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Reference CD-2.2

8-49-13

# Opera Audio Consonance Reference CD 2.2 Linear CD Player

by Jimmy Hughes

I've already reported favourably on the amazingly affordable Opera Audio Consonance CD Linear 120, finding it alluringly subtle and very easy on the ear, yet deceptively detailed and surprisingly revealing. Since then, I have to confess to a brief but exciting Prescott style fling with the mega-expensive Jadis JD-3 – an impressively dynamic and detailed CD player that really had me sitting on the edge of my seat.

The Jadis won't be to all tastes, but if orgasmic excitement and impact are your bag, this really is some CD player. May I also publicly state that, after this sordid but deeply exciting affair, my wife is standing by me during this difficult personal moment in our relationship. Indeed, at this very moment she's not just standing by me, but standing on my head with a massive pair of Doc Martens adorning her dainty feet...

In essence, the Reference CD 2.2 Linear carries on from where the CD Linear 120 left off. Both have the choice of 44.1kHz or 88.2kHz sampling, and dispense with the digital anti-aliasing filter on the basis that the cure is worse than the disease. Sonically they're alike, in so far as both players produce a smooth well-balanced neutral sort of presentation with good definition and detail. By the way, there are two other CD players in the Opera Audio Consonance range – both helpfully called 2.2. However, these are 24bit 196kHz up-sampling models and are quite different to the Reference CD 2.2 linear reviewed here.

I liked this player for its velvety smoothness. The brilliance and sheer visceral impact of the Jadis is not

offered, yet (curiously) neither is it missed. The CD 2.2 Linear is a CD player for those wanting refinement and unexaggerated naturalness above all other considerations. It's perfect for naturally recorded Classical and Jazz. Which isn't to say its presentation lacks drive or impact – on the right recordings the sound will be strongly projected and powerful, but such qualities won't be grafted on to the music by the CD player.



Going from the Linear 120 to the Reference 2.2 Linear, I was initially struck by their similarities rather than their differences. Both offer clear well-balanced sound that's smooth, natural, and very true to life. There's nothing flash or exaggerated about the presentation. However, the Reference CD 2.2 Linear seems to offer greater texture and separation. I immediately noticed this while playing a recording of a piano trio; the violin and cello had greater substance and a more full-bodied yet sinuous tone quality. The two string instruments sounded cleaner with greater presence and superior projection.

There was a better sense of the individual tonality of the violin and cello – a greater feeling of bows being drawn across strings – creating a more vivid and palpable sonic impression of real instruments playing in a real space. Although the piano had the dominant part, you could hear the two string instruments come and go as dynamic levels fluctuated. Very impressive! But more impressive was the manner in which detail was revealed - without undue emphasis or exaggeration. Here is a player that gives you the music cleanly and honestly, without over-dramatising things.

This, it seems to me, is the hallmark of the Reference CD 2.2 Linear. It's not perhaps a player that immediately knocks you sideways. Rather, it caresses and beguiles the ear in ways that are both informative and seductive. The sound is very natural and unexaggerated, very pure and refined. Clarity seems to be greater than the CD Linear 120. There seems to be more space around voices and instruments, creating a greater sense of depth. It's smoother and cleaner too. But it's an inner clarity, rather than detail being thrust at you.

While the Reference CD 2.2 Linear's musical presentation was not as obviously dramatic and exciting as that of the Jadis, it wasn't lacking in dynamic incident. The C2.2's dynamics may appear to be of a subtler less assertive kind, but the gradation of fine contrasts and delicate tonal hues points to its thoroughbred qualities. The CD 2.2 is a very musical player – very easy to listen to, and extremely

► enjoyable. It's deceptively detailed and informative because everything sounds so natural and relaxed. But don't let this fool you into thinking the presentation is bland or lacking in real detail.

As befits a more expensive player, the CD 2.2 is better built and more lavishly styled than the CD Linear 120. You get the Cherry wood slats on the top, and a slightly thicker front panel.



And then there are the two large chrome knobs on the front panel. What a surprise! These work in Joystick fashion. To be honest, when I first got the player, I actually wondered if these wibbly-wobbly knobs had been damaged in transit. I expected them to turn; instead, they rock up and down and side to side! I can't say I like the arrangement – it feels a bit crude – but it works well enough, and you can always operate the player via its remote handset

The transport sometimes sounded a bit clunky, making a rattling noise as though the disc hadn't quite seated itself properly. You've also got to be carefully when loading the disc, as a light touch on the loading tray causes it to close – and close rather quickly! Once the disc is seated, the transport seems pretty quiet – there's just a barely audible whirr as the disc spins.

Looking inside, internal build quality is very good, and the player is logically laid out with the power supply on one

side, the audio section on the other, and the transport in the centre. Although essentially a solid-state player, there is a single Sovtek C6H30 valve for the analogue output stage. D/A converter chip is a TDA1543. In terms of start time and track access, the player is averagely responsive; the CD 2.2 Linear is a machine built for comfort rather than speed. There's provision to dim or switch off the player's illuminated display, otherwise features and facilities are pretty basic.

