

## The Einstein Rohren CD Player

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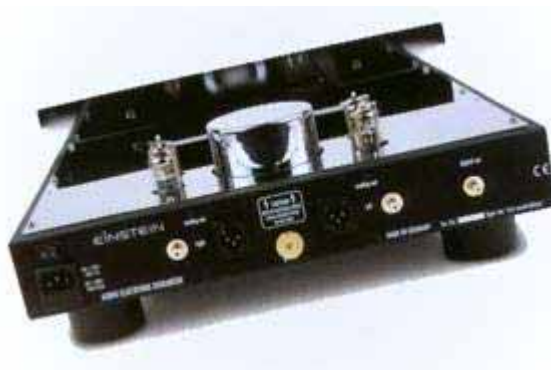


Typical. Its been around ten years since I last had this dilemma, and it used to make me uncomfortable then, but now ... let me just say that it's been compounded by having to review a number of tasty phono cartridges - and the Einstein CD player. In the same issue for God's sake. Why am I whinging? Because when I went into a music shop in Bristol to get a copy of an eagerly awaited new album the helpful man behind the counter casually remarked that they also had it on vinyl. I say helpful. But I'm sure he had no idea of the effect that his words had on me - I was in a state of apoplexy all the way home. Several times I nearly swung the car around to exchange the CD I had purchased for the lavishly packaged double LP.

Why was I so irritated? Like many people (JMH included, judging by the content of his column in the last issue) I have reached a sort of stalemate situation in the balance between CD and vinyl in my music collection. Anyone who wanted to know about my musical tastes for the last decade would be far better off looking at my CD collection than anything else. Sure, I've been making the most of the massive amounts of second-hand vinyl around, and thoroughly enjoying it. But I had long ago resigned myself to the fact that to carry on buying music I would (somewhat grudgingly) have to use compact disc. Apart from anything else, the advent of companies such as Naxos has considerably brightened the horizon in terms of lowering the price of discs, and they've recorded a lot of great music, which has been a real encouragement.

So, much as I lament not being able to buy the music I want (readily) on vinyl, and yes, all things being equal I still think it sounds ultimately more satisfying, I have got used to buying music on CD and enjoying it. My system is now fairly well balanced between the two formats, with almost equal attention divided between them. To be offered a choice of format with a new recording completely threw me... and bearing in mind what I have just said it would seem surprising that I opted for the CD. But hey! I had a disc player whose name is subtitled "the last record player" at home. Presumably this is alluding to it having an analogue-esque performance, but it sounds a bit foreboding to me because a) it is definitely not a record player and, b) the marketplace for turntables is, to the best of my knowledge, alive and kicking. Either way the Einstein is something of a statement, both visually and in its design concept.

Right out of the box (actually including the box; the packing crate is more like a relic from the Titanic, complete with hinges and latches - a real little treasure chest) this CD player is different. Visually striking, the Einstein is a fairly large and very solid machine. The metal work and layout is reminiscent of traditional valve equipment, which is hardly surprising as Einstein also manufacture tube pre and power amps. This unit sports no fewer than four ECC88/6DJ8 valves at the rear of the chassis, and in between the two pairs sits a chromed cap concealing a torroidal transformer. Forward of these is the (top loading) CD compartment; the substantial



hinged lid opens to reveal the mechanism and a magnetic puck which has to be placed on top of the CD. It's very magnetic, and somewhat difficult to use because of it - as soon as you get near the disc it tends to be ferociously grabbed, but not always in the right place, making disc loading a bit fiddly - particularly if you've been at the scotch.

The front panel is something of a dichotomy managing to seem simultaneously austere and slightly art nouveau decadent. It's definitely striking, and likely to polarise opinion. Personally the jury's still out. One by-product of the curved front panel is an extremely deep display window which gives a very narrow viewing, and more importantly, remote operation angle. The large knobs are the only manual controls, and have a stiff and rather indistinct action. I felt like I was going to break them, and their whole feel should be a lot more positive. The end result was a total reliance on the comprehensive remote control, which includes functions for the matching pre-amp, hence the comments about the narrow reading angle. The handset itself is a neat and well laid out unit, but no less prone to getting lost for all that.

Rear panel connections are much as you would expect, with high quality balanced and unbalanced connections available, and a co-axial digital output. Mains connection is standard IEC and the power switch is at the back indicating a preference for being left on, which is what I did.



So, what's with the valves? I haven't got a clue, as the information supplied with the player is in German and I'm not going to embarrass myself by giving you my interpretation of it. The four valves are mounted on a separate isolation hoard to minimise structure borne vibration, and constitute a properly engineered analogue output stage. These are not just a token addition, an idea that some other manufacturers have been seen to employ. Stuff a valve in there and it's bound to sound analogue isn't it? Yeah, right. The player offers a low output impedance of 50 ohms, and there are separate mains transformers for the analogue anti digital circuitry. The only other technical observation I could make is the choice of laser assembly - a Sony type common to many budget CD players. If that coloured my judgement I couldn't have been more wrong.

