

hi-fi+

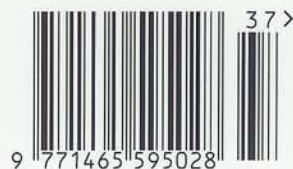
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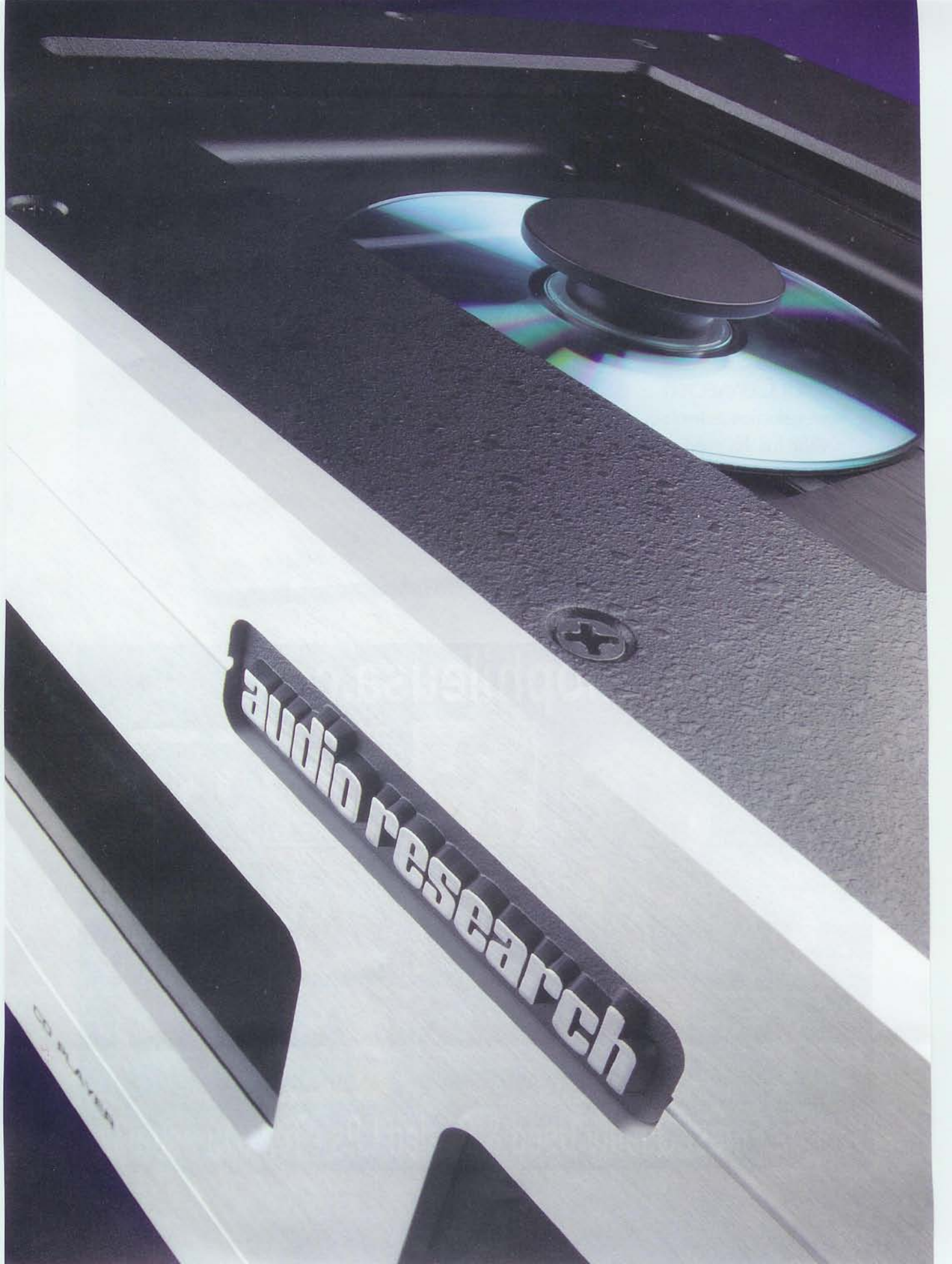
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Stretching the analogue envelope...



