



EAR Acute Classic CD player

Art Dudley | Feb 2, 2017



In *Stereophile's* January 2016 issue, I began a series of reviews of \$10,000 CD players and transport-DAC combinations: an informal and serial survey, the goal of which was to gather, over time, the likeliest candidates for one's Last CD Player Ever. My choice of \$10,000 as the target price was more or less arbitrary, although, in retrospect, that's about what I've invested in my go-to combination of turntable, tonearm, and pickup head—so, who knows? Maybe my subconscious was acting out.

Although the review that follows won't be the last of the survey, this seemed a good time for a recap, which I'll get around to a couple of thousand words from now: something to look forward to. (But no peeking:

As John Atkinson once wrote to a former subscriber who vowed to never again read *Stereophile* on account of a political opinion stated by one of our contributors (footnote 1), *We will know if you do*. Astoundingly, said correspondent, a self-described executive for a music-publishing firm, wrote back to say that he couldn't tell if JA was kidding or not.)

That bit of housekeeping out of the way, it's on to the EAR Acute Classic (\$6795), a CD player that was offered for review by its distributor, EAR USA/Sound Advice, as opposed to being selected on the basis of price: a distinction from the other models I've covered, but one with the potential to reveal the Acute Classic as a cat among the pigeons, value-wise.

Description

The Acute Classic's predecessor was a CD player introduced in 2008 and called, simply, the EAR Acute. Based on an Arcam player of the day—although the chassis, power supply, analog filters, and output stage were all original to EAR—the Acute sold for \$5495, and had at its heart a Wolfson DAC that delivered 24-bit/96kHz performance. Notably, it did not include a USB input.

