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JANUARY 2012

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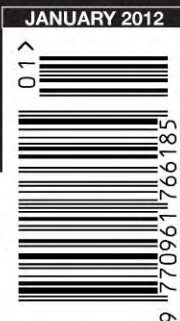


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East Life

Aurum's new C5 is a modern CD player with a difference, because it's made nearer Berlin than Beijing. Paul Rigby reviews this fine mid-priced, German made, silver disc spinner...

Aurum's new A5 amplifier got a good write up in these pages in the September 2011 issue, so I was curious about the matching CD spinner. Could its brother impress in the same way? Well Aurum certainly believe so, saying it's a design with a difference. Precisely what is this? Well Aurum's Senior Engineer Stephan Rath (a long established and experienced engineer who has worked for other companies too; you will see his handiwork within the amplifier portion of Elac's top-of-the-range subwoofers, for example), explained...

"Working with an industrial designer for the chassis, the entire CD player has been created in-house and within Germany; mechanics, software and electronics...The quality is higher, especially in the electronics section of the player as well as quality control and measurements.

For example, I know that a C5, serial number '10' and another C5 CD player, serial number 100, will be the same in terms of quality".

Consistency is very important, which reflects Aurum's belief that a reputation can only be built when it is controlled. It only takes one bad apple to sour the whole barrel, after all. This is an acute problem for audiophile hi-fi companies, as many manufacturers privately confide to me that getting things made remotely in China demands a rigorous overseeing role, as not every batch of circuitboards is made to exactly the same specification at the OEM factory.

Rath then proceeded to talk about the C5's attention to detail, which focuses upon the reduction of distortion.. "We separate our power supplies: the supplies for the digital to analogue convertor, motor and so on are independent," he said.

No big deal you might think, and hardly revolutionary stuff, but according to Rath, it's the application of the technology that makes the difference. "The trick is to put the right technology in the right place. For example, we use damping pads for the CD transport, it's a part of the rim. You can see it when you open the tray. This is one reason why the C5 has an analogue tone. In addition, the output stage is completely discrete with no feedback within the circuit. This reduces several types of harmonic distortion.





"one of the most satisfying and cultured CD players I have heard at this price point..."

We have a special 'trick' to reduce the distortion at specific points in the sonic spectrum." Although Rath refused to elaborate!

Rath's focus on distortion, a vagary that sometimes, he readily admits, he cannot measure, is the result of his own musical passions. "I might be an audio engineer but I'm also a listener. I have a love of listening to music, especially jazz. So I don't see this as just a job. That is the difference between Aurum and our competitors. We are a small outfit, there is only four of us. Yes, we are part of a larger company but our parent has nothing to do with the engineering."

Rath is convinced that, at least in his engineering sphere, this is where his CD design wins. Rath believes that larger companies do less listening and more profit chasing because their economies of scale demand that product be pushed through the manufacturing chain quicker.

This allows him to attend to more left-field aspects of design, like the insidious distortive affects. "On the C5, the distortion was very low within the output but it was audible and tended to affect the soundstage. Now, with this

distortion removed, the C5 provides greater three dimensional elements in the soundstage with more power and punch to the bass plus greater musicality."

Other weapons in his audiophile armoury include a broadband power supply filter on the main and secondary power supplies, plus a special magnetic coupling between the Burr Brown D/A convertor, the datastream and the clock to provide further isolation. "This reduces jitter," said Rath. "Yes, you can measure this aspect but the differences are very small. It's interesting, the differences

when listening are so much greater. The result produces a smoother sound."

Before I began my own sound tests, Rath was eager to pass on one critical piece of advice. "When listening to the C5, the output stage needs a lot of time to warm up. To be honest, nobody really knows why that is. You can turn it on. After a single second, all of the measurements are excellent... but it sounds hard in the midrange. Give the C5 a span of two hours, before you play it, every time, and it sounds a lot better. That's because we don't use a feedback





circuit – again, to tackle distortion.”

Spanning 453x82x305mm and weighing in at a respectable 6.80kg, this is a well made machine, but so it should be at its £2,395 price point! It's nice to use and has a classy feel, with no nasty surprises or glitches along the way. There's a choice of finishes - Black, Choco Black and Light Oak.

SOUND QUALITY

I connected the C5 to my reference system and, after those recommended two hours, span my first disc, the Blue Note production of Jackie McLean's 'Bluesnik'. Compared to my valve-staged Icon CD-X1, the Aurum had a slightly harder edged, solid-state sound while the soundstage was a little more 'in your face'. The upper midband could not be accused of being bright, but there was a slight tensing in those upper frequencies. On the other hand, because the music was better illuminated, with more detail present and correct, the soundstage presented as being fuller and broader. It gave the impression that more was going on and that the stage-bound jazz players had grown in stature.