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audio research

CD PLAYER

The Audio Research CD3 Mk. II CD Player

by Alan Sircom

Audio Research is one of those invulnerable brands, like Patek Philippe in horology or Aston Martin in cars. It's so well crafted, has such a cachet of quality entailed with the name that you are prepared to forgive 'minor transgressions' that would be unforgivable in other products simply because of the performance in other areas. Of course, these brands get to this esteemed position by dint of a series of extremely good products that need no forgiveness. And, on occasion, there is a brand that bypasses the whole 'transgressions' bit and knocks out hit after hit after hit. And that's where ARC scores highly – there may be a duff product buried somewhere in the history, but the reason for Audio Research's invulnerable position as hi-fi maker par excellence is because it doesn't know how to make a bad product.

The £5190 CD3 is typical of the ARC approach. It is beautifully, if conservatively, constructed, with a style that is timelessly Audio Research. If you don't like the look (in black or silver), chances are you will skip the whole ARC range. If you do, the CD3 is the equivalent of a gateway drug; the rest of the system will follow, turning slowly ARC-wards. The engineering beneath the heavy, quality chassis is as refined as the exterior, and as conservative.

Sometimes, I can't help feeling that the whole 'frequency extension' thing is a bit of a cult. You take a perfectly good CD sound, tweak it in ways we can't actually hear directly and that results in better sound; the whole thing smacks of mock-

metaphysical musings with no direct bearing on performance. The fact that it entails a large set of products that you also cannot actually hear directly but which alter what you can only serves as reinforcement. My badreligioscope just starts pinging at this point, and I often think the next step is to be dragged off to a secret location, to be locked in a room for a week with a Wadia but no food, water or sleep until I really, really believe.

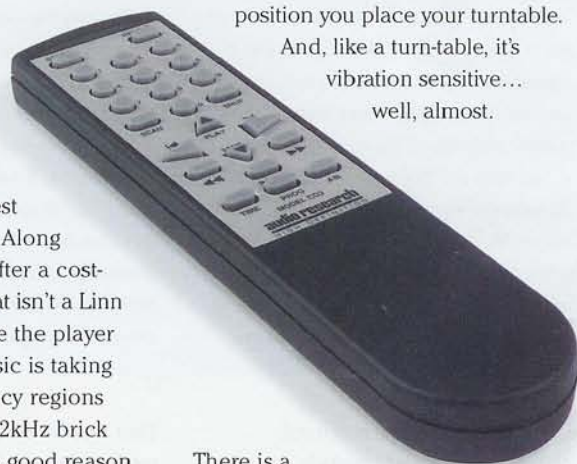
Trouble is, these frequency enhancing CD players are consistently the best loved models around. Along with Wadia, if you're after a cost-no-object CD player that isn't a Linn or a Naim, chances are the player will estimate what music is taking place in those frequency regions well above the disc's 22kHz brick wall filter. And there is good reason for this; if the players sounded bad, they wouldn't be so popular among audiophiles and hi-fi reviewers. But, sometimes I crave a good, no-nonsense CD player without any of the mumbo-jumbo. And that's where the Audio Research CD3 Mk II kicks in.

This is a largely fuss and freak-free player. It has desperately practical things like phono and XLR sockets and digital outputs. The CD drawer is fixed, so the player has a sliding cover and a magnetic puck to keep the disc in place when in use. There's a simple display and an equally simple set of rubbery control buttons on the

front panel. And there's a remote control. Add in handles and feet and that's it. No bells, no whistles... what more do you want?

The top loading nature of the player means, of course, that it takes up the top shelf of any rack it rests upon, it needs extra space for loading room and is best if used from a position of looking down on the player. In short, it sits best in exactly the same position you place your turntable.

And, like a turn-table, it's vibration sensitive... well, almost.



There is a level of shock protection afforded by the conventional CD mechanism that is missing from a solid transport, but – unless you are prone to playing discs mid-earthquake – this will never affect the performance of the CD3. A good stand is mandatory, though, and the quality of the stand makes a small, but noticeable difference to the sound of the player (specifically, the CD3 and Quadsraspire Reference wobblestands do not work together in any fashion).

How much of an initial run in is required of the player is not something we could define; the

Friends reunited...

by Roy Gregory

It's easy to see (hear) what AS likes so much about this player. I reviewed and was suitably impressed by the original version, so his enthusiasm for this updated model hardly comes as much of a surprise. Still, it's (usually!) nice to visit old friends and this seemed like too good a chance to miss...

