



Entre Nous

Just between us, David Price thinks Eera's DL1 CD player is one of the most intimate sounding silver disc spinners he's heard in a long time...

When I am asked to pinpoint precisely what I don't like about CD, I sometimes find it hard. Certain modern models, even at very modest prices, make a decent fist of translating those digits on the disc to analogue electricity, but there's still the sense of 'sameyness', of homogeneity, regardless of what you play. All things considered, when push comes to shove, I am afraid that listening to CD sounds like precisely that, as opposed to listening to music.

At the risk of a chorus of groans from the hoards of our digital using (and loving?) readers, when I put on an LP record I first get the sense I am listening to the music 'inside' the disc, then the disc itself second. This is rather odd, because there is so much more on LP to draw your

attention to the disc itself – snap, crackle and pop to name but three. Still, the resolution of the original analogue music signal is such that despite all these distractions, your brain locks onto the music and 'processes' all the other ephemera out.

Now, the reason I think this particular CD spinner is special, is that there's just a touch of this latter process happening. It lets you listen 'in' to the music much more than is normal with digital disc, hi res or not. In certain other respects I don't like it (and I'll say why later), but what it does do, it does in a highly distinguished way. And given that I personally go for musical fluency more than I do traditional hi-fi attributes (hence my analogue addiction), then the Eera DL really floats my boat.

Perhaps it is no coincidence

that it is GT Audio who imports the French designed and built Eera in the UK. Graham Tricker is a man for whom I have lots of time. First and foremost, he's the whiz behind the Leak Troughline tuner mods., and a total tube nut, but also has a penchant for fast motorcycles, and must surely be the only valve amp owning Yamaha R1 rider around! He describes the DL1 in an extremely complimentary fashion. Well, this wouldn't quite be the first time a distributor has 'talked up' his products, but actually in this case, I think GT has a right to.

The key to this player, both in engineering terms and the ensuing sonic ones, is the transport. Going to back to the aforementioned motorcycles, Eera says that one should think of a bike travelling at very high speeds, and how the damping affects stability. "If the



"what it does with immense skill is play music..."

vibrations flow out without returning and causing jolts on the recorded surface, it's obvious that the track will be easier to follow", says the company.

Enter Eera's Gyropoint system, from designer Didier De Luca (ex-Helios). The mech. is a stock Philips CDM12.10, with trick suspension courtesy of Eera (and the company has taken out many patents accordingly). Looking inside, this has been done conscientiously, too.

The other part of the Gyropoint package is jitter elimination, thanks to rewriting "a great part of the software... conferring acuity of reading and an extracting rate never reached at this time". Further down the datastream can be found a 24bit, 128 times oversampling DAC upsampling to 384kHz.

Now for my first gripe. I don't think - despite the obvious work done inside - that the Eera is a terribly well built CD player. It's a bit too 'cottage industry' for my liking. The 7kg box doesn't have Japanese standards of fit and finish (a Marantz SA7100KI Signature at £600 appears far better made and finished, for example), and the folded, pressed steel casing that's been

powder coated isn't as elegant as you'd expect for two grand. Naim Audio, for example, achieve far better with the CD5's steel wrapper at under half the price. Still, consensus of opinion in the *Hi-Fi World* office is that the gloss black Perspex fascia is very nice, although to me it looks a bit *gauche*, as does the bright blue display (so predictable). Still, at least it's uncluttered and easy to use.

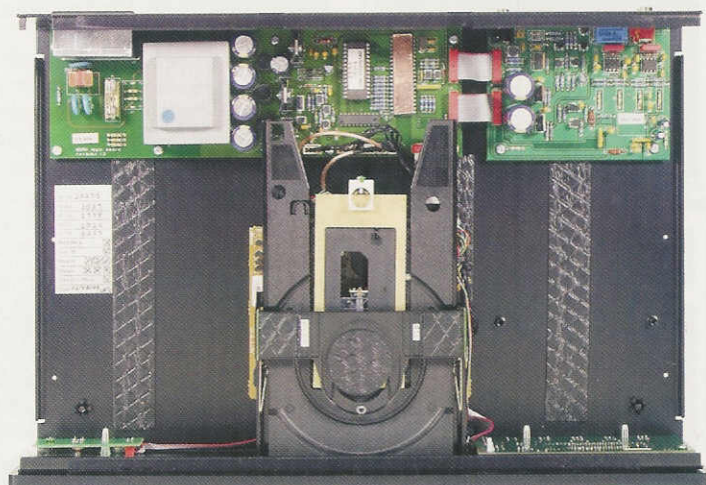
Worst of all is when you press the 'open' button and the disc drawer groans and shakes its way out... The mech. may be special, but the disc loading action is the opposite. As for the remote, the less said the better - the ones coming with Cambridge Audio kit at one tenth of the price would shame it. Around the back, it's minimalism in extremis; line level RCA phono outputs, a coaxial digital out, and IEC mains in with power switch.

SOUND QUALITY

This is a fine sounding CD player by any standards. It's not particularly distinguished in a couple of areas, but there's one thing it does with immense

skill, which is to play music. Cue up Steely Dan's 'Aja' disc, and you can hear it from the opening bars of 'Home At Last'. Instead of the usual excellent digital facsimile of a piano which comes with most £2,000 CD players, you hear what is one of the least digital and most natural recreations of a piano around outside the analogue domain. Timbre is really nice, and you get a sense of it being a real, tactile instrument instead of a high quality digital sample. More importantly however, are the spaces between the notes, which are beautifully judged. Again, the Eera is highly distinguished in this respect. In timing and texture then, it is superb.

