

A Trio of CD Players:

Arcam Alpha 9; California Audio Labs CL-15; Myryad Systems MC100

If you've dreamed of sugarplums *and* SACD players over the holiday season but came up empty-handed, take heart. At this hour there remains a great deal of volatility in digital playback: SACD; DVD-A; the promise of universal players. Want to be an early adopter? Be my guest. But there may not be room for all the new formats in this highly competitive market. And by next holiday season somebody might be hanging their orphaned software in their windows as dream-catchers. Still you need that new player and you want to step up a rung. Fortunately, if the trio assembled here is any yardstick, the "mature" CD player market has never sounded better and at a fraction of the cost of newer formats. Quite reminiscent of the turntable/toner/cartridge market as digital began its ascendancy. Consider this comforting thought; while you're waiting for it all to shake out, the choice you make this year may be the *last basic CD player you'll ever buy!*

The Players

I gave some consideration to limiting the discussion to the Arcam Alpha 9 and the California Audio Labs CL-15, given their similar prices and integrated HDCD decoding. But the Myryad Systems MC100 interested me. Its lineage, build quality, and a price defiantly lower than the Arcam and the Cal Audio made it a contender.

In general these players possess similar accessing features, have comprehensive remote control capability, and share a quality of fit and finish that places them a cut above most under-\$1,000 players. That is, solid but not to be confused with a Chubb safe. The sound quality will not disappoint. Spectral balance, octave to octave, is remarkably similar as it is for many digital systems. Gross frequency disparities are usually induced in the design stage, perhaps for marketing considerations, but that was not in evidence here. The differences in these quarters tended to be subtle shadings-and sometimes shadings upon shadings. As the expression goes it's in the details. Distinctions were not always readily apparent and often revealed themselves only after many hours of listening to a variety of program material. Listening sessions were conducted throughout the survey with the Plinius 8150 integrated or Electrocompaniet ECI-3 driving the ATC SCM20SL or Joseph Audio

RM22si loudspeakers linked with either Wireworld Equinox III or Nordost Blue Heaven cabling.

Arcam Alpha 9

Arcam of Cambridge, England, now in their twenty-first year, is the elder statesman of this crowd. Their top product, the Alpha 9, sports for a nondescript, non-showy appearance in a basic matte-black finish and an emerald green-lit display.¹ It is Arcam's way to reserve the beef for the inner components that matter most. Technically the Arcam Alpha 9 presents an impressive résumé. It incorporates the unique dCS Ring digital-to-analog converter, a technology springing from a three-year partnership with dCS (Data Conversion Systems Ltd.). Pacific Microsonics provides 24-bit filtering as well as HDCD decoding with the PMD-100 chipset. High-performance Analog Devices op-amps, PPS film capacitors, and a Sony CDM-14 transport round out the list of high-quality internals. Arcam also makes certain that owners will not be left in the cold should improvements be introduced down the road. Updated ROM chips for the Alpha 9's software will be made available to current owners at a nominal cost.

Sonically the Arcam Alpha 9 conveys a solid block of midrange and treble integration that is hard to improve upon. It is not a warm-sounding player (none of these is), neither does it seem to go as deep as the Cal Audio or exceed the Myryad in dynamics. It just conveys an uncanny, non-fatiguing balance. Its middle range is the most Yin-like of this group; the others are dryer and veer toward the Yang. Its treble balance might sound slightly soft or "round," though it doesn't sound even marginally attenuated in this region. It is, however, full of body and yields details without icy edges. While its treble might be bettered, for a price, it remains the most luxurious of the Arcam's attributes. String sections sing with a combination of extension and body and layering, while lesser players congeal strings into tapioca. During the "Lux Aeterna" [Rutter: *Requiem*, Reference Recordings RR57 HDCD], the soundstage broadens and deepens, allowing a rising halo of chorus sound to fill the room. When Jennifer Warnes sings the title track from *The Hunter* [Private/BMG 82089-2], her lilting

¹ John Marks offers some comments on the Alpha 9 in Issue 120, page 99.

soprano is one continuous, airy marvel as she slips in and out octaves.

The Arcam also sorts out complex musical passages like nobody's business. When Roy Haynes launches into his tape-saturating drum solo during "On the Beach" from Illinois Jacquet's *Birthday Party* [Groove Note GRV1003-2], the Alpha 9 resolves the attack with little perceivable smearing and great dynamic thrust. All the while maintaining the best soundstage on this disc that I've heard from any player.

