

Having spent too much time of late chanting the mantra that Compact Disc players aren't really any better than they've ever been, it was 'cards

on the table time' for yours truly. Here we had a *Hi-Fi World* fave rave in the shape of Quad's 99 CDP-2 set as a benchmark against the latest and greatest Brit machines, and where did it come? Top, like all the other times it crossed lasers with its closest rivals? Errm, no...

It didn't come bottom of the group though, because that is where you'll find the Marantz covering. This is such a shame because it's the machine I most wanted to like. How so? Well, in terms of build, finish, ergonomics and sheer style it beat all the others here into enough of a pulp to bottle them as a smoothie. It wasn't so much better than the Quad, for example, as a damning indictment of British hi-fi construction values (whether they're assembled in Huntingdon or Guangdong). The beautifully finished, sculpted fascia, subtly floodlit and with a gorgeous action to the buttons was the proverbial Lexus to the Quad's Reliant Robin... I know I'm being harsh, but it's to make a point. Why can't UK Hi-Fi PLC do better?

Still, the Brits had the last laugh, because the Marantz simply sounded too mechanical. There was something about its timing that just robbed it of a sense of ease that the Cambridge Audio had in spades. Allied to a slightly brightly lit upper mid and a feeling of opaqueness (despite being superficially detailed), it just didn't pass muster. Still – I did like its big, brawny, broad-shouldered nature that's so reminiscent of Japanese high end, and couldn't help feel that there was a superb player struggling to get out (SA11-S1, perhaps?).

Next came the Arcam. This was a lovely machine in so many ways, with a truly couth, sophisticated sound that, for many listeners, would be all they could ever want. It's a fraction on the warm side – again no bad thing – and it makes every type of music sound nice. Therein lies its problem, because it's a tad too saccharine to my ears. Such euphonic tendencies aren't always what's needed with some programme material, such as techno and R&B/urban which suffered from loose bass. Still, full marks for superb ergonomics, fine build and neat styling – more of this please, Britishers!

The first machine I started listening to was the Cambridge 840C,

and I can still remember my surprise when The Doors' 'Riders on the Storm' began to play. This remaster is done to superb standards, and the 840C told me so in no uncertain terms. There's something very, very right about the 840C – and I just can't quite put my finger on it. In the same way the Marantz just doesn't seem to time naturally, so the Cambridge seems to time uncannily well. It isn't the frenetic ferret-down-a-drainpipe that is the Quad, but instead has a lazy calm about it that makes it a joy to listen to – kind of like riding a big Harley Davidson motorbike with enough torque to uproot a tree stump.

There's more – the Cambridge's expansive left-to-right soundstage is a joy, and makes the reference Quad and Cyrus seem a tad shut in. It's not brilliant in depth perspective, but that wonderful widescreen view more than makes up for it. The 32/384 upsampling, I would suggest, is no gimmick and in some respects it had a clarity and tonal rightness that none of the others were able to match. Still, the DAC and digital filter package is, I'd venture, one of the best in the business and all it needs now is a slightly grippier transport and a sweeter, more natural and three dimensional analogue section to make it the best £1,500 machine ever – 940C perchance?

Spending £250 over the £750 Cambridge 840C does not buy you a better machine, just a different one which on balance justifies the price differential. If that sounds like an awfully roundabout way of saying nothing, then my apologies, but I'm just trying to say that the £1,000 Cyrus and reference Quad machines are slightly better all-round but fail to comprehensively outclass the Cambridge.

Both provide a slightly tauter and more explicitly rhythmic sound to the Cambridge, and both have better front to back depth perspective (albeit slightly compressed left to right) and fractionally stronger bass for more visceral impact – all of which justifies the extra cash (just). Of the two, the reference Quad

gets more down and dirty with the music's percussion, and offers fractionally better accenting too. This makes for a more enjoyable sound in some respects, but not in others.

The Cyrus is also more rhythmic than the Cambridge, but it's a fraction less taut than the Quad and a fraction better at resolving the overall mix of the music. In this respect, it feels like the Quad has a better transport, and the Cyrus a better DAC/analogue output stage. It is more extended up top, and marginally more tonally fulsome with a slightly wider tonal palette. A well deserved second place to the Cyrus then, but remember to hear it against the Quad if you possibly can.

And the winner is... the Astin Trew AT3500. This surprised me frankly – although we all liked its cheaper AT3000 brother here at *Hi-Fi World*, it's one thing doing a good £600 machine and another mixing it with this lot. In the AT3500, we have – basically – the best of all worlds. It has the width and sweetness of the Cambridge Audio, the depth of the Cyrus, the rhythmic drive of the Quad, and the wide shouldered bombast of the Marantz. The result

"In the Astin Trew, we have the best of all worlds..."

is an extremely listenable bit of kit that has virtually no weak points and plenty of strengths. Whatever music you play on it is big hearted yet subtle and sweet too.

Although sticking a couple of tubes on the end of a CD player can work wonders – let's face it, they're bound to sound better than most bargain-basement op-amps – the Astin Trew AT3500 is more than just an also ran machine with a euphonic output stage. It has the grip, detail, depth and width of the best of the rest here – and adds superior tonality and texture and an altogether bigger hearted and more musical performance. A great result for such a new brand, and one that surprised even me. Even after twenty five years of trying, with CD it seems, things can only get better!