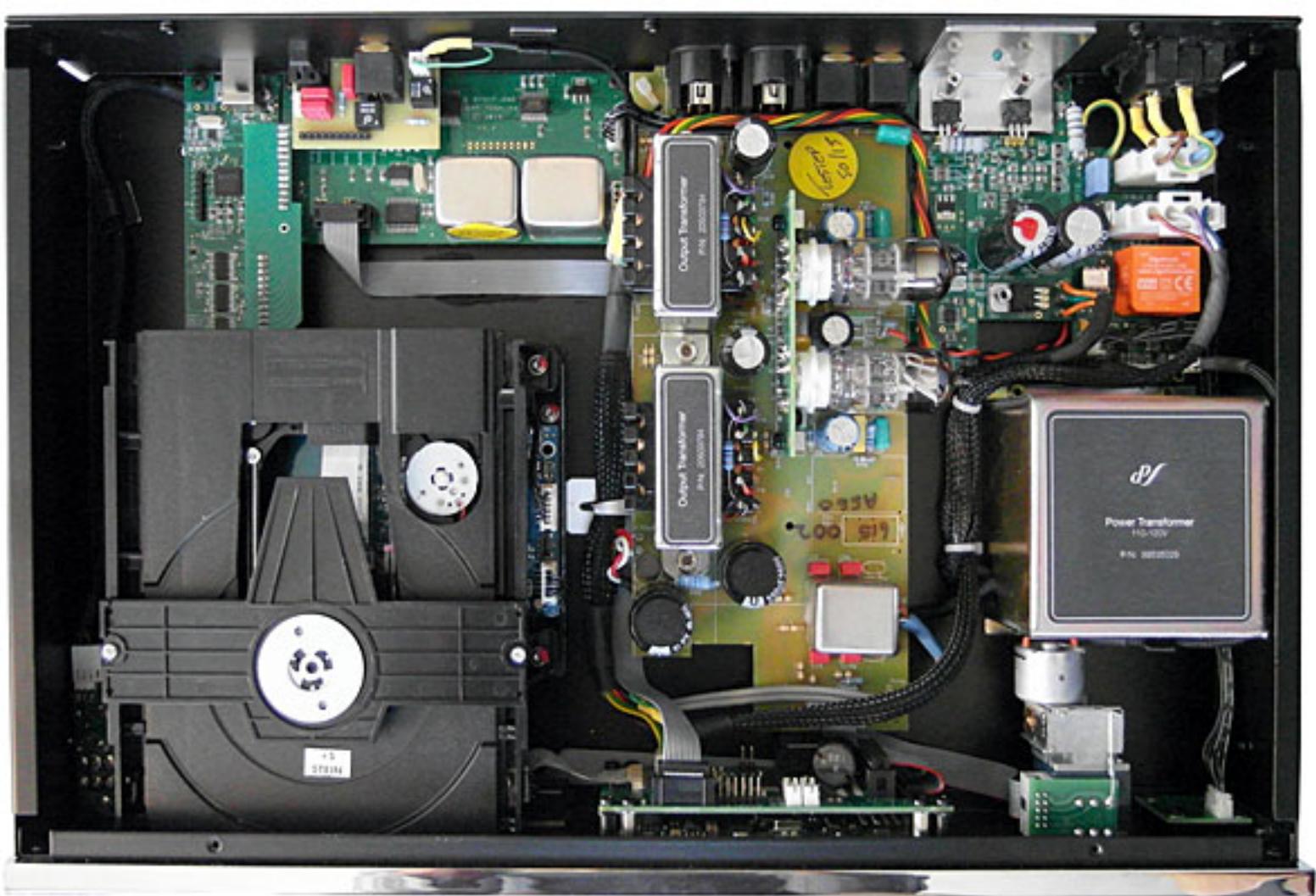


In 2012, changes to the Arcam base unit precipitated a new EAR model, the Acute 3—a curious name of which EAR USA's Dan Meinwald says, "Don't

ask us, we're British." It sold for \$6095 and *did* have a USB input.

Measuring 11.2" wide by 12" deep (including knobs and connectors) and 2.6" high, the Acute Classic—designed by EAR founder Tim de Paravicini—is built on a nicely painted steel chassis covered with a removable aluminum wrap well finished in semigloss black. Inside, a toroidal transformer is concealed by a polished-metal enclosure, presumably for shielding, next to which a power-supply board is home to voltage regulators—heatsinked to the rear of the chassis—and some especially robust-looking resistors and other bits. On a separate digital-input board are the player's Wolfson WM8741 DAC chip, which can process signals of up to 24/192 resolution, and USB and S/PDIF receiver chips, among various supporting ICs and passive parts.

The largest of the Acute Classic's various subassemblies is its analog output board, which contains a stereo pair of custom-wound output transformers, as well as an upright subboard containing two ceramic tube sockets—and the ECC88 (6DJ8) dual-triode tubes used to amplify the output signal. EAR's manual describes these tubes as *not* being replaceable by the user, notwithstanding the relative ease of removing the case: "Replacing valves yourself will void your warranty."



In keeping with EAR tradition, the Acute Classic's front panel is chromed and polished to a mirror finish. On the panel's right-hand side are an LED screen—it displays track information and, for the digital inputs, playback resolution—and a sizable volume knob, also chromed: EAR suggests that their new player can be used to directly drive a power amplifier. One assumes that those output transformers play a major role in buffering the player's analog output signal for such installations.

On the left side of the front panel are a ¼" stereo headphone jack, the disc tray, and the five buttons found on most CD players: Open/Close, Stop, Play/Pause, Previous Track, Next Track. A sixth button toggles between CD playback and the digital inputs: USB (24/192), S/PDIF coaxial (24/192), and S/PDIF optical (24/88.2), respectively addressable by the rear panel's USB Type-B, RCA, and TosLink jacks. Also on the rear panel are one pair each of single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) output jacks. (I used only the former.) An aluminum-and-plastic remote-control handset duplicates the front-panel controls.