Well, Alan's right about two things: the character of this player and the need to take care when it comes to its support. The original CD3 was not the most detailed player but more than made up for that by dint of its wonderfully neutral tonality and overall sense of musical balance. It was a machine that majored on insight into the performance and recording, rather than any artificially imposed romance, accuracy at the expense of forgiveness. However, if you're expecting the same thing from the Mark II then you're in for a shock. Plonk it down and let it rip and you'll be rewarded with a bold, solid and incredibly emphatic sound that's all about purpose and attitude. The Naim association is enlightening and it's easy to hear the dynamic integrity and rhythmic drive that you get from the best Naim players in the sound of the CD3 Mk. II. Unfortunately you can also get a rather clumsy, unsophisticated and unstoppable sense of momentum too, and that's less desirable.

Which is where the support comes in.

It was clearly apparent that the player was unhappy perched directly on the finite element HD-04 rack. Swapping to the titanium Aavik was different but no better, so various support options came into play. A voodoo platform was effective but by far the best option was the combination of the HD-04 with a set of finite element's CeraPuc feet between player and shelf. The effect was far from subtle. Playing the 'Bridal Ballad' from the *Merchant Of Venice* soundtrack, the ARC sat straight on the shelf produced a sound that was big on presence but lacked any real agility when it came to tracking the delicate vocal inflections. The phrasing was uncharacteristically clumsy while the relationship between the voice and lute was horribly simplified and crude. Adding the CeraPucs allowed the vocals to soar and freed the full range of expression. At the same time the dramatically improved phrasing was echoed in the playing of the lute which now took on its proper musical stance; its phrase responded to the vocal, the hesitations in the tempo adding a new emphasis where they'd simply sounded clumsy before. This was not a small change and was echoed on everything I played. The bass guitar on the Stewboss track 'Wanted A Girl', plodding and pitch blurred before, was crisper, better placed and far clearer of pitch. What had slowed and dragged on the track now provided

a subtle push and a needed lift in the low frequency energy that brought just the right sense of hesitant life to proceedings. With proper care given to its support, the CD3 Mk. II adds solid presence and a sense of new purpose to what was an already impressive performance. Comparisons with the (twice the price) Wadia 861SE might be invidious but do reveal a lack of absolute detail, air and separation, the last ounce of musical delicacy, but many will willingly forego such pleasures in return for the enticing body and convincing presence that ooze from the ARC. This player has a real feel for the shape and structure of music, a quality that has been further enhanced by the additional flesh it now puts on those bones. But the really good news is that there's no downside to these changes. The weight is in the right place, and it arrives at the right time. What it's doing is filling out the harmonic envelope and tidying up the temporal one – ironically, exactly the benefit you get from extending the bandwidth. The result has made what was already a great player even better. With musical integrity to make a flat-earthier smile and soundstaging to please the most fastidious of valve fanatics, the CD3 Mk. II really could be all things to all men. What price this player, dressed in black naturally, fronting a NAC552 and NAP300? Stranger (and far more costly) things happen all the time...

player had already been used extensively and successfully in a dealer's demonstration room. Nevertheless, being bounced around in the back of a delivery van is normally a fine way of undermining all the good work done by warming up. The CD3 took about a day and a half to come on song, but even stone cold, it showed its mettle and was clearly something special. Just how special would take a day or so to discover.

There is something preternaturally correct about the sound of the CD3.



That fuss-free demeanour extends perfectly to the sound quality. It's so unquestionably 'right' in so many respects, it really does make you think the frequency extending players are partaking in some kind of odd behaviour. The digital processing in the CD3 is so naturalistic in presentation, it makes many other players sound synthetic. This is a double-edged sword. The naturalness of the player makes live orchestral and naturally recorded acoustic discs sound truly wonderful, with the sort of openness

and soundstaging normally reserved for good vinyl. However, those recordings are precious. Recent classical recordings (especially those of the early 1990s) seem almost ego-driven, with the microphone virtually in the f-holes of the violinist, for example. These sound truly vexatious at the best of times, but the CD3's quality merely shows how unnecessary and exaggerated such an approach really is – as well as ruining the imagery in the process. Yet, strangely, this does not undermine the musical performance, it just makes you realise that if more recording engineers listened to their efforts through a CD3, they would simply be more prepared to make more balanced recordings. ▶