Actually, there were two reasons I took the top off the player; the first (obviously) was to inspect build quality, the second was to investigate a problem that kept occurring after about 45 minutes of use. Basically there was a hissing/rustling sort of sound from the left channel. It would start fairly quietly and slowly build up. Eventually the music would all but disintegrate, sounding like a badly worn LP played with a blunt pin. After a further 10 or 15 minutes the noise would be so bad it was impossible to ignore – you'd have to turn the player off.

It sounded suspiciously like a dry joint. So I had a quick poke around to see if I could locate the component giving trouble. Alas, no luck. But I did notice two things. The first – sod's law! – was that the noise miraculously

disappeared with the top off – indicating that the cause of the problem was heat build up. No matter how I prodded and poked, the hissing noise could not be induced. I've since established that the problem is definitely heat related; possibly the valve is playing up when it reaches a certain temperature and a replacement would cure the noise.

The second thing I noticed was that the player sounded even better with the top off! The music was slightly freer – more open and relaxed sounding – with better definition and detail.

The chassis and top of the Reference CD 2.2 Linear are made from aluminium, and this is known to be less prone to eddy-current effects compared with a chassis made from steel. But it's still a metal chassis, and obviously it still has some effect on things – albeit slight. Because of the noise problem outlined, I ended up using my review sample minus its top.

However I don't suggest you try this at home kids, as doing so exposes the insides (and yourself) to risk of electric shock and possible death. This noise issue aside, the sound produced by the player was very very good. I really liked the creamy smooth refined presentation of the Reference CD 2.2 Linear. Playing Nikolaus Harnoncourt's Teldec recordings of Handel's *Opera Saul*, the lovely openness and neutrality of the player really helped with this rather closed-in and slightly boxy Live recording.

I don't think I'd ever heard it sound so beautiful and natural. The voices still had a slightly backward placement in the soundstage, but it just sounded as though the hall acoustics were ►

► colouring the sound – not the equipment. More to the point, the musical presentation was very convincing overall. With opera, there can be a tendency just to listen to the individual voices. But, with the Reference CD 2.2 Linear, the voices were not simply backed by orchestral instruments; the orchestra was very much an instrumental voice behind the vocal line – harmonising it exquisitely.

Another recording that benefited from the Reference CD 2.2 Linear's openness and neutrality – also on Teldec –

sound with light to brighten-up dull textures. Very impressive! But what I liked about the Reference CD 2.2 was the way it retained the essential qualities of the Barenboim Mozart recordings while minimising what might be seen as their limitations.

In the case of the Barenboim/Mozart set – certainly, with the later more symphonic concertos – it sounds to me as though the orchestra used was fairly big, with a reasonably large body of strings. So the sound in the hall

CD 2.2 Linear for a few days, get used to it, then go back to the CD Linear 120 – No Contest!

While superficially the two players appear to offer a similar sort of overall presentation (smooth, natural, and well-balanced) the Reference CD 2.2 is even clearer and more transparent, with better fine detail and a greater sense of ambience and space. It's cleaner too, with less high frequency edge and hash. You especially notice this on massed violins, which have a greater homogeneity and tonal allure when heard via this CD player. You get a better sense of the body of sound – not just the bass and treble extremes.

A really good CD player then – one to marry rather than have a fling with. For me, the Reference CD 2.2 Linear's greatest strength is its sheer easy, unexaggerated naturalness – it does its job effortlessly well. So well, you hardly notice the mechanics of reproduction. In this sense it's very analogue – even more so than the excellent CD Linear 120. ➤+



was the set of Mozart piano concertos with Daniel Barenboim and the Berlin Philharmonic. Now these have a fairly full/dark slightly 'thick' sort of sound, without much transparency. The orchestra is warm but recessed, without much bite or brilliance. The Reference CD 2.2 Linear did not change the basic presentation as such, but seemed to open-up what had previously been rather thick/dense textures.

It was almost as though the recording was being illuminated from within – if that makes sense. Strings and winds positively glowed, sounding luminous yet sweet and honeyed. I'd never have believed these recordings could be transformed like this. By comparison, The CD Linear 120 was less noticeably transparent and refined – in particular, the upper partials of the violins sounded a tad thinner and more exposed. The Jadis JD-3 worked differently; metaphorically flooding the

would have been fairly dense. If you're going to reproduce the original sound accurately you need to suggest this, and not make it sound as though it's just a handful of players using bright-sounding Period instruments. This the Reference CD 2.2 Linear did – with considerable distinction.

When I originally started auditioning the Reference CD 2.2 Linear, I wasn't initially convinced it was that much better than the cheaper CD linear 120. It sounded good, but I wasn't bowled over by it as I was with the Jadis JD3. However, the more I listened, the more obvious it became that the Reference CD 2.2 Linear did produce significantly better results than the CD Linear 120. To prove it, just live with the Reference

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Type:               | CD player with no brick wall filter and tube analogue output stage. |
| Tube Complement:    | 1x C6H30  |
| Sampling Rate:      | 44.1 or 88.2kHz   |
| Outputs:            | 1pr single-ended RCA<br>1x co-axial digital RCA                     |
| Output Level:       | 2.35v   |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 430 x 210 x 33mm  |
| Weight:             | 16Kg  |
| Finish:             | As shown  |
| Price:              | £1395   |

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