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 CD PLAYER/TRANSPORT REVIEWS

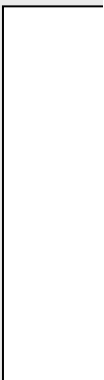
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ATC CDA2 Mk2 CD player-preamplifier Page 2

To test the ATC's CD-playing abilities, I used a pair of Auditorium 23 XLR-to-RCA interconnects from the CDA2 Mk2's balanced outputs into my Shindo Laboratory Allegro preamplifier's single-ended inputs. (I started the auditioning with single-ended Dimarzio interconnects, which have screw-down RCA plugs. Unfortunately, these became frozen on the CDA2 Mk2's RCA jacks and when I unplugged the cables I dislodged the collars from the player's RCA jacks.) When I evaluated the ATC as a CD player *and* preamplifier, a pair of Shindo XLR-to-RCA interconnects joined the ATC's balanced outputs to the [Mytek Brooklyn](#) and [Shindo Haut Brion](#) power amplifiers' single-ended inputs.

All about the CDs

If you've read my previous reviews, you know I'm all about vinyl. But the CDA2 Mk2 demanded that I dive deep into my collection of CDs, many of which were pressed during my 30 years as a jazz, pop, and electronic



mailed files, jazz publicists still send CDs—a smart move, as I'm more likely to play things I can touch, smell, and generally handle.

Words that habitually popped up in my listening notes for the CDA2 Mk2: *rich, dense, transparent, truthful, powerful, subtle, revealing*. One CD with which I heard *all* of these qualities was *Love Is Here to Stay*. Diana Krall and Tony Bennett's romp through the George Gershwin songbook (CD, Verve 002870302). While most of Krall's music is well recorded, the sound of the piano trio backing her and Bennett is a revelation.

The music is performed with relish and recorded with immaculate care—Krall's and Bennett's voices are laid bare, and it's a wondrous thing, even if, undoubtedly, some studio enhancement was involved: Krall's voice is whisper-lush and intimate, while old Tony's sounds rather small. Through the CDA2 Mk2, every glide and syllable of Krall's dark, husky voice was a joy, and Peter Washington's double bass and Kenny Washington's drums sounded huge and transparent. Bill Charlap's piano wasn't as effervescent as the other instruments and the voices, but it's a testament to the CDA2 Mk2's powers of resolution that it presented all this nuance and subtlety with consistent clarity and naturalness. It tempered utter faithfulness to the recorded event with a dash of romance.

With the Krall-Bennett CD standing as the ultimate in fidelity, other reference CDs fell in line as either less well recorded or with a different sonic goal in mind. Even with a recording of lower quality, the ATC imbued the music with a trace of richness that I found enjoyable. There was nothing threadbare or etched or bright or thin in the ATC's sound, only adherence to the recording with a dab of soul and lushness. That last quality sometimes added plumpness to bass notes, yet the CDA2 Mk2 consistently resolved the details of a CD's production and its ambient details—the space around the notes.





One thing that at first bothered me was the ATC's seeming reproduction of modern jazz CDs as mono productions, with aural images clustered toward the center of the soundstage. But as soon as I played a well-loved CD, such as the 2009 re-mastering of the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* (CD, Parlophone 4 58221 0), its wide if not terribly deep stereo spread snapped into immediate, panoramic focus. (Does modern jazz involve lazy, mono-centric production techniques?) I played a wide swath of CDs—the ATC presented each as a character study of a unique sonic personality telling a singular story. The CDA2 Mk2 was unfailingly transparent to the source, warts and all.

Air's *Talkie Walkie* (CD, Astralwerks ASW 18270) resounded from my [DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/93s](#) as never before. The French electronic duo's stacked synths and honeyed voices are always compelling, but through the CDA2 Mk2 *Talkie Walkie* was a complex orchestral vision with the density of Stokowski's *Fantasia* soundtrack. Bass tones were fleshy and Technicolor vivid, voices mysterious and hypnotically layered (especially in "Run"); the music was intensely immersive. Where before I'd heard simple layers of synths, now I heard a midnight forest humming with a thousand breathing insects and animals. The Mk2 created a nearly hallucinogenic experience.

