

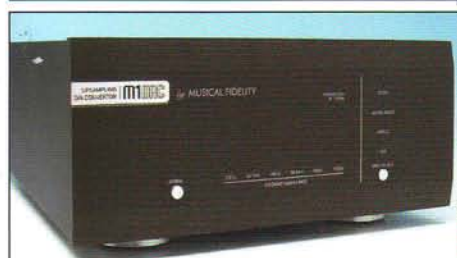
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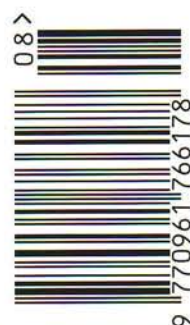
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12 PAGES OF LETTERS - THE BEST WINS A PAIR OF KEF IQ30 LOUDSPEAKERS! (UK ONLY)



Slimline Tonic

David Price finds Micromega's diminutive CD30 CD player a most refreshing alternative to other mid-price machines...

Micromega's an old French name to seasoned hi-fi fans, although of late has undergone something of a rebirth. In 2007 it was acquired by motorsport ace Didier Hamdi, leaving the company's founder Daniel Schar to engineering duties. The new eleven-strong range has been making its way through our pages over the past year, and has consistently impressed. The £1,599 CD30 is the top CD player in the range, which starts at £799 for the CD10.

It's fair to say that the slimline (430x265x69mm, 4.5kg) CD30 isn't exactly from the Japanese battleship school as far as build is concerned. It's nicely and neatly finished with its aluminium wrap case and metal chassis. Looking behind, there's simply an IEC input and RCA phono outs, plus a single coaxial digital socket. The back panel is pressed steel, and

the casework doesn't quite seal, leaving panel gaps the like of which I've not seen since the Citroen 2CV. Doubtless in Japan people would be expected to commit *seppuku* for such, but perhaps in France there's merely a Gallic shrug?

The fascia is an altogether happier story; again it's hardly in the £1,500 Denon league, but looks crisp and original. The bright blue ten character dot matrix display is easy to read from a distance, and the buttons have a positive if clunky action. It's pleasingly simple and unfussy to use, but case tapping hi-fi hacks such as *moi* won't be giving Micromega any points for its resonant quality; a damping panel or two wouldn't go amiss. Nor will punters be impressed by a rather agricultural draw loader which hardly swishes in and out with effortless ease. This would be another sacking offence were this a Japanese engineering issue...

Inside, there's an R-core transformer taking care of digital duties, which is encouraging as they're well suited to low current applications, more so than a toroid. This feeds the drive mechanics, the servo and decoding circuits and user interface section, and gets linear regulators with high power noise rejection. The mech is either a Sony KHM313 or Sanyo SFH850 DVD-ROM unit, via a Philips SAA78247 and Micromega proprietary software running error correction optimised for sound quality rather than mobile use; the code drives the mech for optimum data retrieval in real time. Interestingly, upsampling is done to 132.3kHz (three times that of CD's 44.1kHz); the data word length is also upscaled to 24bit. This then goes to the Analogue Devices AD1853 DAC, an eight times oversampling multibit Delta Sigma design. Micromega also say special attention has been paid to the analogue output stage.



"a pleasant looking modern silver disc spinner that sings like Caruso in a romantic frame of mind..."

SOUND QUALITY

Nicely styled as the Micromega is, I must say its lightweight build didn't exactly fill me with great expectations for its sonic prowess. So it was with some surprise to find it serving up a sound that was altogether more robust. Indeed, musically the CD30 is actually rather authoritative; it has an extremely assured gait that you'd normally only expect from players approaching the £3,000 price point. Indeed, you could almost call it commanding, such was the power and poise it showed with Appaloosa's 'Travelling', a lovely slice of late-nineties jazz infused drum'n'bass from LTJ Bukem's 'Earth Volume One' compilation.