► A big part of the CD3's success story is its ability to stick to a rhythm like glue. This is one of the funkier high-end CD players around (at least, the funkier without a Naim badge on the front). For all the big soundstage, the solidity, deep bass and supreme detail, the player is first and foremost an entertainer, and will manage to find the beat in a CD of sound effects from *Dr Who*. Play something truly up-beat and the sound takes on a taut, bouncy rhythm, all of which suggests the CD3 is essentially transparent to the beat and just plays music. It's only when you compare this to other players, do you find that this rhythmic-agnostic performance is so extremely rare.

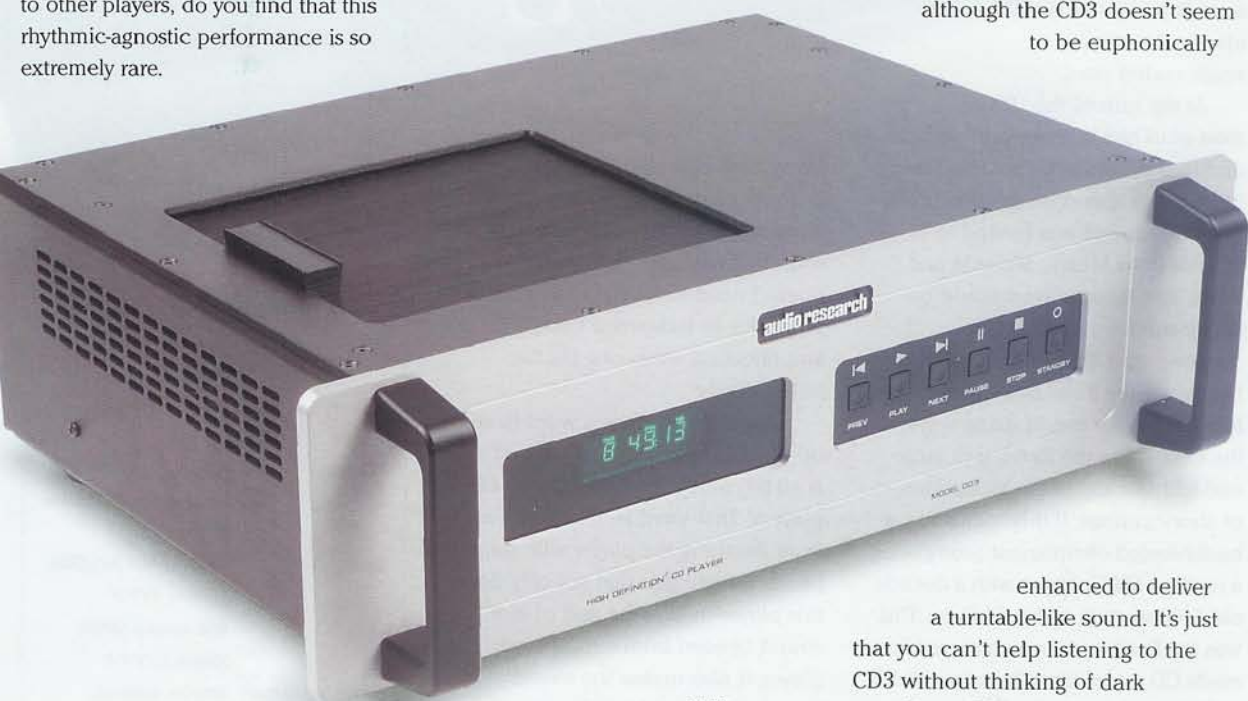
front row are sitting on the laps of those in the second and so on. Here, the orchestra is right-sized and every instrument seems to have its own space within a fully-formed soundstage.

Good soundstaging only comes from good detail and the ARC delivers detail in spadeloads. It's not stark or brutal in its detail, but even the slightest error when it comes to drop-ins and you will know about it. Listen real hard and you can hear what kind of toothpaste the singer uses. That sort of information is on offer.