Lovers of this particular piece



will know that very quickly, the bass guitar and drums kick in, and it's here that the Eera grabs things by the scruff of the neck. The machine is very good in the bass. It is strong and confident low down (although does nothing that would worry any classic Japanese battleship player), but it isn't the sheer quantity of bass that appeals, but the quality. It is the way it is so deftly woven in to that exceptionally liquid midband that seduces so. The track kicks off with a real sense of purpose, like the band know where they want it to go – it's not just a loose 'ramble' through the notes...

As World of Twist's 'Sweets' begins, you can hear its magic again. A largely electronic track, courtesy of producers The Grid, it doesn't have any special sounding acoustic instruments to enjoy, but still gels better than it has a right too. Again, the midband is a joy – in this case the recently deceased Tony Ogden's vocals are exceptional. Instead of being wiry and two dimensional as his voice can often be with even quite expensive kit, it is as smooth as Bailey's Irish Cream, and hovers eerily in space between the speakers. The Eera really shouldn't be doing vocals like this; it reminds me of the £6,000 Chord BLU/DAC 64 combo.

Once again, whilst that vocal hovers lazily, the rest of the mix is superbly rendered, with oodles of space between the drum kit and the album's trademark keyboards. This is another delight – the Eera projects elements out of the mix really deftly, creating a widescreen soundstage inside which the various instruments are locked securely. It's a big, bold, confident midband, but – wonder of wonders – without the slightest hint of hardness.

With a spacious midband and a fulsome yet deftly articulated bass, you'd be forgiven for thinking the Eera would do well with jazz, and so it was that I loaded Sonny Rollins' 'Alfie's Theme' into its wobbly disc sled. The result was joyous. I have to say, I really don't enjoy jazz on CD as a rule, but the DLI wasn't having any of my conceit. Rollins' opening tenor sax was a delight. Beautifully vibrant, sonorous and alive, yet not bright or searing in any way – and I have to say this particular late eighties Impulse CD can all too easily go that way. Walker Booker's bass was strangely easy to follow, lacking any mechanical quality whatsoever, and it pushed along the song with real force.

It was only Frankie Dunlop's tickling of the hi-hats that drew me to fault the Eera DLI in any way. To

my ears at least, the high frequencies are a tad dull. This isn't an unpleasant effect at all, and marries well to the delightfully smooth bass and midband, but it lacks bite. Audiolab's 8000S, at less than one third of the price, has more precision and grip up top. This isn't to say that hi-hats are diffuse, as they time beautifully and integrate with the rest of the mix, it's just that they lack sparkle. Once again, classic Japanese battleship machines such as my Sony CDP-X77ES (with, in real terms, the same retail price), offer far more insight into the sound of the stick hitting the metal. By contrast, the Eera feels like wearing sunglasses at night – slightly too much glare reduction.

This is welcome with many discs, and certainly nobody ever liked a CD player that veers towards brightness, but it does predispose the machine to more subtle, intricate music. For example, the processed pop of the Spice Girls' 'Two Become One' was superbly rendered, all soaring strings and layer after layer of vocal harmony in three dimensions, but the hard-edged strains of Elektric Music's 'Show Business' didn't quite have the bite that it might.

I found this was more of an issue with some classical music. A Deutsche Grammophon reissue of Haydn's 'Creation' sounded lovely, but lacking in air and space. Although the DLI is an extremely musically informative player, it lacks that last nth degree of 'back of hall' detailing that other cheaper designs (like the Quad's superb 99CD-P2, for example) possess, and I think this is partly down to its subtly veiled sounding high treble. Still, this is more of an observation than a criticism, and intelligent matching with interconnects (I used Supra's superb new Sword, which is a very detailed and

explicit cable, in this instance) largely ameliorates it.

CONCLUSION

Overall, I was beguiled by this curious black box. Before I powered it up I took an instant dislike to it – its external build and finish are below par at this price, and I'm not a fan of the 'eighties throwback' (Inca Tech or Magnum, anybody?) styling. However, thankfully you don't have to look at it while you play it, and indeed you wouldn't want to, as it is distractingly musical. Its sound is extremely organic – and it's achieved by obvious attention to detail in design, rather than just by sticking a tube output stage on the end of it to soften up an average sounding CD player.

Between you and I, I was sorely tempted to deduct a globe for its general operational clunkiness and poor remote, but I'm going to give Eera the benefit of the doubt (easy when you listen to it) and give it the full five. *Magnifique!*

VERDICT

Operationally quirky, but the sound is seriously special. Musically lucid like few others anywhere near the price.

EERA DL1 £1,800
GT Audio
 ☎ +44 (0)1895 833099
www.gtaudio.com

FOR

- beautifully beguiling sound
- superb textural detailing
- excellent dimensionality

AGAINST

- over-smooth treble
- remote control
- finish

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

As our convolved impulse response analysis shows, the frequency response of this player has been quite strongly rolled down at high frequencies, measuring -1dB at 17kHz. This degree of high frequency cut is unusual and results in an obviously smoothed sound, although that is not to say overly warm or dull. In that it can be a reflection of filter damping (Q) it can also signify a less zingy and resonant treble than is common.

Output was an unusually high 3.5V, way above the 2V set by Philips. This will help the player stand out in a showroom dem. Distortion levels were reasonably low, but upper harmonics existed and may add a little edge to the sound. The IEC A weighting used in EIAJ Dynamic Range analysis eliminated these, giving a good result all the same.

There was significant programme related jitter on the digital output, measuring around 200pS – an unusual weakness. This is normally re-clocked out.

The Eera DL-1 is a little unusual in what it does, but it measures well enough all the same. **NK**

Frequency response (-1dB)	
CD	4Hz - 17kHz
Distortion	
0dB	0.0012%
-6dB	0.0016%
-60dB	0.47%
-80dB	3%
Separation (1kHz)	120dB
Noise (IEC A)	-111dB
Dynamic range	111dB
Output	3.5V

