

February 1, 2008

Oracle Audio Technologies CD 1500 Mk.II CD Player

An analogy

You're happily married, middle-aged, dangerously close to midlife crisis time. One day you meet a fascinating younger woman who looks you directly in the eye, laughs at your jokes, and expresses merriment where, from your partner, you've seen only years of complacency. You feel younger. Life is, once again, exciting. I've not been there, but some would say that the Trophy Wife phenomenon can be overwhelming, in more ways than one.



Most CD players at any price are rather plain boxes with a disc drawer or a top-loading disc bay; or pairs of boxes, if the D/A side is separate from the power supply. There are exceptions -- the players from Pathos and Chord come to mind -- but the typical CD player delivers the audio goods without calling attention to itself.

The Oracle CD 1500 Mk.II CD player (\$5800 USD) is the trophy wife of CD players. When you see it, you'll feel a stirring you haven't known in years. It's a knockout. Metal touched by beauty. Desire will have its way with you.

Delivery and setup

The cardboard carton from Oracle was wrestled to the door by Joan of FedEx, our local package queen. But at 70 pounds, this was no mere box. Inside the heavy cardboard outer shell were foam spacers, and at the center of those was one heck of a wooden crate, tightly screwed together. Inside that was more foam, and then a shiny piece of technology that took my breath away. If this is their packaging, I thought, what must their electronics do? The Oracle CD 1500 Mk.II is the best-boxed anything I've ever seen. And the shining slab of the player itself seemed to suggest that a seduction was about to take place. I was impressed. I was a boy again. If you're into gear at all, you'll lust.

Like many beauties, the CD 1500 Mk.II travels with a plain friend: its power supply, an entirely nondescript box housing an EI-core transformer, umbilical cable, IEC receptacle, power indicator, and switch. The cable is a serious-looking, computer-type, many-pin hookup. But once I eyed the silver slab of the player, I immediately forgot that there even were two units.

Obviously, the thinking is to keep the power supply away from the delicate digital-to-analog processing. The CD 1500 is a step down from the styling of the CD 2500 -- less chiseled, more sculpted. Now in balanced Mk.II iteration, it's a top loader with a Philips Pro transport, and a magnetic puck that anchors the CD under a removable flattened dome of substantial alloy. Remove the top, drop a CD onto the spindle, lower the puck, lower the top, push Play. There are balanced and single-ended analog outputs, a digital output on a BNC connector, and a full remote control.

On the path to improved digital playback

I keep trying to reach a higher level of sound, often by modifying already good equipment; so far, about a dozen different-sounding CD players have been played through my rigs. While my editor has asked me not to compare the Oracle with my current reference player -- which I've had modified five times -- I can suggest what my quest for better digital playback has entailed.

I'm no bass-o-phile, but one of the first things that surprised me was that the better digital gets, the better the bass. I would have expected to first hear more extended, cleaner highs; instead, I noticed that the bass was getting more and more tight and articulate, becoming less a dull thudding and more a propulsive device for the music. Additionally, there was more and more depth -- the proverbial veils were lifted.

Now, a point about deeper silence: silence isn't an adjective, but a noun. There's no comparative or superior silence. There's no silenter. Nor is there silentest. So why do reviewers keep referring to what's impossible? Silence is an absolute. Black, white; on, off; sound, silence. With better digital, it's not really silence that's affected, but your ability to hear into it -- low-level sounds are more obvious. For instance: When a song fades, it fades into silence. As digital sound improves, you hear more and more of the fade. Similarly, you hear more of the air around instruments or microphones, and begin to hear the sound of the venue. This is all delicate business, but it adds greatly to the illusion that you're re-creating an experience rather than just rockin' the room.

Then there's the matter of treble. I once auditioned three high-end CD players with familiar music, and each sounded different in the highs. Which sounded better was entirely a matter of preference -- all three sounded good and correct.

Bad digital sound is annoying and fatiguing. Good digital sound is simultaneously powerful and delicate. Bad sound is too forward or too distant in perspective. Good sound is "just right" -- but, like wines, a matter of taste. (All good wines may be rated in the low 90s, but that doesn't mean they taste alike, or even similar.) Add system synergy, taste in music, room interactions -- even the state of your hearing, your mood and level of fatigue -- and the judgment of sound quality enters the realm of the psychoacoustic, maybe even the paranormal. When you stop listening to the gear and start enjoying the music, you're where it's all supposed to lead you.