Brad Mehldau's *Seymour Reads the Constitution!* (CD, Nonesuch 79344-8) sounded small and veiled, his piano lacking color and scale. Two CDs from Lisbon's Clean Feed label, The Heat Death's *The Glenn Miller Sessions* (CD, CF460CD) and Igor Lumpert & Innertextures' *Eleven* (CD, CF462CD), followed suit, though their avant explorations had a livelier overall sound than the pale-sounding Mehldau.

It's commonly believed that a good recording of an acoustic piano will reveal your system's tonal fidelity, and its ability to render clean macro- and

second volume of Christoph Ullrich's traversal of Mozart's piano sonatas, K.310, 331, 540, and 570 (CD, EigenArt 10360), revealing fast transients and a chilled-sunlight-pouring-through-my-brain transparency I've heard with no other CD player. The leading edges of piano notes had a brilliant, burnished quality that lent this music great vitality, with excellent spatial and tonal virtues.

My jazz discovery this time out was singer Judy Niemack's *New York Stories* (CD, Sunnyside SSC 1515), recorded in Copenhagen with the Danish Radio Big Band, Jim McNeely conducting his own arrangements of standards and not-so standards. The recording's personality is to the fore and life-size, each instrument well realized, and with a touch of treble filigree creating a lustrous glow. As with the Krall-Bennett disc, but on a larger scale, I could hear the studio walls, the distance between the singer and her mike, the truth of the recorded event warmed by a touch of aural splendor.

Meet the Files

Allied to my MacBook laptop and Western Digital hard drive via a Mytek USB cable, the ATC CDA2 Mk2's internal DAC made quick work of AIFF files. Scrolling through thousands of files I'd forgotten about, the ATC's DAC sounded smooth, tonally convincing, clean, and reasonably dynamic. Going from physical CD to ripped files is like switching vinyl out for digital, but with the edges polished and dynamics truncated. The sound was very good overall, including from DSD files, but it lacked the visceral grip of CDs through the ATC's transport. I didn't stay here long.

Out with the Shindo, In with the ATC

When I swapped out my Shindo Allegro preamplifier for ATC's internal preamp running direct into the power amp, things got only better. While music now sounded slightly more forward, it also grew in scale, resolution, and weight—especially bass weight, which turned boomy with some CDs. Now, with the Krall-Bennett CD, I could hear piano hammers striking piano strings. Tony Bennett's voice was more detailed, the sense of its fleshiness more vivid; his and Krall's voices were better balanced with each other. Ullrich's disc of Mozart sonatas also revealed the unique sound of hammers on strings, and weight and tonality also improved, creating a



at how different the ATC's internal preamplifier sounded from my Shindo Allegro preamps. Warmth remained, as did the ATC's luminous translation of digital material, while resolution—and, to a larger degree, weight and soundstage height—improved by considerable margins.

Conclusions

You could easily spend \$2000 apiece on a CD player and preamplifier and not get the construction quality, ease of use, and fantastic sound of ATC's CDA2 Mk2 CD preamplifier. I was shocked when the ATC went head-to-head with my more expensive Shindo preamp and bettered it in some regards, and it worked very well with my tubed power amplifier. With ATC's CDA2 Mk2 offering pleasing tonality, resolution, and dynamics, a versatile feature set, and rock-solid build, all for a decent price, it's impossible not to crown it with the highest recommendation. It can provide a fine starting point for a solid high-end system.

NEXT: [Specifications](#) »

COMPANY INFO

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COMMENTS



"Breakdance" and "Limbo Rock"

Submitted by Bogolu Haranath on December 6, 2018 - 4:38pm

Pair this ATC CD/pre-amp with the new Elac Navis self-powered bookshelf or floor standers and get ready to breakdance and/or limbo-rock :-)

"Breakdance" Irene Cara :-)