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# Audio Research

# CD3 Mk II



...making the case for a dedicated CD player, rather than a 'universal'

PRICE	£5190
SUPPLIER	Absolute Sounds Ltd
CONTACT	020 8971 3909
WEBSITE	www.audioresearch.com

It's getting harder and harder to justify the existence of CD-only players when you look around at the proliferation of DVD-A-only, SACD-only and universal players at every price point. Unless, that is, you're of the school that no player can do everything, or even two things, as well as a single-function unit. Before even looking at the revised edition of this old stager, then, it's worth deciding where you stand, and why you may want to pass on it.

Briefly, there are only two reasons for buying a multi-format machine, keeping in mind that every player of silver discs has to play conventional CDs. The first is the cost/space issue. You simply may not have the money nor the shelf real-estate for two or more players. The other reason is that you want to be able to compare SACDs, CDs and DVD-As knowing that the only differences are the formats themselves, not the players. As the latter only really applies to anoraks and reviewers let me state right now: I prefer the dedicated player per format approach. Then again, my wife gave up on me years ago.

Audio Research Corporation even issued a 'mission statement' for the CD-only CD3, that states the case succinctly. Cynics might

argue that it's mere excuse-making for not having a universal of its own, but trust me, ARC could come up with a universal if it wanted to, circa 2004. Here's what they argued two years ago and still argue today: 'What sets the CD3 apart from the so-called "combination" players" on the market – whether DVD or SACD based – is that the CD3 is designed to do one thing superbly: that is, to play back normal "redbook" music CDs, CD-R and CD-RW discs with maximum fidelity and full musical expression.'

So welcoming the Mk II version of the Audio Research CD3 took little effort. I loved its Mk I version when I reviewed it over two years ago, aside from its top-loader layout,

**Cynics might argue it's excuse-making, but trust me, Audio Research could come up with a universal if it wanted to**

and I was pleased to note that its Mk II status involves extensive re-working to make it sonically a match for SACD.

At 483 x 152 x 356mm (whd) and weighing 11.3kg (25lb), the CD3 Mk II impresses as a player with substance, like those from Wadia and Mark Levinson. Inside are massive regulated power supplies with two transformers, and the company loves to sprinkle its units liberally with designer capacitors for both supply and bypass functions. All of the circuit boards are Audio Research-engineered with layouts optimised

for lowest digital noise; the company still uses traditional hand-soldering methods. Unsurprisingly, ARC stayed with the ever-dependable Philips cast-metal, three-beam Pro 2 laser mechanism transport, which is mounted on a massive machined base for maximum rigidity and lowest jitter. Alas, the Mk II still uses a manually operated sliding lid, which must be closed for the unit to operate, unlike YBA's and some others. The unit comes with a magnetic puck to hold the disc in place. And I'm not even gonna bother complaining about top-loading because I'm too old to give a damn. Let's just say that it's enough to keep me from coveting the player.

As before, the CD3 Mk II is a standalone

CD player, which also offers both BNC and XLR digital outputs, transformer-coupled and driven by a high-current balanced line driver. This does raise the question of why anyone would buy a player of this grade to use as a transport, when its *raison d'être* is the DAC and output section. The line outputs are offered in both single-ended and balanced mode, and it was – as ever, I'm afraid – abundantly clear that balanced connection via XLR beats single-ended via phono every time. It is *not* subtle.

Audio Research also applies mechanical

damping to the mounting of key components, transport and chassis, and the player sits on tuned polymer feet to minimise vibration-induced noise. The CD3 Mk II's servos operate entirely in the digital domain; the previous transport models were hybrid designs using analogue servos that placed greater demands on power supply reserves.

As minimalist as the back panel, the front is pure Audio Research, right down to the mix of brushed silver fascia, optional black handles and two symmetrical cut-outs for the display on the left and the controls on the right. Oh, how I wish the company would return to using the layout of the CD2, where what is now the display was the CD tray! Enough – I promised I wouldn't whine about the top-loading format. The display is basic, blue-lit, and tells track, time mode and accessed functions, while the array of six buttons deals with only basic transport manoeuvres. Everything else is found on the supplied remote.

As with all ARC products, burn-in is essential. I had the thing left on 'repeat' for three weeks before I could settle down with it, and I'm convinced there's even more to be gleaned. Beyond that, the unit also takes a



long time to warm up even after a few months' burn-in so, as before, it is recommended that you place the CD3 Mk II in stand-by mode when not in use, switching it on from the remote and not from the mains.

