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eera

Tentation CD Player

as reviewed by Robert Learner



Backstory

Since remaking my reference system over the last couple of years—new preamp, amp, and speakers—I've been surveying the digital playback landscape for the right piece. What I found reviewing the excellent Bel Canto 3.5VB DAC is that while I preferred it to the similarly priced Berkeley and Ayre QB-9 DACs, the differences were small.

This finding reinforced my belief that you build a system from the speakers—easy to tell competing models apart—backwards. Find speakers you like that work in your room. Then find the right amp to drive them, the preamp that mates well with it, *then* the digital source. From a value standpoint, I think roughly half of the cost of any system is best devoted to speakers, and there's decreasing value as you move toward the source.

Following this thinking, I began to look at DACs cheaper than the group I reviewed. But coincidence changed my trajectory. Within an hour of each other on the same day, a couple of audio buddies on different continents both told me I had to hear the EERA Tentation CD player. Ignoring the larger karmic picture, I balked. At \$12,000, I thought it would be well past the peak of the value curve for digital playback, and likely a very



marginal improvement at best over what I'd heard.

Further, I'm a longtime fat-ass streamer horrified by the idea of getting up to change the music. But in seeming collusion my friends stuck with it, insisting the Tentation was a must-hear. I like to think I'm stubborn but not stupid. The US distributor, Albert Von Schweikert, agreed to send me the player for review.



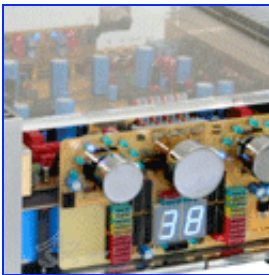
Story

The Tentation sits at the top of the five CD player EERA line. The players are built by hand in France using domestic parts wherever possible. The designer, Didier De Luca, previously designed CD players under the Helios brand—he's been working on digital playback for a long time.

The player is attractive but unremarkable on the outside. No 'bank safe' gauge front panel, no ridiculously-overbuilt-because-that-might-help-it-sell casework. All fine, I'd rather the money go into the guts and performance anyway.

Inside is a heavily modified Philips CD mechanism dubbed the Gyropoint II. The spinner is both beefed up structurally with metal parts replacing some of the plastics, and the mechanism is damped at critical points. The claim is that this gets the bits off the disc more accurately.

As I was unable to get more information about the machine from the designer, the following is simply (and disappointingly) taken from the website. Class A output stages are used, and much attention has been paid to the power supplies. Nothing surprising here. The Delta-Sigma DAC is a 24 bits/192khz chip—I was able to play some 24/96 material on the player.



ROBERT LEARNER'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS

Scaena 3.2s and two 2 JL Fathom 113s subwoofers.

ELECTRONICS

Classe SSP800, Dynavector phono preamp. Audio Research Reference 210 mono amps, 1 Llano Trinity 200wpc 3 channel tube/solid-state hybrid amp (center, rears), 1 Rotel RB 1072 stereo amp (sides).

SOURCES

Squeezebox Touch using Apple Lossless, Oppo 980, Oppo BDP 83, Apple TV, Hanns T20 TT on Gingko platform w/Dynavector XX2mkII. Projector is a JVC RS2 with a Stewart Studiotek 130 110" screen.

CABLES

Signal Cable, Speltz Anticable, DH Labs, Blue Jeans (Belden), Main speaker cable Supra Sword.

ACCESSORIES

Audiav Zirconia main rack and amp stands. Shunyata Hydra 8. Corner bass traps, absorption panels at the point of first reflection and on the front wall by GIK Acoustics, Cornertunes 'triangles' by



The back panel contains the usual suspects: a set of both single-ended and balanced outputs, and a coaxial digital output. Ergonomically, the player works as expected but for one quirk: hitting the pause button on the remote suspends play as expected, but hitting the play button does not resume it. You must hit pause again for playback. In effect, you push the dedicated play button to begin playback, but should you pause, the pause button becomes play/pause in functionality and the play button is rendered useless. Not a big deal, but odd.

Michael Green.



