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bel canto

C7R Receiver - A Preliminary Review

as reviewed by Victor Chavira



Bel Canto sent *Positive Feedback* their latest product, the C7R receiver. Our editor, Dave Clark initially listened and was so impressed by the C7R's price to performance ratio, that he enthusiastically offered me the unit. As long time owner of a Magnum Dynalab 208 receiver and later the 308 Hybrid receiver, I gladly accepted the assignment.

In appearance, the C7R looks similar to Bel Canto's highly regarded C5i integrated. However, the C7R's 120 watt power amplifier module is based on the company's REF 150s. In addition to DSP based FM tuner section, other enhancements include WBT NextGen binding posts, advanced AC filtration, and upgraded alphanumeric display. The cool operator C7R retails for \$2995.

The unit is roughly the size of two laptops stacked one atop the other and weighs just 13 pounds. Three grand may seem steep for the hardware but amount of technology, performance, and most importantly, musical sound more than justifies its price. My primary sources for listening were an Apple Mac Mini and HPG60 laptop running the latest versions of iTunes with no other software enhancements. These devices were connected to the C7R's USB/DAC with a meter of Locus Design AXIS USB cable. Music playlists consisted of ever evolving Apple lossless imports of my CD collection and iTunes downloads. Part two of this review, to be posted at a later time, will discuss the C7R's phono and tuner functions in more detail.



Interfacing with the C7R is accomplished via the singular control knob or the remote. As was the case with the MD 208, volume settings 1-50 are virtually useless in that it represents the sweep between 6 and 7 o'clock on a traditional analogue volume control. Volume levels 60-75 filled my living room with very satisfying levels of sound. That being said, the C7R's lone control knob was among the most user friendly and intuitive I have ever encountered on a stereo component. The C7R is to receivers as smart phones are to cell phones.

After turning the unit on from the back, the display will cycle through a brief warm up protocol. The display is effectively two parts, left and right. Pushing the nicely weighted knob engages the left side of the display for source selection or the right side for volume level. For example, push the knob once to engage sources and then turn the knob left or right until USB appears. Push again to engage volume then dial in the appropriate setting. C7R remembers the volume setting for each source separately. For example, I may listen to the USB DAC at 70 and the tuner at 65. In FM mode, the unit can be programmed to display the station or musical selection like in a car. The display can also be put to sleep. Touching to knob awakens the display until the user releases the control.



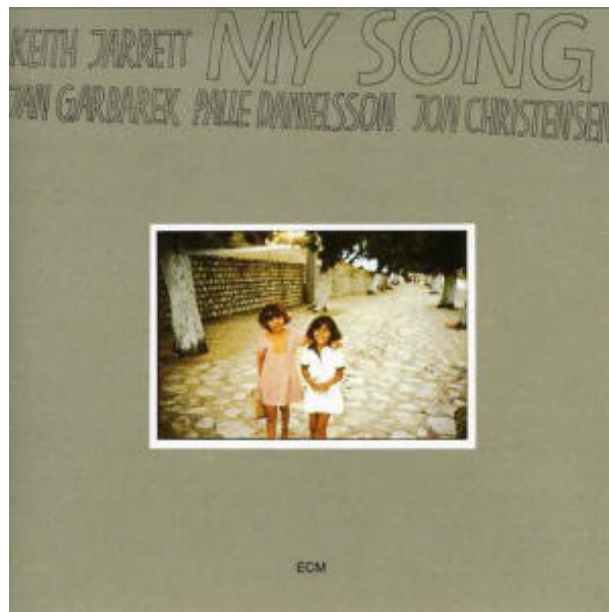
Given my very limited experience with class D power amplification, I had no preconceived notions about their sonic characteristics. I can confidently report that right

out of the box, the Bel Canto C7R produced a transparent and tonally accurate sound. One of the first musical selections I listened to was "Zawinul's Mambo" from Chucho Valdes' 2010 release *Chucho's Steps*. This is an outstanding ensemble recording of Afro-Cuban jazz with the emphasis on jazz. "Zawinul's Mambo" is Chucho's homage to Weather Report's *Birdland*. But rather than perform a straight cover of the classic tune, Chucho's Afro-Cuban Jazz Messengers juxtapose time signatures and melodies at full tilt as drummer Juan Carlos Rojas closes out the eleven minute excursion with a jaw dropping drum solo. Juan Carlos absolutely punishes the rim of his snare that projects dynamic pulses of metallic sound.

