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Opera Audio Consonance CD-120 Linear CD Player

by Jimmy Hughes

In retrospect I initially misjudged the CD-120 Linear. While I liked it from the start, it nevertheless took a while before I fully appreciated just how good it actually was. Don't get me wrong; all the early signs were favourable. But, following on from the Chord DAC-64, the CD-120 Linear seemed somewhat less immediate and assertive in terms of its musical presentation. It was certainly pleasant to listen to, and from the start it was obvious that its sound was both friendly and inviting. Only gradually did it become clear that all this was just the tip of the iceberg. Behind that cultivated exterior there's actually a remarkable amount going on.

The CD-120 Linear is deceptively subtle and surprisingly detailed. It can appear smooth, understated, and (seemingly) laid back and relaxed. But you'd be wrong to conclude it lacks teeth. In many respects it's very Analogue. It has that easy refined naturalness you get from LP at its best. You really notice this with massed choral forces; the sound has a delicious openness that simply sounds right. There's no exaggeration - no undue emphasis of sibilants or shifts of tonality. Dynamics are impressive, but not in an aggressive 'in your face' manner. Instead, you get the impression of the music expanding and growing naturally and effortlessly as dynamic levels increase.

By comparison, the Chord DAC-64 gives a more assertive and perhaps more exciting musical presentation. It creates a more acute sense of things happening. The CD-120 Linear is superficially less brilliant, but this is deceptive. The sound is truer and more natural, with much finer differentiation of subtle tone colours and dynamics. The better your

system, the more this will become apparent. During a lengthy review period, I changed amplifiers three times, and as I did so (and things improved) the special qualities of the CD-120 Linear became more and more apparent.

For starters, it's unusually holographic for a CD player, creating a real sense of space width and depth. This became especially noticeable when I started using the Prima Luna

Prologue 3 and 5 amplifiers.



The way the CD-120 Linear images is impressive.

The soundstage has excellent left/right width and a truly palpable sense of depth, and this creates a vivid holographic effect whereby the music sounds three-dimensional. That two-channel stereo can create the impression of a spacious acoustic that exists between and beyond the boundaries set by the loudspeakers is one of the unexplained mysteries of hi-fi.

Although CD typically produces sharp clean images with wide dynamic contrasts, it rarely if ever achieves comparable dimensionality to a good LP on a top-class analogue front-end. While I'm not claiming the CD-120 Linear fully equals or beats the best turntables, it nonetheless produces a beautifully subtle and holographic soundstage that's

unusually natural and open. By typical CD standards it's exceptionally smooth and uncoloured, with a delicate openness that is very engaging. It's not a CD player that immediately strikes the ear as 'impressive', yet who could fail to be impressed when faced with such realistic results? The more you listen, the more engaging it gets. At least that's what I found.

As a CD transport (forgetting sound quality for a moment) the CD-120 Linear is nothing much to write home about. Track access is lazy, as though the player had to think for a few seconds before executing your command. In this and one or two other respects, the CD-120 Linear reminds me of CD players from the early 1980s. It's frustratingly slow after a typical modern player. In particular, the drawer mechanism was a bit clunky, and, on the review sample, would not fully open or close without a pull or push - hopefully a local fault, and not something that afflicts other examples.

Display Off is offered - a useful feature that (with some CD players) can sometimes improve sound quality. Unfortunately, once you've switched off the display - that's it; off it stays! Unlike some more advanced CD players, the display doesn't temporarily light again - when you press Stop or Pause, for example. Unless you select Display On via the supplied remote handset, the lights stay off. You've the option of dimming the display, or switching it off altogether. Now, it could have been imagination, but I thought the sound might've been fractionally cleaner with the display switched off. But, if there was a difference, it wasn't a very big one.

