

HI-FI CHOICE

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BEST CD EVER

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MARANTZ Superb new amp blows us away!

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ULTIMATE GROUP TEST >>> SPEAKERS

- FEATURING**
- > ALR Jordan Entry L
 - > Arcam Alto
 - > B&W CM1
 - > Dynaudio Focus 110
 - > Monitor Audio RS6
 - > Opera Prima

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Reference manual

No gizmos, no gimmicks, no automated niceties... just CD audio engineering at its finest

PRODUCT Audio Research Reference CD7

TYPE CD player

PRICE £8,000

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 48x13.4x39cm

• Weight: 14.8kg • Crystal 24-bit DAC • Balanced (XLR) and single-ended (phono) analogue outputs

• Balanced (XLR) AES/EBU and single-ended (phono) coaxial digital outputs

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Ⓜ www.audioresearch.com

The word 'reference' is taken really, really seriously in Minnesota. Audio Research has been making electronics for more than 35 years, but in that time only eight products have been given the 'Reference' tag. This – Audio Research's ninth Reference point – is the first ever source component to do so.

The Reference CD7 doesn't replace Audio Research's much-respected CD3 MkII CD player, it sits way above it, costing a cool eight grand to the CD3's already frisky five and

bringing much to the party in the process. But, in the understated manner that's typical of its maker, you'd likely never notice the difference from the outside. Except for the word 'Reference' in small block capitals and a few slats on the side and top right of the player, it would be easily mistaken one with the other. Both are top-loaders, with a manually operated pull-back drawer and a milled black puck to hold the disc in place. Both have a solid build with a thick alloy front panel, distinctive black grab handles and a simple green LED read-out that looks like something out of a £100 Philips player of a decade ago. Both have a simplistic, functional remote control and squidgy-feel buttons on the front panel. Both have a combination of balanced and single-ended digital inputs and analogue outputs. Both have five solid rubber feet. Both use the same transport mechanism and digital converter.

Let's face it, though... the already excellent CD3 MkII is a good jumping off point for a truly first-rate player.

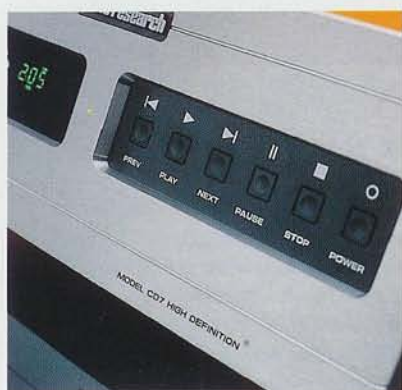
The Reference CD7 is slightly deeper than the CD3 MkII, deep enough to hang off the end of most equipment tables and about the footprint of a decent sized stereo power amp. However, it's more or less identical in footprint to the Reference 3 preamp, so it's in good ARC company. It's heavy, too; not by power amp standards, but this is no lightweight CD spinner. Much of that mass is taken up with the anti-vibration system incorporated in the player. Forget springs, bits of neoprene, foam or anything sappy like that – this is the belt 'n' braces approach: the cast Philips Pro 2 transport mechanism sits shock-mounted on the case's backbone. Resonance and negative vibration effects are effectively sunk into the belly of the beast and the high mass of the transport mechanism makes any minor rotational distortion effects disappear in similar style to a heavyweight turntable platter eliminating wow and flutter – by sheer mass. This is overcoming the mechanical limits of CD by ironwork and sheer strength of will.



EDITOR'S CHOICE

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magazine





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Like the CD3 MkII, the Reference CD7 uses a Crystal 24-bit DAC, although this is not the sort of player that features upsampling, post-22kHz brick-wall signal reconstruction techniques on any other forms of audio hippy nonsense. It's just good, solid delta-sigma technology, done right.

The slats in the top and side of the case dissipate heat from the four 6H30 triode valves used in the output stage of the player, together with a further three 6H30s as high-voltage regulation for the power supply. This is a new thing for Audio Research: despite its 'hollow-state' (valve-based) heritage, the CD players that went before the Reference were all profoundly solid-state in approach. But the development of the Reference 3 preamplifier (reviewed in *HFC 272*) changed all that. The output stage of that preamp offered such a performance boost to the Audio Research sound, in such a potentially modular package, it would have been folly not to use it in other products. So, out went the solid-state output section and in went essentially a baby Reference 3 preamp gain stage, complete with intricate and sophisticated capacitor grid-like layout, unique to Audio Research.

This, of course, necessitates a revision in the power supply stage and this CD player sports the sort of meaty power delivery that is the dream of many an integrated amp designer.

The valves also necessitate higher power consumption than is usual with CD players: it draws up to 120 watts and even up to five watts when turned off, but still connected to the juice. If you want to do your bit to save the polar ice caps from marauding superheated whales or something, look elsewhere... or switch off the player at the wall if you are concerned by a five-watt power draw. (If you are concerned about this, how do you sleep? Your alarm clock radio has about the same power consumption levels.)

SOUND QUALITY

Audio Research is one of those companies that has a very definite 'sound' to its products. They are big, powerful and bright sounding in the main. Recent Reference products challenge that standing, by adding layers of finesse and levels of listen-through insight that puts the company at the very forefront of what's best in audio these days. The Reference CD7 player completes the package.

This player is a Reference point sure enough, but a reference that categorically refuses to wear its lab coat. The player manages to combine the sort of musical grace that is so rare in digital replay with all the detailed analysis of CD at its best. Yet it doesn't seem engineered to sound like an 'analogue' player: its design is wholly 'digital' in approach. It

simply represents the very best of digital engineering as it stands today.

Perhaps the best example of what it does so much better than the vast majority of players is found in the voice of Joni Mitchell. Many of us have years of extensive exposure to Joni Mitchell's voice and the sparse backing she often used in her best works. Many of us also have the same albums replicated on vinyl and CD, because they are old friends. So, Joni Mitchell's voice holds plenty of charm, but little mystery from an audio perspective... or so I thought. I'd forgotten just how important her lyrics, how beautiful the orchestration, how pure the voice until *Blue* was played on the Reference CD7. This wasn't just a CD playing, it was casting a spell back to that first time I heard Joni Mitchell and how much you take that voice for granted.

Those of us old and fat enough to remember punk and new wave will have a collection of truly dreadful remasters of not that good original recordings from the 1970s and 1980s. These take the words 'edgy' and 'raw' to new levels. Usually, there are only two ways that CD players approach such musical content: with all the warmth and charm of a chainsaw, or with all the edginess of a well-chewed soft cushion. Very, very occasionally, a CD player appears that can cut through the raw quality of the recording to deliver up the equally raw musical content, without smoothing over the sound in the process. Eight grand on a CD player to listen to Gang of Four's radical left-wing *Entertainment!* may be an exercise in irony, but it nevertheless serves as a prime example of why this player works so well. It manages to get past the recording and deliver levels ▀

