

French fancy

Neodio NR One CD player

by Alan Sircom



We complete the French triumvirate with Neodio. Add this to the Cairn Diablo and the Focal Grande Utopia EM, we have a complete CD-amp-speaker package from France, all reviewed in the same issue. Okay, so that particular system would be somewhat unbalanced in reality, but it shows just how significant French hi-fi has become in recent years.

Of this particular trio, Focal is the best known and the Bordeaux-based Neodio the least. In fact, outside of *la belle France*, Neodio is almost unknown. Which is a shame, because the product is very, very good. Take the Neodio NR One tested here; it's a solidly built CD player that follows in the exalted footsteps of the Lavardin amplifiers both in manufacture and performance. However, it's not that Neodio is disliked outside of France; it's that the company hasn't really needed to go international. This is a sign of how significant some European markets remain – companies in Germany and France can exist only for the home market. The UK was similarly inward focused for years, and it's likely that – as market forces change around the world – companies like Neodio will start investigating the world beyond their country borders.

Back to the NR One. The player is elegant, although it's hard not to think it a little dated looking; a bit like Spectral, or something like a scaled-down version of the WOPR from *War Games*, only without the flashing lights. With a centre-mounted CD tray in the centre black methacrylate groove running down the silvery aluminium front panel, and just five buttons on the front control surface, it's extremely minimalist, but also very functional. The big yellow LED readout adds to the dated, yet functional appeal; just a dimmable and defeatable four-digit display, it won't tell you much ▶

▶ more than track number and basic track handling, but for many that's all you need. The player sits on three adjustable feet of aluminium and the back panel is methacrylate. The remote control provides the functions missed by the front panel, and is an aluminium billet with buttons.

The CD drawer itself is part of a DVD-ROM mechanism. This helps the player be able to read a wealth of CD-like formats, including CD-R/RW and hybrid SACD, although not DVD, Blu-Ray or CD-V. The mech sits on a visco-elastic vibration damping mechanism and the data passes to an asynchronous upsampling 24bit, 192kHz processor and then out to a balanced and single-ended output stage that sports 100MHz op-amps. A 150VA toroidal transformer, positioned directly behind the IEC power socket, feeds all this. The digital mech and display are both fed by ribbon bus cables.

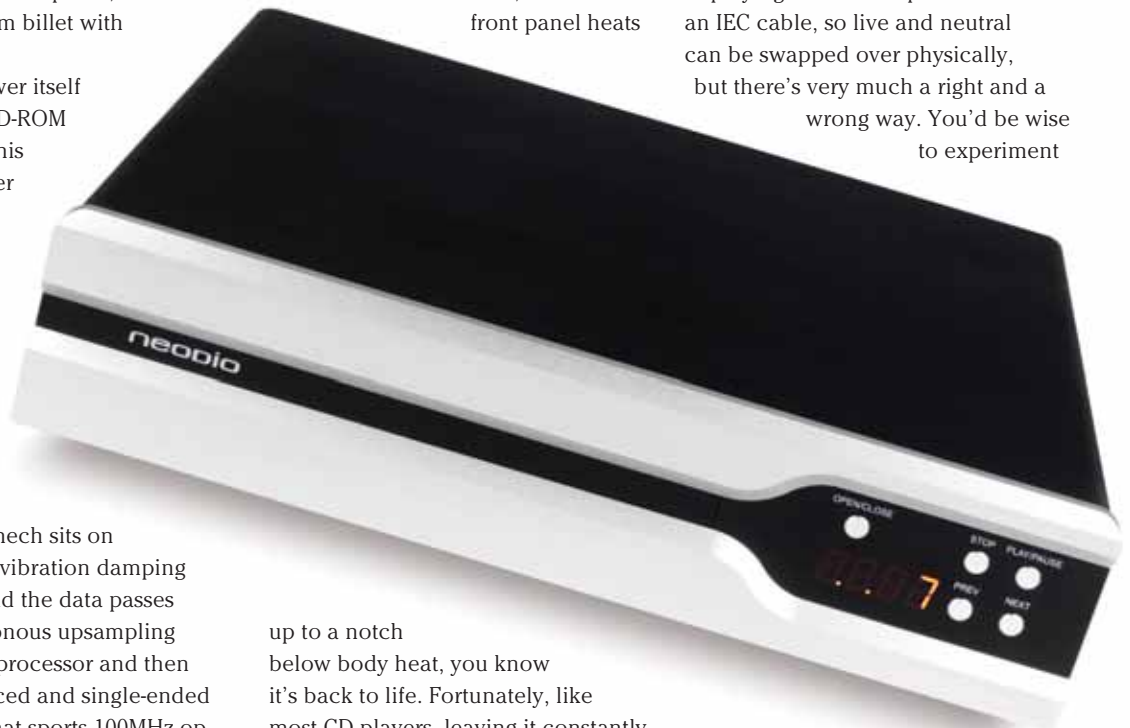
If you judge the value of a player simply by the size of its circuit boards, then the Neodio NR One will struggle to make the grade. There's a lot of air in the casework, but on the other hand, most of us are (or should be) more inspired by what those circuit boards do, instead of their physical dimensions.