Considering the Aurum was up against a machine with a very good tube output stage, the C5 sounded very civilised. It actually had a slightly valve-like persona, but never did it completely relinquish its vigorous solid-state heart. In short, it was a smooth operator; without being an old smoothie! The upper midband was always even and transparent, and treble brisk and open, and at all times I could hear nice, finely chiselled edges to attack transients. There was absolutely nothing untoward here; the machine's wealth of detailing drawing the ear to sonic elements that the Icon sometimes glossed over. The Aurum, never proffered nasty surprises – there was no brightness, no bass honking, no bloom and no shouty upper frequencies. All good, then.

Moving away from classic jazz to the more rock-oriented and slightly diffusive tones of The Jesus And Mary Chain's album, 'Candy', and whilst the Icon proffered great drive and punch in the lower frequencies, the Aurum

arrived with tremendous bass weight and heft that portrayed real power and determination. This was bass to reckon with.

The essence of this band's sound is the heavily distorted guitars which swamp the midband of the mix, and this is a big ask for any CD player – normally JAMC songs sound far more palatable on vinyl. Fortunately, the music was more than bearable via the Aurum, yet it still gave more immediacy and emotion to the track than my reference Icon Audio player. In fact, midband detail was better focused overall – don't confuse that with being clinical, but rather think of it as being more conscientious in terms of what detail was presented and how it was interpreted. This said, compared to the valves of the Icon, the Aurum at high volumes could be slightly harder in the upper midband, but this condition was a rarity and appeared less than many other solid state CD players at a similar price point that I've heard. Again, this benefit was purely down to Aurum's determination in tackling distortion while allowing detail to present itself successfully to the ear.

On the classical piece 'Acis & Galatea' performed by the Dunedin Consort & Players, the C5 provided greater bass weight to the harpsichord, imbuing an extra sense of gravitas, an importance that made the entrance grander and more significant. Vocally complex, this piece was given stronger textural interpretation by the C5, the melange of vocals exhibiting greater focus which lent the soundstage a new sense of order. The Icon could be accused of a certain degree of upper mid bloom and

even some confusion, as too much detail was thrown at it. The Aurum handled all of this with aplomb.

CONCLUSION

The Aurum C5 is an excellent new CD player that presents a surprisingly fluid and tonally smooth sound, yet still packs a real punch and has no shortage of incision and detail. As such it's a really well designed and voiced machine that makes spinning Red Book Compact Discs a pleasure. I'd say it certainly deserves to be right at the top of any prospective purchaser's 'to dem' list – it's one of the most satisfying and cultured CD players I have heard at this price point.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Icon Audio CD-X1 CD player
Aesthetix Calypso preamplifier
Icon MB845 mono blockpower amplifiers
Quad ESL-57 loudspeakers (modified)

VERDICT

A finely built, intelligently designed and excellent sounding mid-price CD player.

AURUM C5 £2,395

Quadral UK
+44 (0)1785 748 446
www.quadralgb-ie.co.uk

FOR

- clarity
- transparency
- smooth upper mids
- bass punch

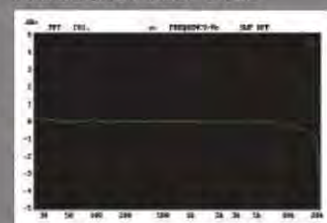
AGAINST

- nothing at the price

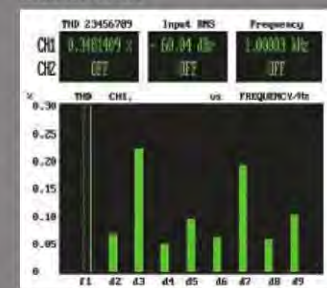
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response shows a small roll off at high frequencies, measuring -0.6dB at 20kHz, just enough to give the Aurum a slightly easier sound than most CD players, although this is not enough to make it sound warm.	-60dB	0.34
	-80dB	3.5
Distortion levels were a little higher than possible, a figure of 0.34% at -60dB, 1kHz, being above the 0.2% or so that is common nowadays. The DAC was also a little noisier than most, noise measuring -98dB. This is not enough to be audible however. In all though, EIAJ Dynamic Range was lower as a result, measuring a mediocre 97dB.	Separation (1kHz)	106dB
	Noise (IEC A)	-98dB
Output from the unbalanced phono sockets measured the usual Philips standard 2V and from XLR 4V. All parameters were checked via the balanced outputs and were identical to those from unbalanced.	Dynamic range	97dB
	Output (phono/XLR)	2/4V

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



Frequency response (-1dB) CD	2Hz - 20kHz
Distortion 0dB	0.003 %
-6dB	0.0015 %