Ultimate CD?

MANY MAY REGARD A £192,000 CD PLAYER AS CONFIRMATION THAT THE WORLD HAS GONE MAD, BUT IT LOOKS A TEMPTING PROSPECT FOR THE (VERY) FORTUNATE (VERY) FEW

"Value for money is inevitably an element in the balancing and weighing up processes of any appraisal, and was clearly going to be a significant factor here. Yet during each listening session – and there were many – considerations of value simply went right out of the window"

The phone rang: "Would you like to hear my latest DAC?" It was that Danish audiophile Peter Qvortrup, *patron* of Audio Note UK, sounding as casual as ever. I thought no more about it until he turned up a month later with four large boxes in the back of a rare Mercedes *E36* AMG estate. "I don't think you'll be able to pick it up!' he said ominously, and he was right; that task (for the heavier units at least) was left to AN UK designer Andy Grove. A partial demolition of my installed system was required to site this CD player, a two-box CD drive mechanism or 'transport', S/PDIF linked to a two box DAC, the secondary full size enclosures containing most of the power supplies. Three mains cables are required, one each for the power supplies, and one more to the DAC to power its digital input stage.

"It's a bit fresh", he noted thoughtfully, "Full of those pesky Black Gate capacitors which take several hundred hours to run in, so you'll have to be patient". Actually, it sounded more than interesting straight out of the box; then significant performance improvements were recorded with each passing week of use.

Customers already owning Audio Note UK's 'high end' CD replay equipment had been enquiring about the next stage of development, adding that performance mattered more than price. This set the stage for Grove and Qvortrup to explore the boundaries of their exotic approach to audio engineering, primarily founded on triode valve amplification, exclusive and exceptional transformers, and truly heroic valve regulated power supplies. Also leavening the mix are custom-made silver-in-oil capacitors, exclusive resistors, silver internal wiring and transformer windings, and advanced magnetic technology for transformer cores. The idealised approach to the critical I/V (current-to-voltage) conversion stage at the output of the D-to-A chip uses a massive transformer, with costly, high nickel cores that are double the size of those previously used. In some respects this DAC signal is analogous to the output from a moving-coil cartridge.

The AN UK product line shows a linear improvement path, each stage reflecting the development of circuits and technologies which continue to provide improvement in sound quality. The valves are NOS (new old stock) types from a large company stockpile. Their audio specifications usually assure sufficient subjective accuracy, but elegant test results have never been pursued for their own sake: the constant aim is always best outright sound quality.

Having designed a good sounding DAC implementation, the problem was how to deliver this quality to the output sockets. The answer was no less than a full *M9* pre-amp, with a massive power supply but without the volume control and selector switch. Unusually, Grove found an advantage in tailoring the digital output of the transport with a VHF triode buffer, repeating the same as an input buffer for the DAC.

The *CDT-Six* disc playing unit, largely constructed from copper slabs, weighs an extreme 36kg. A very heavy, low resonance floating subchassis is used for the Philips *CDM Pro9* CD mechanism, configured as an optically sealed, magnetically clamped top-loader. Separate power supplies are used for the digital, the motor drive, the servo sections, and the S/PDIF output. Mains enters at the power supply box and three locking cables supply power to the disc player proper. Digital output is via a silver plated RCA connection. CD playing may be controlled remotely from a sensibly simple, compact and unpretentious plastic handset, with all the usual features including display dimming to 'off' in three steps.

Dubbed the *Fifth Element*, this non-oversampling two-box DAC is a further development of AN UK's single-box *DAC 5 Signature*. It's founded on the Analogue Devices *AD1865* chip, requires two separate