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SOUND TO THE EXTREME

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Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP CD Player

He struck what?! Where?!!

Aurum, Latin for gold: a lovely metal with a colorful history. Here in North America, the narrative ranges from Sutter's Mill to the Canadian Klondike. In the main, prospectors who knew their stuff fared better than those who ran on hope.

To identify one's new company with gold suggests a high degree of confidence. Aurum Acoustics, based in Conception Bay South in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, has two products to offer: the Integris CDP combination CD player and preamp (\$10,800 USD), reviewed here, and the Integris Active 300B (\$27,000), a loudspeaker-triamp-cable ensemble. Together, the two Integrises plunge Aurum Acoustics smack in the middle of the high-end swim.



"All that glitters is not gold." Too true -- and some that glitters is. I've been living with an Integris CDP long enough to understand that Derrick Moss, Aurum Acoustics' top banana, is a master of his craft. Take *glister* loosely. You've only to look at the sedately styled Integris to anticipate its merits. The company website provides views inside and out, with accompanying texts. I took the top off. The photos in no way gild the lily (click for enlargements). The Integris radiates quality and competence and, equally as important, has been engineered to accommodate expansion and upgrades. For example, a tidy little port on the Integris's backside connects to one's computer for uploading firmware modifications.

Initially, my eye was drawn to the machined lid capping the Philips CDPro-2M disc transport. This handsomely crafted slab whistled softly in its Teflon tracks as I slid it back and forth. Having exhausted a few mechanical drawer systems, I appreciate a design that sidesteps a potential problem while offering the attractions of ritual (philovinylites take note): After placing a CD atop the transport spindle, you secure it with a precisely machined, magnetized puck. You cannot position the puck any way but correctly. With a drawer, opportunities abound for inserting a disc askew. I've done it often.

Ergonomic cool prevails. The puck's underside is fitted with three rubbery nubs to prevent slippage and, secondarily, disc abrasion. On the Integris's faceplate, 17 sedate dots flank the amply visible, dimmable readout. An 18th dot is the standby light. The small, labeled buttons in their countersunk surrounds duplicate most of the Logitech Harmony 676 remote's commands. Mislaid the remote, life goes on. (The Logitech is a versatile, multifunction remote set up for the Integris. It can be programmed for other applications.)

And then what happened, Mustafa?

I can comment with confidence on the Integris's exemplary build quality and ease of operation as a CD player, which is how I've been using it. (You'll find an account of its preamp capabilities further along.) The unit's innards and aptitudes are amply trumpeted on Aurum Acoustics' website. I'm here, as usual,

to comment on the sound.

In my Isoclean report, I mention that I'm keeping one Super Focus power cord and filter-transformer ensemble, along with its associated power cords. Ah, life! Ah, vicissitudes! The "Note" at the end of these remarks relates one of the more interesting aspects of my Integris interlude.

In evaluating a component, one listens to a system. Do I seem to hedge? To the contrary, I'm taking pains to muffle an outburst of enthusiasm. Before you run for cover, let's linger at the Integris's wherefores. Combining a CD player with a preamplifier consisting of adjustable and programmable digital and analog inputs makes sense. If you can avoid component-to-component linkage by housing two well-designed separates under one roof, you're ahead of the game. Again, check out the website. I won't repeat here what you can read there. However, one especially pungent passage bears comment:

"A conscious decision was made to develop the Integris CDP as a CD-centered product for two reasons. Firstly, the vast majority of consumers of high performance digital audio own and use the CD as their primary medium. The availability of music is still dominated by the CD -- newer formats such as SACD and DVD-Audio have barely made a ripple against such a strong current. Secondly, our finely tuned, advanced development of the CD platform within the Integris CDP makes the need or desire for other formats an even more marginal concern. We will monitor the situation closely and consider adding formats if and when they become feasible; however, at this time, we feel we have delivered the best source product possible."

"however, at this time . . . "

Here's the thing: The sound I now get from *well-produced* CDs leaves little to desire. I played a new Virgin Classics disc [5 45720] that seems to me perfect. The illusion of countertenor Paul Agnew standing in the soundfield that occupied my listening room was overwhelmingly real. I was hearing a three-dimensional human in a clearly delineated space. The music, *petits motets* by André Campra and François Couperin, calls variously for flute, violin, viola da gamba, and small organ. On another recent release [Archiv Produktion B0004478-02], Marc Minkowski leads Les Musiciens du Louvre in a Jean-Philippe Rameau compilation the conductor has titled *Une Symphonie imaginaire*. The Integris's superb resolution imparted a particularly luscious brilliance and sheen to the Baroque-period strings. The production's verve and snap were pleasures. Would I have a better sense of this excellent band's qualities in one of the more recent digital formats? A cautious "perhaps": to long for a musical presentation more dramatic, more spatially convincing, more texturally on point than what my system provided with the Integris CDP seems a symptom of a condition one wag has labeled *Audiophilia nervosa*.

A biased digression

Nervosa, schmervosa! Where but in Audiophilia does one encounter so much philovinylia? (Sounds like ice cream in a puff pastry, doesn't it?) As an opportunity for mischief as well as a delight, I played performances recorded digitally in 1983 and issued in '85 on LP, cassette, and CD: Béla Bartók's ballet score *The Miraculous Mandarin* and a masterpiece for chamber orchestra, *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, with Antal Dorati conducting the Detroit Symphony Orchestra [CD, London 411 894-2]. James Mallinson produced, and Colin Moorfoot and Simon Eadon recorded.

Mark the dates. By 1985, Audiophilia's knee-jerk response to the compact disc had houseplants flying out of windows. But by any standard, this is a wonderful release. I've played it often and know it well. The Integris revealed its merits down to the molecules. There's an extended, raucous blast in *Mandarin's* opening *Allegro* that I'd never heard so transparently arrayed. That was the impression the Integris imparted with everything I listened to: the thing was a bear for transparency and resolution, for me the two shining benchmarks of top-flight audio. Get these right and all desirable qualities follow: subtle dynamics, rich and revealing harmonic textures, a lifelike soundstage. I mean, of course, with *well-produced* recordings. Dogs' fleas were likewise revealed.

As were subtle differences in recordings by the same ensemble in the same hall with the same engineer: In 1995, Decca/London released a Mendelssohn program with the London Symphony Orchestra under Swiss conductor Peter Maag as an "Original Remastered Recording" in its Classical Sound series [London 443 578-2]. Kenneth Wilkinson, among the best engineers of the time, had taped the Symphony No.3, the "Scottish," in 1957, and the *Hebrides Overture* and excerpts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

in 1960, all three in London's Kingsway Hall. The symphony isn't in the same sonic league as the other two works, which I don't hesitate to characterize as exemplars of stereo's Golden Age. In those, the high strings sparkle against the lower strings' glowing amber and the brasses punctuate their own distinct space, as do the winds -- a ravishing experience. Good, then great: I had no difficulty whatever in distinguishing the difference. Now *that's* resolution.

Nailing air to a cloud

A reviewer's task is made all the easier if he can assign a sound stamp to the item he's covering. Apart from resolution to die for, the Integris resisted such characterization. I can't tell you how it sounded because it didn't have a sound. Early in my listening, I thought, *Ah-ha -- it's on the warmish side*. Fat chance. I'd listened to a couple of warmish-sounding CDs. Moments later, I'd have sworn that the Integris shaded toward cool and analytical. Again, the recording. For want of a better, I revert to the spotless-window analogy: Through the Integris CDP, not only do I see the forest for the trees, I see the leaves and their veins.

Toe to toe, round one -- oof!

Time to compare the Integris CDP to my Mark Levinson No.390S CD player. Absent an SRA isolation platform for the Integris, I substituted a piece of 0.75"-thick plywood and four Vibrapod Vibracone Isolators for the Aurum to sit on. When I removed the Integris, the No.390S took its place.

