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The Audio Research Reference CD7 CD player

by Chris Binns

It's getting increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that CD technology has been undergoing a bit of a bashing from various quarters recently. With the increasing popularity of downloaded music affecting sales, digital storage getting cheaper by the minute and an increasing number of manufacturers claiming superior results with hard-disk drives, there are those that predict that the days of the silver disc are numbered. *Déjà vu*, anyone? Or possibly poetic justice – its really not that long ago that compact disc was the perpetrator and LP the victim. Only time has shown that the prophets of doom were wrong; as a quick glance at any issue of *Hi-Fi+* will testify. But lets look at the facts. Technology does indeed move at a rapid pace, but at the present time downloading is about convenience rather than quality, and moving even CD resolution type files is problematic for most of us, not so much because of the hardware but the limitations of an ancient and overstressed network. As a result (with one or two possible exceptions) most music is offered at best as a FLAC or lossless file. So while the marvels of being able to store a dozen albums on a piece of plastic the size of you fingernail is very much with us, getting them there is more of a problem, and while they are being held on a flash memory, do we yet know how stable that situation is? Then there is the fact that for a lot of us, owning the hardware complete with all the details and artwork is still an important part of the process of

listening to and enjoying music. But the real irony is that the major record companies who were so scared of losing revenue through downloading are now so enthusiastic, having eventually realised that they will no longer have to fork out for pressing costs, printing, casework, distribution and retailer mark up.

So yes, I guess that I am sticking up for the compact disc, a situation that surprises me as I have never really warmed to the format, but it scares the hell out of me to think that the quality of mainstream music could drop any lower. That and the fact that for the last few months I have been living with the Audio Research Reference 7 CD player, a machine that has very gently and seductively worked its way under my skin. No startling revelations, just a player that has considerably widened the channels between my CD collection and the desire to listen to the music within it.

The CD7 needs little or no introduction. Despite never receiving a formal review it has become something of a benchmark product, the recipient of an *Product Of The Year* award last year and part of a system review in issue number 54. RG is a keen advocate and seems reluctant to let it stray too far from his listening room. It looks much like any other Audio research product, brushed aluminium front panel (double thickness as it is part of the reference range) with large handles, black casework and an air of functionality rather than designed aesthetics, an identity that has served

the company well for over thirty years. The CD transport is accessed via a sliding panel on the top and utilises a magnetic puck to secure the disc in place. The old-fashioned looking display and basic functions occupy two recesses in the front panel. Like the current pre-amps, I find the plastic switch panel a bit cheap and unrefined by comparison to the rest of the machine; it would be nice to have something a bit more tactile and elegant, but I guess I am being picky as nobody else seems to agree with me.

With an existing CD player in the shape of the CD3 Mk. II, it was the development of the Ref 3 pre-amplifier that was to be the major influence in the conception of the CD7, in particular the output stage and associated power supply. By incorporating much of the improved circuitry developed for the flagship line-stage into their existing player, ARC felt that not only was the performance elevated to such an extent that the improvement warranted a new model, but that it was worthy of joining the ranks of their reference range, a privilege indeed. So the '7 retains the Philips Pro 2 disc transport, a heavy unit built on a cast chassis that goes against the current trend for lightweight, plastic CD-ROM mechanisms that rattle around at high speed. A lot of care has gone into controlling and dissipating the unwanted vibration from the mechanism and this accounts in no small part for the sheer mass of the machine; it feels

► more like a power amp than a CD player when you pick it up. Conversion is carried out by a Crystal 24 bit DAC which feeds the gain stage lifted from the Ref 3. Designed around the now familiar Russian 6H30 double triode, the discovery of this valve has had a major influence on the circuit topology of many recent Audio Research products and no less than seven are incorporated into the Ref 7, two per channel form the active electronics while the remaining three go to make up the tightly regulated HT supply. ARC are also making a big deal about the capacitors used in this stage. A swift glance inside the machine reveals the presence of a lot of high grade components and, as you would expect, build quality is to a suitably high standard. Both analogue and digital outputs are provided, and you have the option of balanced and single ended via RCA's, XLR's and a 75Ohm BNC.

I've lived (occasionally reluctantly!) with quite a few CD players over the last 20 years, of which a surprising number have featured valves in part or all of their analogue stages. Often they've been accompanied by a suggestion that, by sounding soft and rounded their incorporation helps to balance out or ameliorate some of the sins committed by digital processing. It's not a view to which I subscribe; instead they seem to mask or undermine the one or two things that CD does well. Good audio circuitry should be just that, regardless of the devices used, and while ARC have always been a champion of thermionic technology, they are not afraid to use FET's or transistors where appropriate to achieve a better result. So the inclusion of valves in the Ref 7 is not just an after thought or gimmick,

and a quick listen to the CD3 that is essentially the same machine but without the analogue refinement serves to highlight the difference.

The Issue 54 system in which I first reviewed the CD7 was designed to balance the performance of CD and vinyl, and included the impressive Kuzma Stabi Reference with a Triplanar VII and Lyra Skala cartridge. One of my comments at the time was that the difference

unprecedented resolution of the colour and texture of instruments. But it is the sound (or more properly, the lack of it) in between the playing, the structural aspects to music, that suggests a more complete and coherent picture of what is going on, one that's more akin to the way good vinyl replay does things.