Myryad Systems MC100



Myryad Systems of England is the relative newcomer of the three. It was formed in 1995 by Chris Evans, former Arcam co-founder/director and subsequently director of technology at NAD. He was joined by his brother David and David's wife Lynn, production engineering and quality management specialists with impressive résumés. The partnership was completed a short while later with the addition of former Mordaunt-Short owner Chris Short. The line now comprises the low-priced/high-performance T-Series and the sophisticated M-Series, which includes power amp, preamp, tuner, integrated amplifier (which I'm reviewing in a up-coming issue), and a more advanced CD player, the MCD-500. The MC100, originally equipped with a 1-bit converter, was upgraded last year to the 24-bit delta-sigma DAC. It is the sole contender in this survey not equipped with HDCD decoding; but Myryad believes that for the majority of discs available, its brick-wall filtering has sonic characteristics superior to Pacific Microsonics' chipsets, which they admit are excellent. Still, when last I checked, there were more than 2,000 HDCD titles on the market, including two mainstream titles I recently bought: The Dixie Chicks and Sophie B. Hawkins. Still only an HDCD fetishist would consider lack of HDCD decoding an insurmountable impediment to the purchase of the Myryad.

The MC100, more than the others in this survey, is glamorous. Its black and silver-anodized reversal

styling (from custom machined quarter-inch solid aluminum), with a large central tray and an equally large blue-lit vacuum display, suggest the hand of a fine industrial designer. It's not low profile like the Alpha's, falling somewhere between the Arcam and the Cal in height. The MC100 projected the greatest sense of quality and attention to detail. It is also the most straightforward to use and I especially liked the one-touch track selection and a tray that retracts automatically if left open more than a minute or so. For convenience and integration, the entire M-Series features the My-Link connectors, which allow at a single touch the remote to power up all Myryad components, even those hidden in furniture.

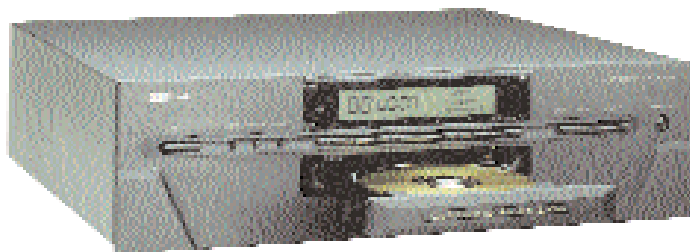
Its midrange is the warmest of the three, solid at 2-4 kHz; its treble is clean, though perhaps gently restrained toward the top octaves. Perspective is back just a couple of audience rows compared to the Alpha 9. And oh my, is it punchy dynamically! Percussion has that "right now" sense of impact and liveliness. It's a great rock 'n' roll player. It doesn't extend as deeply as some and sometimes lacks the full weight of the live performance, but the quality of its low frequencies is exemplary. They seem sculpted and defined in space, right down to the grunt of the double bass during "Stone in My Heart," from *The Thin Red Line*. It images with precision, not surprising given its dynamic and transient excellence. The MC100 is silent at rest and when called upon to reproduce a powerful dynamic attack, it strikes like a cobra from the darkness. I got this feeling of "quiet" time and again with this player.

Soundstaging is about average for this group – none was exemplary. It could be that some of the lowest bass cues were slightly attenuated, or maybe the mark of a less than fully realized upper treble. In any case; the sonic picture is framed with a faintly lower proscenium. Low-level resolution is above average in this price range; but I felt this player missed some of the acoustic envelope and wooden texture of, say, the Koto in "Stone in My Heart."

On the Dixie Chicks' cover of "Loving Arms" [*Wide Open Spaces*, Monument NK-68195HDCD], the Myryad projected the more laid back vocal performance, slightly subdued, pleasantly warm. Guitars were clean but lacking the transient speed and articulation of the best. The highs on the MC100 are smooth but occasionally on vocal harmonies or choral pieces, individual voices seem a bit less defined and lack the effortless soaring quality of a live performance.

California Audio CL-15 Player-Processor

If you need a bloodhound to keep track of California Audio these days, it's not because they're trying to throw you off the scent. Founded in 1986, this company was acquired in 1997 by Go-Video, who has since changed its name to Sensory Science Corporation, reflecting the Arizona parent company's expansion into video as well as audio. The CL-15 is the most industrial and high tech design in this survey. Taller, with a black panel and pumpkin orange



backlit display, it uses the more conventional Burr-Brown PCM 1702 20-bit Colinear DAC and again the PMD-100 HDCD decoding filter. Four-layer glass epoxy PCB construction is used throughout. A fully balanced output option is available.

