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The Audio Research Reference CD8 CD

by Roy Gregory

It was a long time coming, but eventually, inevitably, a CD player turned up in my system that not only challenged the performance of the resident Wadia 861SE but actually beat it on price. That player was the Audio Research Reference CD7, a one-box unit built into the distinctly retro casework favoured by the company, and employing a valve regulated power supply and the same tube output stage you'll find in its Reference 3 line-stage. Not the kind of features you might associate with a benchmark performer in the high tech arena of digital replay systems. But, it seems advances in CD player performance have always owed as much to the past as they have to developments in digital technology itself.

The CD7 quickly became an indispensable presence in the audio landscape around these parts, its consistently musical delivery a boon in dealing with so many different products. But the pace of digital development is unrelenting, and ARC's

CD7 Upgrades...

While it's not possible to retrofit the DAC used in the CD8 into a CD7, one thing that can be done is to modify the power supply to accept the 6550 in place of the existing 6H30s, which in itself should deliver a substantial lift in performance. What's even better is that ARC is carrying out the work free of charge for original owners – all you will have to pay is the cost of shipping the unit. It's an arrangement that is being honoured by Absolute Sounds in the UK, and I assume other distributors around the world. So, owners of CD7s should get in touch with their local distributor to check this out and make the necessary arrangements.

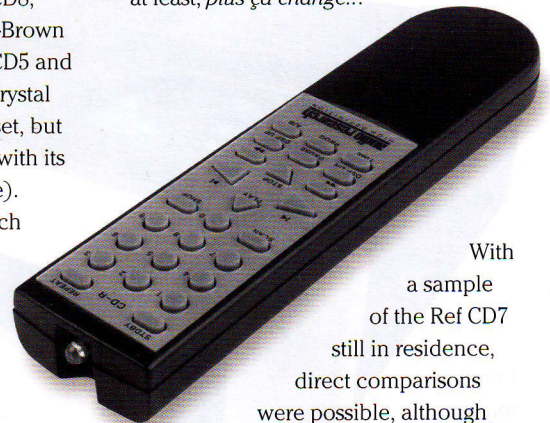
own CD5 and DAC7, more recent and more affordable digital devices than the Reference CD7 have already outstripped that player in terms of their digital technology, necessitating an update to the Reference player.

Enter then, the Reference CD8, which features the same Burr-Brown 24bit/192kHz chip-set as the CD5 and DAC7, in place of the CD7's Crystal CS4396 (another 24/192 chipset, but one that ARC decided to use with its upsampling set at a lower rate).

However, there's more (much more) to the CD8 than a higher resolution digital implementation. Intent on further improving the performance of the Reference player, ARC's engineers managed to shoehorn the Ref 3's valve regulation topology into the CD chassis. Not easy, given that the Ref 3 employs a single (but physically bulky) 6550 in place of the CD7's two nine-pin 6H30s, but the bigger valve delivers superior performance and longer tube life, making the effort well worthwhile. The rest of the circuitry and components have also been given a makeover, the most notable changes being an upgrade to the output coupling caps and the liberal application of damping material to just about everything in sight.

Outwardly (and operationally) the CD8 is virtually indistinguishable from the 7, employing the same Philips CDM PRO2 top-loading transport, complete with a magnetic puck to restrain the disc beneath its sliding lid – which is still manually operated. It also still offers the same balanced and single-ended

analogue outputs, together with AES/EBU and BNC digital output options. The display is now dimmable in five discrete steps, or can be switched off altogether, which is definitely a welcome improvement: otherwise, on the outside at least, *plus ça change...*



With a sample of the Ref CD7 still in residence, direct comparisons were possible, although that meant running the CD8 on repeat for a good month, just to get it burnt in. But with that chore out of the way and both players supported on identical finite element shelves, listening could finally begin. It was well worth the wait...

I'm not going to dwell for too long on the differences between the CD7 and its successor, simply because they are both clear and significant. Back to back listening to familiar material demonstrates the CD8's clear advantage in terms of focus, separation and transparency, the establishment of an overarching acoustic and the layering of images within that acoustic. Nor are these benefits purely hi-fi cosmetic. Growing as they do from clearer, more resolute and more transparent low frequencies, they have an immediate and pretty dramatic effect on the

► clarity of tempo and purpose in music, the solidity and presence of the performers. Playing the Chandos recording of the Taneyev *Fourth Symphony* (Polyansky and The RSSO) the stentorian opening bars have greater impact, texture and poise on the CD8, the brass punctuation is more definite, the orchestral spread as the first movement opens more dramatic and full of light and shade. The string contrasts are more vivid and there's a far greater sense of bowing and energy from the double basses. This life and the precise placement of the notes and phrases

bass notes that underpin the opening, locating each in space and giving the same sense of shape and impulse to the low frequencies that it does to the highs. And as the track develops, there's a poise and calm to the layers as they build, a stability that both echoes the lyric and provides the foundation for the cannonade and dynamic shift that signals the musical change of gear half way through.

