At this stage in the decline of Compact Disc’s popularity, there still is a demand for CD players. A recent visit to the Audio Research REF CD9 SE at a newly £14,500! Apparently so, as the original REF CD9 (HFN May ’13) remains popular enough to warrant an update. The addition of the esteemed ‘SE’ suffix on this occasion, however, does not signal the arrival of a new model, as in the move from the REF 75 power amp to the REF 75SE. But what Audio Research has done makes it just different enough to warrant the new badge.

Brand Ambassador, and long-time employee, Dave Gordon reflected that “the differences from the CD9 to the CD9 SE are fairly simple. We updated the front panel to the new ‘digital’ look and feel. We updated the unit’s performance figures as well, and it pushes the USB file performance over USB is part of your audio lifestyle.

**DIGITAL HUB**

Dave is utterly candid: “Outside of the new USB card, there is no change in performance (but see PM’s Lab Report, p59). When a manufacturer has a product – particularly a digital product – that does not undergo major revisions for some time, or is replaced by a new model, people tend to forget about it, or take it for granted.

The Reference CD9 is a good example. Many people do not realise that the analogue section and power supply in the REF CD9 SE are from the REF 7 SE. Many people tend to forget about it, or take it for granted. But many people do not realise that the analogue section and power supply in the REF CD9 SE are from the REF 7 SE.

**SMART CARD**

For those of you who value streaming, this ensures superior compatibility with products such as Aurender’s music servers. So, keep an eye on the audiophile market for a new product.

**SE... SLOW EVOLUTION?**

When does a change warrant a new model name? I wrote in my last ‘Off The Leash’ column how, back in the old days, a product like the Quad II might have a lifespan of many years, or even decades. What isn’t generally revealed is what happens during those long runs. Pick up any owner’s manual and, at the back, you’ll read how the maker reserves the right to alter the product without notification.

That’s what happened to the AR turntable and many of Quad’s original models, as I learned when working on the reissue of the former and researching the latter. But due to unforeseen circumstances, such as the loss of a supplier, manufacturers may be forced to change parts. It might be as minor as a new paint source for the AR’s top plate, or the demise of a component type, the latter plagued both Falcon Acoustics and Rogers when reviving the LS3/5a (HFN Apr ‘75) still manages to massacre the lot. However, as I learned when working on the reissue of the former and researching the latter, manufacturers may be forced to change parts. It might be as minor as a new paint source for the AR’s top plate, or the demise of a component type, the latter plagued both Falcon Acoustics and Rogers when reviving the LS3/5a (HFN Apr ‘75) still manages to massacre the lot.

It wasn’t that far off the admirably handsome LS3/5a, as I learned when working on the reissue of the former and researching the latter. Manufacturers may be forced to change parts. It might be as minor as a new paint source for the AR’s top plate, or the demise of a component type, the latter plagued both Falcon Acoustics and Rogers when reviving the LS3/5a (HFN Apr ‘75) still manages to massacre the lot. However, as I learned when working on the reissue of the former and researching the latter, manufacturers may be forced to change parts. It might be as minor as a new paint source for the AR’s top plate, or the demise of a component type, the latter plagued both Falcon Acoustics and Rogers when reviving the LS3/5a (HFN Apr ‘75) still manages to massacre the lot.

When I reviewed the unit in an all-REF system, feeding the REF 6 preamp and REF 75SE power amp, driving Wilson Audio Sasha DM speakers (HFN Mar ‘19), all was working. Transparent, balanced throughout because it sounds better to my ears...

**BOLT UPRIGHT**

As the entire set is rich with spatial exploration and unusual instruments, to a Pink Floydian level, the REF CD9 SE was facing a challenge. This is one area where digital nearly always has to bow its head to analogue. Side by side with the LP, there was so little in it that, with levels matched closely, I was hard-pressed to tell them apart. Yes, the REF CD9 SE possesses that much air and warmth.