Observing the usual running-in etiquette, I installed the Einstein into my system and left it playing for a while to settle down. Signal connections were made utilising the unbalanced outputs, as I don't at the moment have the facility for balanced operation, and, I'm still not convinced that it is always superior over conventional connection. My first listening session was definitely not review orientated; I was tired and not in the mood to be analytical. I just wanted to listen to some music. If there is anybody out there who believes that music cannot be therapeutic, you should see me before and after listening to certain pieces; on this occasion I knew exactly what I wanted to hear to calm a rather anxious mood, and it did, very successfully. To the extent that I was still listening four hours later, at five in the morning - a feat not normally managed without some recourse to vinyl. I eventually went to bed suitably impressed by what the Einstein had just done, and made a mental note to do some detailed evaluation the next day.

As it turned out, it was several days before I had the opportunity to listen to the system again. As I had a knowledgeable friend staying who was quite happy to indulge in a bit of a session; we stocked the fridge with beer, lit the fire and settled down for an enjoyable evening. Apart from anything else, I was eager to get a second opinion. Controls aside, the only other problem I encountered was that the machine seemed to be very unforgiving of less than perfect discs. Maybe I have been lucky so far, but I have never had a problem playing any of my discs, until it came to using the Einstein. On a couple of occasions the music was marred with an irritating ticking, and once it ploughed through a whole symphony in an impressive 35 seconds, producing the most hideous noise as it did so. Alarmed, I would inspect the disc to find a tiny amount of muck on it, but obviously enough to upset the mechanism; this would seem to be a sensitive player. I wonder whether the strength of the magnet in the puck, so strong as to make careful placement difficult, might be contributing.



What the Einstein provided was access to the music being played. Often a weakness with CD, musical communication is right to the fore with this player.

So far, my experience with CD players has tended to divide in to two camps. On the one hand, you have the highly dynamic, in your face type of player, where music is presented in an extremely bold fashion, and instruments such as snare drums leap out of the loud-speakers with an incisive snap. The other type comes with the more laid back approach where everything is relaxed and easy going, with great depth and rather more atmosphere. The former lends urgency to anything vaguely mock and pop orientated, but can make more gentle music, for example a string quartet, a frustratingly muscle bound experience, making the dynamics of the musical performance seem totally artificial and unnatural. The reverse is true of the second type. Music which requires a degree of rhythmic snap to it can sound dead and lacklustre, whereas orchestral music acquires a scale and grace that makes for a much more satisfying and believable experience. The effect of these different approaches was so distinct that at one point, auditioning a couple of CD players for personal use, I seriously felt that only by having both could I do justice to the entire musical repertoire.

The Einstein seemed to tread the tightrope between these two extremes, getting the balance just right. It portrayed rock music with pace and power; drums and bass were suitably impressive where necessary while individual instruments and voices had a convincing sense of presence, air and clarity about them. Wheel on a full orchestra and this translated into real authority while solo instruments had a wonderfully wholesome quality especially Cello. Vaughan Williams overture The Poisoned Kiss on Chandos is a rich and evocative recording, and I felt that the Einstein got right to the heart of the interpretation.

The image didn't have the depth that, say the Meridian 508 can exhibit, but nor did it have the slightly vague presentation that sometimes haunts that player. A little less romantic? Possibly. But the compensation was best described by a friend of mine who, after listening to both these machines hit the nail squarely on the head by describing the Einstein as fundamentally more organic.



On several occasions I found myself listening to tracks that I'd previously filed under uninteresting. Take the music of Sir Arthur Bliss - some of it I find engaging, and some a little too much like hard work. With the Einstein I found myself listening to pieces that I had previously considered inaccessible.

Other types of music benefited in the same way. The Paris Concert by Keith Jarrett is a solo recording up to ECM's normal high standards, marred only by the character of the piano - a typical Yamaha, it's rather thin sounding compared to a Steinway. (They've always been the artist's preference, right back to the days of the Cologne concert in the late 70s). However, the Einstein made the most of this material, rendering the performance with the utmost emotion, and again navigating through the 'difficult bits' which normally succumb to the skip button.

Having been forced in the past to choose between players from fundamentally different camps. I have to say that the Einstein is the most complete player that I've ever lived with. As such, it both provides a more satisfying experience from CD, and a possible solution for those who find it wanting compared to LP. Whether it does so by clever manipulation or genuine advance-ment of the technology remains to be seen. That question can only be answered with longer exposure to the product, and more technical information, but that doesn't diminish the Einstein's achievement. At this rate I can stop agonising over the competing formats and simply worry about the music. Maybe there's something in that "last record player" appellation. The Einstein may not sound like a turntable, but it's a strong enough performer to stand beside one.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Mechanism: Sony top loading

Outputs: 1 pair unbalanced (RCA), 1 pair balanced (XLR), 1 digital (RCA)

Output level: 2 Volts

Dimensions (W x H x D): 430 x 140 x 400mm

Weight: 10.5 kg

Price: £3500