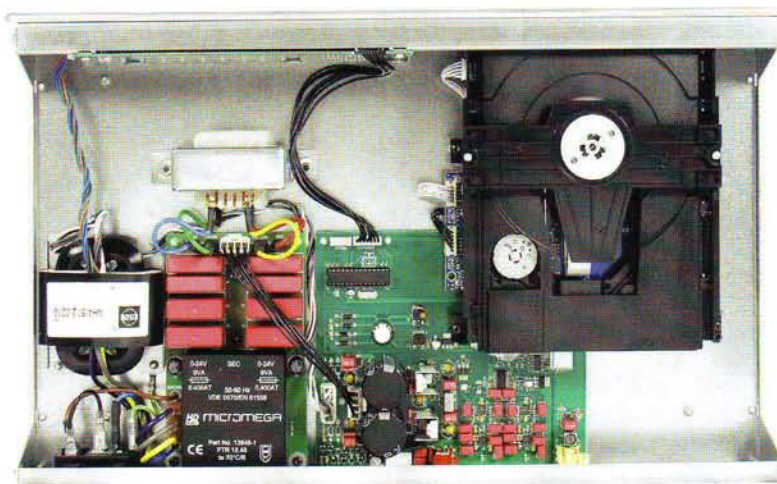
The Micromega's not a particularly warm or euphonic tool, although neither would you call it cool. Tonally it's pretty neutral, but errs ever so slightly on the side of making CD palatable thanks to a very smooth and subtle treble that goes the extra mile. Whereas the top £1,200 machines of last month's group test have just the slightest hint of grain (or perhaps it's fairer to say they're smooth but lack real finesse), the Micromega is an altogether more sophisticated proposition, as the looped hi-hats of this track showed. It snapped these electronic cymbals

into amazing focus, carried their super-subtle inflections and set them precisely into the wider sea of sound, like jewels in a crown.

Moving down the frequency spectrum the CD30 displayed similarly superb insight; it doesn't dramatise things too much, preferring to give a studied and exhaustive view of what's going on, rather than falling over itself to make things rollocking good fun. Yet this sort of intricacy and authority are just what's needed for this sort of music; it doesn't respond either to the emotionally overblown or the stripped down and

deconstructed.

The Micromega is a thorough performer in the low frequencies, although not a remarkable one. There's not the sensation you get from the tweaked Astin Trew AT3500, at similar money, of being dipped in a writhing sea of bass. There's no gratuitous booming, banging and crashing going on, and yet it's very nicely articulated; it's tuneful and drives along the song in such a way as to make the excellent (but admittedly a bit cheaper) Cyrus CD8 SE sound a tad wooden. The acoustic bass work on Corduroy's





'10:28 from Shibuya' romped along in a most expressive fashion, the band's superlative syncopations sounding eerily realistic (I've seen them live a good few times). A fine recording such as this also showcased the player's rather excellent sense of space; the midband was deep and wide and tall, the Micromega able to hang the soundstage back a bit, rather than laser-etching it on my forehead. It caught the loose, laid back, groovy mood of the music brilliantly.

'Up on the Hill' from The Fun Lovin' Criminals showcased the Micromega's rhythmic skills, setting up the song's big backbeat as surely as something you're very certain about. On top, it overlaid some big, spacey keyboards and that thick and gruff but adeptly delivered nasal drawl (sorry, I should say 'vocal') from lead Criminal Huey Morgan. Although the CD30 can sound quite sugary when called upon so to do, it doesn't upsample itself out of the real world; it is able deliver grit when needed. And so this song got its rightful bite and edge back compared to the likes of the Astin Trew, which (especially when switched to 96kHz upsampling) had a propensity to sugar the pill. The best bit was surely the CD30's swagger; it sounded so assured it just didn't need to try, as the song was delivered with great poise and purposefulness. Given that many more expensive CD players sound less sure of themselves, this is a fine result.

The meticulously delivered jazz funk strains of Fourplay's 'Elixir' were a delight to behold. This 1995 recording relies just a touch too much on Yamaha's DX7, a very early digital synthesiser that many feel does a better impersonation of a doorbell than it does a piano, but the CD30 didn't make things worse. Some CD spinners can make this chiming keyboard sound even more implausible than it already is, but the Micromega's finely rendered soundstage had it sounding believable. Also impressive was guitar impresario Lee Ritenour's fretwork; the biting attack transients of struck guitar strings were skillfully caught by this CD player; it's mighty fast when it needs to be. The song's recorded acoustic was beautifully carried, once again extremely capacious and tonally full and bristling with atmosphere.

