

THE ULTIMATE HI-FI GUIDE

HI-FI CHOICE

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The Collection

IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI





Audio Research Reference CD7

Audio Research's first Reference-level CD player is a valve-using superstar

PRICE £8,000 CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 @ www.audioresearch.com

The Reference CD7 CD player is Audio Research's ninth Reference point and first-ever source component to carry the flag. It's a top-loader, with a manually operated draw and a milled black puck to hold the disc in place. Build quality is as solid as they come, with a thick alloy front panel, distinctive black grab handles, a simple green LED read-out, functional remote control and squidgy-feel buttons on the front panel. The player sits on five solid rubber feet and sports a combination of balanced and single-ended digital inputs and analogue outputs.

It's big and heavy, for a CD spinner. Its casework is deeper and higher than most CD players (it's the size of many pretty meaty power amps) and – because it's a top-loader – needs to be placed on the top shelf of a very solid, large equipment table. The cast Philips Pro 2 transport mechanism sits in a backbone in the case of the player. Resonance and negative vibration effects are effectively sunk into the high mass of the chassis and transport mechanism combined, making any minor rotational distortion effects notionally disappear in more or less the same manner as a heavyweight turntable platter eliminates wow and flutter by sheer mass.

The Reference CD7 uses a Crystal 24-bit DAC chipset, although this is not the sort of player that features upsampling, post-22kHz brick-wall signal reconstruction techniques or any other forms of audio space cadetry. It's just good, solid delta-sigma technology, correctly done.

The slats in the top and side of the case dissipate heat from the four 6H30 triode valves used in the output stage of the player, together with a further three 6H30s as high-voltage regulation for the power supply. This is a direct spin-off from the Reference 3 preamplifier (reviewed in last year's edition of *The Collection* – HFC 272).

This, of course, necessitates a revision in the power supply as the valves require higher than usual (for a CD player) power consumption. The player draws up to 120 watts, and even up to five watts when turned off but still connected to the juice.

SOUND QUALITY

The Reference CD7 combines the sort of musical grace that is so rare in digital replay with the sort of detailed analysis that CD is so praised for. But it's not engineered to sound like an analogue player – it's fully, wholly digital in approach, just the best of digital as it stands today.

It excels at 'detail extraction' like all good CD players should. But if this sounds like dentistry, think again. Where many players would reduce this detail to something nasty and bright, this is just detailed, like vinyl... but not vinyl-like. Instead, whatever disc you place in the silo sounds fresh and new and extremely informative.

In truth, we struggled with this player. Struggled to find anything bad to say about it, that is. It doesn't 'pretty up' the CDs it plays, but neither does it make them sound 'too' anything to compensate. And, just to get this absolutely clear, it doesn't sound all warm and 'valve-y'. It's also a really quiet-sounding CD player; not low in gain, but there is an absence of digital hash that has to be (not) heard to be fully understood. This makes the noise floor of the whole system appear lower, with music rising out of this dark noise floor.

“In short, it just sounds like you always hoped CD could sound, if CD was done right.”

The valve aspect comes in with the depth of soundstage; a good valve soundstage is often not dramatically wide of the loudspeakers, but trades this stage width for sumptuous depth. The CD7 follows down that traditional path of valve-like image depth, but not to the extent of undermining the stage width. In short, it just sounds like you always hoped CD could sound, if CD was done right.

Eight grand for a CD player – when one can be picked up for thirty quid these days – may be a tough call to argue for bargain status. But if what's important to you is the replay of music, then this player must be compared to its musical peers, not in absolute terms against lesser products that produce a digital noise simulation of music. In that context, this player should be ranked alongside the best that Wadia, Zanden and the like can offer. And Wadia, Zanden and the like all deliver products that make eight grand seem like loose change. In that respect, this player really is a bargain after all. **HFC**

Alan Sircom

See HFC 279 (May 2006) for our original review of this product