



ICON AUDIO CD-X1 SIGNATURE £1,350

Bucking the trend perhaps, the increasingly prolific Icon Audio have just launched this new CD player which sports 24bit/192kHz upsampling

technology and a tube analogue output stage sporting two 6SN7 output valves, with discrete valve and digital modules and a choke regulated power supply. The CD-X1, spanning 590x530x290mm and weighing it at a heavy 22kg, arrives in two flavours. The basic version is priced at around £1,000 but we managed to grab the Signature edition which includes 'premium' valves and Jensen copper foil oil paper capacitors. Other attention to detail is provided on both versions including point-to-point handwiring, high quality wire wound resistors, silver Teflon audio cabling, gold plated sockets and more.

SOUND QUALITY

An open, effortless presentation. Via the RCA phono outs, bass was tuneful on the Stacy Kent jazz-inflected ballad, 'Cas Petic Riens' (from the album 'Breakfast On The Morning Tram'; Bluenote), while upper mid and treble were so delicate you could imagine snapping them off in mid-air. Bruce Springsteen's 'Wrong Side Of the Street' ('The Promise'; Columbia) highlighted its low

distortion sound, while there were appreciable gaps between each instrument on the widely structured soundstage. Fela Kuti's LP, 'Zombie' (Wrasse) album was tackled with control and insight, plus lots of life. Via the XLR outs, the music was

frictionless and super smooth, lifting more detail to the surface. The valve outputs proved an almost ideal blend of the two, sitting right between transistor RCA and XLR outputs, sounding beautifully detailed yet smooth.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response through the valve output stage to the phono sockets displays slightly rolled down upper treble, our analysis shows, measuring -1dB at 19.5kHz. The XLR outputs bypass the valves, measured flat to 21kHz and will sound a little less smoothed out.

Distortion levels were high at peak levels through the valves, measuring 0.86% at 0dB, but just 0.001% via the transistor XLR output. Distortion was second harmonic only, so will not be subjectively obvious. At -60dB distortion measured 0.2% via either output with no difference in the harmonic structure.

With a 24bit resolution signal via the digital input, distortion at -60dB measured 0.11%, a good result showing the DAC can resolve 24bit accurately and convey the benefits.

XLR output was 1.7V, valve output 2.15V so there's little difference here.

Jitter levels were fair, signal related measuring 70pS from a 1kHz, -60dB test tone, with a 10pS random noise floor and 37pS low rate clock drift.

The CD-X1 has many options and measures well, ignoring the high level distortion valve output stage. NK

Frequency response [-1dB]
CD 5Hz-19.5kHz
Distortion (%)

0dB	0.86
-6dB	0.47
-60dB	0.2
-80dB	2
Separation (1kHz)	80dB
Noise (IEC A)	-98dB
Dynamic range	98dB
Output	2.15V

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



VERDICT

A choice of outputs makes this machine great for any mood or style of music. A dazzling new entry into the Compact Disc fray.

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FOR

- valve output
- clarity
- value for money

AGAINST

- nothing at the price

An enlightening batch of mid-price CD players, this. Although ultimately playing the same ones and noughts, there was a surprising divergence in their respective subjective performances. This means that, pretty much whatever your musical tastes, or indeed how you like your sound delivered, there is something here for everyone. So how did the machines fare?

Bringing up the rear is the Creek. The Destiny 2 is a big hearted beast (an odd epithet for such an unassuming design and a lightweight box) with plenty of naughty bass to rock your listening room. As such, some will find its overall presentation is a little unbalanced as a consequence – yet for any system which is somewhat bass-shy, the Creek will form a perfect antidote. Stomping rock fans who sometimes mistake their front room for a mosh pit will adore it.

Next comes the Marantz SA-15 S2, a real Japanese battleship of a CD player. It's so chunky that it could be used to break windows during jewellery shop robberies in the morning, kicked around in a Sunday afternoon pub football match and then tied on the end of a long chain to knock down derelict buildings in the evening – and still survive to make great music! It's a bracing, barrel-chested CD spinner with the excellent option of making an even nicer noise via SACD. Although satisfyingly charismatic with rock and dance, lovers of classical and jazz will want a more genteel presentation...

The Denon DCD-2010AE pretty much fits this bill; it's as strong and as powerful looking as the Marantz but doesn't have the former machine's slight lift in the upper midband which can result in the over illumination of some CD recordings. The Denon does provide a lower mid filip however, which often produces startling effects from the mix as details found in these deeper, darker waters are raised to ear level. Its bass performance is impressive with a grand, almost heroic stature. Overall the Denon is actually a fine package.

The Roksan Caspian M Series-2 found fifth place in our long list with an intriguing performance. In some aspects, the Roksan can be accused of hiding its light under a bushel. It's very polite, reserved even, and needs some perseverance before you really find the machine's excellent musical abilities caressing your ears. This reticence might lose some listeners who lack the patience to stick with the Roksan but, for those who do, they will find a player that

exudes subtlety and no little refinement; some will prefer this to all others here.

In fourth place is the Leema Stream III, the control freak of the group. I liken it to James Bond's big brother as this is one CD player that is neither shaken nor stirred. Because it can remain calm under the most intense circumstances, it allows a great deal of information to be released that is often masked by many of its competitors, giving you a clear, comprehensible playback every time. A very grown up machine, and all the better for it.

I have to pause here and declare that to my ears the top three are all winners. This isn't a cop-out in any way; I could quite happily live with any of them as my primary digital source. Differences between each were often subtle and subjective and I have been overly harsh to separate them into a winning order...

"the Icon Audio's valve section provides perfect balance; bite and edge with a real analogue warmth that lifts this machine to heady heights..."

In third place, the Astin Trew AT3500+ provided a winning show despite its rather schizophrenic performance. With the 24bit/96kHz facility turned off, the Astin sounded a little self-conscious, finding it difficult to relax. With that upsampling engaged however, the Astin was thoroughly appealing and attractive with a definite balance to its performance. This CD player is the Zen Buddhist of the group, supremely confident, eminently poised – a lucid performer that sounds strangely analogue-like in its way.

Second place fell to the Consonance Reference CD-2.2 Linear Mk.2, a CD player that deals in explicit musicality. A highly intelligent machine, it's the Jamie Oliver of the digital firmament; it gets its hands dirty, pushing them deep into the mix to round up everything and serve it up on a glistening platter. The distortion we measured was not obvious upon playback, being integrated in such a way to make it 'non-invasive'. Still, its energetic and

exuberant presentation may not be for all, and certainly not for those craving for a consummate smoothie such as this...

The winner really was a surprise. The Icon Audio CD-X1 Signature is the cheapest machine in the test but offers stunning value for money. The basic CD player, pushing music via the standard digital phono sockets, produces a highly competitive sonic performance while the balanced output is a bit like eating rich food all day. It's wonderful but some will find it too much to bear. The signal pushed through Icon's own valve section provides a perfect balance; bite and edge with a real analogue, vinyl warmth that lifts this machine to heady heights. It's not exactly the world's best dressed silver disc spinner however; compared to rival Japanese and British designs it feels and looks a tad rough and ready. But the same certainly can't be said for its sound. Compact Disc players like this prove that – just like punk rock – digital discs aren't dead!



Denon's DCD-2010AE is a handsome SACD-capable machine; a good value all rounder



Icon Audio's CD-X1 Signature; surprise winner and the cheapest of the group too...!