

Audio Ideas Guide contributing editor Bob Oxley takes a look at the Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP

Price, \$12,000 CDN \$10,800 US

Integris CDP Compact Disc Player and Line Stage Preamplifier

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I don't think I ever expected to get my hands on a piece of audio equipment as fine as this. In fact, there aren't many as good as this. When it comes to the cost of an audio component (or anything else, for that matter) I want only value for money. But that is not as easy as it sounds and, one must be cautious, a bargain isn't necessarily value for money. There are many fine CD players that are priced lower than the *Integris CDP* and there are several that cost multi thousands. The *CDP*, though, is more than a state of the art CD player. It is also a line preamp. You can pay many thousands for a standalone preamplifier. So, in the rarefied world of High End Audio, I define the *CDP* as value for money. The rest is simply pure delight.

The Component: it is a single box containing a player for 16 bit, or red book, Compact Discs and a line stage pre-amplifier. It has five buffered analogue inputs, five digital inputs and three outputs, one analog, and two PCM digital. Switching among them is simple and noiseless. The transport is a silky smooth *Philips CD-Pro2M* toploader. Disc stability is assured with the use of a magnetic puck. Resampling is achieved with a *Quantum* digital processing module from Switzerland's *Anagram Technologies*. This very sophisticated device is at the heart of the matter, and outputs a 24bit/192kHz signal.

The result achieved in the recovery of information from the common two channel CD is just astounding, as accurate and more detailed than any competing format. This is not the player if you are attracted to surround sound for music playback. This is not the player if you plan to line your walls with SACDs. This IS the player if you have a collection of Compact Discs and want to enjoy them more than you ever imagined.

The *Integris CDP* is a sterling example of the many advantages that, with care and good design, can be realized by putting things in one box. Having indulged in several years of outboard DACs and jitter boxes (remember *Audio Alchemy?*), I came to that conclusion long ago.



It's not worth the inconvenience or the money spent on additional interconnects and power supplies and cords. The shorter and less cluttered the signal path the better. Having the pre-amp included is more than icing on the cake. It is accurate and very, very quiet. Having it coupled with the CD player in the one unit is the essence of flexibility and convenience. With the multiplicity of inputs/outputs it will accommodate all your stuff.

For example, LP playback from a phono section through an *Integris* line input works beautifully. Sound is wide-ranging and dynamic and the noise floor is considerably reduced. Should a phono section become available for the *CDP* you would see me first in line.

One of the *Integris CDP's* lasting virtues is that, with its modular design, it can be upgraded or have additional features added as they become available in the years to come. A more detailed description of the *CDP* can be found on *Aurum's* web site.

The main functions of the *Integris* are controlled from the buttons on the machine itself. The supplied, quite remarkable, *Harmony* remote does everything, including adjusting absolute phase. It is programmed by downloading information from your computer.

The Set-Up: Easy, take it out of the box, make the connections and play. For best results you should use an isolation platform or accessory cones to support it.

One of the most interesting things about the *CDP* is the way it reveals the differences between associated equipment and accessories. When it comes to connections, I had the chance to do some experimenting and I ended up with the *Cardas Golden Reference* power cord and *Cardas Neutral Reference* interconnects. I would like to try the more upscale *Golden Reference ICs*. If experimenting with interconnects and power cords appeals, then a

competent dealer will (or certainly should) let you experiment from the stock of loaners until you have what you like. More than ever I realize when it comes to cables etc., there is no right answer but, BUT, you will hear differences.

My System: I am running the *CDP* directly into a pair of bridged *Bryston 3BST* amplifiers. My *Brystons* are connected to *Wattgate* wall outlets with *WireWorld Electra III* power cords. My speakers are the lovely *PSB Gold i* and the Speaker cable is *Kimber Select 3033*.

The Sound: Well, what do you expect when you drive a *Lamborghini*? You expect something that is beyond the ordinary and very special. So it is with the *Integrus CDP*. The conventional wisdom with top-flight equipment is to say it neither adds nor subtracts. That is nonsensical when it comes to CD reproduction with the *CDP*. It simply does things to the bits that are magical. It transforms.

I have had time to listen to a wide variety of material and everything sounds right. The sound stage is wide and deep, maintaining its proper dimensions all the way back. The imaging is rock solid, the trumpets stay in the trumpet section no matter how loudly they play or the tympani stay way in the back regardless of the amount of air they excite. The *CDP's* ability to resolve the quiet stuff, low level information, which is where much of the sound experience gets its life, is one of its most remarkable features, and the music emerges from such quietness that it appears, unbounded, from its own unique world.

One of the jazz recordings I like, and like to listen to for system evaluation is John Schofield-Joe Lovanos Blue Note *What We Do*. With the *CDP* the sound is focused and beautifully staged. Bill Stewart's drumming is hyperactive and he uses the whole kit. His cymbals sound sharp and steely or delicately filigreed. Snare and tom toms resonate or explode. They are all properly in place behind Schofield, who is slightly left and Levanos tenor, which is slightly right of centre. Schofield can get so many colours from his guitar. Changes take place in the flash of a second. Mind you, as much as I like it, this is not a perfect or purist recording and the *CDP* reveals all. For purist I go to AM's *The Bellingham Sessions*, featuring Chuck Israels. Oh, boy, pure as the driven snow. It's all there. You hear everything.

Image stability is crucial when listening, especially to string quartets. Again, the *CDP* locates each player believably and at the same time they play together in their given space. You sense the musicians reacting to each other.

At the other end of the scale, the *Integrus* conveys the thrilling power of a full symphony orchestra. Herbert Blomstedt's San Francisco discs of the symphonies of *Carl Nilsson* on Decca/London are a wonder. Recorded in Davies Hall in the late 80s, their power is, well, thrilling. In the *4th* and *5th* noble, great music is dressed in compelling sound. You can hear mallets strike, drums resonate and sounds bounce off the walls, and that's just the percussion.

I could go on, for example, the *Mahler 3rd Symphony* in the early 60s recording by Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic in the Sony 20bit reissue but let me say, overall, the frequency response is more even than I've ever heard it in my room. Bass is solid, clean and full of life. (I had to get used to the loss of mid-bass distortion). The midrange and high end deliver space, air, transparency and detail, detail, detail. All this with a sense of freedom that is continually engaging, helping you discover or rediscover no matter how familiar the recordings.

The Bottom Line: My time with the *Integrus CDP* began with a quest to find a CD player that would satisfy me as much as the experience of listening to LPs. This component does that and much more (including making the LPs sound better). You will be surprised how many beautifully recorded CDs you have in your collection. Just yesterday I dug out a Hyperion disc from 1988 (Tony Faulkner, engineer) of music by *John Stanley*. I have always admired it but this time I couldn't believe my ears. New digital recordings are stunning and historic reissues sound remarkably good upsampld.

Finally, everything I hear with the *Integrus CDP* happens in the context of a complete lack of dreaded digital edge. You thought CDs automatically came with digital sound; not so, and the *CDP* proves it in a very elegant way.

Obviously this is a very special, very high-end piece of business.

May I describe it as invaluable? (BO)

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