

Upmarket

Gary Pearce puts a selection of high-end CD players through their paces, and asks: what price quality?



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It's getting increasingly difficult to sell CD players these days. With the meteoric rise of DVD and the appearance of Hi-Res formats such as DVD Audio and SACD, the good old 16-bit CD would appear to have a less than rosy future.

Scan the catalogues of many major hi-fi companies and you'll see a diminishing number of models available. Home theatre and portable audio is where it's at these days, it seems.

But CD is far from finished. On test here are five high-end CD spinners from specialist manufacturers with only one aim: to reproduce exactly what is contained on the disc, and nothing else. You see, there is still huge potential within the red-book standard for excellent sound quality, as the CD players examined here will demonstrate.

It's rather ironic that in the early 1980s the Dutch electronics giant Philips proclaimed 'Perfect Sound Forever': this was the marketing slogan used to launch the CD format. CD has had its detractors over the years, describing it variously as 'soulless', 'digital' and 'unnatural', but in the last ten years or so it has come

of age as a format with more than acceptable sound quality.

So bearing in mind the countless millions of compact discs out there in peoples' homes, and that new CDs are still being produced, is there a market for CD-only players that cost \$5k plus? Remember there is no SACD/DVD Audio or MP3 playback from these devices, just good old CD playback, and that can also be obtained from a DVD player. Also, we have to take into account the rise of downloadable music, where no disc software at all is needed, just a broadband internet connection and a credit card.

But back to the test: knowing that the least expensive player in this test costs \$5000, the term 'Value for money' is definitely not going to be used!

Quality rarely comes cheap, this is true whether we're talking about cars, audio, or just about anything you'd care to mention.

So let's find out what \$5000-\$10,000 will do for our CD listening enjoyment.



Italian Masterpiece

BlueNote Stibbert Mk2 Tube Reference CD player \$5607

BlueNote is an Italian manufacturer with a difference: formed by 13 musicians/engineers/artisans in 1985, they soon began to import audio from the United States while manufacturing their own range of accessories. This started an evolution, and now in 2005 the company is a fully-fledged manufacturer of high fidelity products, from amplifiers to turntables, tonearms and cartridges, plus loudspeakers - and CD players.

So to the player on test here, the Stibbert Mk2 Tube Reference. A dramatic statement in Italian flair, the Stibbert is a luscious blend of aluminium and acrylic, with the drive actually attached to an overhead plinth, itself shaped like an F1 Ferrari steering wheel! This anti-vibration plinth sits on four custom sprung brass bars with aluminium covers and adjustable spiked feet. At the base is a bottom plinth in clear acrylic, adding mass and elegance to the proceedings.

To say the appearance is stunning would be an understatement, and visitors to my home gasped in admiration at my new 'acquisition'.

To prove that the Stibbert isn't just a pretty face, plenty of state of the art technology has been implemented: 24-bit/192Khz D/A converters are used, along with BlueNote's proprietary 'Zero-Clock' digital filter. BlueNote has paid careful attention to the power supply of the Stibbert, with the company's own 'Electro-Power' voltage supply self checking itself 50 times per minute. Finally, this incarnation of the Stibbert is the Tube Reference, with a fine tube output stage, driven by a pair of NOS 6922s (JAN Philips). A rather plain remote control is supplied and the front panel has the usual buttons, albeit laid out with considerable Italian style. BlueNote also includes a felt cover with the Stibbert, so you can protect your precious investment. I found it extremely difficult to fault this player in any area of its considerable musical prowess, whether blasting out A

Perfect Circle or the soothing acoustic guitar of Charlie Haden & Pat Metheny. Vocals were sweet and natural, while the bass had fantastic control and grip. The midrange was explicit and detailed, with an almost holographic nature to the sound quality. There was considerable realism to the sound on offer with instruments having real timbre and body. Complex music held no fears for the Stibbert either; Holst's *The Planets* was revealed with exquisite detail and drama. Dynamics were another forte of the Stibbert, with attack and tension matched only by the Naim CDX2 player also on test here. Involving, analytical, detailed, realistic and musical - have I left anything out?

This was one of those times where art and technology combines to make something really special. It not only looks like an Italian masterpiece, it sounds like one as well. At the asking price I consider the Stibbert Tube Reference to be an absolutely outstanding CD player, and one that definitely needs to be seen as well as heard. Gorgeous.



- +** A beautiful music maker
- Nothing bar the asking price
- =** Worth every penny

Key Features

- 24 bit/192 Khz D/A Converter
- Tube output stage
- Electro-Power' voltage supply
- Proprietary 'Zero-Clock' digital filter
- Frequency Response 4Hz-44Khz
- 1 coaxial digital output
- Balanced XLR analogue outputs
- Dimensions W x H x D 550 x 250 x 450mm
- Weight - 12kg

CONTACT
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"Involving, analytical, detailed, realistic and musical - have I left anything out?"



The Conclusion

CD is definitely alive and kicking in 2005; I was impressed with all the contenders in this super-test. Bear in mind that sound is very subjective, and any of these CD players will give a different result in a different system. In all fairness, none of the players under examination here put a foot wrong at all:

they just have their own individual sonic signatures that suit some systems better than others.

Hi-fi is not a place for political correctness, and I must admit I do have a favourite. But before we get to that, let's have a quick overview of each player.

Audionote



Arcam



Audionote CDT 1 / DAC 1.1 MK2.

Wonderful, warm, realistic and unfatiguing sound quality, but slightly soft in dynamics. Some aesthetic issues.

Arcam's FMJ CD36.

An excellent all rounder, it's the value pick in this test with a great organic sound quality that puts it up with the big boys.

Wadia 302.

A fantastic package, upgradeable and built to last. Great with acoustic instruments, but a slight veiling of fine detail in my test.

Wadia



Naim



Naim CDX2.

The most expensive here, but the price is justifiable with a wonderful performance regardless of musical genre.

And the winner?

The Bluenote Stibbert Mk2 Improved Tube Reference. I loved this player, it looks fantastic and the sound quality with every disc thrown at it was just mesmerising. Like a Ferrari Enzo, this thoroughbred isn't meant to be locked up in your garage - it demands to be shown off and driven. Excellent!

Bluenote

