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Rising Son...

The EERA DL1 CD Player

by Roy Gregory

Like any medium, CD offers a range of virtues. The question is, do you want to maximize its strengths or minimize its weaknesses. With most technologies the answer would generally be “A little of both”, but in the case of the original silver disc, many listeners consider the strengths so specific and (in some instances) the weaknesses so chronic, that the normal rules cease to apply. Why else would the term digital be used as often descriptively as it is factually?

The sound of EERA's DL1 player crystallizes not just one such dichotomy but two. Not only does it sound as unlike digital as any player you'll find short of five figures, it doesn't fit that other neat equation where the opposite of digital is described as analogue. Certain of digital's weaknesses are mirrored by analogue's strengths to be sure, but this is no yin/yang harmony of notionally perfect balance, closer to a happy (or unhappy) accident.

So, if the DL1 is neither digital nor analogue by nature, how exactly does it sound? Big, bold, dramatic and powerful – full of meat and menace. This isn't the most detailed player you'll ever hear, but its sound is all about how it uses its detail, the way it assembles its information and delivers the meaning within. Look no further than the Gladiator OST if you want to learn what this machine is capable of. Load the disc, advance the volume (but not too far – the EERA has a more than healthy output level) then sit back and let the music establish first a mood

of foreboding and then build into a threatening massif as layer on layer, level on level, it moves through stately and menacing to uplifting and ultimately to the explosive release, almost relief, of the shattering denouement at the finale of the third track. There's all those martial airs and themes pillaged so wantonly from the Classical canon, but you can't deny the power and skill with which Zimmer blends them, producing so much more than a simple

accompaniment for the onscreen action, an emotional catalyst that binds and elevates the whole. Sound like an exaggeration to you? That's because you've heard the disc on a CD player where I've had the pleasure of being pinned to my seat by the EERA. Now imagine the same performance off record (you'll need to imagine pretty hard as it's not available on vinyl); think of the dynamic demands, the huge slabs of musical energy heaped one on another and the record player that would be capable of keeping everything together and under control, all whilst maintaining the energy and life in the performance.

Some products just look the way they sound. The plain, glossy black front-panel, relieved by the glint of the small domed, polished push buttons and the bright blue display give a sense of squat, coiled power, kind of like a cross between a 2001 monolith and a panther waiting to pounce. It's a sense of solid substance that's underlined as soon as you pick the player up; it weighs a lot more than you expect it to. Lift the lid and you'll realise that that weight comes from the combination of a solidly built, proprietary energy-sink transport coupled to a heavy steel chassis acting as a mechanical earth. However, this is very much a case of more is better, and heavy though the chassis is, an additional, lossy support is essential. The more effectively you can lead that energy away from the disc transport the better the player will sound. Once again, a structured support strategy pays dividends and the Symposium rack and Rollerblocks delivered obvious sonic benefits, sharpening up the focus and increasing the transparency, underlining the inherent sense of rhythmic integrity and musical purpose.

And if that slightly brooding exterior seems familiar then that should come as no surprise, for the EERA company is the spiritual descendent of the short-lived but brilliant Helios brand. But whilst the DL1 is externally all but identical to the Helios players, a lot of water has flowed under the internal bridge, this, the company's entry ▶



► level player offering a level of refinement and textural detail that escaped the energetic but occasionally over-enthusiastic output of the old Model 3. No, this is much closer to Model 1 territory, which given the price is a pleasant surprise indeed. The price? Well, there's no UK distribution as yet, but the DL1 sells for 2600 Euros in its home market.

EERA (and Helios before them) have always been extremely tight-lipped about the digital technology within their players, although extremely high over-sampling rates play a significant part, in tandem with high-bit filters. What is obvious though, as soon as you lift the lid is the massively engineered transport. Don't be fooled by the flimsy tray. As soon as this enters the chassis it is lifted and clamped by the massive transport sledge which slides up and back to hook over a large ball bearing mounted atop a steel post bolted direct to the chassis.

The whole transport is locked to this single-point energy sink and just watching the operation gives you an intuitive insight into exactly why this player sounds as solid and grounded as it does.