What also made me sit bolt upright was a percussive break – no, make that...
the percussion throughout – which enjoyed a sublime crispness, speed and overall attack that spoke of remarkable transient recovery. This was managed with precision, not aggression, and I am tempted to credit this in part to the superlative tube analogue stages, comprised of four 6H30 dual triodes, plus a 6550WE and a 6H30 in the power supply. For it is tubes, after all, that ensure this is of the ARC bloodline.

BODY AND SOUL
More than 30 years on from the first appearance of tubes in a CD player, I do realise that there are those still who find valves in a digital context something of an anathema, an anachronism and an affront. But thanks to the engineering efforts of early pioneers including Neil Sinclair and Mike Moffat, of California Audio Lab and Theta fame, this is a hybridisation that can now be said to have stood the test of time.

Before the history books are rewritten – as is this industry’s wont – it was my blue-sky prodding of Neil Hayes, as well as the Curtom label founder, Curtis Mayfield. A segue into an instrumental version of Sam & Dave’s ‘I Thank You’ in ‘Mama Get Yourself Together’ caused my world to stop. Yeah, music still does that to me. What the REF CD9 SE brought to the table was a seamlessness, a coherence that made this transcend any minor limitations in the recording. Which is just what you want a system to do: make you forget about the medium, the format, the artifice and simply enjoy a sublime crispness, speed and overall attack that spoke of remarkable transient recovery. This was managed with precision, not aggression, and I am tempted to credit this in part to the superlative tube analogue stages, comprised of four 6H30 dual triodes, plus a 6550WE and a 6H30 in the power supply. For it is tubes, after all, that ensure this is of the ARC bloodline.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT
Plus ça change: the REF CD 9SE remains as delicious a player as I recall, especially now that I have long-abandoned my dislike for top-loaders. Judging by my notes, it’s slightly warmer-sounding, but also a tad more precise and categorically, even more ‘analogue-sounding’ than its parent. Ditch your older ‘9? Not necessary. But definitely add this to your shortlist if you still have faith in high-end CD playback.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

LAB REPORT

Audio Research REF CD9 SE

Six years on from our review, and lab test, of the CD9 [HFN May ‘13], and despite Audio Research playing down any substantive changes inside its new ‘SE’ model, there are still measurable differences between the old and new units. Running production changes and a new manufacturing facility make it virtually impossible to maintain precisely the same spec. over this period.

Sure enough, the tube complement is unchanged, as is the Burr-Brown (now TI) PCM1792 DAC. The Fast and Slow (linear phase) digital filter options still offer the same ~122dB and 88dB stopband rejection(s) with ~0.3dB/20kHz and ~3.4dB/20kHz treble roll-offs, all traded against greater (Fast) and lesser (Slow) ringing in the time domain. And differences? Well, this latest SE version has a slightly lower 4.5V (vs. 4.8V) peak output although the 296ohm source impedance, increasing to 509ohm at 20kHz, is the same. And yet the A/D SN ratio has been improved from ~106dB to ~108dB (via CD and all digital inputs), honing its low-level linearity from ±1dB closer to ±0.3dB with CD.

Switching between native (black trace, Graph 1) and ‘Upsample’ [green trace, Graph 1] modes reveals a similar, slight increase in distortion over the top 25dB of its dynamic range (0.015 to 0.025% at 1kHz) but the frequency responses are slightly flatter in the SE – ~1.3dB and ~0.06dB/45kHz vs. ~2.0dB and ~5.8dB/45kHz (96kHz files with Fast and Slow filters). The biggest difference lies in the jitter spectra – relatively unchanged at 150ps/clock at 120ps/clock with CD but increased from 25ps/clock via USB to >900ps/clock in the SE (SPDIF and USB) thanks, largely, to an added PSU modulation. The effect? Typically, some added bloom and warmth to the bass. PM

Above: THD vs digital level at 1kHz (black = 24-bit / 48kHz, native; green, Upsample mode) vs CD (grey = 1kHz; blue = 20kHz, all in Upsample mode)

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