



For whom the Bel tolls

Looking for a serious silver disc spinner that doesn't take up too much space? You'll love Bel Canto's CD2, says **David Price**

Stop press: people are still listening to digital audio discs. Anachronistic as the practice may seem, *Hi-Fi Choice's* crack field agents can confirm there is still life in the old format yet! So, it's nice to see this – a pure and simple, unreconstructed Compact Disc player. It doesn't have DAC functionality, streaming capability, USB connectivity or anything else except a place to put a lacquered 5in aluminium disc in. Press a button, and it spins up, reads the disc and

plays music via its line outputs around the back. So quaint. You know, this could just catch on...

The CD2 is the latest Compact Disc player from an American company which has traditionally taken digital audio discs very seriously. Don't be fooled by the rather lovely – and indeed fitting, as it transpires – Italian name (“beautifully sung”), this is as American as Beverley Hills or Big Macs. And this hand-built machine is a flexible thing, offering as it does a range of power supply options. We're

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bel Canto CD2
ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
CD player

WEIGHT
8.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
216 x 88 x 318mm

FEATURES

- LED numeric display
- Philips CD2Pro top loading mechanism
- Balanced XLR outputs
- Switchable fixed/variable output
- Upsampling DAC

DISTRIBUTOR
Aanvil Audio
TELEPHONE
07721926384
WEBSITE
aanvilaudio.com

testing the base model with a simple small external power supply, but more performance is possible from the LNS1 power supply (£399) or the VBS1 Virtual Battery Supply (£1,299). The LNS1 can supply one VB-enabled unit and the VBS1 can supply up to three VB-enabled units. Bel Canto also makes a range of DACs too, so the CD2 can work as a high-quality transport.

You would never mistake the casework of the CD2 for, say, a high end Marantz silver disc player. It isn't blessed with that sort of exuberant build and finish – don't expect oceans of copper inside, complex displays and shiny mood lighting on the fascia. Rather, the Bel Canto has the feel of something that is hand built, very well, on a relatively small scale. Its fascia is a thing of beauty – finely finished and with the company logo skillfully inset – while the display deserves joyous praise for being a warm green LED type rather than the cold blue vacuum fluorescent ones favoured by most of the hi-fi industry. The single knob on the right manages to combine all the basic transport functions, and feels nice to use.



The machine's foundation is a pressed steel base, which is damped to reduce vibration, and this also sports the digital and audio electronic circuitry, which is linked by ribbon cable to the fascia controls and the CD mech itself. The latter (the excellent Philips CDPro2LF) sits inside the top assembly, which fits on to the base, and is a top-loading type. Round the back, there's a choice of balanced XLR and RCA phono outputs, with a switch to toggle between fixed or variable outputs. There's also Toslink, S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital outputs, said to work at 24/96, and all are galvanically isolated to prevent the transmission of electrical noise. The reason for this is that the CD2 is an upsampling design, using a Burr Brown PCM1796 chipset and a slow roll-off linear phase digital filter. Bel Canto says that what goes into the DAC is exceptionally pure thanks to its Ultra-Clock circuit, which is claimed to virtually eliminate jitter.

Sound quality

This is one of the least expensive *Choice Exotics* we've done, yet the Bel Canto CD2 gives nothing away to

any of the £10K loudspeakers we've reviewed in its ability to surprise and/or satisfy. Here is one of the very best CD players at or indeed anywhere near the price, one that has a beautifully mellifluous and natural sound that strips away so many of the 'issues' that rain on Compact Disc's parade. It makes an interesting academic point, too – that no matter how modest CD's digital specification is by modern standards, it can still be made to sound thoroughly enjoyable and completely musically satisfying.

Even the 'cooking' version of the CD2 with the stock power supply turns out to be the very epitome of audiophile good manners. The CD2 isn't hard, raucous or overpowering, and it has no strange facets to its performance, which mar the listening experience. Instead, it gets on with the process of playing music in the most unselfconscious way you can imagine. Somewhat reminiscent of one of those early, euphonic-sounding Linn Sondek turntables, this silver disc spinner is a little warm and fulsome tonally. But it isn't this that makes it so nice to hear – it's those swooping, flowing rhythms. Again, to use a vinyl metaphor, it has a unipivot tonearm-like ability to sail through a song, enjoying itself and sharing the fun with everyone else, too.