Installation and setup

Notwithstanding EAR's suggestion that the Acute Classic can drive the

user's power amplifier(s), I began by using the player in place of my well-worn and slightly crotchety Sony SCD-777ES SACD/CD player, in my usual system of Shindo Laboratory Masseto preamp and Haut-Brion power amp, driving Auditorium 23's Hommage Cinema as well as my vintage Altec Flamenco loudspeakers. Speaker cables were Auditorium 23, interconnects were Shindo and Audio Note, and power cords were Luna Cables and the manufacturers' own stock cords.



To test the Acute Classic's USB-addressable DAC, I used an AudioQuest Carbon USB link to connect the EAR to my Apple iMac (running OS 10.7.5). I then used the sound-output utility of my Apple iMac to select the EAR as a streaming destination; my iMac recognized the Acute Classic as "xCORE USB Audio 2.0 Output."

When I used the Acute Classic with appropriate playback software (in this case, Audirvana v.1.5.12), its display accurately reported the resolutions of every file I tried: eg, selections from the high-resolution download of the Rolling Stones' *Out of our Heads* showed up as 176.4kHz (ABKCO); the (slightly less) hi-rez download of *Valentina Lisitsa Plays Philip Glass* showed up as 96kHz (Decca 002277502); bog-standard "Red Book" files showed up as 44.1kHz.

Footnote 1: Oh, all right—it was mine.

NEXT: [Page 2](#) »

COMPANY INFO

EAR Yoshino

US distributor: EAR USA/Sound Advice

1087 E. Ridgewood Street

Long Beach, CA 90807.

(562) 422-4747

www.ear-usa.com

ARTICLE CONTENTS

- [Page 1](#)
- [Page 2](#)
- [Specifications](#)
- [Associated Equipment](#)
- [Measurements](#)
- [Manufacturers' Comment](#)
- [Sample 2 Measurements](#)
- [Sample 2 Auditioning](#)

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

COMMENTS



Dual Layer SACD/Redbook discs.

Submitted by georgehifi on February 2, 2017 - 1:40pm

Art Dudley: "Finally, I listened to the CD layer of the SACD/CD It wasn't long before that familiar treble edge became apparent in the sounds of massed strings and brass instruments—and, sorry to say, Hahn's brilliantly played violin."

I've yet to hear the cd (pcm) layer sound good, on a dual layer SACD

disc, also when being converted by a delta sigma converter even hybrids.

Cheers George

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



Good of you guys to post the

Submitted by cgh on February 2, 2017 - 4:20pm

Good of you guys to post the manufacturers comment.

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



Fair enough. But...

Submitted by Solarophile on February 2, 2017 - 11:33pm

But why is it that there seems to be an over-representation in equipment failures with these uber expensive audio devices?

Costing around \$7k, you would think each unit would be of impeccable quality control and testing before leaving the door. Sure, the jitter FFT doesn't look great. But that higher noise floor thanks to the tubes isn't exactly pretty either.

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



If life were like that..

Submitted by PAR on February 3, 2017 - 2:02am

" Costing around \$7k, you would think each unit would be of impeccable quality control and testing before leaving the door."

I would guarantee that this unit left the factory after some impeccable QC. However in real life units sent for test are not always fresh from their maker, particularly where expensive gear is involved. Much of the latter is only made subject to a confirmed order as it is not viable for the (usually small) manufacturer to have lots of costly inventory hanging around hoping for a buyer.

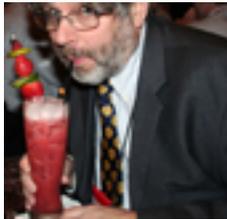
The result is that often the item under test is the only sample available in the given country. It will probably have been tramped around the country for demonstrations and may even

have been lent out to customers known to the importer/dealer and considered a serious potential purchaser. So it most likely has suffered from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

I listen regularly to an earlier version of the Acute owned by a friend and IMO it sounds excellent , far better than many competitive players. I have even played it back to back with my dCS stack and , again, it mostly held its own insofar as subjective enjoyment is concerned.

