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Dual delight

Words like 'bold' and 'dynamic' spring to Alvin Gold's mind when he auditions this magic combo

PRODUCT Micromega CD-20 and IA-100

TYPE CD player and integrated amplifier

PRICE £1,249 (CD-20); £1,125 (IA-100)

KEY FEATURES (CD-20) Size (WxHxD): 43x6.9x26cm

Weight: 4.5kg Outputs: 1x digital, 1x analogue
 Digital-to-analogue converter IC (IA-100) Size (WxHxD): 43x6.9x29cm Weight: 7.0kg Inputs: 5x line level, MM phono Outputs: Headphone Rated power: 100 watts (four ohms)

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A CD player and integrated amplifier combo that supports a wide range of music sources and performs in a vivid and dynamic fashion might easily cause ripples among the competition. But coupled with their compact dimensions, reasonable pricing and Gallic charms, Micromega's CD-20 and IA-100 do just that... and more. Curiously, at first sight, both appear to be relatively straightforward in design and operation and, unusually with this class of product, both are built entirely in France, rather than in the Far East. They also include some intriguing internal tweaks that definitely distinguish them from the crowd.

EASY ON THE EYE

The first thing you will notice when you decant them from their boxes is how long and slender they both are – slimline if you prefer. Yet despite this they're no lightweights. The amplifier case is made from galvanised steel, though the fascia is aluminium. The case structure of the CD-20 is mainly anodised aluminium. But, take a look through the perforated lid of the amplifier

and you'll see a massive heatsink extrusion to keep the output devices street legal. A system handset is supplied (with the IA-100 amplifier), but a dedicated CD player remote is available as an optional extra.

The main control's principal role is volume, using a digital rotary encoder calibrated by a micro-controller, but it can also be used to

speed to be specified and the display to be switched off. The player is also CD Text-enabled, but the display can be defeated, and so can the digital output. The player comes with a system remote control, but its ergonomics are messy and it is excessively button-bound. It would be good to see this improved in due course – or sooner.

“...the CD-20 and IA-100 are able to mould themselves to the contours of various types of music without underplaying...”

set channel balance and headphone volume independently of the main power setting. The rear panel socketry is fully insulated from the case structure, preventing ground loops, while the power is supplied from a detachable IEC lead, which can be replaced for one that auditions better.

PERFECT DISPLAY

The IA100 amplifier is equipped with a 10-digit, blue dot-matrix display, as well as six control keys to access the gold-plated inputs. These include five line level inputs, one of which is labelled iPod/iDok (sic) and an MM phono input. In addition, the amplifier has a tape monitor loop and a processor loop, where the volume level is controlled by an external processor. There is even a subwoofer input and usefully the amplifier can be used to power a 2.1-channel speaker system, with separate control over the subwoofer.

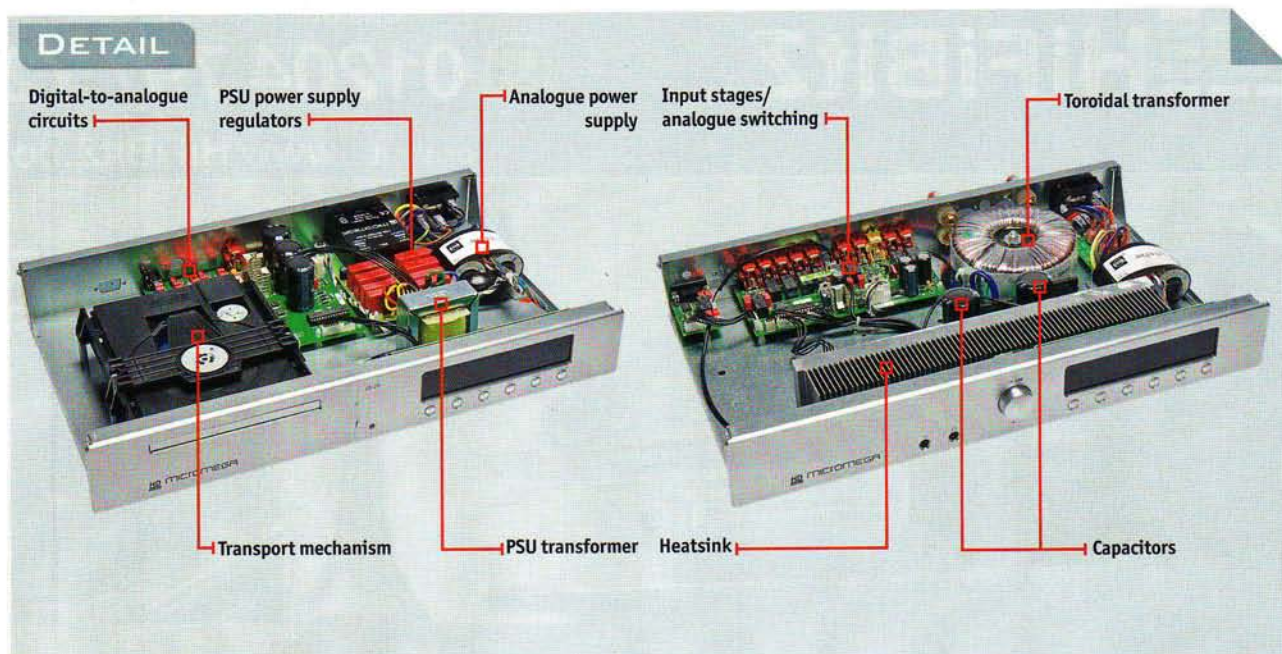
The CD player also has a 10-digit display with a control system that allows the drawer

