

HIFICRITIC

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PICTURES AT AN AUDITION

Bob Pyle records his somewhat traumatic search for the ultimate DAC

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MUSICAL FIDELITY M6 ENCORE CONNECT

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CHARTWELL LS 3/5

Paul Messenger compares a new Chartwell LS3/5 to an original Chartwell LS3/5A from the 1970s

MUSIC & MORE



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This has turned out to be a most interesting issue, as I've managed to pass many of my digital audio responsibilities over to the excellent Andrew Everard. I've never really had much personal enthusiasm for the digital stuff, and while that wasn't really a problem through the '80s and '90s, when CD was the only significant digital game in town, a subsequent proliferation of digital sources, devices and software have made my analogue preferences feel more than a little isolated. (Despite recent news that the UK sales value of vinyl discs had actually overtaken download sales for the first time since the 'vinyl revival' first began!)

I'll carry on experimenting with new digital sources as and when they become available – indeed, this very issue sees me trying out 16-bit streaming for the first time, and with some rather positive results (see also Auralic review, pp12-13, and Subjective Sounds, p60). But I'll no longer feel obliged to keep up to date with the latest digital developments, which, to be honest, is quite a relief.

Instead I'll be able to bang on about some of my favourite hobby horses, such as the premature death of rock music, the ludicrous and totally unjustified price inflation that seems to have afflicted hi-fi (and house prices) in recent years, and so on. (And I should manage to come up with some other issues before we go to press, I'm sure.)

Although it's neither finished nor ready for publishing yet (hopefully it'll appear in our next issue), I've started writing a piece with NVA's Richard Dunn, who has some very radical ideas about where the hi-fi business is heading. To summarise his views, he reckons that the effect of the internet has barely started yet, and to a great extent will undermine the role of the traditional specialist dealer.

He's very critical of the way prices have increased, and claims that this rise is often down to increasing trade margins to compensate for a shrinking marketplace. That's as may be: it may well be true but I'd have to undertake some further investigations to confirm it. (I do, however, believe that money itself has been dramatically devalued by something that we're supposed to call 'quantitative easing'; I prefer the phrase 'printing money', but maybe that's another story.)

Dunn's arguably most contentious claim is that internet forums might have rendered regular hi-fi journalism – and indeed the traditional specialist hi-fi dealerships – effectively redundant. He may have a point, inasmuch as every hi-fi enthusiast out there now has a voice that he/she can use to discuss equipment and its performance.

It's a powerful argument, as the availability of space for anybody to express an opinion has certainly expanded, and should allow a more democratic discussion on the merits or otherwise of specific items or combinations of equipment. Dunn's theory is that this will lead to sale-or-return deals on equipment *via* eBay and forums, and dramatically shake up the profit margins, which is certainly an interesting point. We shall see...

Paul Messenger
Editor

C.E.C. CD5

PAUL MESSENGER TRIES OUT A ONE-BOX BELT-DRIVE CD PLAYER FROM JAPANESE MAKER C.E.C.

C.E.C. – I’m still not sure whether or not to include the full stops – has been around since 1954. It operated initially as the first turntable manufacturer in Japan, and undertook OEM manufacture for a number of important and well established other brands. It moved into CD players in 1983, soon after these started to take over from turntables, and currently makes an extensive range of players and drives. However, the real game-breaker, and the opportunity to put its name forward as a significant player in its own right, came when it introduced the world’s first belt-drive CD mechanism, in 1991.

We reviewed an example of a C.E.C., codenamed *TL3N*, alongside a separate *DA3N* DAC, back at the beginning of 2013 (*HIFICRITIC Vol7 No1*). It’s a combination that performed very well indeed, but totalled a substantial £5,600, whereas this top-loading *CD5* provides something rather similar in terms of features, but in a one-box format that costs less than half the price, at £2,600.

There are of course numerous differences between the earlier combo and this one-boxer. One key feature of the new belt-drive mechanism used in the *CD5* is that the belt itself is now user-replaceable (which apparently wasn’t the case before). Another is a significantly heavier stabiliser weight to smooth the disc rotation. Sadly I don’t have the original *TL3N/DA3N* combo to hand, but can bring out a one-box

Rega *Valve Isis* and a two-box Naim *CDS3/555PS-DR* for comparison purposes.

