

Wadia 861

An American heavyweight that delivers

By Michael Wong

Wadia 861. \$18,999

American company Wadia is one of the founding fathers of High End digital audio. Formed in 1988 by ex-3M engineers, they pioneered the application of advanced telecomms technologies, such as glass fibre optical connection, jitter reduction (before the word "jitter" had even entered the audio lexicon) to digital audio.

Their greatest success came with the Digimaster digital algorithm which innovatively combined oversampling (aka upsampling) with an interpolative digital filter algorithm, the basics of which were soon adopted by Sony and Pioneer.

The 861 is Wadia's latest iteration of their best one-box digital marvel: a CD transport, multiple input DAC and digital preamplifier under one roof. It is also available in stripped down Basic form (no digital in/output board, \$14,995) and as the SE (improved transport, \$21,999).

Resplendent in satin black brushed aluminium, it is one huge CD player, bigger than many amplifiers. Flawlessly built and weighing in at nearly 22kg, it is accompanied by a beautifully made solid aluminium remote control.

Inside, the 861 uses a sophisticated Teac CMK 3.2 transport with full disc clamping. The DAC is capable of accepting inputs with sample rates of up to 96kHz. The only omission from the impressive feature set is HDCD decoding.

As with previous Wadia product, the design is fully upgradable so your investment is future-proofed.

The 861 was primarily auditioned as a standalone CD

player, it's balanced outputs feeding a Krell 300i/Magnepan 1.6 combination. Reference CDP was a Marantz CD-23.

When used as a CD player Wadia offers listeners the choice of three digital filtering algorithms. All three

upsample to 32x the CD input rate but have different time and frequency domain characteristics.

Supposedly this is to aid in system matching but I found that using the default setting provided the best sonic balance. Add in the option of switchable phase inversion and you have wide system matching flexibility or the potential to drive yourself nuts trying to find the "right" sound.

Effortless power

The Wadia is all about effortless power coupled with stunning clarity and immediacy. Neutral and clean, with extended and articulate bass, continuing all the way to a slightly rolled off top end, without any dips or bumps to mar the all important middle frequencies. Where the recording allows, dynamics explode with realistic impact and scale. We get a widescreen canvas upon which performers are painted with the realistic size, depth, focus and reach-out-and-touch-it palpability that separates the exceptional from the ordinary.

Subtle music lines and fine details are reproduced with clarity but never deconstructed to the point of distraction. Listening to *Jazz At The Pawnshop*, every little tinkle of glass, the various conversations and background noises that occur in a nightclub could be clearly heard without losing sight of the music.

One of my favorite test tracks is the Wilson Audio recording of the John Williams *Liberty Fanfare*. This demanding track often flummoxes systems with its wide ranging dynamics and the unorthodox seating arrangement of the players. Wilson chose to seat the players in the classic style, with the horns and woodwinds almost directly facing each other; rather than blowing directly into the hall. The Wadia managed to reproduce the players' positioning and the recording acoustic, including the accurate placement of the bass drum and it's power, without it swamping the other



instruments.

The only discernible audible flaw was a slight roll-off of the high frequencies (-3db at 18kHz) that reduced the airiness of the highs and occasionally gave music a slightly dark tonality when compared with a player capable of more extended highs. The roll-off can be eliminated by using either Algorithm B or C but at the cost of some lost of focus, reduction in clarity and changes in soundstage perspective.

The 861 was designed to play CDs and to play them well. It is simply the best digital sound I've had inhouse and one of the best CD players I have heard anywhere. This is one of the few CD players that fully delivers on the promises made for CD. The sense of power, control, exceptional clarity and immediacy is wonderfully addictive, yet the player is relaxing to listen to and does not impose itself between the listener and the music.

But is it worth it?

But is the Wadia 861 worth 17 NAD 541i's or three Meridian507's?

If we take into account the superb build quality, versatility, ease of use and sound quality that simply isn't available at less cost, I would say yes.

The Wadia 861 is for music lovers, you can safely forget about chasing the latest format wars, just sit back and enjoy wonderful music now. Highly recommended.

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