I expected a closer contest. The No.390S has a well-deserved reputation as a great player. Earlier in the morning, before I set up the No.390S, I listened to a few tracks of a three-CD set, *Anne Sophie Mutter Modern* [Deutsche Grammophon 445 487-2], wherein the remarkable violinist performs seven works with orchestra, including Lutoslawski's *Chain 2*. The brilliance of the composer's orchestral writing expresses itself in large part via supremely beautiful atmospherics. The Integris conveyed the music's subtle drama in terms of precise, dynamically meticulous localization and a richly textured harmonic palette. At a critical moment, the strings hover like apparitions. They're there, the merest step beyond audibility.

Remaining with *Chain 2*, the No.390S also projected a spacious image that, relative to the Integris, was ill-focused and a trifle grainy. The solo violin and ensemble's coarser, less-well-located textures detracted from the composer's feather-light gestures. The Integris was simply far more refined.

I made the same comparison the following day and confirmed that I hadn't been imagining differences. The Integris brought magic to the music. The sounds occupying *Chain 2's* soundfield were as unforced and clearly delineated as ever I've heard in this room.

For those tourists unused to audiophilic hyperbole, a short aside: From the descriptives I've just employed -- *ill-focused, grainy* -- it would appear that the Mark Levinson No.390S, the player I've been using for pleasure and reference, fell off its pedestal, through the parlor floor, and into the cellar, where it now lies at the bottom of a large crater. One of the discs I used to judge the Integris is a wonderfully recorded jazz release, *Flamingos*, with saxophonist Max Nagl, accordionist Otto Lechner, and bassist Bradley Jones [hatOLOGY 609]. I mentioned this release in another review and returned to it as a reference recording. It sounded great with the No.390S; with the Integris, it sounded even better. *Ill-focused* and *grainy* need to be taken in context. It's a question of degree, and *any* degree is more than slight -- a paradox only an audiophile understands in his guts.

Those who sniff a breath of take-it-or-leave-it compromise in Derrick Moss's contention that the compact disc seems destined to remain the dominant music medium shouldn't. It's as revealing a medium as one could wish for. I can best illustrate with a recent arrival from Mode, Brian Brandt's exemplary new-music label. *Listen How They Talk* [Mode 149] features works by Hilda Paredes, a Mexican composer residing in London: a string quartet, a piano quintet, a piece based on Mayan poetry for vocal quartet and string quartet, and *Ah Paaxo'ob*, for an ensemble of 21 instrumentalists. In listening to the string quartet, *Uy U T'an*, I thought to myself, *Is it possible that the Integris is actually generating the performance's extraordinary sense of sweetness, air, and transparency? Was I off the mark in thinking that the component has no characteristic sound?* The question was soon answered by a live recording of the Ensemble Modern in Frankfurt's Alter Oper: workmanlike, but a less attractive, slightly less airy space, perhaps owing to miking constraints. A flawed medium would not reveal subtleties at this level of distinction. The Integris extracted every smidgen of juice.

As to what I heard as sensationally *right*, the Integris's digital-signal-processing board includes a Quantum DSP module developed by Anagram Technologies of Switzerland. The module outputs a 24-bit/192kHz resampled digital signal. "With our CD transport implementation, the result is CD playback quality that rivals any available digital consumer playback format." Several wildly expensive digital systems have received wildly enthusiastic reviews. I've lived with none of them and am in no position to say that the Integris CDP is their equal or better. Even so, my imagination strains to imagine better sound from CD.

A departed guest

The [Wadia 861se](#) CD player (\$9950) left the premises some time ago. I'd have liked to hold on to it longer, but it was required elsewhere. Comparing an item on hand to one that isn't tests memory's mettle.

Using the excellent Wadia's own algorithm (of a choice of three), its soundstage seemed closer than the No.390S's. Than the Integris's too? Had a shoot-out been possible, these impressions of soundstage proximity might have evaporated as quickly as another I harbor: that, paunch and decrepitude notwithstanding, I'm irresistible to gorgeous women. This proximity bit isn't something I'd swear to in court, nor is it especially revealing of anything. But nothing I've heard here or in my former digs betters the Integris with respect to resolution, transparency, image array, and dynamic finesse. I refer you again to the "Note" at the end of this report.

