



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

February 2010

Hegel Music Systems CDP2A CD Player

I'd never heard of Hegel Music Systems until my editor asked if I'd like to review their CD player. A quick Googling revealed that Hegel is based in Oslo, Norway -- to my knowledge, a country not well known for its high-end audio designers. Hegel seems eager to change that impression, and their CDP2A CD player is a case in point. In terms of appearance, it will satisfy those who demand good looks along with good sound. But isn't the world already full of good-looking CD players?



Well, actually, no. Most CD players, even if they perform well, lack the CDP2A's elegance. And its interior may very well be as beautifully designed as its exterior -- unlike many high-end companies, who feel they must use special, expensive component parts to achieve superior sound, Hegel claims to implement off-the-shelf parts in ways that reach the same goal. Maybe the CDP2A *isn't* just another pretty CD player.

Build quality

The Hegel CDP2A (\$2650 USD) is well built, comes in silver or black (silver looks better to me), and, for a high-end audio component, is attractive in an understated way. Weighing a solid 22 pounds and measuring a svelte 16.8"W x 3.1"H x 11.3"D, it feels like a substantial piece of kit. It also comes with the RC2, a remote control of solid aluminum with which nearly all of the player's functions can be accessed. All the RC2 lacks are a drawer open/close button, and individual numbers for selecting the desired track; instead, you scroll up and down.

The appearance of the player itself is Spartan, which adds to its attractiveness. Instead of a bunch of buttons and switches cluttering the front panel, all you'll find are: the central disc drawer; below it, the nondimmable blue LED display; to the left, a large round knob that controls the Power (press it at 12 o'clock) and selects the Previous or Next track (7 o'clock or 5 o'clock, respectively). An identical knob to the right of the drawer and display controls, in like manner, drawer Open/Close (12 o'clock), Stop (7 o'clock), and Play (5 o'clock). That's it. To my eyes, it's understated and elegant.

On the rear panel are an IEC power inlet for the supplied AC cord (which was the only one I used) and, from left to right: a digital output on an RCA jack, balanced outputs, and single-ended outputs -- again, simplicity itself, and all output jacks are gold-plated. The CDP2A is a fully balanced design, so Hegel highly recommends using the balanced outputs for the best sound. However, to my ears, while there was a slight but noticeable improvement in sound quality through the balanced outputs, it wasn't a night-and-day difference; those whose preamps have only single-ended inputs needn't worry that they're missing much.

According to the owner's manual, the CDP2A has 24-bit/192kHz upsampling DACs; a clock-jitter measurement of under 14 picoseconds; 2.3V RMS signal output; a frequency response of 20Hz-20kHz, +/-0.1dB; a signal/noise ratio of more than 105dB; and less than 0.002% distortion.



System

My reference digital source is an Esoteric SA-50 SACD/CD player. Electronics were an Audio Research LS17 line stage, Bryston 4B SST, power amplifier, and an Original Electronics Master headphone amp, all hooked up with Analysis Plus Solo Crystal Oval interconnects. The speakers were Paradigm Reference Studio 100 v.3s, biwired with Analysis Plus Solo Crystal Oval 8 cables. I've replaced all stock power cords with Harmonic Technologies Pro AC-11s, except for an Analysis Plus Power Oval 10 cord on the Bryston amp. Accessories consisted of a Blue Circle Audio BC6000 power conditioner; two Salamander Archetype equipment racks; a Furutech deStat; and a full complement of tweaks from Symposium Acoustics: Rollerblocks Series 2+ and Rollerblock Jrs., Fat Padz, Point Pods, an Ultra Platform, Svelte Shelves, and an Isis Rack.

Sound

On first listening to the Hegel CDP2A after giving it two weeks of burn-in, the words that immediately leapt to mind were *clean, clear, and concise*. No warm, fuzzy tube sound here -- and no cold sterility, either. The CDP2A's sound was that of real instruments being played in real venues, each sharply outlined and set in its own acoustic space. When I listened to Tom Russell's *Love and Fear* (High Tone HCD8190), the accordion used throughout the disc was palpably real -- I could hear the accordionist squeezing his instrument and his fingers dancing on the keyboard. Set in its own space, it stood as if alone on the soundstage, with nothing fake or imitative about the sound.

The CDP2A produced a deep but not overly weighty low end. I wouldn't go so far as to call it *lean*, but it did (if you'll pardon the pun) lean in that direction. It was more a simple lack of weight -- all the sound was there, but if you have full-range speakers that can reproduce the deepest bass notes, you might be a tad disappointed in the Hegel. The majority of audiophiles whose speakers *don't* plumb those depths won't notice a thing, except for the outstanding tightness and detail of the Hegel's bass reproduction.

The CDP2A's top end, too, seemed not quite as extended as some players. Still, it offered an *impression* of full-range sound -- a bit rolled-off, but only very slightly. This is a compromise I'm willing to live with to avoid the screechy top end some CD players still reproduce.