My rig

My system includes a modified Sony SCD-1 SACD/CD player; an Audio Research LS5 Mk.III preamp modified to reference level by Great Northern Sound, its stock tubes replaced with Upscale Audio 6H23EB type 3s; and NuForce Reference 9 V2SE monoblocks. All signals travel via balanced interconnects, and the speaker cable is Audience AU24, ducted through the concrete slab under the wooden floor (which floats on plastic on the slab). The Sony and ARC sit on Aurios footers, the NuForces on BDR cones. An Audience aR1p power conditioner feeds the preamp; a PS Audio HC Ultimate Outlet feeds the Sony or the product being reviewed. AC cords are by Electra Glide, two no-brand cords, and PS Audio Lab Cable. Porter Power Ports wall outlets are at the ends of dedicated lines from a 100A box. Rives Audio designed the room. My speakers are Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 7s.

Does the Oracle speak to me?

Due to interconnect length, I placed the Oracle CD 1500 Mk.II on a table in the hallway behind the closet that opens into the equipment rack, which is inset into the listening-room wall. There should be fewer vibrations back there anyway. The power supply sat below the player, on the floor.

The Oracle's sound noticeably improved during the first 24 hours it was operating. The first thing I noticed was the bass: tuneful and dynamic. I heard more sense of the players' fingers on the strings. There was great drive to the drums. Overall, my sense that the bass was very good, even excellent, stayed with me through every listening session and remained my dominant impression. I really enjoyed the Oracle's bass reproduction -- a special compliment from a guy who is not a bass-o-phile.

Then there were the highs. Certain CDs sounded better than they ever had, but shrill ones sounded extremely so -- in other words, there was no euphonic coloration in the Oracle's reproduction of the highs. CDs made in the mid-1980s, which sound too harsh on neutral systems, sounded unpleasant through the Oracle. With one in particular, the vocals were unlistenable. Another one, Philip Bailey's Chinese Wall [Columbia CK 39542], is a peculiar recording. Over the years, with different players and rigs, I've heard it sound very good and very bad. I suspect it has something to do with phasing, but through some players it sounds big, dynamic, deep, and nuanced. Through others, this disc's sound is turned almost inside out, with wimpy vocals and unimpressive resolution. But the Oracle CD 1500 Mk.II really showed off Phil Collins' production and drumming. The drumstrokes really popped! Little stabs of brass and strings jumped out tastily. There are many different types of singing on this CD, from very high falsetto to normal register, from intimate to full-blast wailing. The Oracle reproduced all of this very well. Listening to Chinese Wall was the highpoint of my time with the Oracle.

System synergy and room interactions mean more than most folks know. In this case, I had a chameleon on my hands -- the Oracle had good and bad sides. With the right material it sounded great, with special attention paid to transients, bass, drums, anything with impact. With the wrong CDs it highlighted some brightness or glare in the range of frequencies generated by a muted trumpet, as well as some vocal ranges. I played CDs that worked wonderfully with the Oracle, and others that I couldn't finish listening to.

Was this faithful delivery of what's on these discs or not? I wish I knew. But when something just isn't right, my attention jumps to Doberman alert level. At times I wondered if something in my system was broken -- if maybe one of my ARC preamp's tubes was going bad (though there should have been thousands of hours left). Later I became convinced that my system was fine.

Through the Oracle, Paul Simon's voice on Graceland [Warner Bros. 25447-2] came out edgy, while Donald Fagen's voice on Steely Dan's Gaucho [MCAD-37220 DIDX 56] sounded right. On his Dig [Virgin 7243-8-11008-0-6], Boz Scaggs could sound wrong or right, depending on the production of the track. Bruce Cockburn sounded fuzzy on Dancing in the Dragon's Jaws [Columbia CK 48736], muted trumpets sounded reedy, and cymbals more like white noise than brushed or struck metal.

I invited a fellow 'phile over to hear the system. He brought along some familiar discs and we listened for several hours. Without giving him any hints, I played a favorite Coldplay track, first on the Oracle, then on my Sony SCD-1. He said that the Oracle sounded as if it was reproducing less air around instruments. However, the music was more dynamic through the Oracle, and the high-frequency energy added to the edgy effect of the band's musicianship. Side-to-side imaging seemed fine (i.e., what I'm used to: very much CD dependent, as it should be). The Oracle's soundstaging was wide, wraparound, and even.

Conclusion

The Oracle CD 1500 Mk.II has considerable strengths: its excellent bass reproduction, dynamic drive, and imaging. However, I felt it was ruthlessly revealing, particularly with poor recordings. I'll make a wild guess and suggest that it's a player to consider for classical and rock music, and polite speakers and/or absorptive rooms.

Until you've heard it, try not to look too closely at the CD 1500 Mk.II -- its appearance is so striking that you'll be tempted to buy it off the showroom floor without first taking it for a test drive. But, as with any component, that test drive, with your music in your system, is highly recommended. Only in those circumstances will you be able to hear if this -- or any -- player is for you or not.

...Bob Wood

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Oracle Audio Technologies CD 1500 Mk.II CD Player

Price: \$5800 USD.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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