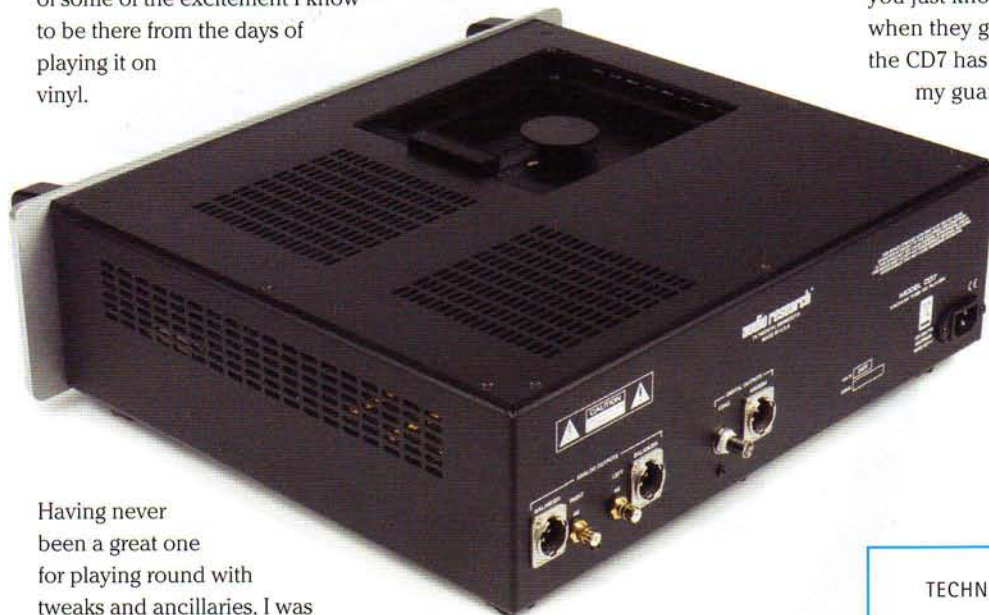


between analogue and digital replay was not as great as I'd expected it to be, which considering the capabilities of the LP front-end says a lot about what the Audio Research does well. Several months and a lot of discs down the line I am still of the same opinion, and it's as good a place as any to start when describing the sound of the CD7. This player manages to reproduce more of the air and space in a good recording than the majority of players that I have heard, with the result that music sounds less processed and thus more accessible. But it is not about laying an analogue sheen over the music, rounding off corners or taking the edge away - far from it. The ARC seems to offer

I have had the pleasure of using the CD7 with a considerable range of gear, but probably the longest standing set up involved the Revel Salon II's driven by the Goldmund Telos 200 power amps and the Ayre K1Xe pre. After some deliberation, I ended up (unusually) using the balanced outputs from the ARC, which in this particular combination sounded just a little more focused, at the risk of trading a touch of flow and expressiveness.

In terms of character, the CD7 is essentially neutral, but its range of tonal colour and harmonic development mean that it tends toward the rich and full bodied rather than lean and emaciated, while the top end is beautifully sweet and capable of real articulation where required. While it is easy to be beguiled by delicate sounds being reproduced with great clarity and ►

► expressiveness, dynamically the ARC is capable of moving pretty fast when the material demands it, from the subtle picking of acoustic instruments through to the raw energy of say *The Who – live at Leeds*. My only caveat is that with recordings such as this I occasionally felt that the extreme bottom end lacked a bit of impact compared to the rest of the spectrum, robbing the performance of some of the excitement I know to be there from the days of playing it on vinyl.




Having never been a great one for playing round with tweaks and ancillaries, I was a little dubious when RG suggested that I try the platform specifically designed for the CD7 by SRA. Maybe it's the combination of valves (which are inherently susceptible to vibration) and the mechanics of the transport in the same box, but the support produced a considerable benefit, more than I had anticipated. It sounded, as if the microphone in the bass drum had suddenly been (re-)positioned correctly, as opposed to half way down the hall, and the timing at the bottom end clicked into focus with everything else. The big surprise however, was the vast improvement in imaging and the way in which the music projected away from the loudspeakers; something that I'd thought CD players didn't do particularly well. So, one more assumption banished.

Another vital area in which the Audio Research excels is its even-handedness when it comes to recording quality.

It always seems to unearth the musical strengths of any disc – even truly crap sounding commercial releases, including a lot of so-called re-masters which actually challenge the use of the "M"-word and make me question my chosen career path.

By now you'll have figured out that this player exposes and dismisses preconceptions and prejudice with equal ease. As someone who grew up with analogue replay, I sometimes wonder whether it's fair or even sensible to always be comparing compact disc with records? I still believe that good analogue recording and replay is better at capturing the essence of a performance, what music is really about. That superiority depends on the specific strengths and capabilities of the format; the way it is able to present the information. Yet the ARC CD7 closes the gap significantly, precisely by doing fundamental things as well as a good record player, while still retaining the strengths of digital replay. Can it just be the addition of

that sophisticated valve output stage? Whatever the reason it's delivered considerably greater pleasure from my CD collection than anything else I've used. In fact, the CD7 sounds a lot like music, which means that it doesn't sound like either a CD player or a record deck, the mark of a really outstanding product. As a reviewer there are some products (fewer than you might think) that you just know you're going to miss when they go. In the last few months the CD7 has snuck so far under my guard that parting with it is going to be quite a wrench... 

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	CD player with valve output stage
Analogue Outputs:	1pr balanced XLR (5.4V) 1pr single-ended RCA (2.7V)
Output impedance:	660 Ohms (balanced) 330 Ohms (single-ended)
Digital outputs:	1x 110 Ohms AES/EBU XLR 1x 75 Ohms SPDIF BNC
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 134 x 390mm
Weight:	14.8 Kg
Price:	£7498

UK Distributor:
Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
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Manufacturer:
Audio Research Corporation
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