I am confident that a retest of another sample will remove doubts. Of course it does have a valve output stage so that has to be taken account of for the measurements. That is just the nature of the beast and all of its betubed relations

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



Second-hand Roses

Submitted by John Atkinson on February 3, 2017 - 4:31 am

PAR wrote: The result is that often the item under test is the only sample available in the given country. It will probably have been tramped around the country for demonstrations and may even have been lent out to customers known to the importer/dealer and considered a serious potential purchaser. So it most likely has suffered from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

This is increasingly the case. One amplifier we recently received for review had overlaid UPS labels identifying 2 other writers who had had the amp before us. As Stereophile is the only publication that measures the products it reviews, for an importer to send us a used and possibly broken sample is rolling the dice. As in this case, it wasn't worth them taking that risk.

As I say in this 2007 essay on our review policies, www.stereophile.com/asweseeit/307awsi/index.html, "All products sent to Stereophile and its reviewers . . . are

deemed to be for review. It is also assumed that they are representative of current production quality."

John Atkinson
Editor, Stereophile

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



Faulty equipment sent to Stereophile for test???????

Submitted by georgehifi on February 4, 2017 - 2:44pm

This does not sit well for me, as a good Stereophile review is the No 1 review a manufacturer can get to open the retail flood gates.

Hell I would have been devastated (and broke) if Sam Tellig didn't give my product a great review, I hung on every word of the review more so than the birth of my son.

And before anyone says I gave him a freebee, NO! he had to buy one from me before he even did the review.

To send to Stereophile some thing that has been around the world without double /tripple checking it first and making sure it's even better than a retail one, means the manufacturer doesn't give a s**t about how the review turns out, to which I highly doubt.

Like I said it doesn't sit well for me, as I've seen so many times with a bad reviews, the manufacturers comments saying it was faulty we'll send another one. REALLY!!!!

Cheers George

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



Not surprised at all- AD.

Submitted by Allen Fant on February 4, 2017 - 8:28am

Not surprised at all- AD.

I have been wanting to demo one of these spinners. Last year I sent an email request to Dan for a list of dealers/retailers. To date, I still have not received a reply?

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

I had one at home for a week

Submitted by mjazz on February 6, 2017 - 12:08pm



I heard the player first at a local hifi show and it sounded pretty "digital". I then borrowed the player for a week and I had more or less the same experience like Art. It was not just right in the highs. It sounded like old digital.

A pity, because I thought I finally found a good follow up player for my Meridian 808i.2, but the meridian sounds in my ears so much more natural than the EAR (through an EAR 912 pre).

It would be a -bad- coincidence if the player I had at home was broken as well....

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Come on guys you should know better than this

Submitted by fortescue on February 7, 2017 - 12:47pm



I had been looking forward to this review, especially given the kind words others have written about this CDP and about its predecessor. It's certainly been on my own audition list despite the fact I already own a fairly high-end Audio Note transport and DAC - I could really use the space apart from anything else!

The harsh review was a bit of a surprise, but the biggest surprise of all was the measurements section: looking at it, it's as plain as day that the unit you tested was broken. Surely it would have made sense to have had a conversation with the manufacturer BEFORE publishing?

You might think it makes you look all grand and objective, but actually you let your readers down when you pull a stunt like this. If the player is genuinely a poor performer then giving the manufacturer a chance to supply another sample, then confirming your findings, is surely a more credible way forward than reviewing a clearly broken bit of kit?

I would think you have been in the journalism game long enough to know that a petty exercise like this just makes you look a bit dumb, possibly even dumber than a manufacturer who wasn't organised enough to send you a fresh sample.

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



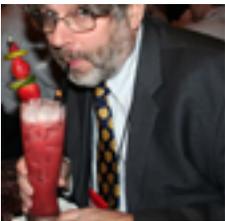
Stereophile should publish the review as they first wrote it.

