

TEST

NAD C541i

CD player has improved definition and weight

It's not a radical change, but the improved NAD has the power to compete, says Andrew Everard

And lo, the NAD C540 beget the NAD C541, which beget the C541i – in the world of mid-market audio, it seems you have to keep tuning in order to ensure your products stay on the pace. Arcam does it just about every year to its CD72, so why shouldn't NAD follow the trend?

Actually, there's an argument for leaving well alone, since rapid product changes tend to irritate existing owners as much as they attract new buyers, but such is the competitive nature of the CD market – yes, even when many would have you believe that DVD is becoming the dominant force – that many manufacturers feel these running tweaks are more than justified. Perhaps aware that there may be some old models still out there in the shops, NAD is choosing to describe the £330 C541i, and the £200 C521i launched at the same time, as 'special editions' rather than direct replacements. However, I can see few people wanting the old model when the new is available for the same kind of money.

Anyway, while outwardly there's little to set the new C541i apart from the old C541 save the addition of that single lower-case letter on the model number, within there have been plenty of changes, starting with the fundamentals: the transport. This is a new mechanism designed to reduce jitter levels while at the same time ensuring compatibility with CD-R/RW discs – some people had problems in this respect with the old machines – and this feeds Burr-Brown Sigma-Delta conversion retained from the old C541 through Pacific Microsonics' HDCD digital filter. This gives enhanced resolution with suitably encoded discs, but as noted before is also used by many companies for its superior sound with conventional CDs.

The gains from the reduced jitter levels are said to include better low-level linearity and thus improved detail resolution. These advances are optimised by the use of improved passive components,



Appearances are deceptive: the NAD C541i scarcely looks different from the C541, but it produces a more involving sound

such as Nichicon Muse capacitors, elsewhere in the signal path, and the continued employment of separate power supply regulation systems for digital and analogue sections of the player.

The single most noticeable improvement over the old player is in fact the improved remote handset supplied, which makes operation somewhat smoother, while those who like to program selections from discs rather than playing them all the way through might appreciate the provision of a delete programming function, allowing those tracks you don't want to hear to be selected. I suppose it might come in handy with some compilation discs!

Another nice touch is that the player can now be put into standby from the remote handset, this being part of a larger strategy being implemented across the NAD range to aid compatibility with whole-house entertainment systems. To this end there are now rear-panel connections for an infrared receiver and a 12V trigger signal in addition to the NAD Link remote control system, while another gain round the back is an optical digital output in addition to the usual electrical feed. Finally, the impedance of the analogue outputs is kept very low, in an attempt to make the player less sensitive to the cables with which it's connected – another important consideration in multiroom systems, where long cable runs may be involved.

Performance

The original C540 was a good player, if a little too polite for its own good at times, and while this was addressed in the C541, there were still times when – at least beside some of its price-competi-

tion – the NAD could sound a little 'safe'. Agreed, some users would have felt that was no bad thing; better a player with a warm, slightly lush sound than one with any hint of an overbright or metallic edge, but others might wish for a bit more openness and atmosphere with some recordings, and feel the warm balance made for a slightly uninvolved listen.

For the most part, the 'old' C541 trod the line between the two extremes with some aplomb, but the new model goes a little further in the excitement stakes without sacrificing any of the surefootedness of the original. Play the new Harnoncourt set of Dvořák *Slavonic Dances* (Teldec, 7/02) and the lightness of touch is noticeable in the tight, controlled way the NAD delivers the complex rhythms, but at the same time the player sounds rich and sensibly weighted, conveying the scale of the orchestra very well indeed. The result, when played through a high quality system – TAG McLaren Audio driving the magical PMC FB1 speakers – is a presentation with excellent life and impact, plus a very real sense of involvement. Yes, much more expensive CD players can unearth even more from the disc and give a greater feeling of presence and dynamics, but by the standards of the sub-£500 CD player class the NAD is very fine indeed. And given that it's nearer £300 than £500, that's no mean achievement.

Its ability with intricate, finely detailed chamber music is similarly impressive, as is clear with Alter Ego's disc of pieces by Philip Glass (on Stradivarius, 7/02). The interplay of *Piece in the shape of a Square*, scored for two flutes, challenges many a player, but while the NAD lacks a little of

the space around the instruments, it tracks the two instrumental lines – in fact double-tracked by a single performer – beautifully, making either easy to follow. It also delivers a fine sense of instrumental timbres, whether with this piece or *Gradius*, which is for solo bass clarinet. Really one couldn't want more definition or control in a player of this price.

Refined and enjoyable, the NAD C541i is an excellent buy at the price. As I have already made clear, the changes involved in creating this player weren't massive, but on this showing they were very definitely worthwhile. ☺

NAD C541i

Type CD player

Price £330

Formats supported
CD, CD-R/RW, HDCD

Digital to analogue conversion Burr-Brown Sigma-Delta, 24-bit resolution

Inputs/outputs Analogue plus optical/electrical digital out, NAD Link, 12V trigger, infrared receiver

Accessories supplied
Remote handset

Dimensions (W x H x D)
435 x 70 x 285mm

Made by NAD Electronics International, Canada

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