

SoundStage!

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Todd Warnke

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The Science of Art?

Who does this guy think he is, HP?

Rather than my usual review format, engaging intro, exacting physical description, detailed and highly accurate aural description and industry shaking conclusion, I'm going to change things up a bit. That is, I'm going to begin with a short physical and aural description and then jump straight into the issues posed by the Exposure CD Player, because, just like your significant other, it has issues, and we need to talk about them.

Recovering the Black Box and Reviewing Its Contents

Black with gold lettering, the 3.75" by 17.5" by 12.5" Exposure CD Player offers no visual cues that it is different than any other box. Popping the lid adds few clues either. Designer John Farlowe has chosen to build his CD Player

around the Phillips 16 bit 4x oversampling chipset and the CDM 12.1/15 transport, and to expend the bulk of his efforts on the power supply of the player. The power switch is on the back, as are the analog output jacks, a single BNC digital out, and the captive power cord. Remote control is via the standard Phillips plastic wand, which, besides duplicating all the front panel controls, also allows for digital domain control of the analog output level. On the left front of the player are the standard controls while the right side contains the display. So far, not much to brag about, nor much to differentiate this player from the pack either. However, when you turn it on and let it warm up (please do - even though I had a well broke in unit it still benefited from a day of break-in and appreciated being left on 24/7) things began to take on different form.



On first listen to the CD Player I found it to be an upfront, engaging and exciting machine, a bit bright as well, but its main attribute was the way it drew me into listening to music. As clichéd as this sounds, when I should have been doing other things, like calling clients, spending time with Robin, or sleeping, I found myself spinning disk after disk. Dropping in Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark* led to *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* and then on to *Hejira* (the new HDCD re-masters are superb on an HDCD DAC, but are also vastly better than the old versions when played on a non-HDCD machine like the Exposure CD Player). If I started listening to *Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground*, I next found myself spinning something by Cornershop and then on to The Orb. And the only thing I can say about the night I started listening to Mozart's 38th Symphony and ended up at the 41st, is that it's a good thing I didn't start with number 1. Yeah, I guess *involving* would be an accurate description of the Exposure CD Player.

As for the sonic blow by blow, bass, in the typical British style, the CD Player was a bit lean but also ever so slightly bumped up in the mid-bass region. This gave the CD Player an excellent sense of rhythm and pace. Jazz disks swung hard, rock rocked out and classical waltzed with surety and nimbleness. Bass extension was nice, although not to the level of the Audio Alchemy

DTI-Pro/DDE 3.0 combo. The midrange, while also ever so slightly lean, was inviting, detailed and was the strongest contributor to my feeling of musical excitement. Massed strings had both bite and power. Female vocals could, and often did raise goosebumps and the middle register of the piano had drive, clarity and power. As for the brightness I mentioned earlier, with break in it dissipated somewhat, but did remain to some degree. While not hard or steely, in absolute terms the treble was slightly lifted compared to the midrange, although the very top of the treble range seemed slightly rolled. Staging was precise, with nice although not ultimate depth. Side to side, the CD Player was a very good performer as well. Image stability was excellent, although image density was slightly less than with the Audio Alchemy combo. I attribute the density problem to the slight bass and midrange leanness noted earlier. Dynamics were very good as well, which added to the upfront and exciting presentation of the CD Player.

My overall aural impression of the Exposure CD Player, as positive as it is, is also contradictory. The CD Player, while exciting, could also be fatiguing with certain program material, especially material that emphasized the upper registers. Though somewhat bright, the player lacked the ultimate in resolution, perhaps due to the mid-treble peak and the slight roll off beyond that. Also, while rhythmical, the slightly lean bass robbed the music of some harmonic detail. While it could be fatiguing, the CD Player was also very musical and demanded full emotional participation. And while lacking maximum detail retrieval, it excelled in musical detail. Whether I was listening to Miles, BB, Joni or Bruckner, I always felt like I was getting the full musical and emotional message. Although subjectively the player seemed a tad lean in the bass and mids, it came across with the punch and drive of an incumbent politician in an election year.

As a final comment concerning the sonic abilities of the CD Player, all of the above observations come from the time the CD Player spent in the "Big Rig," that is with the Audible Illusions L-1 pre-amp, the Blue Circle BC-6 amp and the Dunlavy SC-III speakers. That combo, while musically accurate, leaves no room for aural ambiguities. When I put the Exposure pre-amp and amp I have on hand in the main setup, all the sonic strengths of the CD Player came through unscathed, while many of its shortcomings were mitigated. This is not a knock on the quality of the Exposure pre and power amps, but rather a realization that products from the same designer should (and in this case do) work together with synergy.

