

AcousticPlan Vadi

Review: Roland Kraft; IMAGE HIFI, 4/2008
(Translation and layout by Paul Bardo)

Many CD players are – erm – boring. But they needn't be.

Claus Jäckle was always good for a surprise. The kit the Swabian builds is unconventional, anything but mainstream, and – if my previous experiences with AcousticPlan components is anything to go by – sounds exceptionally good. The AcousticPlan product portfolio included, up to now, loudspeakers, hybrid and pure tube power amps, which is normally about as far as a small high-end audio company will go. Often it starts getting a bit tricky when it comes to digital technology. Fact: it is particularly these highly specialised one-man operations that are not able to design and produce up-market digital technology in-house. As a rule, it's because they either lack the sheer know-how, or that key components can only be ordered in bulk, which is simply beyond the budget of many small high-end manufacturers. Usually this results in quite evidently third party systems being bought in and hidden in new enclosures; an unsatisfactory state of affairs, which all too often also goes hand in hand with sonic inconsistencies.

I must admit that at first I was quite surprised that Claus Jäckle was presenting his own CD player. Not least because I would never believe that the friendly, down-to-earth music lover would ever present anything other than his own engineering. And I was right – amazingly, the 'Vadi' turned out to be entirely his own design. No wonder one had heard so little from Claus Jäckle for so long! The man from Constance freely admits that he first had to acquire the relevant knowledge. In my view a clear advantage, in particular that a valve man like Jäckle can throw himself into the world of digital design without prejudice or preconception... the results are as unusual as they are interesting, and fit visually perfectly with the other AcousticPlan equipment. It is this which bestows the Vadi with looks which are pretty cool and way out for a CD player. I really like it, as form and function have been reduced to the essentials, so much so that the inventor (who is quite obviously obsessed with the external simplicity of his products) even came up with a single-button control!



AcousticPlan's Vadi CD player

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For starters, the Vadi is a 'box' measuring 260 x 170 x 350 mm. With the exception of the 'PhonoMaster' phono stage, Claus builds all his components in this size, so the Vadi matches seamlessly with the other components in the range. The newcomer also shares the same characteristic knobs and blue anodising of its other 'playmates'. Its constructor ascribes 'non-resonant' properties to the housing, which consists of precision-made aluminium plates. Just looking at the sheer thickness of these plates is enough to convince me. The CD transport is situated in the middle of the top plate and has no further cover – the CD spins, recessed by exactly the depth of a CD, flush with the top of the unit.. The cut-out is precision-machined and leaves only the barest hint of a gap around the circumference of the disc; four recesses facilitate disc handling. A piece of metal identical to the control knobs acts as a weight and magnetic puck – firstly rather amusing and secondly it simply looks great.



The Vadi's top-loading Philips Pro transport

Understandably, this begs the question of how the laser is protected from dust. Our thrifty Swabian supplies a kind of round leather mat, which you could also replace with an old CD. Purist, certainly, but then the whole player is purist, at least as far as the digital part of the device is concerned. The digital stage is based on the well-known Philips CS-Pro2M and deliberately avoids any up- or oversampling in the interests of sound quality, which, Claus is at pains to emphasise, (and which is self-evident), blazes completely new trails. These start with a heavy external power supply, which connects to the actual player via an umbilical with a large connector. And a split between transport and DAC? No, says the Swabian, because this would require a conversion to S/PDIF format. Makes sense, just like the external PSU in which there are no fewer than three separate transformers. Thus even the most minute vibrations

and magnetic interference fields are prevented from entering the CD player itself. This also applies to the mains voltage: the power switch is on the front panel, but only controls a small DC switching voltage, which switches the PSU on or off via a relay. Standby consumption: an acceptable 0.6W.

Before I forget, just a word about the reserved, purist appearance of the AcousticPlan player: information about the inserted CD is simply via a large blue two-digit dot matrix display. I personally find this refreshing, not least because you can read the track number even from a distance, and that's all I want to know anyway. Of course the perfectly matching remote is also pretty useful – machined from solid metal, with six little buttons whose symbols are actually milled into the top plate; this piece is really nicely made and never for a second allows any misgivings. You know the drill – 'expensive high-end player' with some cheap and nasty plastic remote. No less than a deadly sin on the part of a manufacturer if you ask me.

