

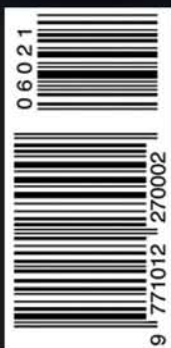
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Triumphant!

EMM Labs CDSA SE



ON DISC • POP, JAZZ AND CLASSICAL

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SACD PLAYERS - EMM LABS CDSA SE

Upper-level excellence

Canadian firm EMM Labs and its near-legendary founder, Ed Meitner, have been at the very core of developing the Super Audio CD format and its Direct Stream Digital (DSD) high-resolution data into the acknowledged audiophile medium it has since become.

Meitner and his proprietary technology was better known in the professional audio environment until EMM Labs ventured into the consumer market, initially with a highly regarded (and hugely expensive) two-box DAC/transport duo.

The advent of the CDSA SE integrated CD/SACD player brings Meitner's innovative technology and design approach within the reach of a wider audience, although the R111K-plus asking price (depending on the exchange rate) can hardly be considered mainstream.

For that kind of outlay, you get an all-aluminium box that adopts a no-nonsense, functional approach to aesthetics. The centrally mounted, Philips-sourced transport tray is partnered by a super-sized blue fluorescent display, while the switchgear is a bank of 10 identical, circular buttons to the right.

These consist of the usual transport controls, but with the addition of a mode switch (for

Considered the leading authority on the high-resolution Direct Stream Digital (DSD) format used for Super Audio CDs, EMM Labs knows a thing about digital conversion.

That expertise finds a highly musical home in the company's own CD/SACD player: the EMM Labs CDSA

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Cover Feature

swapping between CD and SACD layers on hybrid SACD discs), and a digital phase inversion switch.

The supplied, backlit remote control handset duplicates all of these, and adds additional controls pertinent to EMM Labs' other products, including the Switchman 3 digital pre-amplifier.

The CDSA SE's rear panel offers few surprises, although the absence of a coaxial, RCA-terminated digital output may disappoint some users seeking to couple the player to a digital recorder. Instead, EMM Labs provides a superior AES/EBU digital output.

The analogue output stage offers both RCA and XLR balanced output sets, with selectable output levels. For XLR, the choice is between 4V and 7.2V, while the RCAs will deliver 2V or 3.6V, depending on the position of the small, rear-mounted toggle switch.

Software upgrades are effected via a USB

input, while a RS232 serial port allows the incorporation of the player into more complex, multiroom systems with system remote control requirements.

You don't haul out the old Allen key set and dissect a player priced at the six-digit level, but I'm told that the internals of the CDSA SE go some way towards explaining the level of investment required to own one.

Thus, the anodised aluminium chassis is comprehensively treated with special polymer composite damping material to control vibration, while the circuit boards employ composite laminates in the interests of improved thermal qualities and reduced dielectric loss.

While we've got our heads under the hood, a word about the heart of this player, and its main technological claim to fame: the digital conversion circuitry. Meitner has equipped the CDSA SA with discrete, dual-differential DACs

of a proprietary design, which he claims are superior to IC chips because of their superior linearity and much reduced susceptibility to power fluctuations.

A Meitner Digital Audio Translator circuit upsamples Red Book CD signals from the usual 44.1 kHz to twice that of DSD, achieving an effective sampling rate of 5,6448 MHz. SACD discs are also upsampled to the same rate from the original 2,8224 MHz SACD standard rate.

According to EMM Labs, this upsampling is achieved by adopting a dynamic approach to the music signal's transient nature, rather than the more conventional perception of the digital signal as a series of sine waves. The result, the company claims, preserves the phase, frequency and dynamic integrity of the original signal.

The review unit was not equipped with a recent, 2008 upgrade which is retrofittable and



consists of an enhanced version of the Philips transport that incorporates aluminium stabiliser rods, as well as machined aluminium feet for improved chassis isolation.

The EMM Labs was used in conjunction with both Electrocompaniet's 4.7 and an older, but still virile Classé Audio Four pre-amps, while drive was provided by my Electrocompaniet AW120 dual-mono power amplifier. Speakers were Vivid Audio's V1.5 floorstanders, with Nordost and Anti-Cable cabling.

Let's get the few negatives out of the way first. Like many other CD/SACD players, the EMM Labs takes its time to load and read the TOC of discs, regardless of whether they are CDs or SACDs. And I found the review unit's transport to be flimsy, with an action best described as less than smooth – an aspect that EMM Labs claims has been addressed by the 2008 upgrade.

