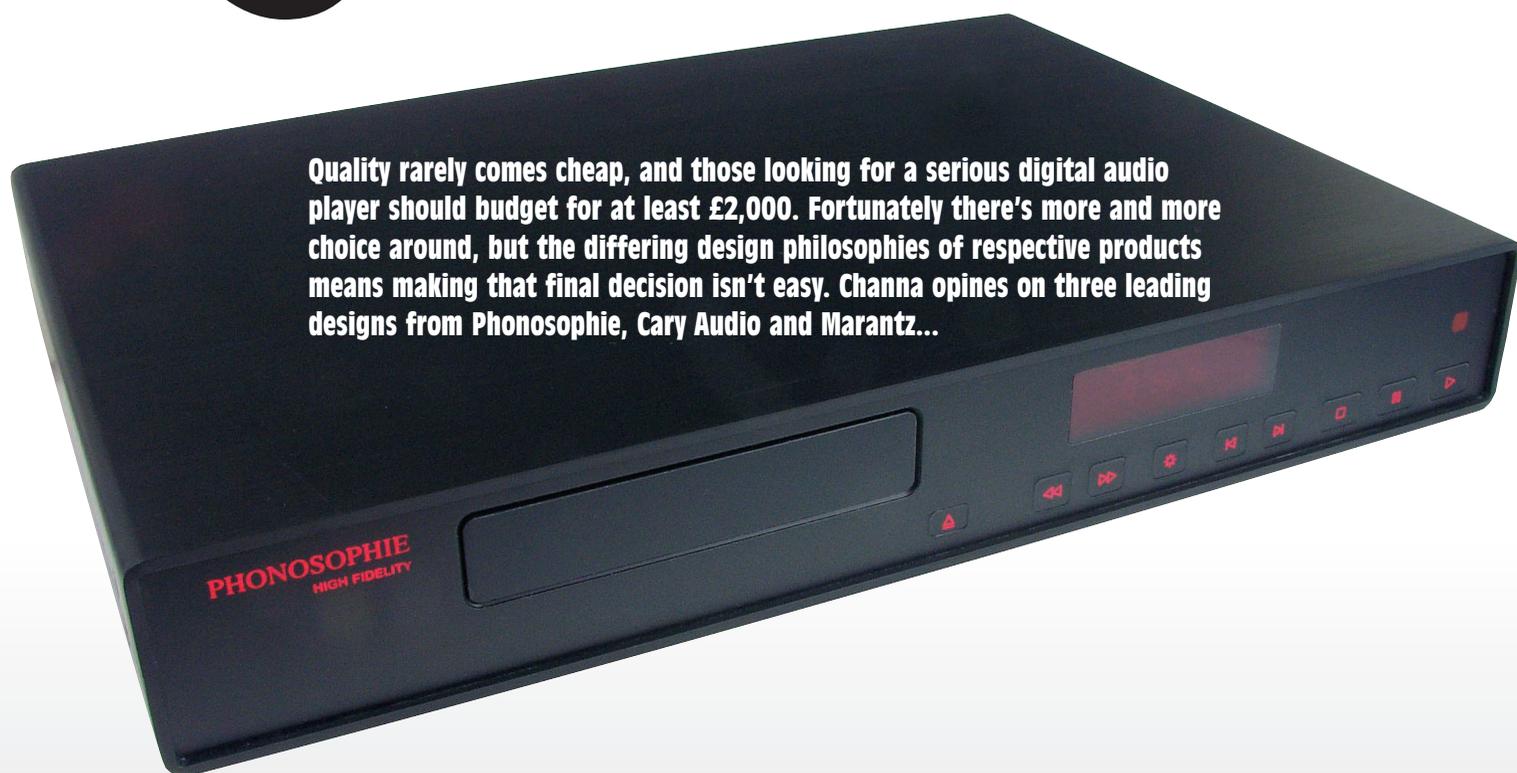


3 of the Best



Quality rarely comes cheap, and those looking for a serious digital audio player should budget for at least £2,000. Fortunately there's more and more choice around, but the differing design philosophies of respective products means making that final decision isn't easy. Channa opines on three leading designs from Phonosophie, Cary Audio and Marantz...

