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THE FALL 2007 DIGITAL "SHOOTOUT"

The below essay/survey was written by an **associate**, who was, in turn, assisted by his own "associates". This essay/survey also supercedes every write-up about digital components previously posted on this website, even including the very recent **Pacific Valve MHZS CD 66 and 88** write-up in **September 2007**.

The following survey of CD and, in 4 cases, SACD/CD players, was undertaken over a span of two months using a state of the art audio system, whose resolution and lack of inherent colorations, made discerning the sonic quality of the individual units blatantly clear. The conclusions that ensue are based on at least 2 and, at times, 3 individuals' evaluations. The sonic qualities of the players are delineated as objectively as possible. This is **not** a case of complimentary system colorations or personal predilections affecting the ranking. Each player's flaws and strengths are described as heard. **Every** player was adequately broken in and in top operating condition. The only variable that changed was the component under test.

The auditioning revealed **5 categories** of sonic performance:

1. State of the Art (1 player emerged).
2. Close to the above but with a couple of subtle flaws (1 unit fell into this realm).
3. Very good but noticeable failings compared to the higher categories (5 players resided here).
4. Acceptable performance for mid-fi but not in the class of 3. (5 players here).
5. Not acceptable at any price above \$ 1,000. (This spot reserved for only one unit).

The players tested included:

1. Doge CD6
2. (Pacific Valve) MHZS CD 66- Modified
3. Reimyo CDT- 777 and DAP777
4. Ayre CX 5E
5. AMR 77
6. Oracle CD 2500 MK II
7. Accuphase SACD/CD DP77

- 8. ARC REF CD 7**
- 9. APL Denon 3910**
- 10. MHZS CD 66- Stock**
- 11. MHZS CD 88- Stock**
- 12. McCormack UDP-1**
- 13. ElectroCompaniet UP SE**

Most CD players currently available fall into one of two sonic categories:

1. Those that are highly detailed, but at the same time somewhat harmonically lean and a bit edgy or
2. Those that are very smooth and easy to listen to, but unfortunately are lacking in detail, transparency and often dynamic excitement.

It is only the great player that combines detail, transparency and wide dynamics with smoothness, and full rendering of harmonics. This kind of digital player is, as we shall see, very rare.

Which player(s) can combine the best of the above qualities? The ability to be full bodied with weight and impact, harmonically complete with a refined upper midrange and highs yet reveal all the detail on a recording characterizes only one of the above tested units. All the others exhibit the above mentioned flaws to a greater or lesser degree. One other is very close but does not meet the standard of that one special player.

Of all the units tested, two were major disappointments based on the rave reviews they garnered by either the major audio magazines, and/or the buzz on the internet audio chat groups, and because they were downright outclassed by all the others (including a couple at much lower prices).

The players will now be grouped from worst to best. They fall into fairly distinct categories, which will become evident.

Category 5

The worst performer of the group was the Ayre CX 5E. In spite of receiving **Stereophile's Product of the Year** award and countless positive comments, the Ayre combined the worst characteristics of both sonic categories. It was badly lacking in detail and transparency as well as being dynamically anemic. Instruments were threadbare and lifeless. Soundstage was truncated as if all the music emanated out of a cardboard tube. Three words describe the sonics of the Ayre- Bland, bland, bland. It really has no redeeming qualities for a player at this price point. The **\$680** MHZS CD 66 is far superior in virtually every aural parameter. This CX 5E was carefully evaluated by 3 serious and knowledgeable, listeners who came to the same conclusions independently.

Category 4

Significantly superior to the Ayre (which is not saying much) are the APL Denon 3910, McCormick UDP 1, MHZS CD 66 -stock and modified) and CD 88. The second major disappointment in this survey is the APL Denon 3910. With all the internet hype about how wonderful this player is, it turns out that it is smooth and non offensive transforming bright, lean source material into something more listenable. Detail is glossed over and dynamics are constricted. This is a player for those who want some easy listening with no sonic nasties. At **\$6,000**, way overpriced and not competitive with much less costly players.

The McCormack UDP 1, another highly touted player (**Stereophile Class A**) barely makes it into this category, narrowly escaping the realm solely occupied by the Ayre. The McCormack is essentially an amusical player that is bright, edgy and very lean with most of the natural harmonics shaved off. The bass is weak and lacking in body. This unit is what gives digital reproduction its poor image. It typifies all the negatives associated with bits and bytes. Its SACD reproduction is marginally superior to its redbook, being not as fatiguing. This player sounds like it should sell for **\$500**.

The MHZS units are more detailed and transparent with wider dynamic gradations but they can sound a tad aggressive when pushed, especially stock. The sound is quite vivid and lucid but not as refined as the more expensive, better players. Modifying the CD 66 with NOS tubes, teflon caps etc certainly improves the performance and makes the MHZS a best buy. It also moves the performance to somewhere between category 4 and 3. The CD 88 is identical to the 66 except that it uses tube rectification. It consequently sounds a touch smoother with a more realistic tone. On the downside, bass is not quite as punchy. But do not be fooled into believing they will provide the sonics of the higher categories of units costing thousands more. For those not that serious about digital reproduction and desiring a well built, great value player, the CD 66 (especially modified) is the ticket. It conveys the music.

Category 3

The Reimyo separates, AMR CD 77, Accuphase DP77, Electrocompaniet and the Doge CD 6 (with NOS tubes being necessary) all fall within this category with differing strengths and weaknesses but their overall sonic performance is fairly equal. The Doge is by far the best value (available direct for **\$1,400**- add **\$200** for upgraded tubes) and is the most refined sounding of the group. As a matter of fact, from the lower midrange on up, its reproduction competes with the best. It is very detailed, transparent and pure yet harmonically complete. Its achilles heel is its bass, and midbass which is lacking in requisite weight and impact. Dynamically it compresses the music at the ffff range. This player lacks balls. It is beautifully constructed especially at its price.

