



Silver dream machine

Chris Ward samples the latest silver disc spinner from EAR Yoshino and discovers it has some tricks up its sleeve

As an audio format, CD has fallen from favour in some circles as vinyl appears to offer more analogue flow, and hi-res digital files bring greater dynamic range and realism. Yet, when I look at my music collection, it is mostly on compact discs collected over the past 30 years with plenty of life left in them yet. EAR Yoshino understands that making a legacy format sound better can be a smart business move, and its Acute 4 transport (£3,120) and DAC 4 (£4,800) make up a masterful two-box combo. But what about those that would prefer a single svelte box that costs less? Enter the newly revised Acute Classic valve CD player and DAC.

Construction is superb and the hefty weight underlines there are some serious transformers on board. The understated steel bodywork says stealth bomber, but the glorious brass fascia with hand-polished chrome finish sparkles like a new Bentley. Connecting the player to my reference Audion Golden Night 300B monoblocks via Black Rhodium Sonata VS-1 (HFC 398) interconnects, I'm ready to power up. The button glows red initially, turning soft orange when fully powered up. A matching orange matrix display cycles from an EAR Yoshino logo to standby mode while awaiting an input.

The slim disc-loading drawer appears a little flimsy for a high-end player, but operates smoothly and

DETAILS

PRODUCT
EAR Yoshino Acute Classic

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Valve CD player/DAC

WEIGHT
8kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
435 x 65 x 285mm

FEATURES
• 2x ECC88 valves
• Inputs: 1x S/PDIF up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM; 1x Toslink up to 24/88 PCM; 1x USB 2.0 up to 24/192 PCM
• Outputs: 1x stereo RCA; 1x balanced XLRs; 6.35mm headphone socket

DISTRIBUTOR
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with precision. Push button controls below the drawer operate traditional eject/close, stop, play/pause, skip back and forwards functions as well as 'source' – EAR's first trick up its sleeve. This is no ordinary CD player, it's a CD player with a DAC that accepts extra digital inputs.

Around the back, balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA analogue outputs are joined by coaxial, Toslink optical and USB 2.0 digital inputs enabling you to feed digital signals from a streamer, portable player, transport or computer to the Wolfson WM8741 DAC. Pushing the source button toggles through these extra inputs, performing simple digital preamp duties. This brings me to the second trick up EAR's sleeve. The chrome knob on the fascia is an analogue volume control meaning you can plug the player directly into power amps or active speakers. The traditional benefit of an analogue potentiometer over a digital volume control is that you won't be truncating digital bits to reduce signal gain. EAR employs a pair of ECC88 valves and some rather special hand-wound transformers claimed to achieve exceptionally good signal to noise level ratios.

While £4,800 is a healthy amount to pay for a CD player, when you add in an accessible DAC, a valve preamp and headphone-driving abilities all controlled via an elegant, functional

remote, the price quickly becomes far better value. As one-box solutions go, this is a smart one. It doesn't try to shoe horn in meaty power amplification or a delicate phono stage, but it has mostly everything else sorted in a very well designed and well built package.

Sound quality

Playing Kate Rusby's *No Names* on CD provides a sublime start. Plucked guitar strings ring sweetly and her clean voice presses forward convincingly out of the plane of the speakers with real body yet also a lovely airiness.

The Acute Classic's hefty weight hints at its prowess

Her fragile vibrato is communicated with superb clarity and sensitivity while vocals are conveyed with lifelike warmth and masses of insight. It's easy to imagine a valve section may add some silkiness, but possibly at the expense of some resolving detail or attack, but not here. The noise floor feels vanishingly low and tiny emotional nuances in the voice come through beautifully. A double bass joins the melody and low tones are especially deep, dark and supple. I sometimes find bass is CD's weak suit, but this feels extremely convincing and far more analogue. Deep notes have a distinct start but they also bloom mellifluously, feeling like a real wooden instrument more than a simple tone. The entrance of Roddy Woombles' vocal is so clean, clear and present in the room it catches me off guard. CD can often seem to present a smaller, more compressed image than analogue or hi-res digital, but the Acute Classic does a fine job of making the performance feel more expansive and relaxed, able to breathe, across a very wide, deep and highly three-dimensional soundstage. The sound quality has just that little bit more light, shade and texture than I expect from CD and more sensitivity and ability to communicate the emotional qualities in a performance. Operating the CD player by remote, the display is particularly helpful as it provides the track number, pause, play and stop with very clear numerals and symbols, plenty large enough to be very legible from the other side of my room. The remote control is very well made and thought through, so adjusting tracks, inputs and the motorised volume control is achieved seamlessly.