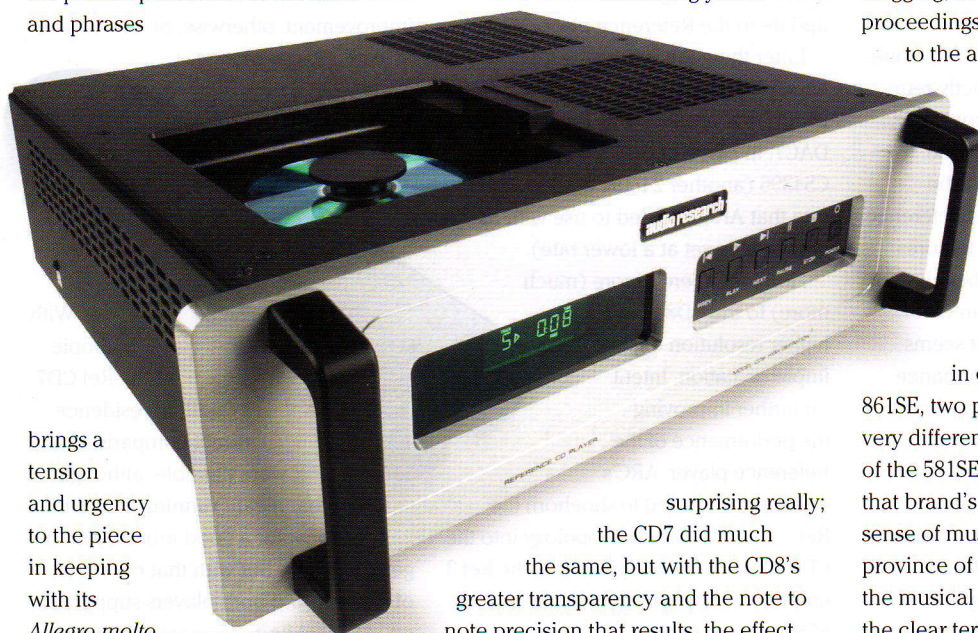
It's almost as if the CD8 latches on to the music's internal clock, matching step and arranging everything accordingly. Not

drum beat a metronomic steadiness, others give it an urgency and drive that pushes things along in a headlong tumble. In fact, it moves and evolves, starting out steady before picking up its tempo as the track develops scope and density. Few players let you hear this, none in my experience make it as apparent or natural as the CD8. Even the full-on, RnB power ballad excess of 'Better In Time' (great song, truly dreadful recording) is kept in check, the heavily compressed bass allowed to add to the drama without clogging, slowing or muddling proceedings. Listen to the vocal, listen

to the arrangement and it's a classic case of making the most of the song's considerable strengths while minimizing the horror wrought at the mixing desk.

In a wider context, this evolution is fascinating.

The CD7 stood its watch in company with my Wadia 861SE, two players of equal charm but very different attributes. If the arrival of the 581SE added considerably to that brand's textural qualities and sense of musical flow – the erstwhile province of the ARC – the CD8 invades the musical low-countries, previously the clear territory of the Wadia. This convergence is something of a current phenomenon; it seems to be occurring more and more, with traditional sparring partners leaving their deeply entrenched positions and getting almost cuddly on the middle ground. The gap betwixt and between the 581SE and CD8 is now close enough to see them singing from the same song-sheet. So, playing Jackson Browne's *Solo Acoustic Volume 1*, the Wadia gives you slightly more explosive applause, with more detail and definition of the individual claps and voices, but the ARC delivers a shade more weight, body and spreads the crowd more convincingly ►



brings a tension and urgency to the piece in keeping with its *Allegro molto* signature, while

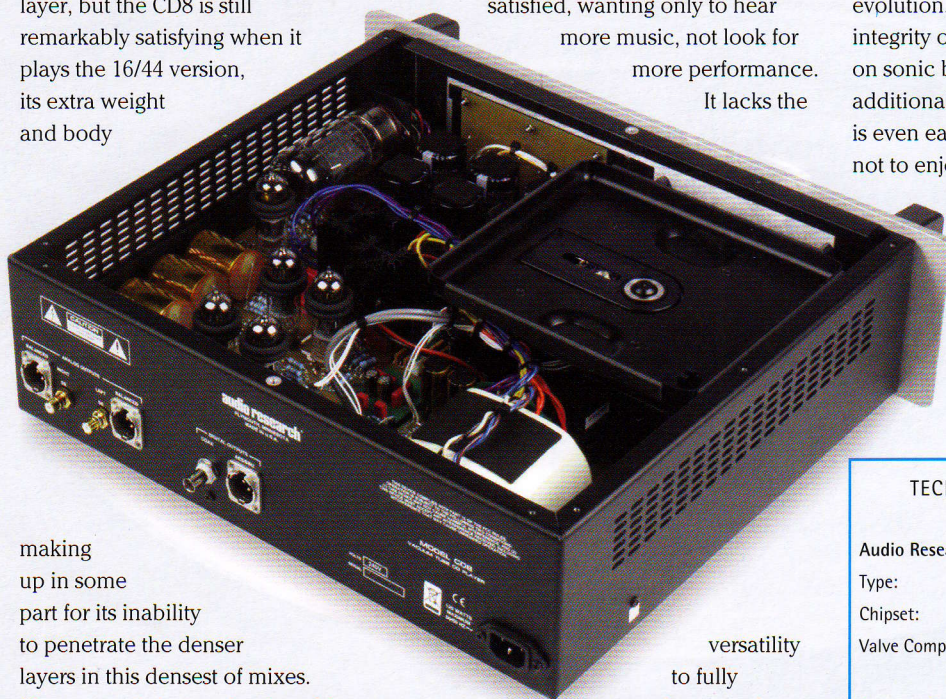
the soundstage sits slightly higher, much deeper and divorced entirely from the plane of the speakers. Shut your eyes and you hear the hall, the stage and the orchestra; picking the speakers is almost impossible.

