



# Special delivery

You can buy a good CD player for less than £400, so why pay more? Because these four classy rivals will reveal your music's hidden depths



For some years the sub-£600 CD player market has been dominated by Arcam. First the company developed the DiVA CD72 from its Award-winning Alpha 7SE, then it revised the player to ensure it held onto its WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION CD Player Product of the Year title. The latest iteration, identified by a 'T' in the serial number found on the rear panel, is our current title-holder, and seems to have a loyal following among the readers of this magazine.

But now it's under threat from two new players that cost a bit more: from Rotel comes the hunky RCD-1070, while British company Exposure is attacking the same ground with its 2010, its most affordable CD player to date. Can either topple the Arcam? Read on...

#### Arcam DiVA CD72

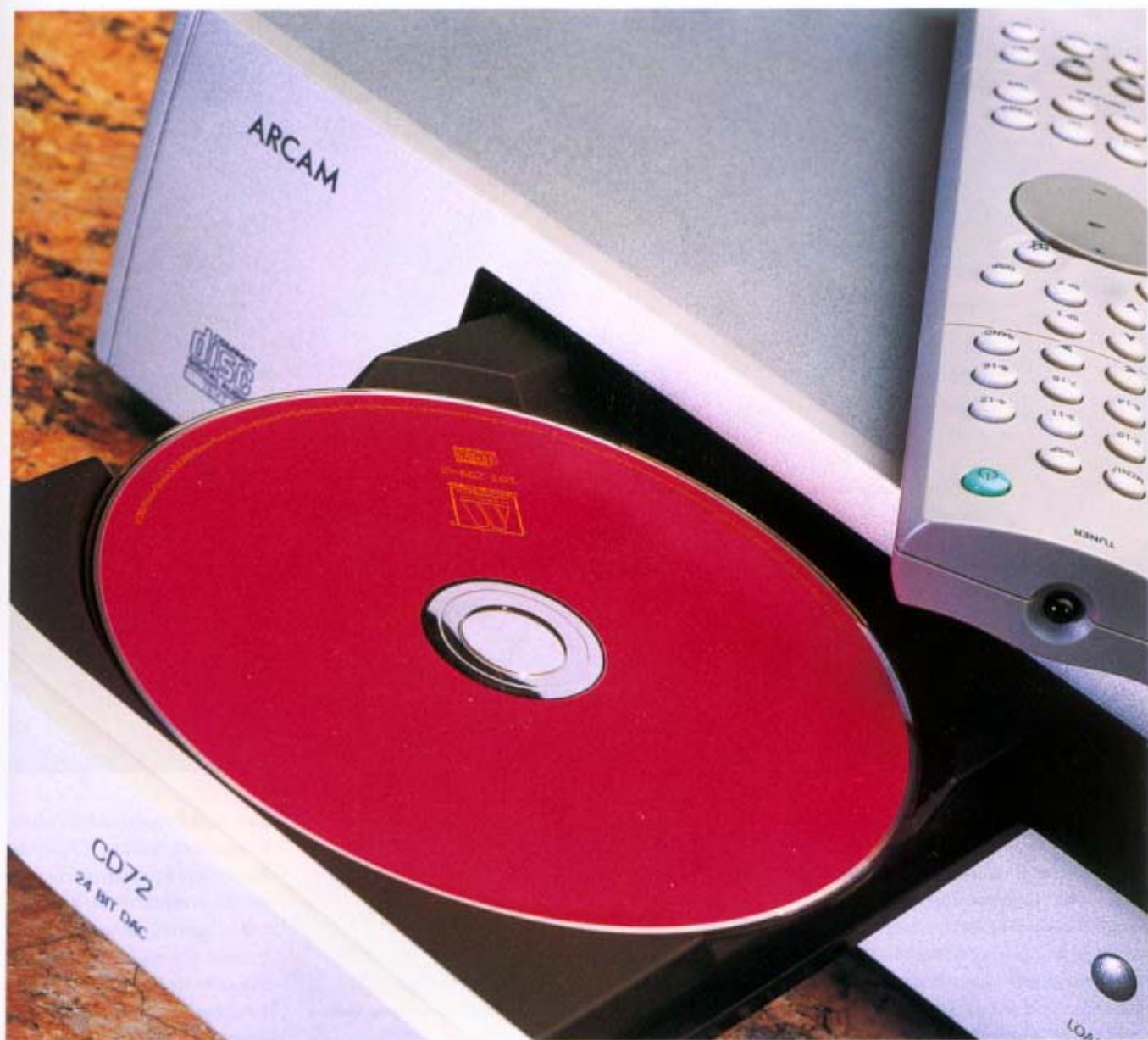
£430 ★★★★★

The appeal of the DiVA CD72 is simple: here's a British-made machine that works well straight from the box, but is also upgradeable. The modular design means it can become a CD92 with some work from an Arcam dealer, this being a strategy the company adopted with the old Alphas, which could move up from 7SE through Alpha 8 to Alpha 9. The most recent changes to the player, carried out midway through 2001, were forced on Arcam by the fact that the Sony transport it was using went out of production. The changes made to accommodate the new mechanism, also a Sony, weren't huge – the power supply circuit was improved, the output stage changed to Class A operation and the master clock replaced.

#### WHAT'S IT GOT?

Make	Arcam	Exposure	Roksan	Rotel
DAC	24-bit	24-bit	24-bit	18-bit
HDCD	No	No	No	Yes
Remote	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Display off	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Digital out	Coaxial/optical	Coaxial/optical	Coaxial/optical	Coaxial/optical
Headphones	No	No	No	No





However, the Burr-Brown 24-bit delta/sigma digital to analogue conversion was retained, and what was done was enough to give the player a little more refinement and a shade more punch in the bass. That kept the CD72 atop the pile when it came to the WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION Awards 2001 judging.