It's not a player designed to be switched off. The rear panel switch is only there for power off for travelling or long periods of inactivity. Neodio runs a 72 hour burn-in in the factory and suggests giving the player an additional 30 to 40 hours of play-time before it comes

to life. We'd double that, and then some. If powered down after the burn in is complete, Neodio suggests the player will come to full form after an hour. There's a lot of aluminium to warm up on the front panel, and as a rule of thumb, when the front panel heats

on an old Sound Organisation table (that's spent the last decade holding up a printer) than it did on a Townshend VSSS or even a Torlyte table.

Cabling is an interesting exercise, too. The player seems very receptive to playing with mains phase. It uses an IEC cable, so live and neutral can be swapped over physically, but there's very much a right and a wrong way. You'd be wise to experiment



up to a notch below body heat, you know it's back to life. Fortunately, like most CD players, leaving it constantly powered does not fill the room with heat, despite a reasonable power consumption of 35 watts.

It's also designed to work on a rigid stand. A decoupled device can work against the vibration support systems built into the player.



This is a bit problematic, because many high-end stands have some form of decoupling built into them. So, if this player sounds so-so, look to your support. This is one of the few players that sounds better

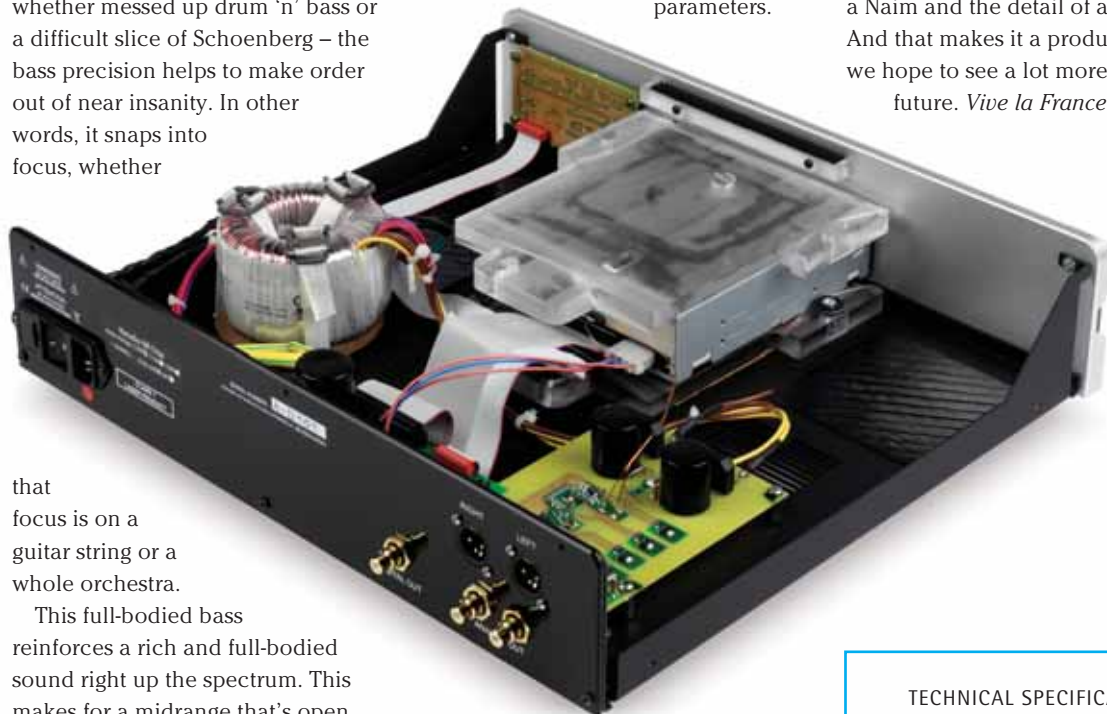
with mains phase to find the right way to listen. The difference is subtle, but there nonetheless. Good, solid cables are more or less mandatory, for both interconnects and mains leads (we mildly prefer the single-ended connection). Fortunately, when all this is done, the product stays pretty much fit and forget.

