

BEAUTIFUL STRANGER



Simon Pope stands agog at the stunning looking Shanling CDT-100 CD player. But will it sound as good as it looks, he asks?

This exquisite bit of hi-fi esoterica comes from the People's Republic of China. Over here it costs £1,650. I've seen stuff of this build quality on retailers' shelves for no less than £5,000. That's what ball park you're in here, build wise. Quad has proved it can be done with their latest ranges of quality products, the latest of which shares the pages of this very issue. Shanling puts it beyond reasonable doubt. And the two have more in common than you'd think, as both hail from factories in the Shenzhen area of China – just inland from Hong Kong.

As soon as you open the box you get extras by the dozen: a free sampler HDCD, an audiophile standard power lead – even a pair of white gloves for budding snooker refs! This gives you some indication of what to expect in the machine itself.

Firstly, you'll notice four stunningly positioned valves. Two of these 6N3P triodes are for one of

the two variable output stages of the CDT-100 and the other two are reserved for the headphone output, the socket of which you'll find on the right hand side. In front of the valves is the stylish acrylic cover that secures the disc onto the top loading mechanism using a Philips CDM 1201 transport. When switched on, this glows a magnificent, eerie blue, which along with the illuminated valves makes for the best CD player to use with the lights off. . . ever!

Four basic control buttons are featured atop the chassis along with three transformers and a choke filter that make up the four lumps to the rear of the player. Inside the sleek yet solid case are two Burr Brown PCM 1704 DACs per channel, a Pacific Microsonics chip for HDCD replay and top spec Crystal semiconductors. These are devices found in much more expensive machines. Getting the picture?

At the rear there are two sets of stereo outputs – one 'direct' solid state and the other a valve output. A preamp section, should you wish to

keep it minimal, can therefore be bypassed. There's also a single digital phono output.

The well built remote (reminiscent of that supplied with the top Marantz models) controls all of the functions, including the gain. The 24/96 upsampling is controlled by the remote and when an HDCD disc is played the blue upsampling light switches over to the HDCD recognition LED. Putting a disc on the player is a very manual deal; you have to physically lift up the acrylic 'platter' and plop the disc down on the hub.

Initially I played around with the various outputs and filters and the best sound (of a very good bunch, incidentally) came with the valve output and the upsampling filter switched on. Sensing that the player could be something special I pulled out all the stops and went straight for the HFW 'simple but effective' reference system which consists of direct connection from the variable output straight into our World Audio Design 300B parallel single-ended monoblocks (stuffed full of

interesting components to boot) and a pair of Quad ESL-988 electro-statics.

The CDT-100 proved worthy of such rich partnering. Immediately I was hit with a fast yet supremely smooth and big sound that's rare with similarly priced players (with perhaps the exception of Quad and Meridian). Wally Brill's mesmerising mix of Jewish canting and break beats, The Covenant (distributed in the UK from Discovery Records – go buy it now!) had amazing purity in the modal vocal lines and an overall richness that took it well into high end territory. Bass was very firm and tight, midrange well detailed and the treble as smooth as a newly bathed baby's botty. Comparing to one of our reference Sony SACD players (the similarly priced 555ES) made the Japanese sound like a dentist drill – and it's a very good player indeed. This also means that the valve output stage of the Shanling is very warm and smooth – but that's surely no bad thing with CD?

Stick on a high quality audiophile disc such as the Reference Recordings version of Mahler's das Lied von der Erde conducted by Eije Oue and you'll get a heady mix of

smoothness and fine detail. Whilst not as deep and three dimensional as some (very) high-end players the CDT-100 has a natural and large sound stage that also has fine space and transparency. Violins, even in the dubious Mahlerian high registers, were sweet and sinuous and the exposed woodwind passages were gloriously transparent.

The key to this player's sonic ability through the valve stage is that it still manages to retain resolution, detail and rhythmic speed whilst possessing supreme smoothness. Like a good valve amp it has lots of natural timbre with instruments – there's none of the grey transparency you'll find with other CD players. As an added bonus the player's valve headphone stage is also hugely impressive, with an open and spacious sound. It will have you ignoring the missus for many an hour.

This is a cracking product. It sounds wonderful and gets towards the big, analogue sound of the superb but expensive Wadia players. OK, so it's a little warm, but it's still well detailed and the direct output has a little more kick and edge to the sound for those who crave those traits.



Then factor in that this player is simply stunning looking and superbly put together and you have one very tempting package indeed - it should be very near the top of anyone's audition list for any type of digital player at the price.

The CDT-100 is simply one the best sounding, superbly built and certainly the most stunning looking CD players on the market. Competitors watch out – this is a serious warning shot from the East!

Shanling CDT-100 £1650.00

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MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Shanling CD T100 has a slow roll off in its frequency response and some filter ringing at high frequencies our analysis shows. It will likely sound a little warm as a result. Upsampling smooths things out a little though.

Distortion levels were high by modern standards. At -30dB, a typical average music level on CD, a figure of 0.12% distortion was produced, around six times higher than usual. At -60dB the picture was the same, with 0.9%, against a modern norm. of 0.3%. However, the player did resolve a -90dB signal correctly. The sound of this player is likely to be a little sharpened or hardened by the extended distortion pattern it produces, and it may lack the smoothness of more modern players. Upsampling did not affect distortion behaviour, nor did the valve stage.

Output measured a healthy 2.27V, with a little less from the valve, probably because it is a

cathode follower line driver with a gain less than one. Channel separation was acceptable at -80dB and noise was satisfactorily low at -97dB, all reasonable figures; the valve stage inserted just a little measured hum, but at an inaudible level.

Dynamic range was limited to 105dB by the -60dB distortion result.

The Shanling measures normally, except for high distortion, which is a pity. **NK**

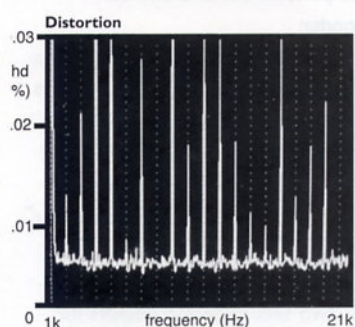
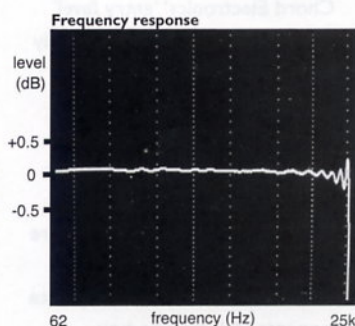
Frequency response
5Hz-21.25kHz

Distortion

	left	right
-6dB	0.003	0.003
-30dB	0.12	0.13
-60dB	0.9	0.9
-90	8	9

Separation	left	right
1kHz	-80	-83
20kHz	-82	-82

Noise	-97dB
Dynamic range	105dB
Output	2.3V



World Verdict £ A high end sound and look for sensible money. The Chinese-made Shanling is well put together and an all-round class act.