Spinning Boris Blank's *Electrified* demonstrates that the Acute Classic needn't be mild mannered, and tubes

certainly don't mean pipe and slippers. I use the elegantly sculpted metal remote to wind up the motorised volume control and Blank's taut, electrified pulses slice through my listening room while seismic bass drones sink through the floor. Some players may exhibit slightly more snap with sharper edges, but the EAR excels in painting the entire musical picture with utter conviction and with a characteristic flow that seems to come with valves. Ultra-deep bass is layered with fizzing synths, staccato percussion, robotic vocals and infectious wah wah guitar to add up to a completely compelling and propulsive track that motors along with real verve and dynamism.

I decide to swap out my Audion 300B valve amplification for a much cherished and newly refurbished Adcom solid-state power amplifier and replay the same track. Grip on my reference Cadence Arca hybrid

It excels at taking modest digital files and turning them into refined music

electrostatic speakers increases, and bass sharpens up, possibly suiting this type of music more. The player, however, still exhibits all the same transparency and sensitive prowess around musical layering, deep soundstage, rich supple bass, clean midband and sweet treble. So, whether you have a preference for transistor power or valve amplification, you will not be disappointed. For me, the Acute Classic feeding valve power gives the greatest refinement and dreamy vocals, but the player is so refined that feeding solid-state power

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

Tim de Paravicini

Founder & designer, EAR Yoshino



CW: Why did you decide to develop a CD player, DAC and valve preamp smart solution?

TDP: We wanted to design a better digital hub for your hi-fi. We're cautious of the fast changing nature of digital media and my core values are to create timeless products that last. The very nature of CD means it is a set standard that cannot be evolved but this DAC enables a wide range of digital sources, whatever they may be in the future.

Can you explain a bit more about your engineering ethos?

I strip everything down to where problems lie and then find a better way. I'm seeking to create the purest and simplest outputs from the DAC and galvanically isolate signals from the main line amplifier using my studio style bridging transformers. I use a passive LC filter to remove digital noise above 50kHz for cleaner audio and to reduce stress on power amplifiers and tweeters. I don't like the graininess of digital volume controls, so I use an analogue volume control to feed my valve line amp.

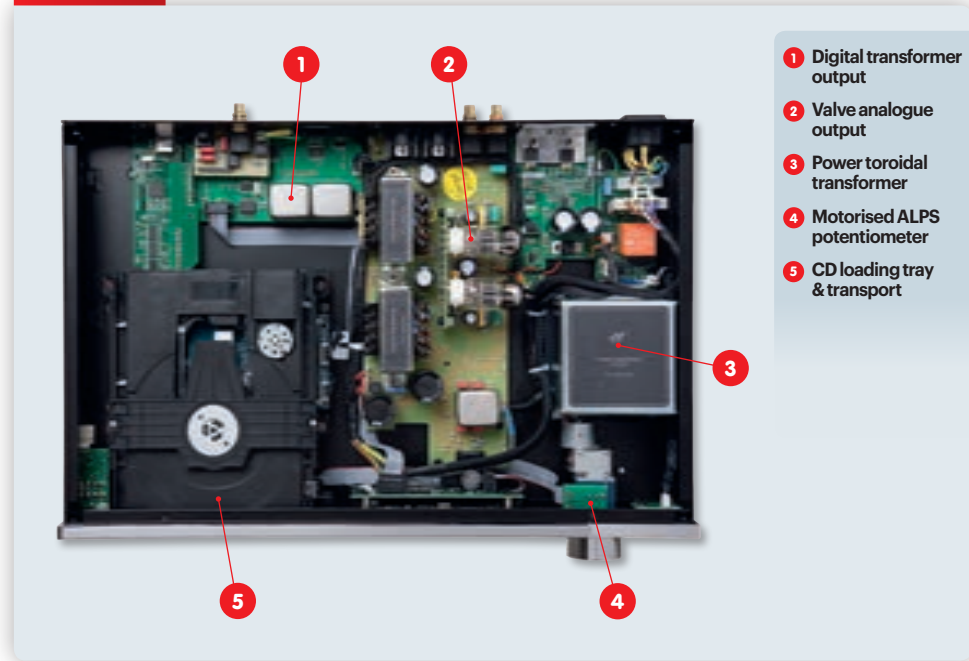
How do you use valves to define sound quality?