This is where things get really, really good. Sonically, the Neodio might not quite be up there with the very best CD players – it's no Wadia or Audio Research, nor is it a Metronome Technologies or a Zanden. But otherwise the player is of the absolute first water. The bass in particular is exciting, deep and potent, underpinning and reinforcing the performance brilliantly. This works ▶

▶ for more than just big orchestral pieces, it also helps to reinforce the voices of singer-songwriters, because it adds solidity and roots the sound in a three-dimensional space. Of course, when you get a complex, multilayered bass performance – whether messed up drum ‘n’ bass or a difficult slice of Schoenberg – the bass precision helps to make order out of near insanity. In other words, it snaps into focus, whether

the sense of flow is down to a fluid and natural-sounding dynamic range. You’ll probably never hear the term ‘dynamic range’, though; the ‘natural-sounding’ part gets in the way first. You’ll find yourself listening to the music far more than to the musical parameters.

of the true strengths of the design; it takes the middle path and that means it draws strengths from all these better known designs. So, the Neodio is ideal for those after a mix of the richness of Audio Research, the soundstaging of Wadia, the beat of a Naim and the detail of an Esoteric. And that makes it a product that we hope to see a lot more of in the future. *Vive la France!* ▶+



that focus is on a guitar string or a whole orchestra.

This full-bodied bass reinforces a rich and full-bodied sound right up the spectrum. This makes for a midrange that’s open and expansive and a treble that’s clean and detailed without tipping over into brightness. It’s a big sound (saying ‘full-bodied’ twice in the same sentence seems to give a bit of a hint to this) but not a dull one. For all this deep bass and rich performance, the music is never lost within the sound. Once again, it’s not as immediately rhythmically bouncy as a Naim player, but the sense of musical coherence and flow is little short of wonderful.

Part of this flow is thanks to a soundstaging and articulation that draws the listener into the music. The Neodio is perhaps better at deciphering the breathy tones of a chartreuse songstress than delving into the machine-gun rap of an Eminem; but either way it’s a remarkably open sound. And part of

Sometimes it’s hard to pin-down a very good CD player’s performance. It’s in part because most of them sound, well, digital. The alternative is a record player. Like the select handful of very, very good CD players, this one doesn’t sound like either of these end stops – it’s not bright, steely and digital (but it is extended well into the treble) and it’s not vinyl-like in its approach. Instead it just sounds like a CD player, only one that’s freed from all the things that make CD players sound wrong to many ears. And that means the player joins a very select list of players *sans pareil*.

Because it’s not so well known round here, it’s logical to describe the Neodio NR One in terms of players that are more commonplace in the UK. And strangely, that highlights one

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Neodio NR One

Type:	Integrated CD player
D/A Converter:	24-bit/192kHz with asynchronous upsampling
Analogue Output:	1pr balanced XLR, 1pr single-ended RCA/phono
Digital Output:	Coaxial RCA (S/PDIF)
Audio output (fixed):	2.6Vrms
Power requirements:	35 watts
Dimensions (WxHxD):	440x105x400 mm
Weight:	9 Kg
Price:	£4,795

Manufacturer

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