Nor is this new facility with timing and tempo a case of never spare the horses. The newly released Deluxe Edition of *Tea For The Tillerman* narrows the gap between vinyl and CD versions of this classic. But listening to 'Hard Headed Woman' it's the CD8 that reveals the depth of reverb on the opening vocal, that separates the cymbal shimmers and single plucked

surprising really; the CD7 did much the same, but with the CD8's greater transparency and the note to note precision that results, the effect is that much more obvious. Where its predecessor succeeded despite its more rounded, warmer bass by dint of centring the energy at low frequencies properly and coupling it to a natural sense of flow, the added shape and shading that comes with the CD8 allows it to dig even deeper into the temporal plane. If you thought the CD7's *pièce de résistance* was its ability to make the most of less than wonderful recordings, just wait until you hear the CD8 doing its thing. The almost imperceptible increase in pace that marks Eliza Gilkyson's 'Engineer Bill' is a case in point. Few players get it right; some fall on the side of caution, lending that

▶ between you and the stage, allowing the acoustic space to reach out towards you in a more convincing and inclusive manner.

Move on to the recently re-mastered *Foxtrot* and there's no missing the extra space, air, detail and definition that the Wadia lifts from the SACD layer, but the CD8 is still remarkably satisfying when it plays the 16/44 version, its extra weight and body



making up in some part for its inability to penetrate the denser layers in this densest of mixes. Close enough in fact that I could see some listeners preferring it, and those for whom the appeal of SACD remains illusory or irrelevant needn't feel short changed. High-res die-hards on the other hand, will point to a warmth in the sound that leans to the forgiving side of natural – with a consequent impact on low-level detail and absolute resolution. Indeed, while the CD8 is not as rounded as the CD7, its spectral balance is very similar, adding a sense of chest to voices and body to strings – hints revealed most obviously when running comparisons with hybrid discs against front-rank SACD players.

And therein lies the tale. These two players might no-longer represent the opposite extremes of CD's sonic spectrum, but conceptually they are a century apart. The Wadia offers the option of multiple digital inputs,

switching and volume control as well as SACD replay: the ARC is a one-box CD spinner. But then it's quite possible the best all round single-box CD player I've heard and certainly a match for anything at its price. It brings an organic and inherently musical quality to proceedings that leaves the listener satisfied, wanting only to hear more music, not look for more performance.

It lacks the

as a result. It did so by getting the musical fundamentals right; arguably by treating the transport's output like any other signal rather than fixating on digital technology for the sake of it. In doing so, it played to the Company's established strengths. The CD8 is a thoughtful and thoroughly effective evolution, retaining all the musical integrity of the CD7, while grafting on sonic benefits to considerable additional musical effect. The result is even easier to listen to and hard not to enjoy. It offers greater range

and even more musical communication. ARC's Reference CD8 may only be a CD player, but for many a listener that will be more than enough. ▶+

versatility to fully embrace and integrate into today's digital convergence revolution. It also lacks the rosy glow that many a two-channel Luddite swears by and can only find in filterless designs. But weight, body and a sense of musical purpose? That's just for starters. Follow it up with a healthy serving of rhythmic sophistication and musical communication. Colour, texture, immediacy and presence? They're all on the menu too. Musical drama and an involving performance – in fact, a sense of performance full-stop? That'll be under house specials...

Audio Research's Reference CD7 was a slightly surprising success in that it came out and challenged the digital big boys head on, despite all their years of experience and the advantages they should have enjoyed

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audio Research Reference CD8

Type:	Top loading tube CD player
Chipset:	Burr-Brown 24/192bit
Valve Complement:	5x 6H30 1x 6550C
Outputs (Digital):	1x 75 Ohm Co-axial (BNC) 1x 110 Ohm AES/EBU (XLR)
Outputs (Analogue):	1pr single-ended RCA/ 1pr balanced XLR
Output Levels:	1.8V single-ended 3.6V balanced
Output Impedance:	330 Ohms single-ended 660 Ohms balanced
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 134 x 390mm
Weight:	14.8kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Price:	£9,498

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com

Manufacturer:

Audio Research Corporation
Net. www.audioresearch.com