Sound

A benchmark piece for me is the circa '04 Cary 303-200 CD player. Like a Harley, it sounds bold, upfront and harmonically rich. The designers apparently missed the memo that audiophile stuff has to be creamy smooth and laid back. *Let's not offend anybody with dynamic excitement.* For me, the Cary cuts through the pudding.

Though various more contemporary DACs and CD players passing through my system surpass it in this or that parameter, few provide a more engaging listen. The recently reviewed Bel Canto 3.5VB DAC outpoints it, a touch cleaner and quieter, but it's a win by decision, not a KO. The Ayre QB-9 presents more space and delicacy, but doesn't quite match the Cary's balls-out drive. The Berkeley DAC surpasses all at presenting a 3D soundstage and delineating instruments, but lacks a sliver of flow and liquidity versus some of the others.

If the above sounds like splitting bits, well, I'd been finding that's what you have to do to differentiate top quality digital playback components that value fidelity to the source. The choice is a pinch of this or a dash of that, an Oregon vs. Washington State pinot. Then comes along the EERA Tentation, that sings, why choose?

Speed, flow, clarity—these strengths of the Tentation conspire to make other digital components I've heard sound as if the music meets slight resistance coming out of the speakers. With the Tentation, it's as if the aerodynamic drag coefficient of the song has been lowered. Net is a raise in edge-of-seat excitement.

Image density—digital can sound like the effect of expanding a 720 x 480 image over a 1920 x 1080 screen; stretched thin we feel we can see through the picture. Better digital components ameliorate this sense, but none to the extent of Tentation. The music pulsates with body in the air—this is part of what's meant by the term analog-like. Defined as such the Tentation is the most analog sounding digital player I've heard.

A gift from the unreliable remaster gods, the 30th Anniversary edition of Steve Miller's *Fly Like an Eagle* is a legitimate revelation. While I listened to ton of music through these players, I'll use it as the point of comparison among them.

Tentation vs. Berkeley DAC

The title track sounded both faster and with more foundation on the Tentation than the Berkeley. The mid-tempo, hypnotic "Wild Mountain Honey" revealed the speed advantage again, as well as the unparalleled image density of the EERA. The Berkeley did, however, have slightly more high frequency extension.

The consistent ease and flow of the Tentation on these and other tracks revealed the Berkeley to sound a bit artificial and mechanical at times— in the vein of but to a lesser extent than my old Lexicon MC12B processor.

Tentation vs. Bel Canto

Fly Like an Eagle revealed the Tentation to exceed my prior transparency champ, the Bel Canto 3.5VB, in this parameter. It illustrated how transparency and speed are interrelated—a less obstructed path is a faster one.

When I first hit play on the Tentation, what struck was image density. What stuck with more listening was speed. But what this is last word in so far in my digital playback experience is transparency. Across the whole band. The listed 130dB S/N ratio is the highest I've seen in a digital player, and an accurate measure or not, it points to the ultra

low noise/extreme clarity of the Tentation. I think there is something unique and special going on with the output stage.

Transparency and speed lend an upfront, exciting presentation reminiscent of my beloved Cary, but the Tentation takes those qualities further, and adds an image density, a muscularity to the music that makes it that much more palpable.

Conclusion

Let's face facts, switching from the original burn of *Fly Like an Eagle* to the remaster will yield a bigger jump in sound quality than switching among these digital players. That said, I did hear subtle though meaningful differences when comparing components, particularly when comparing the EERA to the others.

Let's face facts, the EERA Tentation is the best digital playback I've heard. Should be at its price and is. And yet we all know that 'should be' and the reality are often different things, particularly in the audio world.

So here's hoping the hype about the Gyropoint II transport system is just that. A bit-perfect rip should supply the 1s and 0s just the same, no? That way, the transport contributes nothing to the sound quality of the Tentation. That way, it's all up to the digital processing and the output section. That way, an EERA DAC, the product I want after all my digital go-rounds, will sound just as good.

Prêt lorsque vous êtes M. de Luca. Robert Learner

Tentation CD Player

Retail: \$12,000

EERA

web address: www.eera.fr (English language version of site avail)

Contact/Importer

Von Schweikert Audio

web address: www.vonschweikert.com



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