We often call good products 'architectural' in their

players have a bass as slower than a diesel Morris Minor, but here the CD3 manages to keep bass lines coherent and separate from the really deep underpinnings. There are times when the player pushes so much information at the listener, it slows down; don't expect Mahler's *Eighth* to bound along like a happy puppy. But, swap Mahler for Montiverdi and the sound steps up a gear, as those voices (without the supporting pipe organ) do not need the boat anchor bass.

All of which leaves one reminded of a good, well-engineered turntable, although the CD3 doesn't seem to be euphonically



Soundstaging is another strong suit. Like much of ARC's product, the CD3 produces an image that is primarily deep rather than wide, but it still manages to throw its stage well clear of the speaker boxes. There is a sense of soundstage layering like a good record deck, too. Often with even very good CD players, there is a slight perspective shortening on well-recorded orchestral works, that makes it seem like the players of the

solidity, making the reader think of bold, powerful buildings like the Bank of England. But 'architectural' isn't strong enough for the CD3 – it's 'geological' in its bass performance. Sounds are produced from an unshakable foundation and if a sound is produced in a certain space in the soundstage, it is physically locked there to such an extent, you feel like you could trip over the musician. Yet, the bass is light and lithe, too. Often, solid

enhanced to deliver a turntable-like sound. It's just that you can't help listening to the CD3 without thinking of dark sounding solid and musical turntables like The Basis or an SME. There is a commonality of musical integrity here, and this is something altogether rare in CD spinning: Especially those CD players that don't tweak the frequency extension, such as Wadia and the Reimyo.

Of course, there is the choice of balanced and single-ended outputs. This is not really a choice, more a decision based upon the options available on the amplifier. If you have a pre-amp that sounds best with

► XLRs, use XLRs. If it sounds best on phonos, use phonos. If you want to experiment with the sound of both in a pre-amp that handles both, knock yourself out and go for it – it'll still come down to the pre-amp in the end. In other words, the CD3 is so damn well engineered, so unfussed by such things, that the balanced output sounds pretty much identical to the single-ended ones.



At the turn of the 1990s, most of us had to make our big 'first digital' decision, often without having big sums to spend on a player. Back then, my choice was limited to models from Arcam, Marantz and Rotel, and these players could be neatly summed up as 'warm', 'exciting' and 'honest' respectively. Like many, the Rotel RCD-965 was the best choice for me. In many ways, the CD3 is like the Rotel, writ large and without any of the limitations or shortcomings. If this seems like a back-handed compliment (comparing a modern \$5000 player with a decade old \$400 model), it shouldn't be. This was the first player I encountered that made CD sound like CD and yet didn't make it unlistenable in the process. That the ARC can replicate the feelings I had about Rotel's model means the player's honesty makes it my first choice for a high end CD player these days.

If I could change anything about the CD3 (aside from making my sample have the words 'Property of Alan Sircom' printed on the side in understated, but definitive letters), I would revise the buttons and give them a more positive, less spongy, pocket-calculator feel. That's it.

Everything else about this player is pretty much as good as it gets in its unfussy, fundamentally right sounding manner. No wonder ARC doesn't need to bother with a CD player for its Reference Class amplification – this one fits the bill perfectly.

Ultimately, there is a word to sum up the Audio Research CD3, and it is all-too infrequently used with CD players. That word is 'likeable'. Far from damning the player with faint praise, it highlights that not only does this player deliver the sort of hi-fi sound needed from a five-grand player, it also makes the sound intensely listenable and musically enjoyable. Few players are this good. If you think all that extra sound beyond 22kHz is just invention and want a player that deals with the true sound and nothing but, the CD3 is a welcome breath of bullshit-free air. It's little wonder this is ARC's only digital product; it's good enough to bring out the best in both the cheapest and the most expensive amps in the range. You can spend much, much more on a CD player and get much, much less. Heartily recommended. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Top-loading CD player/transport
DAC:	24bit Delta Sigma
Outputs –	
Analogue:	Balanced XLR, 5.4V RMS Single-ended RCA phono 2.7V RMS
Digital:	Balanced XLR (AES/EBU), 110ohm, 4V P-P BNC co-axial S/PDIF, 75ohm, 0.7V P-P
Output Impedance:	400ohm balanced, 200ohm single-ended
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480x134x311mm (handles extend 38mm from front panel)
Weight:	11.4kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Price:	£5190

UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909
Net. www.absolutesounds.com