Congo Ashanti's *Days Chasing Days* is joyful. On many price rivals, this track plods along innocuously, but switching to the Bel Canto, the experience is transformed. Suddenly I find myself immersed in the mix, enjoying the lovely, easy groove and the freedom with which the lead vocalist moves on and off the beat. The CD2 provides an immensely stable rhythmic foundation to the song, meaning it's able to relax into the music and party. To be honest, this isn't something CD is famous for doing, and indeed I've heard DACs at ten times the price unable to pull this

trick off. CD can so very often sound musically frigid, but not when it's played by this Bel Canto.

Trying the Audiolab 8200CD I have to hand is a fascinating comparison. This is a far cheaper player but still excellent, yet the Bel Canto makes it seem rather humble. Via the CD2, the spaces between the notes widens dramatically, and the music seems to open up and let the listener in, in a way that the other machine can't quite manage. It also shines with a

It taps right into the emotion of the performance captured on disc

lovely treble performance that gives hi-hats a sweet yet convincingly metallic ring. This extends all the way down to the midband, making vocals – especially the more challenging female variety – sound delightfully creamy and smooth. Yet this comes from the player's apparent lack of distortion, rather than any unnatural tampering with the tone. This sort of sound is what really distinguishes a great CD player from one that's merely good.

But there are downsides, too. For example, the bass sounds slightly loose; it doesn't quite start and stop as fast as a flickering neon light. Yet somehow it doesn't detract from the player's innate musicality, as every bass line the CD2 plays comes across in a most engaging and tuneful way. One might also comment about the slight 'thickness' in the midband – it lacks the super-fine transparency you hear in some other more expensive silver disc spinners, and the soundstage isn't quite as deep as it perhaps could be, either. Yet this machine's sheer musical cohesion completely distracts you from such

Forget the trend of blue displays, the Bel Canto goes with green

CONNECTIONS



Q&A

John Stronczer

Bel Canto founder and ceo



DP: Has Bel Canto done a number of Compact Disc players before?

JS: Previously we've produced the PL1 multi-format player and, of course, the CD1 CD player that preceded the current CD2.

Why did Bel Canto choose to use the Philips CD2 Pro mechanism inside the CD2?

The key reasons were down to the reliability of the mech, its overall longevity and, of course, the sonic performance.

Is the digital jitter reduction circuitry unique to Bel Canto, and if so in what way?

The quality of the clock and details of the implementation are critical to the results.

What DAC and digital filter chips were chosen, and why?

The latest CD2 player uses the high-end Texas Instruments Burr Brown PCM1796 chip for its low-distortion and wide dynamic range. It is run using the slow roll-off filter and running at 96k or 192k sampling frequencies.

Why was upsampling chosen; what benefits does it confer? In your opinion, are there any downsides to upsampling?

We have found that the Asynchronous Sampling Rate Converter is absolutely critical to controlling jitter here. As long as the ASRC has sufficient dynamic range and distortion in its algorithm, I do not believe that there is any downside to its use.

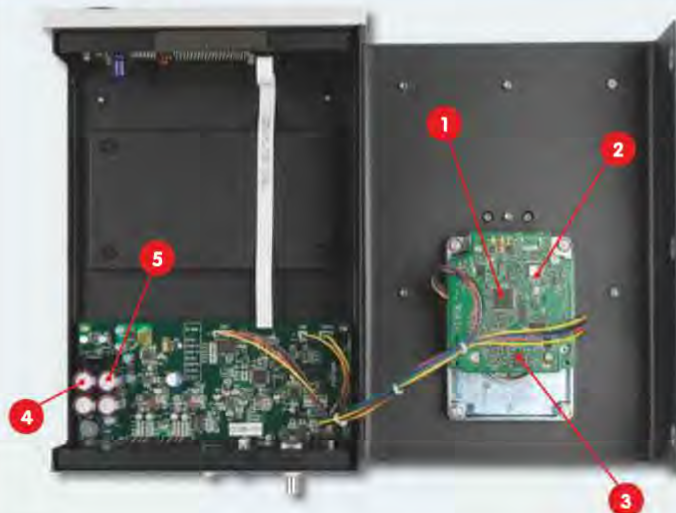
It's unusual to use a green LED display these days, so why did you choose to fit one to the CD2?