PHONOSOPHIE IMPULS 1 £2,675

Phonosophie is a German company that has been operating since 1985. They hand make everything and produce complete systems, including turntables, tonearms, amplifiers, speakers and the Impuls range of CD players. The Impuls 1 can be upgraded to 1.5, 2 and 3 specification. They all share the same Phillips 12.3 transport mechanism and 1bit NPC SM5872 DAC. The £3,675 Impuls 1.5, £4,875 Impuls 2 and £12,725 Impuls 3 have better circuitry, power supplies, transport modifications and Phonosophie's own analogue filter. All Phonosophies use hand-wound transformers made especially by Toroid (Sweden). Silhouetted, the Impuls 1 resembles the previous 'olive' Naim 3 series. There is the attractive wrap-around curved and low-slung stance, aluminium cover and plastic face-panel framed within. However there are differences, the 4mm charcoal aluminium casework is made in Germany for Phonosophie and is a highly polished with a very fine

across-ways grain giving a refined feel. Dimensions are 447x 70x 340mm, weight 7kg.

The Impuls 1 comes supplied as standard with PK2 DD55 DIN interconnect (£125), Powercord CU (copper plated contacts) (£120), FBI remote and Digiplug AG (Silver). It has DIN outputs (the physically connected WBT sockets can be electrically connected at the factory instead). The DIN output was used with a no-cost option PK2 DB52 DIN-BNC lead which requires BNC to Phono adapters at £8.90 each for non DIN/BNC amplifiers. BNC-Phono adapters according to Phonosophie provide matched 50 Ohms to the BNC from the DIN while a direct DIN to Phono lead is unmatched. Also on the rear panel are IEC mains input with switch, switchable int/ext DIN power supply connection and phono sockets for system remote. The Impuls 1 is designed to be left on, has adjustable display (in sleep mode for best sound) and logo (attuned through a 'secret' button behind). There is a digital volume control via the remote.

SOUND QUALITY

The Phonosophie lent a wonderful expansive quality to Joe Jackson's 'Steppin' Out'. It was structured and rhythmical, with the piano sub-melody especially good, as it is so important to the whole piece and when properly done - as it was here, it surges gorgeously within the composition revealing "Steppin' Out" ecstatically. Bass was deep and tuneful and the vocals were very well executed with Jackson's voice, minimising the sometimes edgy tonalities but not the brilliant phrasing of the lyrics. However, there was just the slightest discernable mid-forwardness to vocals but this did not deter the enjoyment.

Nine Inch Nails' 'Piggy' had the most amazing separation to its complex, densely layered and heady mixture of industrial electronica and live instrumentation. The undulating bass lines were delivered with heaps of atmosphere. The crashing percussion coda was very effecting indeed with a great feel for the huge drum-track and accompanying decaying notes. 'You Don't Know Me'

MUSIC

Joe Jackson 'Night And Day' (CD, 1982)

Nine Inch Nails 'The Downward Spiral' (Hybrid SACD, 1994/2005)

Bjork 'Joga' (CD, 1997)

Ray Charles 'Genius Loves Company' (Hybrid SACD 2004)

Pamela Thorby/Richard Egarr 'Handle Recorder Sonatas' (Hybrid SACD, 2004)

by Ray Charles and Diana Krall was push yet emotional and highly resolved. There was extended, expansive sound all round with Ray's vocals providing deep in-room emotional resonance, while Diana's were arresting.

Strings had the requisite lush embalming quality of this genre yet they were respectfully placed into the whole mix, neither lost nor dominant. 'Largo' from the 'Handel Recorder Sonatas' had body and delicacy in equal measure and though simple it was benignly addictive, gluing me to my seat. The String and Vocal mix of 'Joga' had profoundly placed strings, creating large orchestral swathes. Bjork's vocals were stunningly allowed to breathe, naked, alongside the orchestration. Her singing was beautiful with tangible expression and self-assuredness.

CONCLUSION

It was interesting comparing these three players with the high end

Metronome CD player (see p32), because it highlighted their deficiencies in the midband and treble. Indeed it was altogether more sophisticated - understandable being almost twice the cost! The Phonosophie nearly matched the emotional delivery of instruments and vocals to the Metronome, with the Marantz just behind. The Cary however demonstrated timing parity; most impressive as the Metronome is dazzling in this regard.