The Man from Aurum Acoustics takes the lectern

I asked Derrick Moss to explain the Integris CDP preamplifier's features. I am what he calls at the end of this e-mail extract "a CD-only user." Well, mostly . . .

"The five analog inputs allow the user to connect sources such as an external phono stage, tuner, tape playback, two-channel DVD, two-channel cable/satellite set-top box, and the left and right front channels of a home-theater system. In combining the preamp and CD player, I feel we've sacrificed nothing of the preamp's performance and gained significantly in terms of CD playback.

"All the inputs are active and buffered, not passive implementations. Users can expect a consistently high level of performance from whatever device they connect. The inputs feature the same high-quality Cardas and Neutrik connectors, with solid-silver wiring connecting the Cardas jacks to the PCB, as the output stage. The phase-inversion function works on both the analog and digital inputs.

"Each input has a gain adjustment of +/-12dB in 0.5dB increments. This may be useful for dialing back a too-high source input or providing a boost to a low-output device. This way, users can have consistent level matching from input to input. To maximize transparency, this feature is accomplished without adding unnecessary circuits. Users simply program the volume-control circuit's microprocessor via a user interface accessed by the Menu button on the Integris's faceplate. Users can also rename all inputs up to a dozen characters in length rather than remain with input identification. The result is seamless, memorized, and easily readjusted.

"Another feature for HT enthusiasts is the volume-control bypass function selectable for any of the analog inputs. This is useful because the main volume control is usually located in the external HT processor. Users thus avoid a secondary volume control. When that input is selected, the gain is then automatically set to unity, or offset +/-12dB, as above, if desired. This way, the home-theater system levels are balanced once and life is thereafter easy. This feature allows HT owners with two-channel audiophile priorities to avoid a typical performance bottleneck. Their CD playback and other analog inputs don't have to go through the processor at all.

"Then there are the digital inputs and outputs. You can connect any PCM source up to 192kHz and get the benefit of the Integris's Quantum resampling processor and 24/192 DAC. Such sources may include another CD transport, a DVD player, DAT, a PC, the HT processor, etc. However, the digital inputs do not accept non-PCM formats such as Dolby Digital, DSD, or MP3. The two digital outputs allow connectivity into systems such as the home theater's processor or the PC.

"The manual instructs users in how to navigate and configure these options. With flexibility comes some complexity. The user can choose to use as much or as little of these options as he or she likes. These

features are integrated in such a way that a CD-only user's enjoyment need not be hindered by what lies beneath."

The manual is available online.

The designer steps away, the reviewer gingerly takes his place

I took the Integris CDP's preamp section for a modest outing by connecting the CD player next up for review, the Consonance Droplet CDP 5.0, to line-level analog inputs, first balanced and then single-ended. I also ran the Gryphon Exorcist (report in the offing) via a single-ended analog input. Either by remote or faceplate buttons, going from the Integris CD player to preamp is easy as pie. As you scroll through the inputs, they're spelled out on the faceplate's readout. The manual details advanced programming options: e.g., naming an input FM tuner, or matching a component's volume to that of the Integris's CD section or other outboard gear.



With the Integris operating as a preamp, I was obliged to use a different power cord and pair of interconnects for the Droplet CDP 5.0: respectively, an Acoustic Zen Gargantua II and balanced Nordost Valkyrjas. The Droplet poses a problem going directly to my Mark Levinson No.33H amps. I can set its volume no higher than step 1 of a range of zero (mute) to 50. With the Droplet's volume set to 50 through the Integris, the volume range was conventionally manageable.

Attempting to re-create the Droplet's straight-to-amps volume, I could detect no difference between Droplet-to-amps and Droplet-to-preamp. So far as I could determine, the Integris's preamp section was neutral, transparent, and quiet. It won't make coffee. One can't have everything.

Does it get any better?

