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Raysonic CD168 CD Player

by Philip Beaudette

I don't go out of my way to keep up with everything happening in high-end audio. Since I started writing for *SoundStage!*, I have focused on the components I'm using at the moment, not what *everyone else* is using. Therefore when I visited Montreal for the Festival Son & Image last year, I was exposed to many brands with which I had little or no familiarity. Quite a few of these companies either originated from or manufactured in China. What amazed me most about these Chinese-built products was their incredibly high fit'n'finish, particularly given the products' asking prices.

Several months later I received a CD player from the Toronto-based company Raysonic. Made in China, the Raysonic CD168 immediately reminded me of what I'd seen in Montreal, impressing me with the exceptional build quality one can now expect for a very reasonable price. But, as we know, it's sound that counts, and the CD168 delivers there as well.

What's in a name?

I have to confess that prior to seeing the \$2399 USD CD168, the name Raysonic had me envisioning a CD player that I would see at Wal-Mart -- flimsy and



Review Summary

Sound "Regardless of the material I threw at the CD168, it never failed to impress me, most notably because of the clarity and ease with which it handled the crucial midrange." Its sound was "extremely revealing" but not analytical. "Soundstage depth was reasonably good, as was the ability to give a sense of the scale." "Slightly subdued treble and softening of deep bass" "took some of the edge off the screech of the electric guitars" and affected bass "impact and depth." However, "high frequencies were well behaved, never threatening to become harsh or aggressive."

insubstantial. That preconception fell apart as soon as I lifted the shipping box for the first time, the sheer weight of which bespoke something far more expensive. After unpacking the CD168 and picking it up, I was left with the same impression I had of the Simaudio Moon CD5.3, which I reviewed last year: It was built like a particularly flashy tank.

The CD168 is in the middle of Raysonic's line of CD players. The CD228 is one step above and the CD128 is one step below. All three are top-loading designs and appear to use the same chassis (the CD228 also has an outboard power supply). Featuring a Philips VAM1202 transport mechanism, the CD168 utilizes a suspension to isolate the transport from vibration. A small weight fitted with magnets clamps the CD in place, and a clear acrylic lid protects the transport and engages the player to start reading the disc.

Using a pair of Burr-Brown PCM1792 DACs, the CD168 upsamples data from 16 bits and 44.1kHz to 24 bits and 192kHz. It can't decode DSD from SACDs, but this wasn't an issue for me, because the majority of my discs are Red Book. Around back you'll find both RCA and XLR outputs; the pair of Burr-Brown DACs signals that the CD168 is likely fully balanced, which may indicate a sonic advantage to using the XLR outputs, which I wasn't able to try. Should you need it, there's the option of bypassing the DACs and feeding the digital signal to an outboard converter through a digital coaxial output. Why anyone would buy this player to use as a transport only is beyond me, but digital outputs are pretty standard, even on the most expensive CD players. Personally, I'd like to see digital *inputs* become standard, because they would enable another source -- a DVD player or wireless music server -- to take advantage of a CD player's digital-to-analog converters. Clearly the audio industry doesn't share this view, because most CD players don't offer this feature.

What sets the CD168 apart from most CD players (and any audio component I've reviewed so far) is its use of a class-A, triode vacuum-tube output stage. This features four Russian-made 6922EH tubes fitted into ceramic sockets. A built-in warm-up function is said to increase the tubes' life span. Although the tubes emit a faint orange glow, this pales in comparison to what must be considered the most visually striking aspect of the player: the blue LEDs that illuminate the tubes, the perimeter of the CD transport, and the control buttons on top. Although the LEDs can be turned off, I enjoyed their warm glow while I listened at nighttime, so I kept them on.

Features "Featuring a Philips VAM1202 transport mechanism, the CD168 utilizes a suspension to isolate the transport from vibration.... Using a pair of Burr-Brown PCM1792 DACs, the CD168 upsamples data from 16 bits and 44.1kHz to 24 bits and 192kHz.... What sets the CD168 apart from most CD players...is its use of a class-A, triode vacuum-tube output stage. This features four Russian-made 6922EH tubes fitted into ceramic sockets."