Submitted by ChicagoJEO on February 8, 2017 - 10:32pm

I have to disagree. When Stereophile receives a product, it's the manufacturer's responsibility to insure that the reviewer gets a properly functioning unit. As a consumer, I don't have the test equipment (and well-trained ears) to tell when something is malfunctioning, if it happens at the relatively low level that was the case here. If Stereophile starts getting the manufacturer to buff up the unit to a higher level, I think that's a kind of collusion that would give the product a review indicating a quality level the average consumer is not likely to experience.

If the unit is exhibiting bad behavior that any consumer would be likely to recognize (bad artifacts, or simply not even functioning at all), then it's appropriate for them to return it to the manufacturer, as that's something the average consumer would also be likely to do.

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



Broken?

Submitted by John Atkinson on February 9, 2017 - 4:41am

fortescue wrote: the biggest surprise of all was the measurements section: looking at it, it's as plain as day that the unit you tested was broken.

Plain to you, perhaps. The high distortion I measured was within the manufacturer's specification, as was the high headphone output impedance. The poor performance of the digital section was no worse than that of some other products we have reviewed.

And while the maximum output level was higher than specified, we didn't think that in itself was reason to think the sample was broken, as it was identical in both channels. Yes, this may have been due to a manufacturing fault, but as I wrote in the essay linked to in an earlier posting, "It is assumed that [products sent to Stereophile and its reviewers] are representative of current production quality." If it turns out that a product is *not* representative, then we feel that the fact that neither the manufacturer nor the distributor has effective QA is a relevant

fact.

fortescue wrote: Surely it would have made sense to have had a conversation with the manufacturer BEFORE publishing?

The manufacturer and distributor were sent a proof of the review; the result was the "Manufacturer's Comment" you can read on this website and the promise to send another sample for a follow-up review. That followup appears in our March issue and will be appended to this web reprint next week.

fortescue wrote: You might think it makes you look all grand and objective, but actually you let your readers down when you pull a stunt like this. If the player is genuinely a poor performer then giving the manufacturer a chance to supply another sample, then confirming your findings, is surely a more credible way forward than reviewing a clearly broken bit of kit?

You seem to think that our responsibility as reviewers is to present a manufacturer in the best possible light. You are wrong. We are critics, not consultants.

John Atkinson
Editor, Stereophile

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments



Well I guess we' ll see ... I

Submitted by fortescue on February 9, 2017 - 5:05am

Well I guess we'll see ... I had been keen to audition this player having heard only the original Acute CD and thinking highly of it. I guess we'll soon find out whether I should bother or not.

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

The same old story since hi-fi was invented...

Submitted by galahad on March 13, 2017 - 5:30am



John, I really appreciate your sentence: "We are critics, not consultants.". I would add: "We take reviews, and measurements, extremely seriously.", because customers (i.e. readers) ALWAYS come before manufacturers...

That said, you've been way too "clement" with this poor (to say the least) machine...

Listening is subjective, whereas specs are objective, and when a machine costing thousands of dollars presents absurdly below-average specs, I wonder how some "reviewers" (not you at Stereophile, to my great pleasure) can say it's "beautifully sounding"! The EAR player's specs and measurements are simply appalling (THD, S/N ratio, crosstalk, linearity, etc.) and on Stereophile's website itself we can find many digital players and DAC's that cost less than a tenth and whose specs are incomparably better...

My review would be: "Save your money and keep away from it, unless you really can't live without such a nice faceplate." The price requested for such a technically inadequate machine is so high that I would even refuse to do a listening session!

I thank you John for your correctness, and again let me say, for the sake of "absolute honesty", that such machines as this model by EAR should be curtly labeled as "grotty", and the manufacturer (in this specific case, NOT generally) a "duper".

