports for headphones, but it publishes its annual sustainability reports and goals. Price The Sony WF-1000XM5 cost £259 (\$299.99/A\$419). For comparison, the Google Pixel Buds Pro cost £154, the Sennheiser Momentum True Wireless 3 cost £189, the Bose QuietComfort Earbuds 2 cost £229.95, and the Apple AirPods Pro 2 cost £249. Verdict Sony's fifth generation of its once market-leading noise-cancelling Bluetooth earbuds are its smallest, lightest and most comfortable yet. But while they still have some of the most effective noise-cancelling on the market, they are beaten by Bose. The WF-1000XM5 beat their chief rival on sound but are themselves trumped by some high-end rivals from Sennheiser. No other earbuds feature quite as complete a package as the Sonys but they are no longer leagues ahead. That makes the choice of quality earbuds much harder and it hinges more on compatibility with the phones, tablets and computers you use than on the outright performance of the headphones. For instance, while the XM5 support spatial audio with Android, they don't with Apple devices, making the AirPods Pro a better buy there. They are also not repairable and the battery is not replaceable by Sony, losing them a star. The XM5 are a great pair of noise-cancelling earbuds that don't disappoint; they're just no longer a head and shoulders above everything else as previous versions have been. Pros: Great sound and spatial audio for Android, very effective noise-cancelling, good ambient sound modes, good call quality, long battery life, comfortable, future-proofed connectivity, multipoint, full EQ, pocketable case, cross-platform app support. Cons: expensive, can't fully customise gesture controls, no extra wings to hold them in for running, beaten on noise-cancelling by Bose, no spatial audio for movies with an iPhone.