The *CD5* might look a little oldfashioned in presentation with its silver front and folded steel casework, but it certainly feels hefty enough to suggest pretty solid build. Construction is classic, with a slightly oversize cast front panel ahead of a pressed steel wrap. The front has a generous tinted plastic display panel that probably occupies about one-third of the total area, clearly showing what the player is doing in CD mode.

The four buttons that operate through the display itself control the basic functions of the top-loading CD (belt) drive mechanism. The latter sits in a well beneath a sliding plastic panel, and uses a 7cm diameter brass stabiliser puck and weighs a substantial 0.33kg. A couple of other buttons select power on/off and cycle through the four alternative DAC inputs (which default to CD). There’s also a 6.3mm headphone socket alongside a volume control for its partnering amplifier.

All these functions are of course duplicated on a neat and sensibly lightweight remote control handset, which also includes other functions such as the alternative filters (Flat or Pulse), various display modes and brightness settings, repeat and track programming.

The back panel includes the various inputs and outputs. Outputs include RCA/phono or AES/balanced analogue plus co-axial and Toslink S/PDIF digitals. The three different digital inputs include a USB-B plus co-axial and Toslink S/PDIFs. Mains electricity enters *via* a regular IEC socket.

What this means of course is that the *CD5* can function both as a CD player and (in an admittedly somewhat limited way) as a digital pre-amplifier, as the built-in DAC can accept CD or any of the three alternative digital connections mentioned above. Said DAC is sourced from ESS and uses an ES9018K2M chip which is allegedly capable of handling hi-res files of up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128/5.6MHz *via* its USB-B input. I’ll have to take that observation on trust, since I’ve never bothered with hi-res downloading (or DSD for that matter).

The display is large and flexible, showing the various operating modes when CD is in use, or the alternative if one of these has been selected. In the latter case it also shows the sampling frequency and whether the format is PCM or DSD. The selected

Manufacturer’s Specification C.E.C. CD5

Playable Disc	Audio CD and finalized Audio CD-R/RW
Spindle Drive System	Belt-Drive
CD Stabiliser	Diameter approx. 70mm, Weight approx. 330g
Digital output	Co-axial: 0.5Vp-p/75Ω; Optical: -21 to -15dBm EIAJ
Digital input / Sampling frequency	Optical: S/PDIF up to 24bit/192kHz USB: PCM up to 32bit/384kHz, DSD 2.8224MHz to 5.6448MHz Co-axial: S/PDIF up to 24bit/192kHz
DAC	ESS ES9018K M
Digital Filter	FLAT or PULSE (Flat only DSD)
Analog Output	Balanced XLR 4Vrms, Unbalanced RCA/phono 2Vrms
Headphones output	6.3mm
Frequency response	20Hz to 20kHz, +/-0.1dB (CD playback)
S/N ratio	105dB
Cross talk	105dB
THD	0.016%, 1kHz/0dB
Power Supply	AC120/230V, 50/60Hz (Specified on rear panel)
Power Consumption	17W
Dimensions	435(W) x 335(D) x 109(H)mm
Weight	Approx. 8.6kg (Incl. CD Stabiliser)
Finish	Silver/Black
Price (UK)	£2,600

PAUL MESSENGER



digital filter option (labelled either 'pulse' or 'flat') is also shown.

The difference between these filter settings is interesting. 'Flat' is commonly encountered in digital audio, and while it gives a superbly flat frequency response, there's a down side in terms of time domain distortions, including the usual (arguably audible) pre-echo. 'Pulse' ameliorates these time domain difficulties (as they are still present in most recordings) by rolling off the high treble (-2dB at 20kHz when dealing with 44.1kHz CD style material).

Sound Quality

Soundwise the CD5 delivers perfectly satisfactory results in its own slightly gentle and laid back sort of way. I wouldn't say it has the sharpest or tightest timing, but any lack of tautness is very marginal indeed, and in other respects it's actually rather good. Stereo imaging, for example, is invariably precise and well focused with impressive depth perspectives, while any colorations are also extremely low.

Tonally it seems to be just a little on the 'warm' side of strict neutrality, but again this is very much a marginal observation. The subjective difference between the player's alternative digital filter arrangement is also very small, though I did marginally and consistently prefer the 'pulse' setting when carrying out 'unsighted' comparisons.

I thought I ought at least check out the other inputs, and did my best, though computers as usual did their best to sabotage things. They were at least partly successful, in steadfastly preventing me from

checking any of the hi-res material that's on my server (the only hi-res material that I have). I was also a tad confused to note that some CDs that I'd copied onto my computer showed up as 48kHz, rather than the 44.1kHz that should have been displayed.