The C7R exhibited very impressive wide band performance and absolute control over the Chairo Hyper 1000 monitors currently in my system. Bass sounded deeper and more densely packed with energy as if old worn strings had been replaced with a fresh new set. Cymbals shimmered with punctuated rhythms and overtones. More importantly, the musical performance expanded across a coherent soundstage behind the plane of the speakers. The mass dynamic contrasts of acoustic grand piano were also more convincingly demonstrated.

Listen to Simone Dinnerstein's beautifully expressive interpretation of Bach's Choral "Jesu, joy of man's desiring" for solo piano. The warmth and grace of her left hand notes are beguiling in their long low sustain. Her right hand imbues subtle dynamic contrasts between principle melody and underlying harmonies. The C7R's solid high definition power delivery and the unique sonority of concert grand piano is a synergistic match.

Keith Jarrett's 1977 recording *My Song* features a sublime tune called "Country". Alto saxophonist Jan Garbarek breathes a poignant melody over Mr. Jarrett's folk tinged accompaniment. The C7R's ultra quiet and transparent operation allowed music to materialize on a back ground utterly devoid of unmusical disturbances. Notes started and decayed naturally without a hint of artifice.



As the centerpiece of my two channel home theater, the C7R performed exceptionally well. The *Mission Impossible 4* DVD is filled with spectacular action sequences, death defying stunts, and dramatic musical soundtrack. The 13 pound C7R pumped out heavy weight sound effects and crisp clear dialogue. The C7R strict control over the woofer excursions called mind an amplifier with twice power and damping factor.

If Bel Canto made compromises to package so many fine features at this price point, I am unaware of what they are. The C7R may seem unpretentious in appearance but it is a bona fide musical performer on par with the best in its class regardless of price. At this early stage in the review process, the Bel Canto C7R merits serious consideration for product of the year. Stay tuned for more in the coming weeks. **Victor Chavira**

C7R
Retail: \$2995

Bel Canto

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C7R Receiver - Part 2

as reviewed by Victor Chavira



My [preliminary review of Bel Canto's C7R](#) celebrated the receiver's excellent USB DAC, transparent power, and innovative design. Part two of the review will focus on the C7R's phono and tuner functions. Admittedly, 90% of my listening is computer based. However, the ten percent of my time that is dedicated to LP must intensely pleasurable and nostalgic. My E.A.R. 834P phono preamp has fulfilled that standard for many years. Nevertheless, a direct comparison of E.A.R.'s esteemed 834P with the C7R's internal phono module is unwarranted and unfair. The three tubed E.A.R. has only one job to do and is half the multifunctional C7R's mass. Therefore, I have decided to approach listening as a prospective customer with a basic question to resolve. Would the C7R make me happy to play LPs and foster long term interest in the analogue arts? To answer this question I called into service my recently reconditioned Linn Axis turntable with Linn Adikt MM cartridge.

Before getting started, I had to relocate the turntable closer to C7R near floor in order to connect the phono cable from the base of the tone arm to the receiver. Prospective owners may also have to make such an accommodation. Next, I pondered which LP to hear in order to formulate my baseline impression of the C7R's phono module. Classic Record's reissue of Miles Davis' *A Kind of Blue* on 200 gram Quiet SV-P vinyl is certainly a well known performance and superb pressing. As the needle lightly dropped onto the record, I noted the C7R's extremely quiet operation. Background noise was nonexistent before cueing up the record and virtually imperceptible as the vinyl groove spun under contact with the stylus. As the familiar music of side two started, I was somewhat disillusioned. In contrast to the C7R's lively and highly musical USB function, the phono module sounded more reminiscent of early CD sound; thin, flat, and

lacking in the beguiling essence of analogue. Given that the phono module had very little time applied to it, if any, by Dave Clark, I concluded that a good measure of break in was in order before serious listening could begin.



Over the next several days I continuously played a locked groove of pink noise from the Cardas Frequency Sweep and Burn-in Record overnight on mute and checked progress of the sound with music during the day. Ultimately, I was able to clock about 48 to 50 hours in this manner. However, in my opinion, one hundred hours of burn in would be optimal for the C7R's phono module to bloom on level with its other source functions.