With anything from the wide dynamics and effects-laden soundstage of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* to the commercial pop of Sophie Ellis Bextor's debut set – never say we're not catholic in our musical tastes! – the Arcam is communicative and involving, punching out lead vocals and solo instruments with real drama while ensuring bass



Arcam's Award-winning CD72 is communicative and highly involving

lines have weight and there's no shortage of treble information. The multiple layers of Floyd's *The Great Gig in the Sky* are clearly apparent, Clare Torry's celebrated vocal weaving its way around in the soundstage, while the characteristics of la Bextor's pipes are there in all their glory.

Acoustic music is delivered persuasively, with vocals and solo instruments to the fore and fine integration between bass,

midband and treble. This serves choral and orchestral works well, a good example being the recent Hyperion recreation of *The Coronation of George II*, the organ and choral voices having good impact. It's as well suited to a spot of vintage jazz from Dave Brubeck, thanks to its fine rhythmic ability.

However it's not perfect: there are two players in this group that more than give it a run for its

money, giving better ambience and having more bass punch and dynamics, and thus greater listener-appeal. We're about to encounter one of them...

#### Exposure 2010 CD

£599 ★★★★★

Exposure products achieved a reputation as weapons of choice for heavy rockers, if a bit too exciting for mass-market acceptance. The agricultural looks of past kit didn't help – it was menacingly black and serious, with simple controls and few of them. True, we recall evenings cranking stupid music at even more stupid levels through Exposure amps, and discovering them to be almost totally unburstable,





but at the same time we came to a greater appreciation of the kit's all-round musical ability.

The 2010 CD is part of a range aimed at a wider market, and including an integrated amplifier and power amp, both already reviewed in these pages, and a forthcoming tuner. The finish is smarter, with a thick brushed metal fascia (available in black or the silver we have here) and crackle-painted main cabinet over the all-aluminium chassis, while under the lid lurks a Sony transport and 24-bit conversion from Burr-Brown. These are backed up with a custom transformer, while the conversion circuitry is isolated from interference by being on its own circuitboard, the master clock being located close to the DAC.