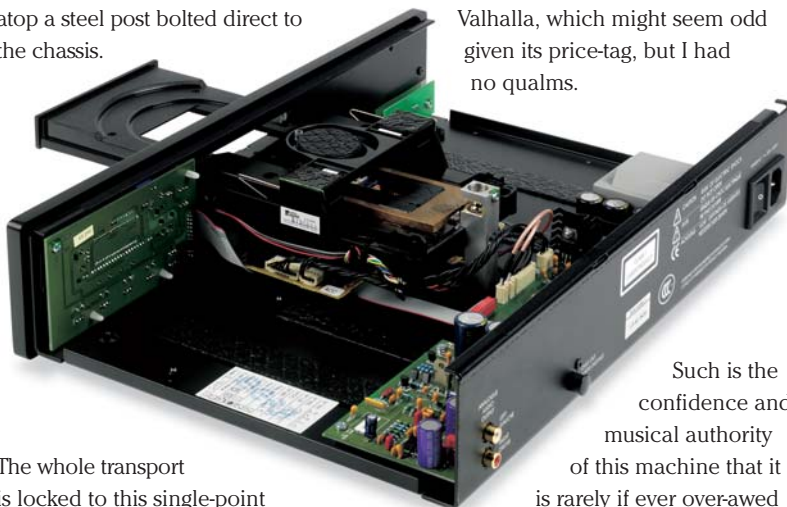
Externally, you get the bare minimum of socketry, with simple left

and right analogue output phonos and a single co-axial digital out – something which reflects the state of the market for add-on DACs rather than the DL1's worth as a transport, a role in which it actually excels. Once again, the Spartan array of buttons on the front-panel offer a range of search and skip functions, augmented by a simple, generic plastic remote offering all



the basic things you'd expect but none of the niceties: so no dimming the display or phase reversal options then.

I ran the DL1 straight into the Connoisseur, RADIA and Nola Pegasus system, all hooked up with Nordost Valhalla, which might seem odd given its price-tag, but I had no qualms.



Such is the confidence and musical authority of this machine that it is rarely if ever over-awed (by the music or the matching system). I wanted to know just how far I could push it; the answer is, as far as you like.

I've already mentioned the astonishing power, substance and

intent the EERA delivers from the Gladiator soundtrack, and this is one disc where its sheer energy and seemingly limitless dynamic range make it preferable to the Wadia 861SE. Sure, the big American player has detail, subtlety and textural nuance to burn, but it simply can't match the muscular dynamism and sheer excitement that the EERA provides: The Wadia is impressive, but the DL1 is enveloping. The question is, whether

less dense and dynamically demanding material will survive the broader brush that the French machine brings to its canvas? Art Pepper's 'Las Cuevas De Mario' is a wonderfully subtle and convoluted track, built entirely on a subtly insistent

rhythm motif that's set up by the bass and piano, before the drums start to add accent and prompts. Against that background foundation Pepper's sax and Jack Sheldon's trumpet play beautiful chorus and call and response melodies. Superbly understated, there's a lot going at once yet the instrumentation stays sparse. A long time collectible record, the most successful CD transfer I've come across is the Analogue Productions Gold CD (CAPJ 012). Which isn't the same as saying that CD players manage to map the sinuous evolutions of this meandering track. Too often there's plenty of meander but no track as a whole. The EERA nails it. Right from the weight and pitch precise notes of the opening bass bar, the sonorous complexity of the piano, the tune simply grooves. The brass injections are sublime, the odd explosive intrusion from the drum kit all the more meaningful for its suddenness and solidity. Pepper's ►

▶ lines are stretched out and breathe, toying with the orderly progress below. The playing is sublime but what makes the track make sense is the sense of ensemble, the clear intent that whilst everyone's doing their own thing, they're actually all doing the same thing. That elusive gel, the glue that connects a band is what the DL1 reveals. Indeed, so obvious is it that you could hold this single track as exemplar for someone asking you to explain jazz; this and Coltrane's 'My Favorite Things' where the subtlety and extended lines of McCoy Tyner's piano make their own claim. It matters not which – the EERA excels with both. Indeed, the up tempo 'A Bit Of Basie' simply underlines just how organized and surefooted this player is.