Alessio Zanelli

Italy

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Related

Latest

Galleries

Recommended



Sonographe SD-22 CD player



Hegel Music Systems Mohican CD

player



Sony CDP-R1/DAS-R1 CD player



NAD 5425 CD player



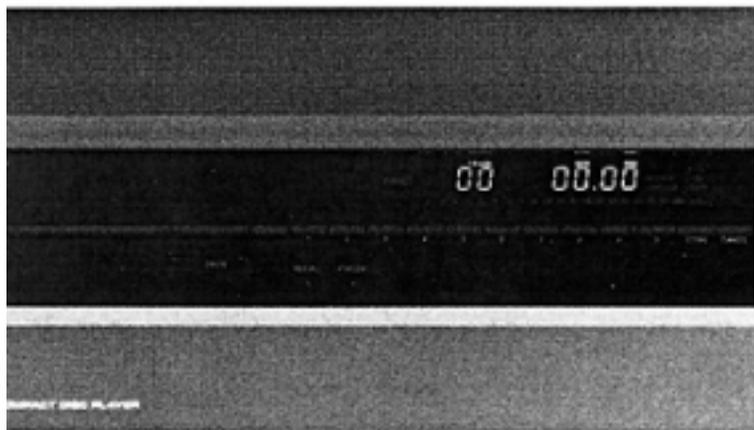
NAD 5000 CD player



Bang & Olufsen Beogram CD-X CD player



dCS Rossini Player & Rossini Clock



The Mod Squad Prism II CD player



Sony CDP-X77ES CD player

Sony D-7S portable CD player

Yamaha CD-X1 & CD-2 CD players



April Music Aura Note V2 CD receiver



Metronome CD8 S integrated CD player



JVC XL-Z1050TN CD player



Audio Note CDT One/II CD transport & DAC 2.1x Signature D/A processor



Accuphase DP-90 CD transport & DC-91 D/A processor



audio research
Trade In to Trade Up!
Trade in values up to 75% of original MSRP

stereophile

AUDIOSTREAM

innerfidelity

AnalogPlanet

S &

Loudspeakers

Floorstanding
Stand/Bookshelf
Subwoofers

Amplification

Tube Preamps
Tube Power Amps
Solid Preamps
Solid Power Amps
Integrated Amps
Phono Preamps

Digital Sources

CD
Hi-Rez Disc
Digital Processors
Computer Audio
Media Servers

Analog Sources

Turntables
Tonearms
Phono Cartridges
FM Tuners

Accessories

Cables
Phono Accessories
Powerline
Room Treatments
Stands/Racks
Headphones
Miscellaneous

Featured

Budget Components
Audacious Audio
J. Gordon Holt

Music

Recording of the Month
Records To Die For
Music/Recordings
Face The Music

Columns

As We See It
Art Dudley Listening
The Fifth Element
Audio Streams
Gramophone Dreams
Music in the Round
The Entry Level
Fine Tunes

Features

Special Features
Reference
Audiophile Essentials
Interviews
Think Pieces
Historical

Show Reports

CES 2017
CES 2016
CES 2015
CES 2014
CES 2013
CES 2012

RMAF 2016
RMAF 2015
RMAF 2014
RMAF 2013
RMAF 2012
RMAF 2011

AXPONA 2017
AXPONA 2016
AXPONA 2015
AXPONA 2014
AXPONA 2013
AXPONA 2012
AXPONA NY 2011
AXPONA 2011

Show Reports

SSI 2016
SSI 2015
SSI 2014
SSI 2013
SSI 2012

LAAS 2017
Montreal 2017
NY 2016
TAVES 2016
AudioFest 2016
Newport 2016
Munich 2016
NY 2015
TAVES 2015
AudioFest 2015
CAS 2015
Newport 2015
Munich 2015

More Show Reports**Latest News**

Audio News
Past eNewsletters



SPORTS & ENTERTAINMENT
HOME TECH GROUP

© 2017 Stereophile

TEN: The Enthusiast Network

All rights reserved