Playing well-produced CDs of large-scale orchestral works has been a particular pleasure with the Integris CDP; e.g., Pierre Boulez and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performing (in 1995) Bartók's *Dance Suite*, *Divertimento* for String Orchestra, *Deux Images*, and *Hungarian Sketches* [Deutsche Grammophon 445 825-2]. I heard a nicely proportioned soundstage; an abundance of instrumental detail, none of it in the least etched or strident (except, of course, where the instrumentation produces stridency); sweet and extended highs; a meticulously defined midrange; and a thoroughly tuneful and clean low end. Revisiting Bartók has been a pleasure. Indeed, everything I've enjoyed in the past, and recent releases too, have been a step up from what I'd come to expect.

Another soul-satisfying example was a 1993 CD reissue of a 1955 recording by RCA's Lewis Layton of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, composed only a dozen years earlier, performed by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony [RCA Victor Living Stereo 61504-2]. This disc permitted me the luxury of hearing how great stereo recordings of this early period differ from more recent productions -- a subject, perhaps, for an opinion piece. For now, it's enough to report that I'm still wading in the Integris's revelatory tides. And I've played enough clunkers to assure myself and you that the Integris called 'em as it saw 'em, and it saw 'em plenty good.

If it weren't for mediocrity, we'd have nothing against which to measure excellence. Thanks to the Integris's powers of retrieval, I'm discovering how much of my collection is just that: excellent, impinging in a few instances on goose-flesh fantastic. This is without question the best CD playback I've ever heard. The Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP stays. I'd sooner part with a lung.

Note

I mentioned at the end of my [Isoclean report](#) that I intended to keep the filter, transformer, transformer's power cords, a few sets of RF isolators (dummy receptacle plugs), and one Super Focus power cord.

Then appeared the Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP, which I wanted even more to keep. Then reality, all decked out as Not Enough Jack, stopped by for a chat. Result: The Super Focus power cord remains, purchased, along with the RF isolators. To substitute for the departed Isoclean power suite, I fetched from the attic an Audio Power Industries Ultra Power Wedge 112 and its dedicated wall cord, and into it plugged the Integris's Super Focus. And thought I was happy.

I was, until Aurum's Derrick Moss, with whom I'd been exchanging e-mails, offered that I ought to try: 1) Cardas Golden Reference interconnects and speaker cables, and 2) plugging the Integris directly into the wall outlet. (In making comparisons for that review, I operated the Wadia 861se player directly from the wall outlet and liked what I heard. The Mark Levinson No.390S has always sounded better with line conditioning upstream.) Why Cardas? Moss uses their Golden Reference cables with his 300B ensemble, power cords included. I'd been using in perfect contentment Nordost's Valhalla ICs and Valkyrja speaker cables, along with Audio Magic Clairvoyant speaker cables. I put in a request to Cardas for the loan of GR cabling and, to make this note no longer than need be, I'm here to report that contentment is subject to quantification.

A final tweak: Golden Sound's ceramic Super DH Cones and composite DH Squares, again at Moss's recommendation. (I'm waiting for an SRA Ohio Class isolation platform, which are individually made to the dimensions and weight of the components they are to support.)

Moral: When someone whose work you respect offers advice with particular respect to that work, you ignore it at your loss. A Cardas report will follow. Its tenor you've already guessed. Add a few percentage points to everything I've written about the Integris CDP's sonic virtues and you'll have a fair fix on what I think of this component fitted out with Cardas and absent line conditioning, which includes the removal of the Quantum Symphony Pro, about which I've been consistently enthusiastic. I've also removed the Walker Ultra Links, which served me well under different conditions.

What was once of audible value now seems superfluous. Why that should be trumps my understanding. Perhaps it's the cabling, or the Isoclean power cord's superior filtering capabilities. Moss, who thinks power cords are as important to the sound as interconnects and speaker cables, will be sending me his customized version of Cardas's Golden Reference power cord, but not soon enough. I'll have to hold off comment till I get to the Cardas report.

The longer I live with it, the more I believe that the Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP is one of the best audio components I've had the pleasure of recommending.

...Mike Silverton
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Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP CD Player

Price: \$10,800 USD.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

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