



NORTHERN BEAUTY

Hegel's CD player may not fit the norm but it cuts the mustard where it counts

PRODUCT Hegel CDP2A
 TYPE CD player
 PRICE £1,500
 KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x8x29cm ◊ Weight: 10kg ◊ 24-bit/192kHz sigma/delta DAC ◊ Balanced and single-ended outputs ◊ Coaxial digital output
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Bent Hegel set up his company in 1990 following an illustrious career in music, video and audio technology in the professional market, and he has some serious plans to put Norway firmly on the hi-fi map. His philosophy is not so different to many in this field – “to preserve the analogue, clean organic sound as much as possible by using high-resolution technical solutions”. Yet he has done more than many in this quest. The ‘SoundEngine’ technology for blocks of amplification that he has developed is described as a “local error correction system”

and turns out to be a variation on a feed-forward loop that surrounds just one stage of amplification. It compares frequency, level and error content between in and output and adds an inverted correction signal if required. In other words it only acts when it needs to and because each loop is so short it works at very high speed compared to normal feed-forward/back systems.

The CDP2A is the more affordable of two CD players in the Hegel range, which contains amps of all the usual stereo varieties – integrated, preamps and power amps. This player has borrowed the amps’ high-current

power supply, described as having the same capacity as those of 100-watt amps. The theory is that this preserves dynamic range by keeping the noise floor down to -130dB.

Digital to analogue conversion is via a Crystal balanced sigma/delta 24-bit/192kHz DAC that is combined with synchronised upsampling and a low-jitter master clock – the signal remains fully balanced all the way from DAC to the balanced outputs. The player also has traditional single-ended phonos for amps without balanced inputs.

Unusually for a small company, Hegel has designed the CD-servo and laser front end



from scratch, his experience with low-noise analogue front end and high-speed digital design providing the expertise required.

The CDP2A is fitted with an unusual but intuitive set of control buttons on its cast-alloy fascia. The two buttons each serve three functions by pressing in the relevant corner to elicit the desired response – play, open, stop and so on. Even nicer is the metal-bodied remote control – at least twice as nice as you usually find on players at this price. Densen charges £200 for its Gizmo remote which has a few more buttons but it’s very similar in build and style. The Hegel remote includes half a dozen amp-oriented switches but its clear legends make driving the player very simple.

The blue LED display is not the brightest around but given that there’s no option to vary luminosity it’s set at a good compromise level for low and high-level ambient lighting.

SOUND QUALITY

This dark grey player does not, we’re very happy to report, produce a ‘grey’ sound. It may seem a shade darker than some of the alternatives but there is plenty of colour and texture to the instruments and voices it reproduces. On test, John Surman’s rich soprano saxophone soared against Dave Holland’s solid and timely bass playing on

Anour Brahem’s *Thimar*, the sound at once clean and revealing. Ingabrigt Flaten’s double bass on Bugge Wesseltoft’s live album was also highly appealing. The Hegel is clearly rather comfortable with the nether regions, digging out the woody tone of this lovely instrument and relaying its sense of time in an effortless and fluent fashion. Sensitivity to timing is better than average, the player reflecting the way pace varies throughout a given track in a particularly natural manner.

Reverb is also well served, and the sense of scale/shape in the music is always clearly presented. Likewise, if there’s not much of it you get a smaller picture. And while apparently a smooth operator it’s not afraid to get down and dirty if something of that ilk comes along. In other words, if you want edge you got it.

It’s also transparent without shoving it down your throat and has a finely judged balance between resolve and finesse. It’s blissfully devoid of glare or hardness too, something that even in this day and age digital sources can often be heard to produce.

Next to its Danish competitor the Densen Beat Plus, the Hegel sounds more relaxed and sedate, even quiet, but while timing may not

This player is even more relaxed than the eternally calm Eikos which is surprising, yet it is never dull, a desirable quality in any audio component. The handclaps on Ali Farka Touré’s *Niafunke* were reproduced with their natural reverb and rhythmic power fully intact while the great man’s guitar playing effortlessly drove the piece along. These qualities are reminiscent of the Classe CDP-10, one of last year’s favourites at this price point – it would be intriguing to put them side by side. Another contender in this ballpark that would be useful as a comparison is also Scandinavian – the Copland CDA 822. If you can’t get a result with one of these three you need to save up more moolah!

One good test of a player’s manners is Nils Petter Molvaer’s heavyweight *Khmer*. This is a very substantial track that can easily become fatiguing, and will reveal glare in almost any component. The Hegel coped admirably with the onslaught of bass drums, guitar, samples and trumpet. This is partly because it is slightly restrained in energy terms but mainly because it’s so intrinsically placid, it adds very little of its own character to the music, especially when compared with more ostensibly ‘musical’ machines.

“The Hegel is clearly comfortable with the nether regions, digging out the woody tone of a double bass and relaying it effortlessly.”

be as obvious as it is with the Densen the overall balance is more natural and rich. Bass in particular is more substantial but this doesn’t stop midband energy from shining through, and the Esbjörn Svensson Trio’s vibrant grooves lack none of the piano’s ‘clang’ or the player’s low-level ‘singing’.

Little Feat’s *Red Streamliner* proved that the Hegel is also a strong emotional communicator. Under the catchy groove there is a power in this tune that creeps up on you and catches the lump in your throat – the ability to reveal as much is not a quality to be underestimated. Another great oldie is King Crimson’s *Larks’ Tongues In Aspic Pt. I*. In the Hegel’s grasp this showed its age but retained much of its tension and power. We’ve heard greater dynamic contrasts from it in the past but always through more expensive hardware. With Shostakovich’s *Jazz Suite No 1* (Chaïly/Concertgebouw) on the other hand there was no shortage of dynamic contrast, high-frequency shine or space, which proves that the Hegel is highly sensitive to the material it’s playing. As that’s what high fidelity should be all about this is an excellent result. In fact, if this piece were the only one you played on it, the very notion that the Hegel is even the slightest bit ‘dark’ in balance would never occur.

All in all, the Hegel CDP2A is an extremely welcome newcomer – build, design and crucially sound, are all very much in the CD player Premier League, and if you need any more convincing, just look at the quality of that remote! **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT

SOUND >> 88%

FEATURES >> 85%

BUILD >> 86%

VALUE >> 87%

CONCLUSION
 This attractively designed Norwegian newcomer deserves all the praise it can muster. It does what every hi-fi component should – simply gets out of the way and lets the music shine through.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 87%