The CL-15 has capabilities unique to players offering a digital volume control, which allows it to bypass a preamplifier and plug directly into an amplifier. While this direct path has the advantage of providing better sonics, it does lack flexibility if your system is comprised of other line-level components. And in another twist, it doesn't have the customary digital-out like the others in the survey, but does sport a digital-in, which enables a digital source - perhaps a portable DAT recorder - to take advantage of the superior processing capabilities built into the CL15. Nonetheless the lack of a digital-out is unfortunate and isn't helpful to audiophiles who might want to swap DACs in and out for comparison purposes. Finally it is the only one of the three that provides an RS-232 interface for connections with PCs, multi-room control systems, and Cal Audio's own DMP (Digital Management Program) software. This makes the CL-15 compatible with future Cal Audio products.

While the Alpha 9 seems a study in the sort of stolid neutrality that might impress a Swiss banker, with the MC100 as its somewhat more relaxed sibling, the Cal Audio is the crazy thrill-seeking uncle. It has a voluptuous bottom, that is, lower mids and bass. Politeness is not its middle name. It's punchy and dynamic, with the snap of a bullwhip. When Doug MacLeod and his band let loose during the title track from *Come To Find* [AudioQuest Music AQ1027], the CL-15 itself lets loose with drum dynamics and guitar transients that propel the tune forward. On the Jennifer Warnes' disc, the Cal Audio was king, reproducing the depth and stomp of the electric bass and kick drum combinations. The slight thickening in these regions does not always illicit the ultimate in detail, but if extracting more would have entailed thinning out this range, it would have been no bargain. (To my mind, pursuing every sonic fragment and detail turns the listening experience into an intellectual Easter Egg hunt and guts our emotional response.) The midrange was rich and detailed, although not as purely continuous as the Arcam. It was roughly on a par with the Myryad, though slightly more forward. Further up, a slight whitening of the string section suggests an emphasis in the lower treble.

Head to Head or... DAC's All, Folks!

Few instruments can convey full range scale, dynamic weight, and delicacy the way the piano does. The tasteful piano intro to Lyle Lovett's "North Dakota" [Joshua

Judges Ruth, Curb/MCA 10475] was exemplary at delineating the "inside" character of each of these players. The Alpha had a ripe, plummy sound and seemed the most resonant. Of all the players, this one gave the strongest sensation of felt hammers striking metal strings. Existing at once, these images should be perceived in balance with one another. The MC100 and the Cal Audio straddled the Arcam tonally, the CL-15


exhibiting a touch more top end and perhaps a slight edge, while the Myryad shaded the upper treble a bit, sounding just a touch less airy. But they both sounded cooler, giving the piano a less reverberant, crisper tone. I thought the Arcam achieved the preferable harmonic balance on solo piano. During the duet passages with Rickie Lee Jones, the Cal Audio CL-15 was more forward and brighter than either the Alpha 9 or the MC100. But drum fills were more dynamic. Even the texture of the drum skins as they were struck seemed more like the real thing. And you hear every breath and nuance. On Sunny Sumter's rendition of Stevie Wonder's "Overjoyed" [Sunny, Mapleshade 05932], her vocal with piano accompaniment extols the lower midrange strengths of the Cal Audio and detail and dynamism of the Myryad's mid-band. The Alpha 9, on the other hand, casts a spell with its pristine, all of a piece midrange and treble, giving up a little low-end weight in the process.

Of the CD players that have come through my listening room, these three performed above average, with wide though not exceptionally deep soundstages. The Arcam achieved the best depth, by a slim margin, by virtue of its wider microdynamics and low-level resolution. The fragile harp and organ interplay during "The Lord Is My Shepherd" [Requiem, Reference Recordings RR57] was an excellent test for these attributes. The steady insistence of the organ, playing off the shimmer and decay of the harp, was only exceeded by an outboard DAC, the Musical Design DAC1-A20, which demonstrated that as good as these players are, there are still finer shadings of resolution to be retrieved.

Perhaps the fundamental differences between these players occurred in the upper midrange and treble frequencies. This could best be described as how they "breathe." For me this is a combination of factors that includes dynamics and transient information, resolution, and the sense of air and naturalness. Choral works like the Turtle Creek Chorale's *Psalms* [Reference Recordings RR-86 HDCD] produce imaging and resolution challenges for all the players. All performed capably, but only the Arcam consistently unraveled the complexity of these passages, separating out vocal images with limited smearing and allowing an ambient soundstage to emerge from the silences. During "Stormy Monday," you can nearly feel the exhale of air on the microphone from Roy Gaines through the Arcam [I Got the T-Bone Walker Blues, Groove Note GRV2002-2]. Less so with the cooler and dryer Myryad and the Cal Audio. On extremely demanding string section passages, like the "Lento" from Vaughan Williams *Symphony No. 7*, ["Antartica," Bourne-

mouth/Bakels, Naxos 8.5507.37], some congestion crept into the playback of all three machines. With its dryer, whiter emphasis, this was a bit more in evidence with the Cal Audio.

At the end of the day I could be happy with any of these players without arm-twisting. Their broad similarities far out-stretch their subtle differences. In every system, I suggest the selection of components that are complements to one another, that satisfy personal definitions of seductive sound. Certainly for very fine system tuning, all three of these players qualify. The Myryad satisfies because of its strong overall balance, great styling, and mild compromises that don't rob it of essential musicality. It wouldn't be the sharpest or heaviest knife in the kitchen, but it would have good heft and a balanced feel. The Cal Audio provides the greatest tonal contrasts and visceral excitement of the bunch. More like a broadsword, the Cal Audio makes a dynamic plea to the "kick butt and ask questions later crowd," coupled with sophisticated features that will keep it current in a variety of installations. Just give the masses that digital-out! The scalpel-like Arcam succeeds in its straightforward fidelity to musical balance. It has a sound that is dense with harmonic sophistication. It lacks only another 20 pounds of machined aluminum to take on the heavier hitters at \$3-4,000.

As I said at the outset, 44.1 kHz CD player technology is mature and the selection has never been better. 

NEIL GADER

MANUFACTURER/DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

ARCAM ALPHA 9

AUDIOPHILE SYSTEMS

8709 Castle Park Drive
Indianapolis, Indiana 46256

Phone: (888) 272-2658

www.aslgroup.com

Warranty: Two years

Price: \$1,599

CALIFORNIA AUDIO LABS CL-15

SENSORY SCIENCE

7835 E. McClain Dr.
Scottsdale, Arizona 85260

Phone: (602) 905-9626

www.sensoryscience.com

Warranty: Two years

Price: \$1,695

MYRYAD SYSTEMS MC100

ARTECH ELECTRONICS, LTD.

Box 455, Williston, Vermont 05495

Phone: (514) 631-6448

www.artech-electronics.com

Warranty: Three years

Price: \$1,295

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sota Cosmos Series II, SME V tonearm, Shure V15VxMR, Audio Technica ML170, Lyra Lydian cartridges; Rotel RCD-951, Pioneer 414 DVD Player; Plinius 8150; Sim Audio Moon I5; Electrocompaniet ECI-3; ATC-SCM20SL speakers, Sound Dynamics RTS-3, Joseph Audio RM22si Sunfire True Subwoofer Mk II; Wireworld Equinox III, Nordost Flatline Blue Heaven, Kimber BiFocal XL, Kimber Hero interconnects; Mana Acoustics Sound Frame, Polycrystal Stands and Footers, Bright Star Audio Big Rock platforms

Manufacturer's Response

Thanks to Neil Gader for his review on the Myryad MC100 CD Player. We are pleased that our unit fared so comfortably when compared to the Arcam and CAL, pieces that cost 300 to 400 dollars more.

Neil mentions there are now more than 2,000 HDCDs available, as if that were a lot. When compared, however, to the hundreds of thousands of standard CDs on the market, this is really just a drop in the ocean. The question is, out of those few available HDCDs, how many would the average listener purchase? Maybe 3 or 4, or even 10? We felt that with relatively small support for HDCD, we would put every penny into developing a CD player that costs less, sounds better, and is beautiful (not just another black box). For added value and aesthetics we decided against the use of cheaper plastic or thin extruded face plates and chose instead to use solid quarter-inch -thick anodized aluminum. An expensive blue vacuum display with large digits was chosen. You can see it from across the room. The special finish on the cabinet is easy to clean and hard to scratch, all small details that Neil picked up on. . . . From the response in the market place, it is evident that we have chosen wisely.

My last point pertains to the increased demand for more user-friendly components. As in all the M-Series Myryads, the My-Link bus system is built in, so all components can be easily integrated into the ever-more-popular custom A/V installations with little fuss. This system also enables the user to link all Myryad M-Series components together for operation from the System Remote included with our pre-amps, integrated amps, tuners and A/V processor, whether they be placed in a stack or in different locations. . . .

DAVE LANG, PRESIDENT

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