I used the player with the McIntosh C2200/MC2102 and the Marantz SC-7S1/MA-9S1 pre/power amp combinations in balanced mode throughout, through Wilson WATT Puppy System 7 and some prototype LS3/5As. My reference was the Marantz CD12/DA12 CD player and DAC combo, also in balanced mode, and all wiring was Transparent Reference.

Here's where things get a bit sticky, because three audio gurus visited while I was assessing the CD3 Mk II. And I couldn't help but overhear their musings, including those of one who chuckled and posited, 'How clever! They've rounded off the frequency extremes to make it sound more analogue and valve-like!' At which I sighed with deep relief, because it reminded me of what I wrote about the Mk I, and confirmed that this was, indeed, a player 'voiced' for the vinyl-

Below and left: balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs, and the same options for digital outs too



lovin', two-channel-über-alles brigade.

Given that I'd spent the month prior to the ARC's arrival listening almost exclusively to vinyl, it was a relief to learn that CD in 2004 continues to narrow the gap and to improve... despite SACD. Like ARC's stereotypical client and most readers, I own a CD library that I have no intention of replacing in SACD, DVD-A, Blu-Ray or anything else that might come along. Enough is enough, and I just ain't gonna buy the complete Led Zeppelin canon again. (Not that I'll live long enough to see, say, SACD or DVD-A reissues of the Sopwith Camel's eponymous debut, or *The Best of Mickey Katz*.)

What the CD3 Mk II does is make it all smooth and silky and non-aggressive. It has width and depth and incredible bloom, and the performance improved in nearly every area on a daily basis. What I did was leave the unit on 24/7 with a mix of real music and burn-in CDs, playing the same disc each morning after 12-14 hours away from the player. It would be nice if ARC could put a few hundred hours on each machine at the factory but they don't, so consider life with the CD3 Mk II like buying a brand new car. It just gets better and better before a plateau months in the future.

Given that the machine may still have some burn-in ahead of it, I can state that, relative to the CD12 package in particular, it is a first-rank machine that will be of more appeal to those who prefer rosy euphony over clinical, obsessive detail retrieval. In this area, it was warmer, more lush and probably

less accurate than the Marantz. Voices, including the Judds' take of 'Don't Be Cruel' and Robert Plant's gorgeous 'Darkness Darkness', had less tendency toward sibilance or harshness, but brass had less punch and 'bite'. The lower registers favoured acoustic bass – I dug out my stalwart Kodo drummers for that – while synthetic music was slightly softened. But these traits are minuscule in degree, and the arbiter has to be system-related.

One can only imagine how fat (as in 'sluggish' and 'obese', not hip-hop talk) this would sound through, say, a 300B-based system. At the same time, it would add some soul to an all solid-state package. That it was so close to the never-bettered, Ken Ishiwata-hot-rodged Marantz CD12/DA12 was nothing short of revelatory. The gains over its predecessor? Judging by memory, and my notes from '02, I'd say it's more precise, the soundstage scale is even larger and more open, and the midband even more lifelike.

At £5190, it has its work cut out for it. But provided that the demonstration you hear involves a burned-in player, I can see it joining a very tiny short-list of 'final CD-only players' to consider before the OEM supplies of CD transports vanish in the wake of universal offerings. This machine is pure Audio Research: high-end, thoroughbred and utterly musical.

If only it had a drawer at the front... ■

Ken Kessler

## Technology

What's different about the Mk II? Sorry to disappoint you here, but Audio Research is playing its cards close to its chest, and much of what I wrote about the first CD3 still applies. Like the Mk I, the Mk II uses a 24/192-capable Delta-Sigma Crystal DAC, and does not upsample because Audio Research says its 'empirical research shows sonic compromise is unavoidable due to sample rate manipulation and approximating errors. The engineering focus of the CD3 is to maximise performance with the prevailing music format by keeping the overall player design simple, reliable and optimised for the one task it must accomplish.' The DAC was 'chosen for its resolution and musicality when matched with our fully differential, Class A J-FET analogue output stage.' But regarding the Mk II edition, Audio Research states that there are in total 45 parts changes and additions, '...made through the careful application of proprietary electrical, mechanical and optical modifications and treatments.'

## Features

- Classic Philips metal-chassis transport
- Top-loading with magnetic puck
- Balanced analogue outputs