Use "Around back you'll find both RCA and XLR outputs; the pair of Burr-Brown DACs signals that the CD168 is likely fully balanced, which may indicate a sonic advantage to using the XLR outputs, which I unfortunately wasn't able to try."

Value "Although \$2399 isn't exactly cheap for a CD player, it starts to seem a lot more reasonable when you consider that this player approaches the quality of statement-level digital front-ends but doesn't come near statement-level prices. On those terms, the CD168 offers good value."

The CD168 tips the scale at just over 24 pounds and measures 18 7/8"W x 5 1/8"H x 11 3/4"D. It's a beast, or at least it would be if its lines weren't so graceful. The brushed and anodized aluminum chassis (available in either silver or black) is beautifully crafted and should draw stares from everyone who sees it. In combination with its mirrored display (that I could easily read from my listening chair) the CD168 was far and away the nicest-looking CD player I've ever seen, and that includes some costing a whole lot more. Included with the CD168 is a full-function metal remote control.

However, despite all the praise I've lavished on the CD168's appearance, there were a couple of things I would have changed in the design. First, the unit's power switch is located on the right side, standing out rather noticeably against what is otherwise very handsome metalwork. I would have preferred to see the power switch located around back.

Additionally, if I owned this player I'd probably glue rubber feet to the bottom of the remote control. Because it's made of metal, you risk scratching your furniture if you don't set it down carefully. I also didn't find the remote's fast-forward and -reverse buttons very user friendly. When you first press one or the other, the laser scans at twice the normal speed -- slow enough that you can find the section of the song you need. However, after several seconds of holding the button, the player scans so quickly that it's nearly impossible not to overshoot the part you're looking for.

Review system

The CD168 was partnered with a Bryston B100 SST integrated amp via Kimber Kable Tonik interconnects. AudioQuest Type 4 speaker cables connected the B100 SST to PSB Platinum M2 loudspeakers, and both the CD168 and B100 SST were plugged into a Blue Circle BC6000 power conditioner. For comparison, I used my NAD C542 CD player connected via an AMX Optimum AVC-31 digital coaxial cable to the DAC onboard the B100 SST.

Sonic ray of light

During the time I used the CD168, I played a wide variety of music, including rock, folk, bluegrass, jazz, hip hop, solo piano, choral and popular. Regardless of the material I threw at the CD168, it never failed to impress me, most notably because of the clarity and ease with which it handled the crucial midrange. In this sense, the Raysonic CD168 reminded me a little of the Blue Circle SBD DAC I reviewed a few months ago. I described the SBD as having a natural, very smooth and even sonic demeanor. With the CD168, these adjectives applied especially to the midrange, which was completely engrossing.

I love vocals, and as I listened to Tori Amos, Sarah McLachlan and Beth Gibbons (of Portishead) I was really pulled in by the clarity and detail I heard in each woman's voice, the CD168 creating a sense of intimacy that is paramount to an engaging listening experience. The same applied to backup vocals, as I found out when listening to Rebecca Gates harmonize with Elliott Smith on "St. Ides Heaven" from Smith's self-titled second album [Kill Rock Stars KRS246]. It's remarkable that I can hear a song a hundred times on my own stereo, but when I change something in the system another aspect of the music will suddenly catch my attention. It's like breathing new life into something very familiar, and it happened on the Elliott Smith tune and many others as well. The CD168's portrayal of voices was

extremely revealing.

However, I should clarify that I don't use the word "revealing" to mean "analytical." Describing a component as "analytical" suggests that it dissects music, pulling it apart as though it will be viewed under a microscope. For a sound engineer (and some music lovers) this might not be a bad thing, but, for others, the ability to tease a song apart detracts from the musical whole, causing the listener to get lost in the detail. On the other hand, a component that's detailed while remaining musical tends to carry with it a greater sense of realism. This is the category into which the Raysonic CD168 falls. Listening to La Chapelle Royale and the Collegium Vocale perform Mozart's *Requiem* [Harmonia Mundi HMX 2901620], I heard individual voices emerge from the mass of singers with wonderful clarity, and they were spread across a broad soundstage. Soundstage depth was reasonably good, as was the ability to give a sense of the scale of Switzerland's Stravinski Auditorium, where the performance was recorded.