Factory-fresh, the 2010 was rough. Not a little ragged, but 'head for the hills' strident and thin, and it took a 48 hour run-in on repeat to let the sound fill out and show what it could really do. And that done, this reveals itself to be a player able to



Exposure's 2010 CD is a thrilling listen, whatever music you like

amaze: spin the Sophie Ellis Bextor disc and the rhythms are tight and hard-hitting despite the excellent bass extension on offer, while that voice is thrown into sharp relief, for good or bad.

There's even more sense of impetus than through the Arcam, and the same holds true when the Pink Floyd disc is loaded. In fact, the Exposure makes *Dark Side...* sound like a layer of dirt has been wiped from the sonic window, revealing more of the mix and the power of the playing, while that swooping vocal on *The Great Gig...* is even more abandoned.

It's an exciting listen, and the trick is repeated with Jools Holland's *Big Band, Small World* set, where the character of the

various guest performers is immediately clear, but even more important the power and tight interplay of the big band itself is thrilling.

That ability also gives it the edge with big orchestral and choral works, like *Coronation* or Bruckner's *Symphony No. 8* (Wand/Berlin Philharmonic on RCA), where the ambience on offer changes the experience from just music to something truly riveting. The live Bruckner is striking in this respect, and the impact of brass is truly exciting.

The 2010 is a real find: it's one of those players able to get you trawling through your CDs just to see what it can do – we checked out everything from a Squeeze singles collection to trio

jazz, and from acoustic folk to loungecore supremos Pizzicato Five – and the chances are it'll delight every time. We recall saying much the same about the original Exposure CD when we first encountered it, that the 2010 does the same for a fraction of the price is great news.

**Roksan Kandy KC-1**

£495 ★★★★★

Roksan describes the build of this player as 'distinctly different to that of many entry-level machines', and while we'd agree that the Kandy KC-1 is solidly put together, we'd suggest the price-band of this test is anything but entry-level for most people.

The Kandy player combines a good quality Sony transport with 24-bit/96kHz delta/sigma digital to analogue conversion from Burr-Brown – the pattern's getting familiar by now, isn't it? – and wrapping the whole thing in high-quality casework built from 1.6mm steel (chassis) and 6mm solid aluminium (fascia). A novelty here is that the player, like





other Kandy components such as the KA-1 amp, is also available in a range of pastel colours. Now call us old-fashioned, but a pink CD player isn't quite our thing, though it may be yours.

The KC-1 has been with us for a while, but in common with most manufacturers Roksan has tweaked the product along the way, though not enough to create a complete new model. There was little need: the Kandy player was pretty right from the start, thanks to the usual close attention to both power supply provision and circuit layout.

Separate windings on the transformer feed the digital and analogue sections, the player having six regulated power supplies, while good op-amps are used in the output stage. It also remains a satisfying player to use as a result of its solidity of construction and logical layout.

Run the player in for a couple of days – we gave this one the same warm-up as the others here, although like the Arcam and Roksan here it'd been on



Roksan's Kandy certainly knows how to grab your attention

the premises for a month or two – and the balance is very typically Roksan, being forthright whatever music you play. It's a sound designed to grab the attention, with sparkling treble bringing out the atmosphere of everything from Pink Floyd disc to the Hyperion *Coronation* and the live Bruckner.

It majors on Ms Bextor's voice, making the most of her occasionally odd phrasing and vocal character, but for all that the player isn't perfect. Slightly lazy rhythms are in evidence with music like this and the bass fiddles of an orchestra, while drums and other percussion instruments are loose, yet lack the absolute extension of the best here. The result is plenty of

excitement, but some lack of scale, while jazz bass is a shade weedy, missing some of its characteristic resonance and warmth.