The Hegel's midrange was simply glorious, so good that I didn't want to turn it off -- always a good sign. Long after I should have moved on to doing chores around the house, I wanted to just keep on listening. I came to understand the CDP2A's glory in this region by listening to Grace Kelly's alto sax on her latest album, *Mood Changes* (Pazz Productions 16-9). That instrument simply came alive through the Hegel. I've heard Kelly in concert, and the CDP2A was essentially perfect in reproducing her live sound. The mids were weighted slightly to the lower end of the spectrum, but only a bit -- it wasn't something that called a lot of attention to itself.

Voices, from the rough-and-ready pipes of John Prine to the angelic harmonies of The Wailin' Jennys, were handled with aplomb. While voices didn't sound quite as fully rounded as through some other players, the CDP2A's reproductions of singers weren't like cardboard cutouts pasted on the soundstage -- instead, they sounded very much like real people standing between my speakers.

Another strength of the Hegel was its way with pace, rhythm, and timing (PRaT). This player could carry a tune, keeping each note in its proper place and managing the timing of note reproduction with precision. This went a long way toward making the Hegel a fun music-making machine.

I also enjoyed how the CDP2A could simultaneously reproduce two separate things, such as Mark Knopfler's voice and guitar on his *Kill to Get Crimson* (Warner Bros. 781660-2). Although they occupy the same space in "Love Will Never Fade," the Hegel kept them completely separate with completely separate sets of harmonics. Impressive.

Dynamic range was handled much better by the CDP2A than by many a CD player at or near its price. From the delicacy of "Moon Shadow," from *The Best of Cat Stevens: 20th Century Masters* (A&M B00008773-02), to the bombastic power of *The Great Gate of Kiev*, from the CD layer of Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony's recording of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (SACD/CD, RCA Living Stereo 61394-2), the CDP2A was masterful at going from soft to loud in the blink of an eye.

Also in the Mussorgsky, the strings were silky-smooth and entirely free of any ear-piercing qualities. The Hegel rendered soundstages wonderfully, in terms of both width and depth. I heard this with many discs -- at least, those that contained such information in the first place.

Finally, the Hegel did detail beautifully. I could clearly hear the rosin on the fiddle strings in "Racing with the Sun," from The Wailin' Jennys' *Live at the Mauch Chunk Opera House* (Red House RHR CD 220) -- it was as if I were standing right next to the fiddle player. Nor did the CDP2A skimp on the sound emanating from the fiddle's body; it kept both aspects intact. This excellent trait of the Hegel allowed me to concentrate on enjoying the music instead of concentrating on the sound. Which is what we're supposed to be doing, right?

Comparisons

I pitted the Hegel CDP2A against my reference digital source, the [Esoteric SA-50 SACD/CD player](#), which at \$5800 costs almost twice as much. The comparison was instructive and enjoyable: instructive in that, while I heard definite differences, they weren't as pronounced as I'd expected, given the difference in price. In many ways, in fact, the CDP2A's sound was more like than unlike that of the SA-50.

While the Hegel was clean, clear, and precise, the Esoteric added a small touch of warmth and richness that the Hegel didn't. I used *Holly Cole* (Alert 6152810418) for these comparisons for its excellent sound and its wonderful mixture of multiple instruments on some tracks, and sparser arrangements on others. It gave both players a good sonic workout.

Whereas the CDP2A reproduced Cole's voice as a real-life entity, the SA-50 contributed its extra warmth and got deeper into microdetails, revealing a bit more chest and throat sound than the Hegel. Instruments, too, were well reproduced by the CDP2A, with good senses of weight and detail. However, the Esoteric SA-50 did all that and more: its bass went lower with more authority, and its highs were more extended, detailed, and natural. The SA-50 also offered a bit more fullness to instruments. Other than that, these two CD players had remarkably similar sound. I could live happily ever after with the Hegel in my system, so well did it push all my hot buttons for excellent sound.

Both of these players upsample CD's 16-bit/44.1kHz signals, though only the SA-50 offers the option of turning this off if desired. The Hegel upsamples to 24/192, the Esoteric to 24/176.4.

Conclusions

I said at the beginning that Norway is not rife with high-profile, high-end audio companies. Perhaps the existence of the Hegel Music Systems CDP2A indicates that I need to qualify that statement. Hegel is proud to make off-the-shelf parts perform above expectations, and the CDP2A did that in spades. The CDP2A not only lived up to the promise of high-end sound, it exceeded my expectations by a wider margin than I'd thought possible.

If you're looking for your final CD player, the one that will last you until hi-rez downloads become commonplace, and you don't feel like spending *all* of your kids' college fund on it, then find a Hegel dealer and give the CDP2A a good listen. I believe that you'll walk away impressed. For under three grand, it's as fine a CD player as I've heard. And it looks great.

... John Crossett

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Hegel Music Systems CDP2A CD Player
Price: \$2650 USD.
Warranty: Two years parts and labor.

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