



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Neodio NR22 CD player

by Alan Sircom

It's strange how quick things change. A couple of years ago, the idea of a high-end CD player sporting a USB input would have been unthinkable. Now, practically every new CD player features some kind of computer-friendly input. The NR22 from French brand Neodio is no exception.

The player is very similar in design and layout to the NR One we tested in 2009. Both use a central DVD-ROM drive sitting in a constrained layer base, both use a Crystal 24bit, 192kHz digital conversion, with 100MHz op-amps in the output stage and both sport a hefty 150vA toroidal transformer instead of the usual switch-mode supplies seen in many disc-spinners. They even have both balanced and single-ended outputs. To all intents and purposes, the two players are almost identical.

At least that's the theory. The NR22's DVD-ROM transport sits sandwiched between two slices of cork-damped plexiglass, the aforementioned addition of a USB input, and an 8mm thick curved cover of five constrained layers of tinted polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA). Naturally, the addition of a USB input demands a serious re-think of the internal layout of the player, and lots of cork-damping and care in EMI elimination. Small changes make big differences.

The company pays particular attention to the way the circuit is clocked, in order to minimise the dreaded jitter. Instead of the usual simple quartz-oscillator timing chip,

Neodio uses an analogue clock circuit; this seems counter-intuitive, because quartz is more accurate... but apparently very prone to microphony problems.

That means the player retains the distinctive, very 1970s French chic aluminium and PMMA front panel, with its completely hidden centre transport DVD mech, bottle-shaped inset for the five main controls and

“A high-end CD player sporting a USB input would have been unthinkable.”

basic orange LED read-out. And it still sits on three adjustable aluminium feet with cork inserts. It's a mark of just how engineering-led the designer, Stephane Even, is that the three are perfectly placed for resonance control, with the single front-mounted foot sitting directly beneath the transport mechanism.

As you might imagine, a lot of the installation involves getting the player perfectly level, which is comparatively easy, although the player is deceptively heavy and that slows the process down slightly. But do spend the time getting it perfectly level, though, as the resultant improvement ►

► in performance is marked. This is intriguing, because in so doing, Neodio gets to treat the CD like an LP; digital engineers are more keen on discussing conversion or error correction, this one considers the spinning disc as – guess what? – a spinning disc!

In case you think this now veers off into audio fantasy land, guess again. The engineering behind Neodio is very thorough and exacting. The company deliberately eschews audiophile grade components, preferring instead to use enterprise-grade components that have a very high reliability. So, even though this is hardly a hot running device, electrolytic caps inside Neodio products are graded to work at 105°C, so there's little chance of things going 'bang' during day-to-day use. It's why the preferred choice of chassis is a non-magnetic aluminium and wood sandwich. The one point that may cause some consternation is the plastic DVD-ROM drive – compared to the likes of Esoteric, it's not exactly awe-inspiring. Still, we use these in computers every day without a problem and if it's good enough for Meridian's Reference 808.3 player, it's good enough here.

Neodio is also currently exploring what it perceives to be the gaps between what we can hear and what can be measured. In particular, the company is focused on determining how dynamic range, tonal balance and soundstaging can be related to testing schema (this last is particularly difficult with conventional measurement, because most tests are performed using just one channel). Whether this will deliver any significant changes in the way people test products remains to be seen, but it's good to see companies like Neodio (and the 'knowledge alliance' of Acuity, Nordost and Vertex) pushing the envelope of listening and testing.

Of course, if you set out your store with regard to dynamics, tonality and soundstaging, you had better make damn sure your products do all these things well. Fortunately, Neodio has nothing to worry about here. The NR22 player – like the NR One that was tested last year delivers all the goods. Once again, it's in that happy place, with the detail of a dCS the naturalness of a Wadia, the stage width of an Esoteric and the bounce of a Naim. It manages to mix the best of these without sacrificing the whole.