These two components are one step up from Micromega's CD-10 CD player (reviewed in HFC 328) and its IA-60 amplifier. Enhancements in the CD player being the ACTS power supply, which has been optimised on the premise that the electromagnetic environment that CD players have to live in is increasingly adverse. An example of this Micromega points to the use of switch-mode PSUs in computers, televisions, DVD players and satellite receivers, all of which can generate a lot of noise.

The CD player works at a maximum output of 2V RMS, which means that a 16-bit design is required to operate down to the 30 microvolt level – a very tiny signal level, which is all too readily disturbed by externally applied interference.

The player's mechanism is teamed with a Philips SAA78247 controller and Micromega proprietary firmware and error correction. The D/A converter is an Analogue Devices AD1583 Delta Sigma design, operated in





■ differential mode with strong rejection of common-mode noise – a similar idea is used in the IA-100's amplifier power supply. The converter includes eight times oversampling of the 44.1kHz input signal, with a gentle third order Bessel low pass filter on the output.

The drive specified for the CD20 uses DVD mechanisms from either Sony or Sanyo, because, as the maker points out, they are readily available, of very high-quality and totally reliable. This is also by virtue of the fact that they are mass produced and, for this reason, under strict quality control.

R-CORE DESIGN

Technically, easily the most striking feature of the IA-100 amplifier is its use of two transformers. A relatively massive toroid for the power section was chosen because it is inherently quiet and can deliver a lot of power from compact dimensions. An R-Core transformer is specified for the preamp.

For those who are unfamiliar with such things, the R-Core transformers were popularised by Panasonic's Technics division. They have a much narrower operating bandwidth than toroids, which is exploited here to inhibit interactions between different areas of the circuit. Similar optimisation went into other elements of the power supply, including the bridge rectifier (which is rated at 25 amps continuous and 200 amps peak) and the detailed design of the phono input.

The main transformer in the CD player is an R-core design, chosen for a similar reason an R-core is used in the preamp section of the IA-100. Again, it has a relatively narrow operating bandwidth, which makes it easier to isolate the power supply from the servo and decode circuits.

WARMTH AND GRACE

At first sight, the CD-20 CD player appears to be quite similar to the CD-10. There is a comparable warmth and grace as well as a perceptibly and attractively lightweight quality to the sound (that I had already experienced from its junior sibling) but at the same time the player sounds well defined and disciplined. What I don't like about the CD-20 –and again this is a reprise of the CD-10 story – is that it is not an SACD player.

While I realise that this will be of no particular importance to some readers there are many like myself with a strong interest in acoustic material which benefits disproportionately from high-res coding. So no SACD facility is a real loss.

On the other hand, the amplifier's performance exceeds its price tag. In fact, it works surprisingly well driving loudspeakers like the Mordaunt Short Performance 6LE, a product that's not especially power-hungry, but is qualitatively demanding. On a play-through of the Red Book layer of Mahler's Ninth, performed by the Bamberger Symphony under Jonathon Nott, both Micromegas acquitted themselves extremely well, in particular in the electric Rondo Burlesque (3rd movement). Similarly, the combination sounds open and dynamic in the Beethoven string quartet No 10 Opus 74 from the Tokyo Quartet and the warm and cosy elegance of Madeline Peyroux's voice in *I'm all right* from *Half the Perfect World* album.

The impression given by these two Micromega components is bold, dynamic and confident, each offering a performance with clean, open textures. Both the CD-20 and the IA-100 are able to mould themselves to the contours of various types of music without underplaying the passions and tensions of each. In many ways the

amplifier gives the impression of being the better half of the two. It generally sounds more than routinely comfortable in its own skin, but notwithstanding any limitations, the CD player is also an elegantly impressive performer.

Having previously heard these products briefly at a Paris hi-fi dealership, I was already aware of just how good they were and by the end of this review period I really didn't want to relinquish them.

But if I was to choose, the amplifier is the one I would probably go for, partly because the CD player lacks that all-important (to me at least) SACD facility. At the end of the day, it's the amplifier that sounds more grown up, complete and expressive. **HFC**

VERDICT - CD-20

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



CONCLUSION

Well made and purposeful, articulate and civilised sound. No SACD, unfortunately, just CD replay only. But, without doubt one of the better mainstream players.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE



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VERDICT - IA-100

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VALUE



CONCLUSION

Bold, yet civilised sound with real stature. Poorly designed remote control. Fast and fluid performer brings a touch of panache to its role.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE



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