

Arcam FMJ CD33

Lord over the Ring By Brent Burmester

Arcam FMJ CD33 compact disc player. \$4999

Five years ago, Arcam of England released the Alpha 9 CD player, and I wanted one. It utilized the famous dCS Ring DAC, an audibly superior technology converting the invisible digital information on disc into the analogue waveforms our ears enjoy. This good stuff eventually found its way into the successor to the Alpha 9, the FMJ CD23. Finally, I've got my hands on a new FMJ CD33, and wouldn't you know, they've done away with the Ring DAC! Did they throw out the superior sound quality with it? Read on.

The FMJ range dispensed with the flimsy grey curves of the Alpha components and set up shop in sturdy aluminium-fronted housings. The look is pleasing, as you can see in the accompanying picture, but it doesn't give away the \$5000 price tag.

I expected to find balanced outputs on the back panel, but two sets of unbalanced RCA sockets, and co-axial and optical digital-out are all you're getting.

The green fluorescent display would keep some buyers at bay, were it not fully defeatable. Never mind the aesthetics anyway; the dollars lurk under the bonnet.

Built for New Zealand conditions?

The CD33's casework is heavy, rigid, and damped by a special laminated construction. The four-layer through-plated circuit-board features sexy gubbins like high precision clocks, multiple regulated power supplies, WIMA, Elna Sarget, and Sima capacitors, and op-amps by Analog Devices and Burr Brown. But best of all, this new Arcam player comes equipped with (cue drum roll)... Upsampling Multidac!

Good as the old Ring DAC might

have been, 1998 is an age away in terms of digital processing. Today, if it doesn't

upsample CDs, it's a paperweight. The FMJ CD33 not only samples-up, it manages to go about as far up as any domestic machine can – all the way to 192 kilo-samples/second, which is over four times faster than conventional CD, and each sample is 24 bits, not the usual 16. It's no coincidence that those are the vital statistics of DVD-A, which CD upsampling seeks to emulate in terms of naturalness, if not upper-frequency extension.

The Upsampling Multidac was developed by Arcam in partnership with Scottish IC specialists, Wolfson Microelectronics. It incorporates four DACs per channel, which should make for less strain in the digital-to-analogue conversion process, and corresponding gains in noise and distortion. But enough of that, it's not my job to sell it to you.

Form an orderly queue

After warming up on repeat play for about six days, the CD33 had cooked nicely and could be auditioned. Regardless of genre, music immediately impressed as it leapt from my speakers with new energy and first class tangibility.

Unlike the Rega Jupiter, which I also rather fancy, the Arcam was not about 'bigging-up' the sound, instead it presented performances in exact proportion and with a supreme sense of command. Everything was there, high resolution, oomph, and none of that upper frequency aggravation that mars so much CD replay.

Bass was firm and tight without being lean, and the image width carried far beyond my speakers. Instrumental decay on plucked strings and the synthesized reverberation on vocals on Massive Attack's *Mezzanine* were exemplary, and the player's skill with dynamic contrasts made late night listening at low volumes particularly rewarding.

Five grand doesn't quite put a



CD player in the high end, but the Arcam exhibits certain traits that are normally the exclusive domain of the select few. Pedigree gear tends to be choosy about things like placement, interconnects, isolation, warm-up etc. This particularity can be likened to an aristocrat's taste for the finer things in life.

One interesting demonstration of this was the CD33's sensitivity to the quality of mains electricity supply. In it's first couple of weeks with me, it was forced to feed from an overcrowded multiboard.

Once I could accommodate the player on a quieter outlet the improvement to bass extension and drive, transient attack, and image-width was marked. Buyers will be rewarded for any extra effort put into accommodating the CD33 in the style of its choosing.

Criticisms? Just one, after a fashion, and it relates to the Arcam's aforementioned discrimination and taste. While the CD33 is never guilty of shrillness or harshness, it's insightfulness could discourage owners playing some of their rougher CDs.

It's the well recorded albums that really come to life and put a smile on your face, so poorly engineered music will get relegated to background noodling.

Still, in this price range a predilection for quality recordings doesn't amount to much of a fault.

This is an excellent CD player incorporating some very advanced electronics – it deserves strong recommendation.

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