That huge blue display may also be considered a little too utilitarian: it looks as if it should belong to some laboratory instrument, rather than a piece of hi-fi equipment. But then, I suppose one could argue that the CDSA SE is more science than hi-fi in technology terms. And you can switch it off.

Fortunately, the deck delivers pure, crystal-clear, unadulterated music – the kind of performance that grabs you by the throat, and that evokes an emotional, rather than a rational response. Think of the goose bumps you experience when you're attending a live concert, and you get the general idea.

In other words, the EMM Labs does more than just extract the recorded notes of a performance. It manages to retain and express the soul, the intent, the very life of the music. This is not a cold, scientifically calculated, deadly accurate depiction – it's a startlingly convincing approximation of the real thing.

Small wonder then that the sonic image seems to jump from the speakers with life, body and colour, making it easy to visualise instruments and performers going about their musical business with verve and commitment.

It's this tangibility, the ability to recreate the music with presence as well as precision, that makes the EMM Labs player so special. It delves deep into a recording, finding and expressing even the finest subtleties and the slightest tonal gradients, and then accurately and intuitively contextualising them in the interests of a richer, more believable listening experience.

Instead of remaining an aloof listener coldly appraising the deck's abilities, I found myself

VITAL STATS

Digital conversion

.....Discrete, dual-differential DACs, MDAT signal processing

UpsamplingDouble-DSD to 5,6448 MHz effective

Formats

.....Red Book CD, two-channel SACD, MP3

Frequency responseNot stated

Signal-to-noise ratioNot stated

Digital outputsAES/EBU on XLR

Analogue outputs

.....Choice of RCA and balanced XLR

Dimensions (WxDxH)

.....435 x 400 x 140 mm

Weight12 kg

PRICER96 900
(R111 000 with 2008 upgrades)

VERDICT

One of the best CD/SACD players I've heard, regardless of price. Superb with SACD material, while extracting more than you'd expect from normal CDs. Never loses sight of the music, though.

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drawn into the heart of the music itself, exploring every disc with a renewed sense of adventure and appreciation.

So fluid, so effortless, so natural was the delivery of the music that my listening sessions extended deep into the night for weeks. I loved the total lack of grain, the almost understated but scarily accurate attention to spatial and temporal detail, the tonal linearity and the extensive dynamic scope of the player.

A comparison between CD and SACD yielded some interesting results. The EMM Labs served up SACD performances of unrivalled quality, perhaps because of its uncanny ability to make musical use of the additional detail harvested.

All too often, the improved resolution made possible by SACDs can lead to a sound that is hyperrealistic, coldly clinical or simply too contrived to be enjoyed. But the EMM

Labs suffers no such anomalies: its approach remains unerringly true to the music, and the additional data is effortlessly incorporated for the greater good of the overall performance.

Diana Krall's 'The Girl In The Other Room' on SACD displayed a vitality and presence I'd missed before, while a recently remastered SACD version of Pink Floyd's classic 'Dark Side Of The Moon' was almost eerie in its expression of immediacy and ambient detail.

In both cases, the SACD eclipsed the CD version by quite some margin – a margin that is usually a lot smaller in the case of my reference Esoteric deck. And believe me, the UX-03SE is no musical slouch.

Perhaps because it shines so brightly in the SACD stakes, I felt that the EMM Labs could not quite capture the same magic, the same goose bump-inducing excellence, when dealing with normal, Red Book CDs.

Not that I am saying its CD playback is inferior – quite the opposite, in fact. As already mentioned, this player finds subtleties and sonic finery simply ignored by most other players.

But CDs sounded less vital, more understated and less obtrusive than their SACD counterparts. That's probably why I could listen to the EMM Labs for days without any sign of fatigue or sensory overload – and that's a rare trait indeed.

A word on MP3 playback, which the CDSA SE is happy to read. Put it this way: this is no miracle machine, and it is very quick to expose the limited tonal depth, dimensional disparities and limited

bandwidth typical of compressed music files. But then, MP3s were never meant to be listened to critically on a R100K-plus machine, and quite rightly, they don't stand up to scrutiny here.

The EMM Labs CDSA SE is a top-class CD/SACD player, one of the best even in the audio world's upper echelons. It stands its ground among the world's rarest and most exotic decks, and proves that Ed Meitner's mix of solid engineering principles, innovative technology and attention to detail pays handsome sonic dividends.

Most of all, it remains gloriously, convincingly true to the essence, the intent and the emotion of the original music – and that is arguably its greatest triumph.

Deon Schoeman

emm Labs

SE