The use of the ECC88 in itself does not define the sound. A valve is a valve, but the topology and use of that valve is what's important. I spent a lot of time developing a line level amplifier for professional users and designed an output transformer that allowed me to use modest voltages and maximise the output of the ECC88 with the capability to drive 600ohm loads over a very wide band up to plus 26dB.

How do you maintain standards?

Everything is closely inspected before being accepted. Most of our suppliers are within 50 miles, which helps communication and strong relationships. We have worked with many of our suppliers for over 20 years. Our production staff is seriously experienced with an average of 10+ years working for EAR Yoshino. After initial testing, our products are also burned in for 3 days before final quality testing.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Digital transformer output
- 2 Valve analogue output
- 3 Power toroidal transformer
- 4 Motorised ALPS potentiometer
- 5 CD loading tray & transport

HOW IT COMPARES

Rega's Isis CD player (£6,125) also employs valves and the Rega house sound has strong musicality. Similarly, Audio Note's CD-3.1x/II (£4,257) uses ECC88 valves to create a silky performance. EAR's Acute Classic has more digital inputs and preamp functionality, but each player deserves an audition. Luxman's D-06u CD/SACD player (£5,995) is a beautifully built and refined player that can play DSD files, so may be a bit more futureproof, but the simplicity of the EAR player with its analogue volume control and valve magic is highly addictive. There are very few single box propositions that offer its poise, refinement and functionality.

amplifiers could yield the perfect marriage for your musical choices.

I boot up iTunes and connect my MacBook Pro directly to the back of the Acute Classic via The Chord Company's SilverPlus USB cable (HFC 407). Selecting the USB source, the player instantly locks on to the Mac output. DACs don't always play ball, but this is as simple as pie. Indeed it's refreshing that I'm not wasting time in endless settings menus or downloading bespoke software. I play a 24/96 recording of Arnesen's *Magnificat, Et Misericordia*, performed by the Trondheim Soloists and Nidaros Cathedral Girls' Choir. This piece of choral music is particularly lush so I expect any shortcomings in this file to be laid bare, but instead the opening strings sound sweet and clean and the clear timbre of the soloist soars high above the rich, flowing orchestra. Tiny inflections in the lead vocal are beautifully captured without ever sounding harsh or shrill against the rising power of the female choir. I'm playing a simple file via iTunes and yet this performance truly makes the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. The EAR Acute Classic certainly seems to excel at taking relatively modest digital files and turning them into refined music.

Conclusion

This superbly built valve CD player/DAC with preamp prowess reminds us that the potential arms race over ever-greater processing power in more and more advanced DACs,

playing rare files counts for nothing if you don't enjoy the sound that comes out of the box. EAR isn't pushing any new processing boundaries and the DAC section maxes out at 24/192 via USB, but its analogue mastery seems to make even modest data feeds sound sublime. This player's valve section is clearly kind to digital files, but don't for a moment think that weak files are somehow being smoothed over by some sort of tube magic, removing digital edginess at the expense of insight. Quite the opposite, CDs, computer files and streamed music all sound marvellous through the Acute Classic. Vocals and acoustic instruments sound that little bit more real, grunge sounds grittier, jazz jazzier and electropop more electrified. Everything flows effortlessly and musically. If you love musicality and enjoy the convenience of your CD collection, then this is for you. Thoroughly recommended ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Musicality; DAC with remote volume control; build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Keeping the front panel shiny

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Smart blend of analogue mastery with digital know-how creates sumptuous product that makes music sound great

FEATURES



OVERALL