This is a player needing care in auditioning: its bright treble might suggest you're getting more from it than competitive designs, but things could easily get too bright and edgy.

#### Rotel RCD-1070

£525 ★★★★★

Rotel once ruled the midrange CD player roost. The RCD-965 and its various spin-offs made a change from the hard, bright players of the time, and won themselves many fans.

In more recent times Rotel slipped a little in the CD stakes, producing players that were OK,

#### WE TESTED THEM WITH

##### REFERENCE SYSTEM

CD player **Marantz CD-7**

Preamp **TAG McLaren Audio**

**AV32RDAB**

Power amplifier **TAG McLaren Audio**  
**100X5R**

Speakers **Monitor Audio Studio**

**20SE/MJ Acoustics Pro 100**

Cables **Chord Co**

##### PRICE-COMPATIBLE SYSTEM

Amplifier **Rotel RA-1060**

Speakers **Mission 780**

Cables **Chord Co**

but hardly groundshaking. The RCD-1070 is designed to put that right: part of the flagship 10-Series, not the mainstream 9 line-up, it was launched hot on the heels of the fine RA-1060 integrated amplifier.

Behind the macho styling of the Rotel and within the substantial casework, the company has installed a centrally-located CD transport of a low-resonance design, mounted to avoid vibrations getting to the disc. The





whole point is to deliver the most accurate data to the digital section, which comprises a new multilevel DAC of 18-bit resolution sourced from Burr-Brown, along with an 8x digital filter with HDCD decoding. Other aspects of the design include a custom toroidal transformer and extensive use of discrete components rather than integrated circuits in the signal path, a Rotel preference that ties in with the company's policy of selecting components purely on the grounds of listening. Indeed it's for that reason the DAC was chosen, rather than the 20-bit devices found in recent players from this company.

Like all the players here, the Rotel was run for a couple of days on repeat before listening commenced, although this sample had previously been used for last month's *First Test*. That done, it was pitted against the other machines in this group, and immediately impressed with its superior weight, plus greater insight and detail, when compared to the less expensive players here. This is a player

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION says				
	sound	build	facilities	verdict
Arcam	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆
Exposure	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★
Roksan	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆
Rotel	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★



capable of sounding bigger and more powerful than its price would suggest, thundering out bass lines be they the big fiddles of an orchestra or electric/synth bass on rock and pop.

There's an appreciable 'whoomph' when a full orchestra or a big band such as Jools Holland's kicks in, the Rotel combining with suitably accomplished amplification and speakers to shift air in persuasive fashion. Yet at the same time there's sufficient finesse and treble detail to bring out the ambience of a live recording, the

space around the orchestra on the Bruckner striking in its wide, three-dimensional soundstage.

Change gear to the Pink Floyd disc and the multiple layers are set out for inspection, while the powerful bass really hits hard and the superbly recorded guitars have excellent bite and decay. It even proves its worth with the commercial dance music of Sophie Ellis Bextor, really bringing out the character of her voice and revealing why some consider it to be rather special. There's a frisson with this disc that only one other

player here can match – and that one, the Exposure 2010 CD, is £75 more expensive!

### VERDICT

The Arcam is still good, and its competitive price guarantees its appeal. However, it's not quite the star turn it was before the Exposure and Rotel entered the arena: the £525 Rotel buys a more convincing sound, and the £600 Exposure is in a different league. If you assume, as we have here, that anyone

looking for a £400 player might pay more if the performance warrants, the newcomers are undoubtedly the better buys.

Compared with the Exposure the Rotel's a little warmer in the bass, but where it lags a little is in rhythmic acuity: the RCD-1070 is no slouch, but the Exposure simply sounds faster, tighter and more exciting, giving the subjective impression that it's getting more out of the music.

The Rotel is undoubtedly very impressive. But the Exposure is more than its match for sheer musical involvement, which makes it worth every penny.