Returning to the aforementioned *A Kind of Blue*, the previously flat soundstage gained considerable depth and perspective. Saxes and horn formed more convincing shapes on the musical tapestry. Piano overtones and bass resonated with more realism. Brush strokes on snare and stick taps on cymbals were rendered with improved coherence. Again, the C7R exceptionally low noise must be commended at notes emerged and decayed from an anechoic -like background.

This may seem cruel for a phono stage in its infancy but next I played a 1963 recording of Mozart's Concerto for Clarinet in A Major K622, as performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy on Columbia. The second movement Adagio is some of the most sublime and transcendent music that I am aware of. Like a young bird testing its wings, the C7R responded with glimpses of soaring grace and filled me with optimism for the future of the maturing sound. The massive dynamics of the orchestra strings contrasted well with the forlorn beauty and air of clarinet.

Keeping in mind prospective owners again, I searched my LP collection for a performance actually recorded in this century. The only LP that fit the criteria was Norah Jones' 2002 debut on Classic Records. I do not listen to Norah very often. Rather, I keep this record handy as a reference of female vocals recorded in an intimate setting. Of course, the album cover looks rather nice near the C7R as well. *Don't Know Why* begins with gentle brushes on snare as Norah's breathy voice appeared within deep soundstage. Bass sounded firmly grounded. Vocal "ooo" harmonies were pleasantly defined.

Throughout the proceedings I also played a variety of classic rock and latin jazz. In every case, the C7R phono module honestly reproduced the best qualities of each recording with improving marks in the areas of spatial resolution and depth of perception. Some of my favorite recordings are used LPs of average to below average condition and C7R candidly relayed as much without distracting from the musical connection to the performance. True to an old audiophile adage, the best sounding LP in my collection is one I listen to the least. Classic Records reissue of [Manuel De Falla's Three-Cornered Hat Complete Ballet](#) as recorded by the London Symphony

Orchestra under the baton of Enrique Jorda is exceptional. The performance was originally recorded on 35mm magnetic film and transferred to vinyl by Classic. Check off all the audiophile points here. The C7R's phono module admirably reproduced this LP's huge, dynamically engaging, and harmonically layered sound. The C7R phono will reward the patient listener with a solid foundation for appreciating the renaissance of vinyl.

Without a doubt, the C7R's bonus feature is its FM tuner. Southern California is home to many fine broadcast stations my favorites being [88.1 KKJZ](#) (jazz) and [91.5 KUSC](#) (classical). The C7R was connected to the unused rooftop TV antenna with coaxial cable. Unlike some receivers that still have push connectors for a wire T indoor wall antenna, the C7R only accepts coaxial cable. An adaptor and T antenna is included in the packaging. As mentioned before, I have been privileged to own some very fine FM tuners from Magnum Dynalab. The hallmark of a great tuner is the complete absence of distracting artifacts and warm harmonic mid band. The C7R delivers clear, responsive, and lively FM sound. Broadcasts of orchestral music from KUSC sounded spacious as if the front of the wall behind the speakers vanished and was replaced by the large recording venue. KKJZ's broadcast is somewhat less powerful than the classical station. Nevertheless, the C7R had no trouble locking onto its signal. In fact, during the entire time the C7R was in my home, I never had to adjust the frequency setting due to signal fade. If you have doubts about FM in these digital times and are unfamiliar with high quality analogue FM sound, you will be enlightened by the C7R's performance.

Finally, I must call attention to the C7R's headphone feature. In my humble opinion, the sole purpose of owning a high fidelity stereo system is to enjoy the sound of music in the space of one's own living environment. I have never had a headphone jack on any of my previous components. Occasionally I listen to my Grado SR60s on the laptop or iPhone. In spite of this, the C7R's headphone feature was a revelation for me. I truly enjoyed listening to handfuls LPs and playlists late at night without disturbing the sleep of my family. The headphone sound is remarkably similar to the power amplifier with deep controlled bass, vivid midrange, and clear extended high end.

In summary, the Bel Canto C7R is an innovatively designed and highly musical receiver that performs on level with the best in the market. The C7R's compact size and appearance may look like something out of the Sharper Image catalogue or tucked away in the corner of a snooty office. However, Bel Canto's C7R is a true showcase component and high value centerpiece of a very musical system. Therefore, the C7R earns my highest recommendation for listeners looking for this type of product and price range. Additionally, I hereby nominate Bel Canto's C7R for recognition in *PFO's* annual awards. **Victor Chavira**

C7R

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