But it wasn't this great hall in Montreux, Switzerland that really showcased the CD168's ability to recreate ambience. Rather, it was the way in which it reproduced the character of a small café in Manhattan's East Village. Recorded in 1993, *Jeff Buckley Live at Sin-e* [Columbia C2K 89202] is an amazing glimpse of an artist honing his craft, figuring it out as he performs to a packed room in NYC. The sound quality on these discs is astonishingly good, bringing the performance right into the listening room. Fortunately the set plays as a whole, with none of the talking between songs edited out. I think that albums like *Sin-e* are the whole point of recording live music: to sonically transport the listener to the event, and in this case to a pivotal moment in a young artist's career.

Live at Sin-e is remarkable because it makes it easy for the listener to imagine sitting at a small table just a few feet from Buckley's stunning performance. With the CD168, the café possesses an intimacy reminiscent of what seems, based on the sound of the applause, like a full house. The sounds of the audience are heard as clearly as the occasional buzzing of Buckley's amplifier. With his voice dead center and slightly behind the speakers, Buckley's wonderful presence was portrayed so well by the Raysonic CD player that I actually did get the feeling I was sitting and watching what must have been, for the people who were there, an unforgettable experience. In short, the recording is gorgeous, and a CD player as good as the CD168 will tell you as much.

In addition to superb portrayal of vocals and the ability to present a convincing soundstage, two other of the CD168's sonic characteristics were its slightly subdued treble and softening of deep bass. For example, I found that listening to Sonic Youth's "Diamond Sea," from *Washing Machine* [Geffen Records DGCMD-24825], was a more relaxing affair, as the Raysonic CD player took some of the edge off the screech of the electric guitars, removing a bit of the rawness that is a defining trait of Sonic Youth's sound. And although it was well filled out, the bass lacked some of the impact and depth I'm used to hearing on this track. What this actually meant in practical terms was that I was able to play the music a bit louder, in large part because high frequencies were well behaved, never threatening to become harsh or aggressive.

Comparison

Relative to my reference digital combination -- an NAD C542 CD player (\$500) fed to the DAC onboard

a Bryston B100 SST integrated amp (a \$1000 option) -- the CD168 offered a rather different perspective. Both front-ends are proficient at pulling detail out of the music, and they share similar midrange lucidity, although I'd give the edge to the Raysonic CD168 because of its smoothness. Where they differed most was at the frequency extremes, and most obviously in the bass. When Elliott Smith strummed the lowest notes from his acoustic guitar on "See You Later" (*New Moon* [Kill Rock Stars KRS455]), the CD168 softened the sound, removing some of the intensity from the way Smith struck the notes. When I switched over to the NAD/Bryston combo, the vigor returned, and Smith's delivery was felt as much as it was heard, his strumming sounding more forceful. The same was true on Smith's "2:45 am" (*Either/Or* [Kill Rock Stars KRS269]); through the CD168 the beat of the kick drum bloomed warmly into the room but lacked the impact and had less of a "thud" than when heard through the C542 and B100 SST. On Sonic Youth's *Washing Machine*, I heard firmer, feel-it-in-the-floor bass through the NAD/Bryston combo and electric guitars that sounded, well, more electrifying. The subdued nature I described with the CD168 was absent with the NAD/Bryston duo.

It's clear to me that these sonic signatures, which are both compelling, will appeal to different sets of listeners. While I think many people will be able to appreciate the strengths of each, the Raysonic CD168's reduced energy at the frequency extremes combined with its velvety smooth midrange offer an altogether different perspective than the drier-sounding NAD/Bryston combination. Of course, what you value in musical reproduction will determine which is right for you.

Conclusion

At its price, I don't know of another CD player that approaches the tank-like build quality and stunning aesthetics of the Raysonic CD168. And it's as pleasing to look at as it is to listen to. Although \$2399 isn't exactly cheap for a CD player, it starts to seem a lot more reasonable when you consider that this player approaches the quality of statement-level digital front-ends but doesn't come near statement-level prices. On those terms, the CD168 offers good value. That it's fun to look at in the dark is a valuable bonus.

...Philip Beaudette

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Raysonic CD168 CD Player

Price: \$2399 USD.

Warranty: Two years parts and labor, 90 days for tubes.

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