Back to the Vadi and its extremely elaborate power supply, which is based around a total of nine independent voltage supplies; analogue and digital sections are separated right back at the transformer, so that, for example, the transport's servo cannot cause any voltage swings. In this respect, Claus Jäckle is anything but purist, splashing out on completely discrete voltage regulators, quite a rarity in contrast to today's widely available and more commonly used integrated regulators. 'Far better properties than any integrated regulator' is the reason our thrifty Swabian goes to such expense here. Immediately after the Philips Pro transport the already pampered signal is dealt with by 18 bit DACs from Analog Devices – we're talking a so-called R-2R multibit DAC, deliberately not a Delta-Sigma one-bit chip. The latter would be a cheaper process but fundamentally generates more noise, which makes it dependent on noise shaping and steep filtering on the output. Also, R-2R DACs are less susceptible to jitter. This makes the choice of D-A conversion technology easy for sound freaks, just so long as the bean counters aren't in charge. After the D/A section, instead of the usual op-amp-based solution comes a passive low-pass filter whose four large filter coils you can't miss; in combination with the corresponding capacitors. Then comes an extremely lavishly made valve output stage, for which the Vadi could confidently wear a medal for rarity on its front plate.

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The keyword here is output transformer, which shows close family resemblance to AcousticPlan's preamplifier which is – OK I'm exaggerating slightly – absolutely full of them. No wonder that the Vadi also eschews the usual coupling capacitors and that the zero-negative-feedback E88CC-based anode follower output stage is connected to the outputs via a self-built output transformer instead. This is precisely the reason why it is so easy to balance this interface directly at the transformer without all the messing about involved in further amplification stages which could introduce imbalances or asymmetry. Its brevity and compelling logic make this a highly plausible signal path that will bring a smile to the face of anyone who knows valves.

And that's not all: underneath the mesh grille behind the transport there hides an elaborate power supply just for the '88 output stage – a valve-based one, naturally. And most importantly, fully valve based. Claus Jäckle goes all out even at the input and splashes out on an EZ81 rectifier valve, which stabilises the power supply for the output stage in combination with the EF86/EL84 regulating circuit. Therefore the Vadi is, if anything, the most consistently executed 'valve' CD player there is... needless to say the entire valve part of the design is point-to-point wired. In a batch of five, the build time per unit is about 30 hours; even the boards and other assemblies are all hand-soldered.