As far as I was able to tell, that slight lack of precise timing was probably the responsibility of the ESS DAC, as it seemed pretty consistent between at least the two different inputs that I tried. However, I should emphasise that this is a very minor criticism, and at least partly down to a personal preference.

Conclusions

The CD5 makes a whole lot of sense. On the one hand it could well be purchased as a 'last CD player', while it can also function as a 'digital pre-amplifier', able to accept digital signals in three formats: USB-B (for the computer); Toslink (for the TV); and co-axial S/PDIF (for the server). That arrangement would suit my own system just fine, but does it suit yours? And will it continue to do so after you've added streaming in the future?

It's hard to predict tomorrow, so I can't say for sure that the CD5's present relevance will hold for all of the next decade. I remain optimistic that a CD drive plus three external digital sources will be sufficient for my needs in 2026, but I can't guarantee it. Certainly the CD5 looks a versatile proposition, and already has a fair amount of future-proofing features, especially for those wishing to explore the ins and outs of hi-res downloading, so formal Recommendation would seem appropriate.

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RECOMMENDED

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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

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AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

BECAUSE HIFICRITIC IS FUNDED BY ITS READERS THE SUBSCRIPTION COST IS NECESSARILY HIGHER THAN FOR MAGAZINES SUBSIDISED BY ADVERTISING REVENUE, THOUGH CERTAINLY NOT AS HIGH AS PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIST JOURNALS.

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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I'm not sure whether it's really appropriate to use this column to bang on about a means of receiving music over the internet, but Qobuz and TIDAL have loomed large in my leisure activities over the past couple of months, and have actually proved a generally positive experience.

I could see the attraction of streaming services when I visited the children, who had relatively small collections of pre-recorded music and seemed happy enough listening to compressed MP3-encoded files. They seemed perfectly content, streaming off Amazon via the TV and a pair of tiny B&W *MM1*. But I couldn't really see the relevance to my own situation, in view of my large music collection and dislike of MP3 encoding.

I was therefore rather surprised to find myself quite seriously impressed when recently experiencing the 16-bit streaming delights of Qobuz and TIDAL, courtesy Auralic's *Altair* (see pp12-13). Journalists get to play with such things without having to pay a subscription, which is certainly a worthwhile bonus, and it does mean that I can try more than one streaming service without the usual cost penalty. But I'm still not certain I can sensibly advise which one is the better. Auralic rates Qobuz, but on my explorations it seems a trifle less capable than TIDAL.

The bottom line is if course that streaming involves computers, and computers do have a will of their own, and if you don't like them (and I don't), they don't like to cooperate. I was happily listening to a live Ry Cooder concert from San Francisco when the stupid thing simply stopped. I did eventually get the concert starting again, after spending about an hour restarting several things several times. But it was a frustrating experience that did nothing for either my blood pressure or my attitude towards computers.

Still, I suppose I'd never have heard Ry Cooder's version of *Wooly Bully* if I hadn't had access to a decent streaming service, so I ought to be grateful for such a merciful experience...only for the damn thing to crash again a few minutes later. Maybe I'd just chosen a 'difficult' album... who knows.

When everything's working fine, I have to say that streaming has a lot going for it, because of the way it can expand even a reasonably comprehensive record collection. I'm particularly fond of live recordings, and found a number of alternative versions of familiar (and sometimes not so familiar) tracks. Quite often I've acquired a studio version of an album without realising that live performance versions were also available from around the same time.

Being a Deadhead at heart, I was particularly pleased to notice that a whole collection of live recordings had now been released from the *Europe '72* tour. I've had the vinyl triple album for many years, but had never expected to hear the set that I'd heard live at the Bickershaw Festival more than forty years earlier. (I do remember the sun coming out for the first time that weekend, just as the Grateful Dead took to the stage!)

At the same time, I did try to play four Rolling Stones albums (including my all time favourite *Let It Bleed*), only to be told that none of my selections was available. It all seems to be rather random, as I had no trouble finding some very rare Beatles tracks, along with the regular mainstream material. It all seems to be very unpredictable.

What really matters, however, is that streaming is all about the music, not the hardware. The 16-bit/44.1kHz services like Qobuz and TIDAL sound just fine to these ears *via* the Auralic *Altair*, so what's not to like: it's a golden opportunity to expand your record collection dramatically for £20/month.