The AMR has generated tremendous excitement over the internet as well as being the recipient of a rave review in **6 moons.com**. Favorable comparisons have been made to the state of the art **Zanden** separates. Build quality is magnificent. Sensually, however, it

did not live up to its advance billing. The AMR falls into the smooth, polite sound camp with sacrifices to detail, dynamics, bass extension, midbass punch and ultimate dynamics. It is a very nice sounding player that will not irritate nor annoy, but neither will it excite nor viscerally impress. Listened to on its own without access to the top two players in this survey, the AMR shortcomings are subtle and may go unnoticed by many. However, the best units here will expose the AMR's errors of omission

The Accuphase DP77 is sonically a dead ringer for the AMR. They sound so much alike they could be identical twins. Everything said about the AMR applies to the DP77. The Accuphase does offer the advantage of SACD reproduction.

The Reimyo DAC/Transport is the most expensive player in the survey at **\$13,850**. Its performance is not commensurate with that lofty price tag. It does have a midrange to die for. Big, spacious and immediate. Its reproduction in this range is obviously superior to every other unit in this test except for one player that comes within a hair of equalling it. Its main flaws are a lack of control in the low bass, which is accompanied by some wooliness in the midbass and a lean, bright edge in the upper midrange especially evident on complex music being played loud. Consequently, while the Reimyo possesses areas of greatness, it is ultimately precluded from entering the upper categories due to its frequency selectivity and lack of complete balance. Its DAC is superior to its transport which no longer uses the **JVC** mechanism that the single box Reimyo did. This became evident when the transport was substituted with the MHZS CD 66 CD player. Used as a transport only, the \$680 Chinese player essentially equaled the performance of the Reimyo. The Reimyo DAC and CD 66 transport is sonically superior to all the other units in this test with the exception of the top two. At the cost of about **\$5,800**, it represents good value.

The Electrocompaniet UP SE is a big, bold gutsy sounding player that is exceptionally easy to live with since its errors are only ones of omission and its strengths considerable. It is the most dynamic of the group with bass and midbass reproduction that also stands alone. Tremendous weight and impact in the lower registers. This unit is exceptionally smooth and harmonically complete. The highs are not the least bit bright or edgy, instead erring on the side of being a tad rolled off and overly smooth. The main failings of the Electro are that it slightly blunts initial transients, softening them and reducing their intensity and low level detail is not fully conveyed. Overall, the UPSE sounds somewhat on the dark side. Systems that are overly lean (those using **Thiel, Wilson, B & W** coupled with **Krell**, or **DCS** electronics for example) will find the Electro a welcome relief.

Category 2

The Audio Research REF 7 is significantly superior to all the other players discussed above. It does everything superbly, which is its major strength. It is beautifully balanced from top to bottom. Its frequency response is exceptionally linear, its dynamics explosive, and its detail portrayal is revelatory. It passes along all the information with pristine clarity and full harmonics. In two areas it proved unique- transient purity and

impact and soundstaging. The initial transient, heard through the ARC takes on an intensity and visceral impact that will get the heart a pounding. It is sheer excitement. Up to this point, no player came close to replicating this phenomenon. Furthermore, the sound field the ARC generates knows no bounds. It is huge when the source material is so recorded. Sounds way beyond the speakers are plainly experienced yet within that massive sound scape there is focus and precision of instrumental localization.

Does the ARC have any flaws. Yes, there are two. They are subtle and not obtrusive but they do exist. The first is a lack of midbass power, weight and body. Drums do not have the impact they could nor does double bass and cello possess the growl they should. The other is a slight leaning out of the harmonics in the upper midrange accompanied by a slight tendency towards stridency in this range. The flaws are there to be sure, but the ARC is so special that they do not really detract from the pleasure derived from listening to music through it. If the category 1 unit did not exist, the ARC would be the player to have. It brings life and excitement to the musical experience and makes one forget the hardware and focus instead on what this hobby should be really about- the music.

Category 1

The player that has it all and proved the most satisfying is the Oracle CD 2500 MK II. The Oracle sounds as stunning as it looks. For once, beauty and substance combined in one package. The 2500 has no obvious flaws which is what sets it apart from the rest. It is the best or close to that in all areas and ultimately that is what makes it unique. While other players may exceed its performance in certain respects (i.e Reimyo's glorious midrange or ARC's unbridled soundstage), no other player conveys the musical message with so little of its own personality. It really gets out of the way and allows the music to flow without coloration, distortion or omission. There is no point ruminating about its wide dynamic gradations or thunderous bass or its pristine clarity or its harmonic completeness etc, etc. Suffice it to say that its excellences are so overwhelming, that the listener becomes disarmed and flounders to conjure up any salient criticisms. The ARC is close in overall performance but the Oracle takes it to a subtle but tangible higher level.

Personal Notes- I did **not** participate in this "shoot-out". I have only heard the Pacific Valve 66 (modified) and the Oracle. The actual writer and other participants will remain anonymous, as they have requested. I will simply ignore any requests for their identity. I will vouch for both their objectivity and competence, along with the above description of the audio system(s) used in the auditions.

I will post differing opinions, if they appear both sincere and credible, but I won't engage in any fruitless debates about the merits, or lack of them, of players I haven't even heard myself.