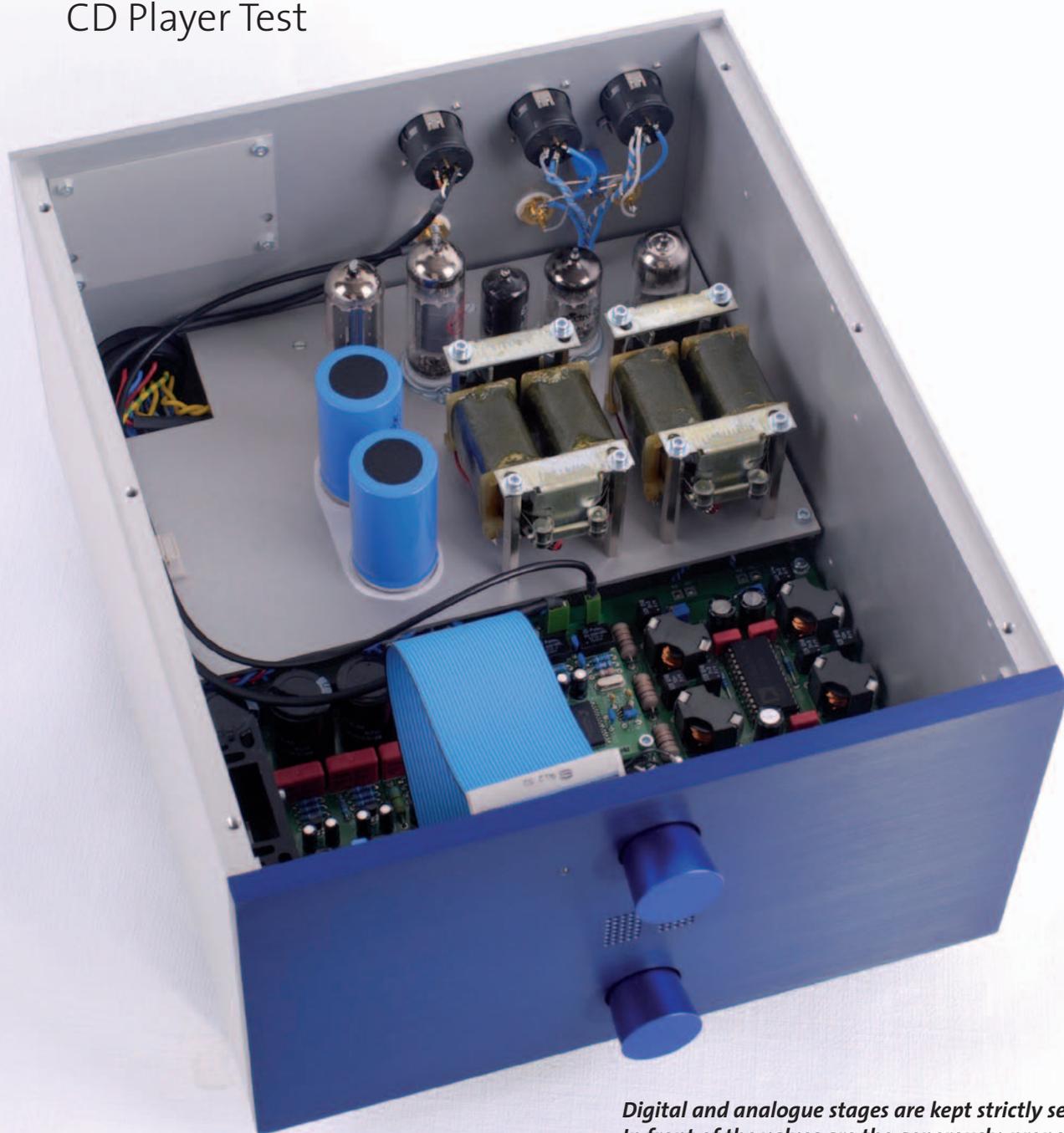
Initially the rear panel of the Vadi poses a little puzzle: what is the covered breakout panel in the back plate for? Of course: 'Option plate' says Claus and refers to other optional versions, such as a digital input or perhaps a USB bus. Very appealing idea that, USB in and valve out – crazy days indeed. Despite that, the tubes, or perhaps even the digital stage – who knows? – require a warm-up session. Before critical listening the unit should be powered up for at least half an hour, though at this point I would advise against leaving it powered on permanently, as the wear on the valves would be uncouth!

Right from the first note a kind of A-ha experience arises: A-ha! So that's how it is! I have to admit, I have never yet heard a CD player that sounds like the Vadi! But one thing at a time. For starters: the first impression you get when you hear it is that you are put in mind of the old story of the gentle giant – this basic idea kept cropping up in everything that occurred to me with regard to the Vadi. And that was a heck of a lot... To start with, this piece of equipment is really not simple to describe. One that on reflection just seems to be right. And that makes you question a large part of all that you thought you knew about CD players. The Vadi sounds 'rich' in a wonderful way. No, not in the sense of being detail-obsessed or analytical, but rather in the sense of timbre, tonality and forcefulness. If you will, it makes the sound of



The option plate (top right) allows for possible upgrades, such as a USB connection

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Digital and analogue stages are kept strictly separate. In front of the valves are the generously-proportioned output transformers

other CD players sound comparatively like basic information. How can I express this? Let's try putting it like this: if we assume that there exists a higher level, which reaches much closer to the listener, captivates and binds him, simultaneously mystifying him with sheer fullness, then the Vadi transports us to precisely this, one could almost say, transcendental level. Sorry for babbling, but I am, if anything, a bit lost for words. It is quite simply extremely difficult to describe how a box like this, with its reduced-to-fundamentals and, precisely because of this, forceful sound, can be related to an old Playstation (which I am still convinced is superior in certain respects to even super-expensive equipment), yet simultaneously extends incredibly far beyond this, exhibiting an occasionally ghostly presence and a sometimes insane sonic charisma.