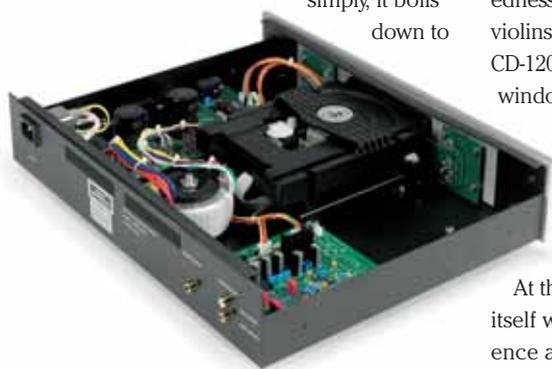
A single set of unbalanced



▶ analogue outputs are provided, plus a digital output for an external DAC. Shrewdly, given the CD-120 Linear's natural unexaggerated sound, the manufacturers have increased the analogue output slightly to 2.35 V, compared to the more normal 2 V. This gives the CD-120 Linear marginally greater drive, subjectively helping to suggest increased presence and dynamic attack. If you're making A/B comparisons with other CD players, be aware that the CD-120 Linear may well sound a fraction louder at the same volume level because of this slightly increased output.

The CD-120 Linear uses a 16bit TDA 1543 D/A Converter, and does not have a digital filter on the output. This is its magic ingredient. For those interested, there's a link from the company's website to an article written by Japanese engineer Ryohei Kusunoki who first advocated this approach, explaining (in rather fractured English) his rationale. Put

simply, it boils down to



the cure being worse than the disease. So, Consonance ditch the digital filter, and in doing so claim much improved phase linearity and better timing, with less smearing of the extreme highs.

Certainly, the CD-120 Linear has audibly less of that tonally 'hard' closed-in effect one typically associates with CD – it's without doubt unusually natural and open sounding. Kusunoki argues that CD's sonic problems are largely caused by the digital filter, and claims

the adverse effects of this filter have far more significant effects on sound quality than the imposed limitations of CD's 44.1kHz 16bit specification. Judging by the sonic performance of the CD-120 Linear, he may well be right – though I daresay there are other factors too.



The CD-120 Linear can either sample at regular 44.1kHz, or at 88.2kHz – this being accessed from the remote control. Comparing 88.2kHz with standard 44.1kHz, the latter sounds slightly edgier and a shade more congested. The 88.2kHz option sounds noticeably cleaner and more transparent, with less of that electronic 'edge' and congestedness one so easily gets with massed violins and voices. In 88.2kHz mode, the CD-120 Linear is much more of an open window on the recording being played, sounding clear, sweet, transparent, and very natural.

It was pleasant to listen to, but engaging too - making the music sound interesting and involving.

At the same time the actual sound itself was easy to 'forget'; it had presence and colour, yet did not draw attention to itself. Again, these are very Analogue sorts of qualities. The total effect was very natural and believable, and once acclimatised to the way the CD-120 Linear did things, I did not feel it lacked brilliance, clarity, or separation – indeed, quite the opposite.

My final surprise was price. I wasn't aware of the CD-120 Linear's very reasonable cost when I first began listening to it, and was agreeably shocked and pleased to learn how little it will set you back (in audiophile

terms). It easily gives Chord's DAC-64 a run for its money, and actually beats it in terms of relaxed smoothness and unexaggerated natural-ness. If you prefer your music with a bit more attitude and excitement, the Chord still has the edge – but not by much.

Sometimes a new component has you excitedly going through your favourite recordings, listening out for fresh details or new revelations. The CD-120 Linear had me doing just that; I was curious as to what it might make of each new recording I tried. But, rather than sitting there on the edge of my seat waiting and hoping to be impressed, it was more a case of just leaning back and enjoying the results. It's definitely a CD player that appeals to your heart and emotions – though that isn't to say it doesn't stand up to being analysed; it does.

The CD-120 Linear is a curious mix of apparently conflicting opposites. It produces natural and unexaggerated results that aren't 'impressive' in loud or extrovert terms. Yet at the same time you could never claim the results are bland or faceless. The music is reproduced in a deeper more meaningful way than one often finds with silver disc. The CD-120 Linear is a very musical CD player – one of just a few able to make digital sound like good analogue. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Integrated CD Player
Chip-set:	16 bit TDA 1543 x2
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono 1x co-axial digital
Output Level:	2.35 V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 85 x 320mm
Weight:	10kg
Finish:	Silver
Price:	£695

UK Distributor:

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