A recent Linn recording of Mozart's 'Symphony 29 in A major' (Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Sir Charles Mackerras) showed the Micromega in its element. We had a CD player that's not a million miles away from the budget brat pack sounding distinctly expensive in the way it projected a spacious, enveloping live acoustic, with wonderful atmosphere to the concert hall. Linn's superlative recording quality allowed the CD30 to shine, displaying a beautiful tonality and grace; massed strings were full bodied, dizzyingly fast and yet had a lovely tactile texture. The music bounded along with a sense of immutable flow; there was never a moment when attention was lost and you were left thinking about tomorrow's breakfast or Saturday's shopping. The Micromega seized the helm of the ship, so to speak, and spelled out in no uncertain terms what the vessel's trajectory would be. The result was a first movement (Allegro moderato) of exceptional poignancy and yet delicacy too; the CD30 doesn't use brute force for effect, rather it gets its musical insight from sheer efficacy.

CONCLUSION

An interesting one, this. Micromega's CD30 reminds me, if you'll pardon another automotive analogy, of the classic late seventies Renault 5 Gordini Turbo. Take a fine but inexpensive chassis, with a few rough edges here and there in terms of panel fit and detail finish, drop in an exceptionally able (at the price) motor and you have a recipe for inexpensive fun - or cheap thrills, call it what you will. The recipe worked for Renault, as it later returned as the Clio Williams, and so it should work for this French hi-fi manufacturer too. The result is a pleasant looking modern silver disc spinner that's

slightly rough around the edges in terms of build and use, but that sings like Caruso in a romantic frame of mind...

The result is a confident and commanding performer, with an excellent rhythmic flow and superior dynamic articulation, as well as a wonderfully open and expressive midband. This is sealed with a treble performance that's truly exceptional at the price, I feel. There's a delicacy to high frequencies which you just can't buy from any of the slightly cheaper machines, and is rare with more expensive ones; I'd say this is the CD30's standout feature.

At the other end of the scale, bass is strong and articulate, but the Micromega has to defer here to the Astin Trew which seems to plough its own unique furrow in this respect. Overall then, this charming Gallic silver disc spinner proves itself worthy of serious auditioning, should you be in the market for a sub-£2,000 CD player.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier
World Audio K5881 power amplifier (modified)
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

VERDICT

Musically lucid and engaging performer with an exceptionally refined treble performance at the price, although construction quality isn't this machine's forte.

MICROMEGA CD30 £1,599
Absolute Sounds
+44 (0)208 971 3909
www.absolutesounds.com

FOR

- sweet, delicate, airy treble
- midband detail and subtlety
- engaging rhythms
- lucid bass

AGAINST

- uninspiring metalwork
- noisy disc transport

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

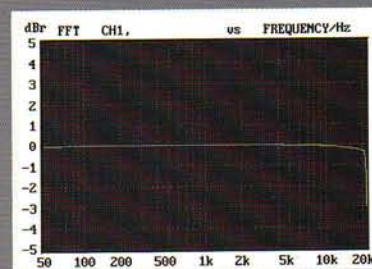
Frequency response shows a gentle roll off at high frequencies, measuring -0.3dB at 20kHz. This sort of roll down, although slight, is enough to ensure the player will not sound sharp or glassy.

Distortion levels were low throughout the player's dynamic range, measuring just 0.0003% at 0dB down to 0.24% at -60dB. Although not quite class leading, this is a good result and largely accounts for a good, if not exceptional, EIAJ dynamic range value of 98dB. Output was a normal at 2.1V and noise low too.

The CD 30 measures well all round. It has no weaknesses or peculiarities and should give good sound quality. NK

| | |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| Frequency response (-1dB) | 2Hz - 21.3kHz |
| Distortion (%) | |
| 0dB | 0.0003 |
| -6dB | 0.0005 |
| -60dB | 0.24 |
| -80dB | 2.4 |
| Separation (1kHz) | 112dB |
| Noise (IEC A) | -112dB |
| Dynamic range | 98dB |
| Output | 2.1V |

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION

