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Copland

CDA 825

Five years in the making and totally redesigned, this toploader hits the bullseye

£4,287

Absolute Sounds

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For its CDA 825 CD player, Copland has gone back to the drawing board and come up with a fresh machine – top loading and incorporating a new type of filter utilising psycho-acoustic findings as the basis for its operation.

Its styling is classic Scandinavian cool: no clutter nor inscriptions, save for the laser-cut lettering. This, combined with the circular top cover, makes it the best bit of design we've seen in ages. But then Copland has a reputation for making high-quality, competitively priced audio electronics that often use valves alongside transistors. So when it brings a new CD player like the 825 to the market, we're always interested. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen very often: the last time was the award winning CDA 823, five years ago.

Copland has not just put the building blocks of the CDA 823 into a more contemporary case – it has totally redesigned the player from the ground up. The chassis has been optimised to isolate the player from the low-frequency vibrations produced by loudspeakers. Tap the top and it doesn't seem all that solid, but this is because the damping system isn't designed for high-frequency resonance and doesn't use rubber or plastic. Instead, it has carefully placed fixings which tune out the sort of resonances it has to deal with in real life.

On the digital to analogue conversion front, Copland has used Wolfson's well-regarded WM8741 24-bit/192kHz converter chips with two in each channel. This dual-differential approach produces a balanced output that is designed to eliminate noise. It's a tried and tested route in high-end digital sources that offers a benefit, whether you use the single-ended or balanced outputs.

Going against the growing trend for offering digital inputs like USB on modern players, Copland has produced a dedicated CD spinner with only outputs, analogue and digital. It is therefore as committed to its task as the clarity of casework design would suggest and you have to wonder whether those into PC audio would be in the market for a player at this price.

SOUND QUALITY

Understated in appearance and sound, this is a neutral and undemonstrative machine. Yet it becomes apparent after a few tracks that it has a hard to define appeal that stops you from pressing the next track button, let alone Stop or Pause. A few more tracks and we realise that the appeal lies in what is absent rather than present, namely that this CD player doesn't exhibit grain or glare, something that the vast majority of digital sources produce when you play piano or female vocals. This is some revelation and we can't help thinking that it has something to do with the apodising filter that set out to eliminate a flaw in digital systems that has not been tackled before. Whatever it is, it works like a dream. We stop thinking why doesn't this player sound super transparent and turn our attention to how we can get the system to be more revealing. One question is why did PMC have to take back its fact.8 speakers? Their incredible openness would have revelled in the calmness of presentation from the Copland.

The transparency is, to an extent, a factor of warm-up: two or three hours are not enough and a weekend later there is no shortage of resolution on offer. The player doesn't have a bright, super-clean sound but it reveals an awful lot of harmonic detail right across the band – it's more of an analogue balance in fact. Not warm or in any way smoothed off in the mid or treble but devoid of digital crispness, in practice this means that small bells have a pure, shiny ring to them and bass drums have weight and power while the midband lets you hear right into the mix.

With a great recording such as Tord Gustavsen's *The Ground*, this means that the speakers disappear and let the musicians (or their sound) inhabit the room in a very solid fashion. It brings out the shimmer of the cymbals, the woody resonance of the double bass, and the body and mass of the piano to spectacular effect. In fact, we don't recall hearing this sound being so evocative of the live event. If only more discs were recorded this well. Keith Jarrett's *Testament* disc is also

“Reveals just how enthralling your music collection really can be”

gratifying, the solidity of the piano and the stage it's sitting on is palpable thanks to the Copland's extraordinary control and speed in the bass.

Even the less spectacular discs don't disappoint, they may not offer the same degree of realism but they have more going on in the mix than is usually apparent. Thanks to the aforementioned lack of grain you can play louder too, so the quality of musicianship is even more entrancing.

It doesn't seem like a fast player in the manner of a Rega or Naim, but the bass is extremely well defined, yet delivered in a totally effortless fashion. There's no undue emphasis of leading edges, which is not something you often encounter in audio sources of any persuasion. Even at sensible levels, the bass has a weight and solidity that is thrilling. You may not be a bass head now, but once you discover what's lurking on your favourite discs I guarantee that you will be in future.

At the same time as informing your head, this Copland lets the music play with your heart and it's a thrilling experience. The last time we encountered that sensation was with an £18,000 two-box EMM Labs, which puts things in context. Don't buy this expecting an instant hit that will fade over time, buy it to find out just how enthralling your music collection is. You don't need a better reason than that.

Jason **Kennedy**