Now for the Deep Stuff

We all have certain preconceptions about the high-end design process. One is that speakers, having the difficult task of converting electrical energy to mechanical and then acoustical energy, are so distortion laden that "accuracy" is a goal, not an actual possibility. So, we expect speakers to be "voiced," that is that the designer will be forced to listen to the speaker and from a set of distortions exclude those which bother him most while letting through those which bother him least. On the other hand, front end electronics designers, especially those working in digital, have no where near the need to voice a design since the distortion products inherent in a DAC are orders of magnitude below those of speakers. Yes, many of us can hear differences between various DACs, but these differences we generally attribute to price point limitations, power supplies and evolutionary changes in digital reproduction.

John Farlowe, head of design at Exposure, disagrees with that. Rather than attempting to produce the most accurate player possible (in the conventional sense of the word), he has purposely voiced the Exposure CD Player to fit his priorities, namely emotional impact and immediacy over pure accuracy or linearity. And, under that criteria, he succeeds fabulously. This is an intensely involving and exciting player. Whether that works for you is a philosophical question that only you can answer.

And answering that exact question is something we all have to do, the result of which shapes our systems. As a reviewer I'm no different. I have to answer that philosophical question with each and every review. Does accuracy = linearity or does accuracy = emotional impact? What the Exposure CD Player does is move that question, which is usually fought over speakers and the tube versus solid-state amp territory to the land of digital front ends as well. In a way, the Rega Planet CD player does the same thing. While not in the same price class, the Planet is a serious design that purposefully departs from the accuracy = linearity camp. The major difference between these two players is that for \$895 we don't expect linearity and do expect some compromises, whereas for a \$1995 price tag linearity is usually not optional.

A further question this brings up is whether the proper role of a playback system is to accurately (by this I mean with the greatest linearity possible) reproduce what is on the recorded media, or should it attempt to reproduce the emotions that were present at the recording session? Or is something else all together? Perhaps, since the recording is already flawed a high-end system is nothing more than a personal tone control (how do you accurately reproduce the emotion of a typical multi-tracked pop/rock session, or even the exact sonics of such a session? And wouldn't that sound horrible?) In other words, is the whole system so flawed that only personal, relative truth is possible?

Back to Earth

As for the Exposure CD Player, I find it to be a valid *high end* choice. It is musically and emotionally direct in a way I seldom see. To those who value such a presentation it will provide rewards far in excess of the \$1995 sticker price, while those whose systems or tastes need a more restrained or "linear" component will fail to see the true glory of the Exposure CD Player.

One more reason I like the Exposure CD Player is that it truly makes a statement. There is no wishy-washy, lukewarm, AOR or 50th percentile in it. Just as a great rock band or jazz group will leave no middle ground, the CD Player will force you to take a position. I like that a lot.

...Todd Warnke

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Exposure CD Player

Prices: **\$1995 USD**

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Toffco Responds:

My response to Todd Warnke's piece is best summed up by the question of a friend of mine. I let her read the "pre-print" copy of the review. After reading through the pages she looked up and said, "I don't get it, why would someone want anything other than the most musical and involving cd player?" I answered her with, "Uh, I don't know" My friend is like most people, she enjoys music but has almost no interest in hifi. I tried, without much success to elaborate for her on the issues Todd brings up in the review. Trying to explain "audio philosophy" to a normal person though, isn't just difficult, it also makes my hair hurt. So, for this reply I'll be blunt: Anyone who values measurements, sonic characteristics or linearity (whatever that means) more than musical involvement is a GOON. A GEEK. Or what Exposure's John Farlowe likes to call a "hifi nut" - though he's quite light hearted in his use of the term. Not that I haven't had my bouts with the insidious affliction, but I'm better now. Much better.

The Exposure CD Player isn't an assault on the "state of the art" in digital playback. At the risk of sounding like a distributor, I'd say it's more an assault on boring hifi. How is it that some systems can sound ok sonically, but not satisfy musically? Here's a thought: Look at who designed it. It should come as no surprise that a product will reflect the priorities of the person responsible for it. It has come as no surprise to me that the person responsible for the performance of Exposure products, John Farlowe, is an unabashed MUSIC LOVER. In fact, John would much rather talk about music, interesting, travel experiences or even the weather it seems, before hifi! The products manifest that enthusiastic love of music. Not philosophy. Not technology. Perhaps gardening... but music comes first. Not that Exposure is alone in crafting exceptional gear, but from experience I'd say that the list is much shorter than it is longer.

My current favorite music/audio writers would have to be Art Dudley of *Listener Magazine* and Herb Reichert of Audio Note NYC. Their thoughtful, entertaining and no-nonsense approach to audio related stuff has raised the level of discourse and sent it in positive directions. I'm happy to add *SoundStage's* Mr. Warnke to this list. Hopefully, Todd's review will be a springboard for further discussion. Let's see it as a challenge to reviewers, readers and industry goofs like myself to examine our own pre/misconceptions about how our own home audio should be. Let us also be grateful that a real "hifi nut" like Todd Warnke will, in the end, stand by the music. It seems *SoundStage!* readers are in good hands.

Mike Pranka,

Toffco

US Distributor of Exposure Electronics