Of those 'big three', the Neodio shines because it keeps them all in considerable balance. Dynamic players can sometimes sound hard at the top, tonal balance can come at the expense of a deep soundstage and top-notch imaging can sometimes sound a little dynamically flat. The Neodio's great strength is it keeps all three in perfect harmony. Which kind of makes it hard to comment upon, because it simply does what a CD player is supposed to do... although in reality most deviate from this balance, albeit relatively slightly.

What I found very inspiring is the way it locked onto a groove, whatever that

“What I found very inspiring is the way it locked onto a groove, whatever the groove.”

groove. You expect The Cure's *Mixed Up* to be slightly ploddy and bass heavy (it's an early 1990s recording still suffering from TDS – Townhouse Drum Syndrome, named after the larger than life drum sounds from that famous and now-defunct West London studio complex). What you don't expect is it to also have a very strong, very definite beat, ►





► because the last time you heard that album successfully dig up the beat in the mix, it was being played on vinyl. The CD was dismissed as a bad transfer. In fact, it's as much a function of the player as the disc.

A strange aspect of the NR22 that is also common on good vinyl – but rare on CD – is its ability to change tonality with each new disc. Albums are not recorded under the same circumstances and CD players have a tendency to smooth over these differences. The Neodio does no such thing; bang in the 1959 Beecham/de Los Angeles version of Carmen and the overall mix is very different from Stay Positive from The Hold Steady. Perhaps unsurprising given the different genre and the 50-year gap between the two, but most CD players blur this distinction.

“If there’s one word that can sum up the Neodio NR22 sound, it’s probably ‘lithe’.”

If there’s one word that can sum up the Neodio NR22 sound, it’s probably ‘lithe’. The performance is fluid, natural, well-balanced, but most of all, it manages to sound like real music. This, above all makes the Neodio a rare pleasure to sit in front of, and you tend to listen to a lot of very varied music while engaging in that pleasure. It might not turn a jazz-hater into a John Zorn collector, but you will find new life in your old disc collection with the Neodio.

The USB input is actually very good and not just for show and to keep the player ‘cred’. It is certainly a lot better than most on-board USB connections (including the Musical Fidelity M6CD and M6PRE). It’s never going to eclipse a good DAC (even the HRT Streamer II+ and Arcam Solo rDAC show it a clean set of heels in ultimate clarity and focus terms) but it’s more than good enough to keep the NR22 future-proofed.

One final point; ignore the XLR option where possible. It’s not dreadful, but the single-ended is considerably better which means it’s probably something of an afterthought. It also benefits from really good power feeding it, and the Running Springs Jaco tested this issue did wonders to the already good sound, making it still more dynamic and insightful.

As people rush to write off CD’s future, it seems to be aping the progress of vinyl at back in the late 1980s, early 1990s. Back then, LP was a ‘dead duck’, and yet that period produced some of the best turntable designs ever, including many that have kept on going – albeit often in highly modified form – since that time. We then had the ‘vinyl revival’, the ‘final vinyl’ and the ‘revived

final vinyl revival’ and I suspect this will keep on going until journalists run out of the letter ‘v’. I also suspect the same thing will happen to CD, and people will want more than just downloads and ripped discs. The NR22 is a world-class player that can do both well. I reckon this isn’t the last we’ve seen of this clever French brand. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Neodio NR22 CD player

Transport mechanism: Modified DVD-ROM drive

Chassis: constrained layer aluminium wood chassis

Constrained layer 8mm PMMA cover

Inputs: USB type B

Outputs: RCA and XLR (2.6v rms)

Digital output: Coaxial S/PDIF

Converter: Crystal 24bit, 192kHz

Upsampler: Crystal, Asynchronous

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44x10.5x44cm

Weight: 12kg

Price: £10,000

Manufactured by: Neodio

URL: www.neodio.fr

Distributed by: Select Audio

Tel: +44(0)1900 813064

URL: www.selectaudio.co.uk