The Phonosophie Impuls I gets my top recommendation in this group because it simply played CDs better than the other machines. It did so with a verve and full bodied acoustic that was never once ill-at ease with any of the music used. The emotional drama in the music came through wonderfully and conversely so did the control it used to measure the music, it was simply stunning. I personally love the

aesthetic design of the Impuls I, as it's a welcome return to the iconic industrial design of the past yet now inclusive of superb build quality, operation and finish. Casting aside the aesthetics which may not be to all tastes, it is also upgradeable to the highest player in the range as well as a good practical proposition because it is so svelte and low-slung, unlike the other two much larger and bulkier players. It is more expensive than both the Marantz and Cary, yet in the long term for those with extensive CD collections it represents better value through its upgradeability as well as inherently superior sound quality. This is a player that appeals to both the head and the heart.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Metronome Technologie CD3 Signature CD Player (£4,795)

The Chord Co. Chameleon 2 Silver Plus Interconnect (£120)

Exposure XXII / XXVIII Amplification (£2,798)

Waterfall Victoria 'TWN' Speakers (£2,000)

VERDICT 
PHONOSOPHIE IMPULS 1 CD
PLAYER

Phonosophie

☎ +44(0)1730 261 924

www.uberphon.co.uk

FOR

- upgradeability
- superior sound
- slim iconic design

AGAINST

- nothing!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

With a smooth pass band response characterised by a little high frequency roll off, our impulse response analysis shows, the Phonosophie CD player is conventional enough in response terms, it's upper -1dB limit measuring a normal 20.8kHz. Looking well damped, this player will sound smooth enough in basic tonal balance.

Linearity was good at high levels but, by modern standards poor at -60dB, distortion measuring 0.58%, a sea of quantisation noise showing on the analyser, stretching to 20kHz. This resulted in a poor EIAJ dynamic range figure of 105dB. Luckily, the player was in line with market expectations below -60dB, with 10% distortion at -80dB being normal enough, sinking to 2% with dither.

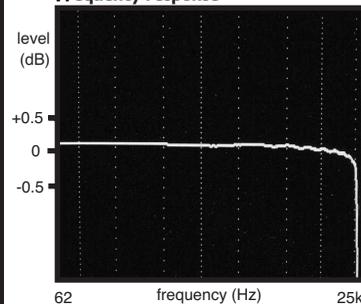
Output level was normal enough at 2.3V and jitter well suppressed at around 150pS from programme related products, a good performance, although common enough now.

The Phonosophie could usefully have been more linear at -60dB, otherwise it measures normally enough. NK

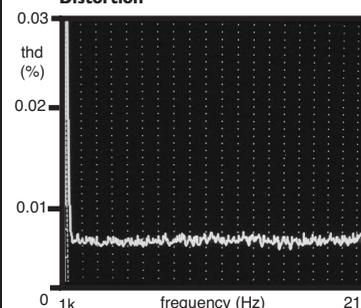
Frequency response	4Hz - 20.8Hz
Distortion	
-6dB	0.0008%
-60dB	0.58%
-80	10%

-80 dithered	2.0%
Separation	
1kHz	137dB
20kHz	124dB
Noise (IEC A)	-98dB
Dynamic range	105dB
Output	2.3V

Frequency response



Distortion



THE EDITOR SAYS:

This comparison illustrates how hi-fi hacks can't just glibly label one machine 'the winner' and have done with it. All three machines have real and strong merit, but a very different combination of strengths and weaknesses. The Phonosophie is obviously the only CD spinner, so it's no surprise that it triumphs with ye olde digital disc. It shows us that, even its very accomplished opposition (famous for great 16bit) can't completely maintain low res standards when forced to include hi res - an interesting point. Still, slot an SACD into the Marantz and be amazed at its stunningly fluid and beguiling sound. It sounds silky and luxurious like the very best Supex moving coil of yore, and lets music ebb and flow in a similar way too. What it doesn't do is an explosive, 'seat of the pants' performance like the Cary (in non-tube mode); this player is licensed to thrill, yet doesn't seduce like the Marantz. Your call!