



## NAD C541i £330 01223 203200 www.nadelectronics.com

A great value player from a classic budget stable

**T**his new NAD special edition model is a tidy, if blandly designed player. The remote is little bigger than palm size, and is well laid out, though more use of colour would have been an improvement.

But bland or not, the C541i is quite adventurous under the skin, with a specification that would do justice to players at much higher price levels. With separate taps on its toroidal transformer for analogue and digital duties, and a sprinkling of audiophile quality passive components (like Nichicon Muse caps), the NAD also features a fully buffered digital output and a low impedance analogue output (below 300 ohms) which offers a degree of immunity from cable capacitance effects. The output op-amps are from Burr-Brown, the DAC is a 24-bit/96kHz Delta Sigma part from the same source and an HDCD digital filter is specified, which is an unusual refinement at the price. The CD-R/RW compliant mechanism is extremely quick, making the player feel more responsive than most.

It has a number of features aimed at the custom install market, including standby switching from the remote control, an external IR input for hidden installations along with NAD Link system control sockets, and the ability to

be switched by 12V trigger signal. The firmware is designed to be integrated with Crestron and other controllers.

### PERFORMANCE

With more hours play under its belt than when it was first tested in *HFC's* July issue (in the *Incoming* section), the NAD has thrown off some of its obvious richness and smoothness in favour of a balance that is at once dynamic, colourful and assured. There is a strong sense of detail, with a very slight roughness or texturing of high frequency information. The bass is full but has a dry quality, though the adjective that springs first to mind is transparent, followed by tuneful.

It is an excellent all-rounder and despite some minor cosmetic blemishes to the sound, its performance is highly impressive at the price. The clean, open textures and smooth, expressive demeanour worked well with the Brahms *Clarinet Quintet*, and the Garbage album had tremendous drive

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VERDICT
SOUND
FEATURES
BUILD
VALUE

A dynamic, tonally varied and confident sounding player with class-leading detail resolution. At the price a Best Buy badge is richly deserved.

CHECKLIST
OPTICAL DIG OUT ✓
ELECTRICAL DIG OUT ✓
CD-RW PLAYBACK ✓
CD TEXT ✗
CALENDAR DISPLAY ✗

and poise. It didn't always convince though. The rocky terrains of the *Mahler Six* sounded slightly reined in during the crescendi, and in particular in the hammer blow motif, whose reticence almost suggested an element of gain riding, leaving the impression that the power supplies were sometimes not quite coping with the demand. At such moments – few though they were – the NAD reverted to type, and did sound a little lazy, warm and blurred. But this was so infrequent, and so mild, that it was on the limit of observation where it was noticeable at all. ☺

### LAB REPORT

- ▶ The C541i is derived from the C541 and C540, but only the C541i, with its Sony mechanism, can read CD, CDR and CD-R/RW discs.
- ▶ Burr-Brown's PCM1732 DAC replaces the PCM1716 used before, providing HDCD-compatibility with an excellent 101dB rejection of digital images.
- ▶ Noise is not so impressive, but with a 99dB S/N ratio, just keeps its nose ahead of CD's 16-bit standard.
- ▶ NAD's proprietary analogue filter successfully quells any ultrasonic noise but also causes an increase in conventional harmonic distortion from 0.0015% (midrange) to 0.03% (high treble).
- ▶ Jitter amounts to just 190psec – a very clean result and one that contrasts with the high +223ppm clock error which, though insufficient to cause an audible change in musical pitch, does indicate below-average clock selection on NAD's part.

▶ **LAB CONCLUSION:** The disc-handling of the 540-series has been steadily improved while the technical performance of its DAC and analogue stages is not significantly different.

### DETAIL - CONNECTIONS

