

CD/SACD PLAYERS

Aesthetix Romulus CD Player/DAC
\$7000

This all-tubed CD player and DAC is one of the great bargains in high-end audio today. What makes the Romulus special is that it sounds so “non-digital.” Rather than being flat and congealed, it opens up the spatial presentation, giving instruments and voices room to breathe. The Romulus couples this expansiveness with an unusual (for digital) sense of top-octave air and openness. The tonal balance is rich and warm in the bass, which, when added to the player’s treble smoothness, results in an immediately engaging and fatigue-free presentation. The Romulus isn’t “tubey” in the classic sense, but neither does it sound like solid-state. The design and build-quality are beyond what’s expected at this price. If you have no analog sources, the Romulus can serve as a preamplifier and DAC with multiple digital inputs, provided you purchase the variable-output option (\$1000). Thanks to an innovative hybrid analog/digital volume control, there’s no loss of resolution no matter the volume setting. aesthetix.net (243)



MBL Corona C31
\$9200

The Corona line from MBL may well be just about the most purely beautiful electronics on the market with sonics to match. However, in today’s computer-driven marketplace, if you needed further proof that the CD player is alive and well, look no further than the C31. A slot-loading CD player at heart, it includes a high-performance DAC with inputs for USB, SPDIF, and TosLink. At times NG found himself giving the CD player a slight nod for superior image focus and the reproduction of low-level detail. But moving to 24-bit/96kHz material, he preferred USB hands-down. The classic MBL signature—the bloom and analog warmth that informs all its gear—is built into the C 31’s DNA. A fabulous two-fer. mbl-northamerica.com (228)



Esoteric K-03X
\$12,000

A brilliant concept beautifully executed, the Esoteric K-03X is much more than a CD/SACD player. It is also a full-fledged DAC, with ample inputs, multiple upsampling and filtering options, and even provisions for an external word clock. Its USB interface is state of the art, supporting the highest resolutions and asynchronous clock control. As a DAC, the K-03X has few peers. Both the S/PDIF and USB interfaces are among the best AT has heard. In either case, rhythms are unflagging, details emerge clearly and naturally, and listener fatigue is non-existent. Dynamics are superb as well, and the sound is always open and airy. The K-03X also excels as a disc player, especially when playing SACDs. CD sound is not quite up to the K-03X’s benchmark in other modes, but it is ravishing nonetheless. Though it is not cheap, the K-03X delivers a level of versatility, build, sound quality, and operational smoothness that fully justifies its price. esoteric.jp (213)



dCS Puccini and U-Clock
\$18,999; dCS Puccini U-Clock; \$5499

If you’re among the 99.99% of audiophiles who can’t afford dCS’ \$110k Vivaldi digital playback system, the company’s Puccini CD player is the next best thing at less than one-fifth the price. As with the Vivaldi, the Puccini is packed with dCS’ proprietary technologies, including the brilliant Ring DAC and a custom software-based digital filter. The sound from CD is extraordinarily dense in detail and tone color, with a solid bottom end and spacious soundstaging. The icing on the cake is the Puccini’s fabulous rendering of SACD. The U-Clock is an outboard clock that not only improves the Puccini’s sound quality but also serves as a USB interface so that you can access the Puccini’s DAC with a computer-sourced signal. Recently updated to support DSD on USB and Puccini digital inputs. tempohighfidelity.com (183)



Esoteric K-01X
\$21,000

The entry fee for Esoteric’s flagship K-01X isn’t chump change, but how often does such a sum purchase three reference-level components? The K-01X is the best CD player and SACD player and USB DAC AT has ever heard. Even as an SPDIF DAC the K-01X fully competes with reference models, and as a transport it puts many stand-alone units to shame. In either player or DAC mode, the K-01X’s resolution, dynamics, soundstaging, and timing are all top drawer. Meanwhile, the internal linestage, often an afterthought in otherwise good DACs, is a standout. Sum it up, and the K-01X’s sonics are never less than riveting. Esoteric has packaged all this performance and functionality in a flawlessly operating, elegantly hewn chassis, making the K-01X one of the high end’s best values. If AT had to choose a single yet singular digital source component, the Esoteric K-01X would be it. esoteric.jp (230)



CH Precision D1 CD/SACD Transport/Player
From \$37,750, depending on configuration

Although a formidable CD/SACD transport/player in its own right, the D1 comes into its own when paired with the companion CH Precision C1 DAC/Pre. The two communicate via the company’s proprietary CH-Link, and once you hear the Link’s open, natural sound, you will never go back to SPDIF. Furthermore, the CH-Link can carry raw DSD straight from an SACD to the C1. The combination of D1, C1, and CH-Link results in the best SACD sound AT has yet heard. The bottom line is: Buy the D1 with the C1. ch-precision.com (239)