If I wanted more of anything it would be separation. A player like the 861 tells you more about the relative scale of instruments and the space between them, looks (even) more deeply at their texture and the technique of the player. But for sheer verve and enthusiasm there are few CD players that come close to this one. Rock and pop it simply laps up, while the banter and repartee that opens Ryan Adams' *Heartbreaker* has a compelling sense of energy, a natural timing that brings the humour to life in a way that once again escapes most players and serves to highlight the superb pacing and temporal sophistication of the EERA.

Bach's structures have never been clearer than they are with the DL1 playing Perahia's *Keyboard Concertos 1, 2 and 4* on Sony SK 89245, the purpose in the playing and the sense of progress through the themes perfectly declared. It is only here that the grace and poise of Perahia's playing eludes

the EERA, which whilst refreshingly robust and solid, can't quite grasp his precision, his shifts of weight and density the way that for instance the Micromega Aria can. Having said that, the Academy are rendered a pale imitation of their real selves by the top-loader and you need the Wadia to deliver it all – at quite a cost.

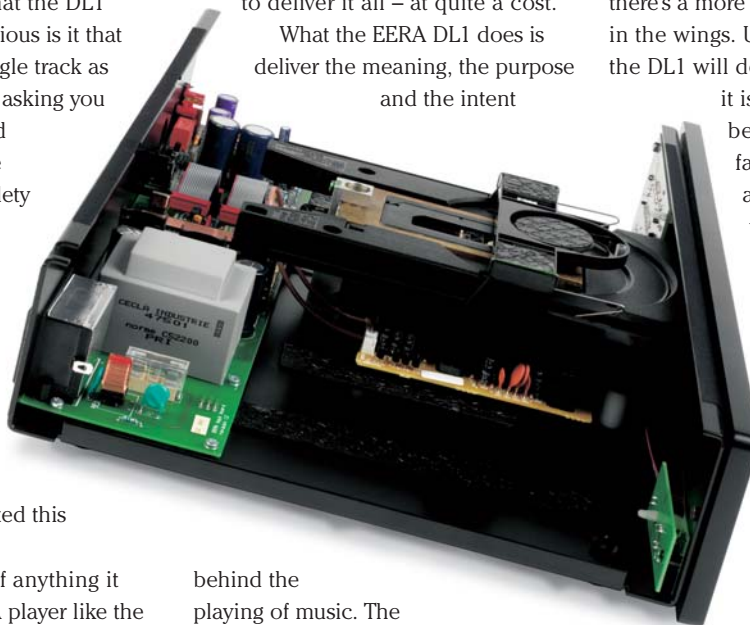
What the EERA DL1 does is deliver the meaning, the purpose and the intent

behind the playing of music. The finer aspects of an instrumentalist's technique might escape it on occasion, but not the use to which he puts it, or the physical presence and harmonic identity of his instrument. The old chestnuts of rhythm and timing are both present and correct in a way to gladden the heart of any analogue aficionado, yet to describe this player as sounding "analogue" is to miss the point. There are precious few record players (and none anywhere near this price) that can match the dynamic integrity, substance, energy and above all, bass linearity of the DL1. Nor does it possess the easy space that comes from vinyl records. This is an altogether denser and more purposeful reproduction, but one that draws you into the music and carries you along with it. If you want academic insight then you'd best look elsewhere, but if you want to understand why man has made music since the dawn of history,

if you want to kick up your heels or simply get carried away, the EERA DL1 is your ticket to ride. When it comes to sheer musical entertainment it sets a new standard at this price, and challenges players at far higher prices still. Indeed, the only reason I hesitate to declare its benchmark status is that there's a more expensive DL2 waiting in the wings. Until it arrives however, the DL1 will do nicely, and even if

it is only keeping that bench warm, it sits so far above the competition at its price point that it will remain unmolested for quite a while. At last I can retire the old Helios Model 1; the Dauphin is dead, long live the Dauphin.

Now – about the King...



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD player
Transport:	Modified Philips CDM12
Digital Stage:	24-bit resolution with 128x software based oversampling
Outputs:	2x single-ended phono analogue 1x co-axial digital
Output Level:	2.7V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 90 x 290mm
Weight:	7.5kg
Finish:	Black
Price:	2600 Euros

Manufacturer:

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