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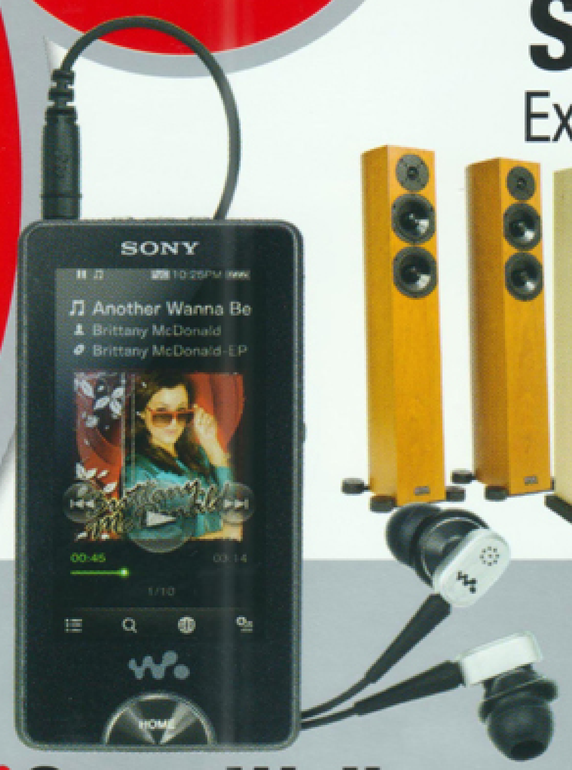

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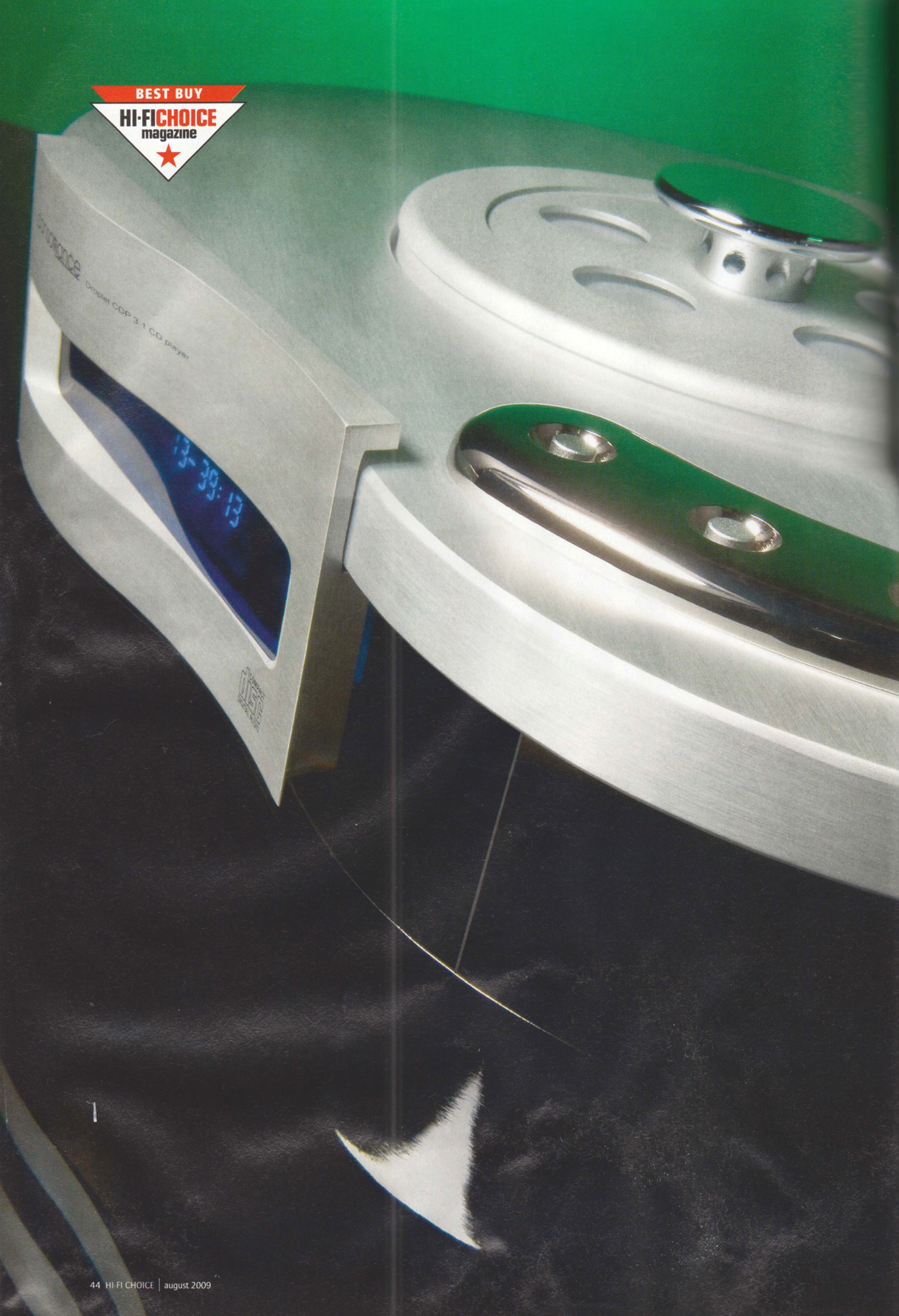
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HI-FI CHOICE
magazine
Droplet CDP 3.1 CD player

Valvelicious!

The Mini Droplet CD player from Consonance has a performance to match its looks

PRODUCT Consonance Mini Droplet CDP3.1 Linear
TYPE CD player
PRICE £1,995
KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 15x43x35cm ◉ Weight: 15kg ◉ Digital input: 1x coaxial ◉ Digital output: 1x coaxial ◉ Non-oversampling ◉ E88CC valve output ◉ DAC: TDA1543 multibit ◉ Remote control
CONTACT ☎ 01273 608332 ⊕ www.aliumaudio.com

In a world of 'me too' CD players Opera Consonance's Droplet models stand out. Not only because of their curvy shape and distinct finish, but because they use valves and avoid oversampling. The Mini Droplet is as different on the inside as it is on the outside, which as we discovered in our review is indeed unusual.

Opera Consonance is based in Beijing and run by Eric Shi Hui Liu, an optical engineer who started out building valve amps on his kitchen table. Opera was the first Chinese manufacturer of turntables and tonearms and today makes everything the stereo enthusiast requires, except for cartridges.

The Mini Droplet CDP3.1 Linear is so-called because there is also larger Droplet CDP5.0 which looks very similar, but uses a relatively conventional 24-bit/192kHz DAC chip. The Mini Droplet is described as Linear because it is a non-oversampling (NOS) player with only gentle output filtering – an approach favoured by some fashionable names in the business and one which seems to be particularly popular among glass-audio aficionados. Typically, filterless DACs use relatively old-school converters and this one's no different: it employs four Philips TDA 1543 16-bit chips and offers a choice of sampling rates on top of the standard 44.1, these are two- and four-times and can be switched with the remote, albeit only when the player is stopped. So you can run the Droplet NOS or not, to taste.

To say the Mini Droplet is attractively designed and finished is an understatement. Just look at it! It's one of only a handful of visually exciting CD players on the market and is a joy to own and interact with. It's base is made from piano black-lacquered MDF and the top plate is a hefty slab of aluminium; the two joined together by an aluminium frame for the display and carbon fibre posts. Peer through the Droplet's vented sides carefully enough and you will see the E88CC double-triode valve that drives the output stage. This player's predecessor had a solid-state output, but this proved so unpopular with distributor Alium Audio's dealers that it was changed, which says something about the strength of association between NOS and valves.

Once you have taken in the radical styling of the casework you can't help noticing the huge lid that covers the transport mechanism. This chunky lump is hewn from aluminium and acrylic and removing it reveals a puck which magnetically clamps the disc. So putting on a disc is only marginally less a kerfuffle than your average turntable. In fact, a clamp-less turntable is probably easier to use! But so long as you have somewhere to put the lid it's pretty painless and brings a degree of vinyl-like interaction, it also means there's no drawer mechanism to eventually go wrong. Underneath the player are three tubular legs with squash balls in their ends, a neat isolation technique albeit one that may not last as long as the rest of the player.

"The Mini Droplet is as different on the inside as it is on the outside, which as we discovered is indeed unusual."

Connections are single-ended and include digital in and outputs, while the soon-to-be-banished front red switch, switches the digital input on and off. You can also switch the digital input in with the chunky aluminium remote; the FA button does the input while the FB changes sample rate. There are no track numbers, but this is a nicely made and very stylish handset for the price. The analogue outputs are non-variable and deliver a peak output of 2.5 volts, which is a bit more than standard, but not uncommonly so.

SOUND QUALITY

We put the Mini Droplet in place of our reference player – the Resolution Audio Opus 21– and placed some Guru QM10s into the mix. Radiohead's *In Rainbows* got aired through the new Cyrus 8 XPd amplifier (see review next issue) and the Mini Droplet instantly gave some impressive results. The MD changes the balance from our familiar source and just as obviously, the stereo presentation, but it does nothing to undermine the appeal of the music. Just to make sure that nothing was amiss we took the digital output from the player and put it through the Cyrus 8 XPd's digital input. The result was in much

the same ballpark as the analogue output from our Resolution Audio reference player, so it was clear that the valve output stage is making the biggest tonal difference.

The balance variation is not subtle, there is a curtailing of frequency extremes which means that the bass is devoid of serious weight and the treble lacks a sense of 'air' and as a result, you can't hear the shape of a concert venue so clearly. The upper bass is on the full side and the midrange shines forth, characteristics which are not unheard of with valve-driven components, but aren't usually so obvious with CD players.

Moving over to the more neutral hands of Bowers and Wilkins' 802D speakers and the extra resolve of Bryston's BP-16/2B SST2 pre/power amplification, the degree of tonal variation is slightly tempered and it becomes apparent that the MD does something quite beguiling with the discs its spins. It brings a degree of fluidity to the music that is very rare with digital sources. This is clearly something to do with the remarkable transparency that valves have through the midband, but we've had plenty of glass-powered CD players in the past that are not in this league, so the NOS DAC has to be a contributing factor, too. The extent to which it puts the music before the sound is extremely powerful. You soon cease to be concerned about issues of neutrality and get sucked into the performance being played.

The idiosyncratic nature of the presentation is obvious when a familiar disc starts up, there is a strong sense that the imaging is amiss and this is evident when you move over to a more conventional player. We pulled in a Bryston BCD-1 which gives distinctly better bass extension and a precise sense of space and depth, making the MD sound positively vague in terms of imaging and relaxed in respect of timing. But, and it's a big but, the less conventional player brings a musical integrity to the result that is extremely powerful.

Put on something with an emotional message and that comes through in no uncertain terms; Gillian Welch brought a lump to our throats with the song *The 14th of April*, the quality of which was so enthralling that it was very difficult to hit the stop button once another track was allowed to follow.

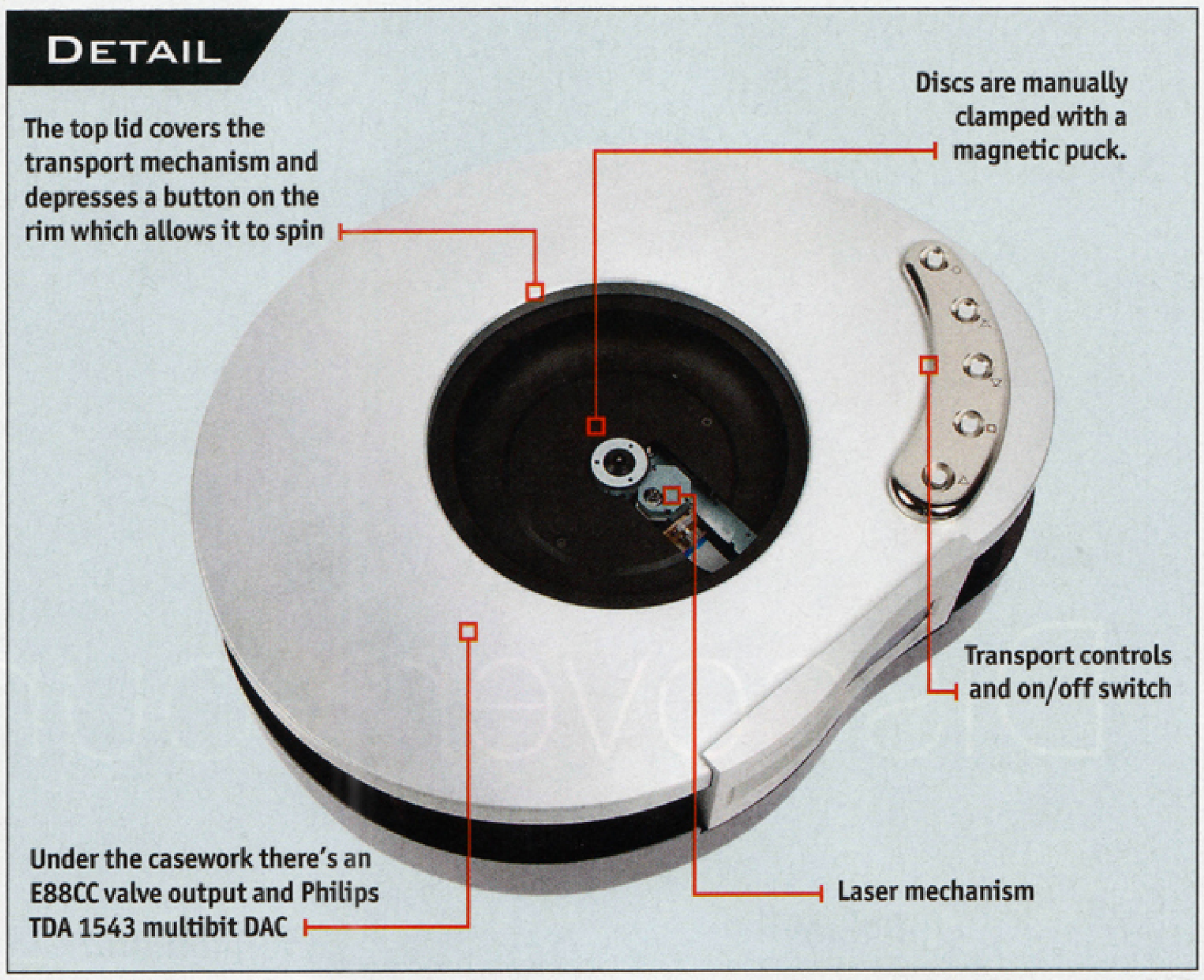
The Mini Droplet certainly does timing and imaging in its own way, but the more hi-fi aspects of the sound are not emphasised. The way in which it presents digital music is more 'analogue' than most readers could imagine.

So if you're looking for the highest resolution for your money you'd probably be better off with another CD player, but if its emotional connection that you crave, then this is a very desirable proposition, especially if you're more of an analogue lover than a digital one.

The Mini Droplet is a bit like a Linn LP12 turntable: it's not a precise and neutral transcriptor of the signal, but it gets to the heart of the music in a way that so many more 'accurate' players don't. The sound will inevitably suit some material more than others. Hard rock and dub fans might be disappointed. But, if your tastes are more discerning and refined, it could well be the most affordable route to CD nirvana. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

DETAIL

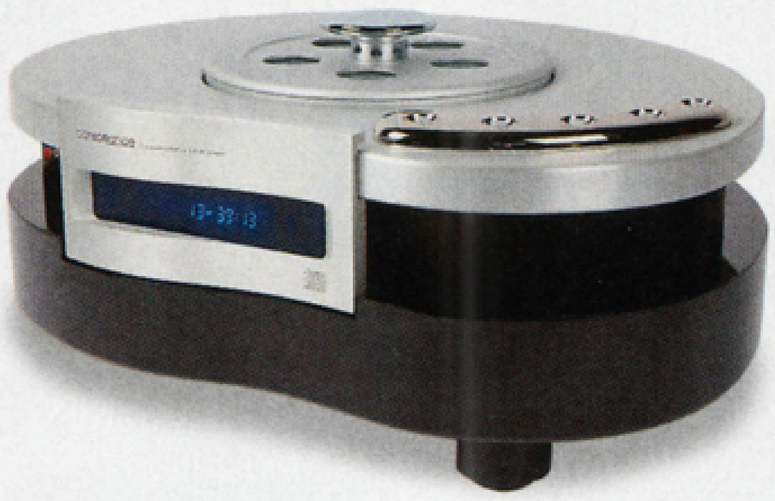


"The extent to which it puts the music before the sound is extremely powerful. You soon get sucked into the performance..."

NON-OVERSAMPLING

The appeal of non-overampling DACs lies in the less is more audio ideal, the fewer components there are in the signal path the more of the signal should get through. The NOS DAC was conceived by Ryohei Kusunoki in 1996. He wanted to find a way of avoiding time smear in digital audio and, therefore, considered the digital filter to be the biggest cause of this problem. As it's the digital filter that does the over oversampling, he built a DAC that did away with it altogether and used an analogue filter after the DAC.

Some companies offer NOS DACs with no filtering at all, an approach that can cause problems with some amplifiers. Consonance uses a gentle analogue filter. A number of high-end electronics makers including Audio Note UK, 47 Labs and AMR incorporate NOS DACs in their products, but the Mini Droplet is the least expensive example that we have come across so far. There are, however, a few relatively inexpensive NOS DACs on the market should you want to experiment.



VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★☆	**PRO** Immensely engaging and fluid sound that will have you glued to the listening seat, distinctive styling and build for the money.
FEATURES ★★★★☆	**CON** Romantic sound will not appeal to all and it's unlikely to work with all types of music. Another con is the slow disc-loading process which takes some patience.
BUILD ★★★★☆	
VALUE ★★★★☆	

CONCLUSION
A CD player for the heart rather than the head, it gets to the nub of what music is essentially about. Neutral it's not and that will limit its appeal, but there's no getting away from its ability to engage the listener - try and get a demo before you buy.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★☆

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