

The world's most desirable kit
TEMPTATIONS

“Rarely have we heard such all-round excellence”

■ **Audio Research CD6** CD Player

■ **£8050** 

Two things strike us when unpacking Audio Research's CD6. First off, we're surprised that a company so synonymous with valves (even in its digital products) hasn't used them here. You have to take a jump up to the even more ambitious CD9 for that.

Next, spotting the digital inputs has us pondering the future of dedicated high-end CD players. There aren't many left that don't cater for other digital sources. It makes perfect sense, of course, and gives a machine like the CD6 life after the silver disc is marginalised.

Anyone familiar with the brand will find few other surprises here. Audio Research is part of the high-end



TECH SPECS
Transport No
Integrated Yes
DAC Yes
Multidisc No
Outputs
AES/EBU, 1
XLR, 1
RCA, 1
Headphone 0
Inputs
AES/EBU, 1
Optical digital, 2
XLR, 0; RCA, 0; USB, 1
Memory Yes
CD Text No
Dimensions (hwd)
13 x 48 x 31cm
Finishes 2

There's an impressive sense of scale when the music demands it and the sort of wide-ranging dynamic swing that only the very best equipment can manage. There's plenty of composure to be found with the CD6 too

establishment, and its enviable reputation has been built on products that perform well and prioritise function over luxury. After more than 40 years of success, the company is unlikely to change its ways now. The CD6 is an extension of that.

Build is sturdy - it feels like it will last decades. This is helped by a no-nonsense hard-wearing finish. Yet we're not totally convinced. We can accept exposed bolts littered over the player's casework as symbols of Audio Research's 'working tool' rather than 'luxury trinket' approach, but why can't they all be the same type? We counted three different varieties on view and that makes the player look a little home-made. We're also amused by the company's need to

write 'Digital CD Player' on the front panel as if there was any other variety.

Slide the manual CD lid on the top panel and you find Philips's well-regarded Pro2 disc transport. Don't be tempted to poke the exposed laser - it's fragile - and don't forget to put the magnetic puck in place when loading a disc, otherwise the player won't work.

Not particularly logical

The CD6's front-panel buttons are simply laid out, but not particularly logical in positioning. We end up checking the labelling every time, rather than using them intuitively. Using the CD6 for a couple of weeks didn't help with this, either. We use the remote more often than is normal instead. This

is a metal handset now, rather than the basic plastic design the company has used for years. It's simply laid out, but there's little flair in the design.

At the back you will find four digital inputs - a single USB, a coaxial and a pair of optics. All the inputs will accept a 24-bit/192kHz input signal. You'll need to use dedicated software drivers for the USB, but these are simple enough to load. There's a pair of digital outputs - AES/EBU and BNC coax - for those with an even more capable DAC, or who want to do a bit of outboard digital processing. There's also the usual array of single-ended and balanced analogue connections.

The CD6 builds on the experience of designing even more ambitious digital products, such as the CD9 and Reference



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See overleaf for more detail...



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never mind years

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Audio Research

In detail

1 Main digital board This is mounted close to the back panel to reduce signal paths, and kept away from the analogue circuitry to minimise interference. The USB input is taken care of by the separate board mounted on the side.

2 Analogue board It's a surprise not to find valves here, considering Audio Research's heritage. Still, there's plenty of care taken with layout, and some impressively specified components.

3 Top-loading design We don't see many any more, which is a shame. Such a configuration does away with the sliding drawer and associated motor.



DAC and, just like those, the CD6 uses four 24-bit DACs per channel and dual master oscillators - one to govern 44.1/88.2/176.4kHz sampling rates and the other for 48/96/192kHz. This helps give the most accurate digital timing, leading to better sound quality.

The CD6 offers a choice of filter options, as is the fashion, but thankfully it's limited to just two: slow and fast (though if you like to tweak, you will be pleased that the user can force the unit to up-sample the source signal.) If you're using CD, coaxial or optical this will be to 176.4 or 192kHz (depending on which one is the multiple of the original source signal). USB signals are limited to either 88.2kHz or 96kHz.

Up-sampling off

We prefer the 'slow filter' in our reference system of Bryston BP26/4BSST2 amplification and ATC SCM 50 speakers, and keep the up-sampling off. It sounds right with this setup, but you may find different depending on your tastes and system.

We play a compact disc and the CD6 casts its spell right away. It delivers a convincingly natural presentation that brims with insight and subtleties. We play Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* and the CD6's insight and dynamic reach sweep us away. It renders a wonderfully expansive sound stage, with sharply focused instruments, and a lovely impression of physical depth. The sound is hugely detailed, with the richness and texture of instruments coming through.

There's an impressive sense of scale when the music demands, and the sort of wide-ranging dynamic swing that only the very best equipment manages. There's plenty of composure too, with the Audio Research never sounding rushed or stretched even when the

music gets demanding. We like the even-handed tonality too, the way no particular instrument gains priority unless the music demands it. Very little hi-fi can actually get its own sonic signature out of the way and let the original recording take centre stage. This Audio Research CD player is one of the few that can, such is its transparency.

We move on to Nick Cave's *Into My Arms* and enjoy the way this player delivers his distinctively coarse vocals. There's everything here we would want: natural warmth and solidity with fluid low-level dynamics. The CD6 delivers a

masterclass, rendering the piano's harmonics in beautiful layers.

We try the CD6's digital inputs and are equally impressed. The pleasing standard set by CD replay continues with high-resolution files from The Rolling Stones (*Gimme Shelter* 24-bit/88.2kHz) and Michael Jackson (*Billie Jean* 24-bit/176.4kHz) delivered with all the energy they deserve. Despite its innate refinement, the CD6 doesn't hold back when it comes to thumping out beats or delivering aggression. Rarely have we heard such all-round excellence.

If you're looking for a top-class integrated CD player, the CD6 is as good a place to start as any. It's one of the best sounding we've heard at this price, and for those who need futureproofing (and let's face it, few of us don't) easy access to its excellent on-board DAC makes it a really useful product in any high-end system.

Consider if You want a top-quality CD player, but one with digital inputs too
Highlight It's rare to find a piece of kit that sounds so balanced

Ward Fiebiger Director of Engineering



The goal was to create a high-resolution digital source based on a solid-state platform, while maintaining the sonic signature of Audio Research and its tube heritage. We employed several design technologies derived from our Reference CD9 and incorporated them into a fully discrete, solid-state analogue audio stage. The design is fully balanced and direct-coupled. Multiple low-noise J-FETs are utilised to provide more dynamic headroom. Servo-controlled stages are used to reduce any DC offset at the outputs. There's a total of 11 stages of voltage regulation in both digital and analog circuits.

The transport is the Philips Pro2, for its reliability and sonic performance. It is mounted to a custom-designed monolithic mounting-support milled from aluminium, and additional suspension isolation is added. Burr Brown PCM 1792A DACs were chosen for accuracy. The digital circuit is designed around a dual master clock, which offers oversampling of signals in their native rates to 176.4kHz or 192kHz and 24-bit depth with no quantisation errors.

Rating ★★★★

FOR Wonderful midrange; huge scale; strong dynamics; excellent as a stand-alone DAC; build

AGAINST Aspects of finish could be smarter; remote should be classier

VERDICT If you're looking for a top-class CD player this could well be it