Perhaps this will make more sense: Many – if not all – digital machines irritate me with a certain amount of 'frugality' – a sound which, in itself, is harmonious and coherent, and may even fascinate, but which lacks a deeper, finer differentiated structure, levels in which fun and effort permeate, which are certainly present in good analogue replay equipment. The 'music behind the music' if you like. Everything is there, but flat as a pancake, without the deeper emotion, without any vibrating energy that is characteristic of a good vinyl turntable. It's exactly this hidden sound-universe that the Vadi seizes back with tremendous ease and effortlessness, but also with an authority that connoisseurs of vinyl will associate with only the very best turntables and pick-up systems. This is confusing at first, because CD players usually actually

sound 'simpler', and don't easily allow that immersion in deeper levels of perception. Yet this infernal device does exactly that – combined with a softness not usually associated with CD and a 'cosiness factor' that is entirely new to me. The first listening impression left me with the probing question 'what happened to all the hardness?' In this respect the Vadi wasn't 'edgy' and 'angular' or aggressive enough for me, but this mostly disappeared as the player warmed up, though was still perceptible. Brutal, unusually deep bass and a ridiculous presence appeared in my notes, along with an almost painterly three-dimensionality that is usually the preserve of my analogue equipment. Strange! Also a weight and fullness, a fulminant energy in the sound, which even appeared to challenge Shindo's Monbrison via the phono input, a huge amount of sound pressure in the system, which positively flooded into the room, appearing to ebb and flow.

Wow! So much energy, so much power in the chain – that had never been there in the digital realm before. At the same time gentle, incredibly rounded and soft, stretching itself out lasciviously, the dynamics surprising the listener with respect to the volume control, yet then again effervescent, with all this softness and yet an underlying hardness – amazing, no, let's be honest, crazy, a sound never heard before, plumbing the digital depths which, as we now know, would previously never have ascribed to the simple 16-bit system, and which was better defined by SACD. How does it do it? Is it the short, minimised signal path between DAC and output? Is upsampling, oversampling and all this endless faffing with digital filters just a diversion? One that obstructs the view and molycoddles the signal in the wrong place? Acoustic memory doesn't give much away, but I think there was once a player from 47 Labs that had a sound that tended toward the same direction, which

reduced the path between bits and bytes and the analogue output to its basics, but didn't go nearly as far as is the case here... and already it's pumping bass energy into the room again, completely crazy, punchy, powerful, rolling, yet lightly oscillating, as if the image consisted of thousands of ink droplets, each different, each unique, each worthy of contemplation. Not just warm and full, no, quite the opposite, differentiated right down to the last dot of the i, with hardness and ruthlessness, yet oddly, again so soft and friendly, as if it was a 'smiley' competition.

I am, admittedly, fascinated and yet perplexed at the same time, I've never heard such well-defined three-dimensionality from a CD player, never been so undecided about what I should scribble in my notebook, never so distracted from the necessary test notes, never so completely absorbed by the musical suspense that appeared unexpectedly, which turned discs that I'd heard to many times into new lands to explore.

Sorry, but I really have no idea what I should say about the Vadi. First of all, it's raised the bar, degraded my putative experiences to so much scrap metal. Not to mention the fact that it is now ten past ten at night and the player has been running since this morning, it's done away with my preconceptions about dynamics. It whips, shreds, caresses, presses, shoves, rages and beats me right to my soul. Deep within the music, in a pure, brightly-coloured, forceful sound. I'm by no means through with this darned piece of engineering. Is Claus Jäckle a guru? Damn! He's a Swabian. Swabians can't become gurus. Or can they? And maybe this story has a sequel. I'm off for now. Off to listen to some music... ©

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What we liked:	Obviously (also) the looks.
What surprised us:	Unbelievably emotional sound!
What's missing:	Hmm, perhaps the fast forward speed could have been a tad quicker.
What to do:	Gather together the last few pennies...

tech spec

CD formats supported:	CD, CD-R
Analogue output:	normal, RCA 1.3 V balanced, XLR 1.3 V
Output impedance:	normal 200 Ω, balanced 200 Ω
Signal to noise ratio:	>100 dB(A)
Frequency response:	20 Hz–20 kHz
Digital output:	S/PDIF – Coax 0.5 V p-p, 75 Ω AES/EBU – XLR 5 V p-p, 110 Ω
Dimensions: (<i>w x h x d</i>):	260 x 170 x 350
Weight:	19 kg incl. external power supply
Finish:	frontplate blue, casing silver. Others on request.