Firstly for aesthetic reasons, it matches the rest of our product line. Secondly, it's easy to read as this is where the eye is most sensitive.

How would you describe the overall sound of the player?

I find it sounds fundamentally incisive and honest, and of course these properties increase with the addition of LNS1 or VBS1 power supplies.

IN SIGHT



- 1 MMC phono stage
- 2 Network Processor and Precision Upsampler (under HDMI board)
- 3 Ultra-low jitter clock
- 4 Class A headphone amplifier
- 5 DAC with hybrid volume control

HOW IT COMPARES

Leema's Antilla II (£3,295) is an arresting looking device that is very attractive in its way. Build quality is excellent, and it contains some clever engineering. But so does the Bel Canto, albeit in a slightly different way. Whereas the DAC section of the Antilla is a real *tour de force*, the Bel Canto's speciality is its transport. If you're looking to upgrade later, and use either machine as a transport, the CD2 would make a lot of sense. In stock form, the Bel Canto has a stronger, more fluid bass whereas the Leema is an altogether more detailed and three dimensional affair. Either one is excellent at the price, and both are worth auditioning.

minor audiophile indiscretions. Its tunefulness makes such criticism seem like pedantry.

This quality dominates its performance, no matter how demanding the music you try with it. Hit the CD2 with the hard, edgy, raucous wash of noise and distortion that is My Bloody Valentine's *When You Sleep*, and the player sails through it like it was a Bob Hope ditty. It cuts to the emotional chase, so to speak, and suddenly you feel like you're listening to a soft, lilting, romantic ballad. The Bel Canto doesn't pull off this rather audacious trick by lavishing gallons of syrup all over the recording – sweetening and softening its sound – but instead seems to be able to tap right into the emotion of the performance captured on disc. It works with the emotive power of the music, going for the music's melody and rhythm like a laser-guided missile. As such, the CD2 makes everything incredibly easy to listen to, without ever sounding in the least bit boring.

As all reviewers and readers know all too well, promising starters often turn to disappointment, but the Bel Canto never betrays its good nature. I run the gamut of my music discs – from the new electronica of Nu Era to the sinuous, teasing rhythms of Donald Byrd's *Street Lady*, and the wee thing just keeps getting into the swing of things. Quite why becomes more apparent when I try it as a transport only; driving an Astin Trew Concorde DAC 1 digital convertor it is quite superb, again showing those trademark traits of rhythmic assuredness, a big and strong bass and an easy, lilting flow. This

experiment reveals just what the onboard DAC does, which is to give a fine, open and enjoyable sound without getting too forensic; there's more low-level detail and a few percent more dynamics to be gleaned by hooking the Bel Canto up to an expensive digital convertor.

Conclusion

This is a most fine digital disc spinner then, and if you're still committed to this format the Bel Canto CD2 will surely prolong your interest in it. The great thing about it is its ability to distract you from the format's lack of fine detail and scale, by sounding immensely, musically enjoyable. It's also an excellent transport, so will make a top-notch silver disc playing source to feed into a high-res capable digital-to-analogue converter. Very high marks also go to the build, finish and general ergonomics of the unit, and its pricing is surprisingly keen for an imported machine. If all CD players were this good, then digital downloads might still be struggling! ●

Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



LIKE: Gentle, musical sound; fulsome tonality; excellent transport

DISLIKE: Limited features compared with some rivals

WE SAY: Charming, quirky, characterful disc spinner that cuts to the musical chase