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AUDIO REVIEWS

As I wrote in my review of the AMR CD-777, it's trite but true that similarly priced digital machines will generally show *far* less differences than amplifiers. And those will show rather less than most speakers. How many differences would show between the Abbingdon Music Research CD-777—set to Master II as the default preference of its designers—and the Stello CDA500 (which allows user-selectable upsampling to 96kHz and 192kHz but ran at zero as my personal preference)? The context was my familiar system of Esoteric C-03 preamp, FirstWatt J2 stereo amp and ASI Tango R speakers all leashed up with ASI LiveLine solid-core wires.



Despite the lead-in, the difference between these machines was *not* subtle. The Korean had an extra gear in the bass and delivered obviously more slam, punch and amplitude in the low end. That parlayed as more rocking drive which propels certain tunes forward and adds gravitas to soundstage depth. It also had the higher contrast and sharper edges to *sound* more forward and energetic even though the subjective stage distance didn't alter. The AMR was more relaxed, less rhythmically tensioned and created a softer—though not soft—focus. Heavy cymbal work with multiple

layers of brass shimmering and tapping had more buzz with the Stello, more gossamer decays with the CD-777.

Speaking in generalities, the Stello had the more upfront modern perspective closer to stage, the AMR the more traditional audiophile farfield take in how it shifted preponderance of transient bluster into higher blend mode. Saying the same thing differently, the Stello was more front-heavy on the attack of notes, the AMR more mid-centric on their bloom portion. Still on generalities, modern music listeners keyed into grittiness, spunk and slam beats would likely favor the Korean whilst concert goers of classical music would find the Brit closer to their experiential perspective. AMR's old-school chip married to old-school tubes definitely pursued a softer tact and went gentler on angular stuff. While I didn't relate to its top end as missing any data, I did consider its bass stepped back in power and mass. Where the Stello was fresh, impulsive and direct, the AMR was more polite and somewhat distanced. Punky youngster versus genteel elder? Overdrawn for effect, a semblance thereof seemed à propos.



Still from the same review, I said that my Yamamoto YDA-01 converter fed from AMR's digital output nestled very close to the Stello in character. It matched it in low-end prowess and overall drive but then diverged by not being quite as honed on the leading edge. The Japanese converter ratcheted down the Stello's grippiness and injected just a touch more nonchalance. To overdraw again to make a point, if on a Thai menu the Stello was four stars spicy, the Yamamoto was three and the AMR was mild. Bringing in the \$4,200 Raysonic Audio CD228, it joined the Stello and Yamamoto in opposition to the CD-777. The Sino/Canadian two-boxer also confirmed the CD-777's relative lightness in the bass but vis-à-vis the Stello and Yamamoto lacked in grip. The Raysonic dished out comparable amplitude down low but lacked a few degrees of control and articulation. A bit more fat, somewhat less muscle tone. In terms of inner tension or energy however, it grouped with the other two as distinct from the AMR.

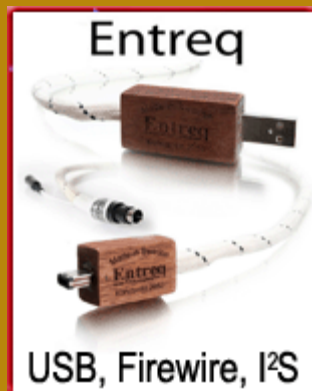


Adding it up: The more expensive two-box Raysonic CD228 wasn't as articulate and controlled as the Stello and offers neither USB nor any other digital inputs for that matter. The more expensive AMR CD-777 was overall softer and more lightweight in the bass. Like the Raysonic, Metronome's even costlier CD One T lacked connectivity although sonically it was a real contender. My favored Yamamoto YDA-01 converter driven from the Stello's own digital output meanwhile was very similar to the Korean, albeit not *quite* as energetic or driven when the latter was set to 'native' mode without upsampling.

Connecting the CDA500 and Ai500 balanced and single-ended netted no real differences. I occasionally thought that balanced had a very slight edge on transient grippiness but this approached hairsplitting. I wouldn't recommend that prospective owners of the duo allocate longer green on balanced cables. Running S/PDIF out of the CDA500 and into the Ai500 did incur a softening and distancing however. Clearly the D/A converter of the digital deck is superior - as it should be for a dedicated digital machine.



Weighing the evidence: After ample opportunities to be compared and run through its paces, the CDA500 joins its stable mate as an affordable 'super' machine that punches above its weight. It packs a D/A converter of Yamamoto caliber, dresses in truly fancy threads and sports comprehensive socketry. Disc spinners are a dying breed. To those who download music exclusively, they're already passé. But then there's us hangers-on. We still buy CDs and/or have sizable collections. Our thousands of discs may or may not end up on some type of server, eventually or sooner. For now then, owning a quality deck that's not outrageously priced, sonically upper crust and PC ready just in case remains a valid concern and proposition. That describes the Stello to a T for *terrific*.





Srajan Ebaen



Quality of packing: Very good. These folks are pros.

Reusability of packing: A few times.

Ease of unpacking/repacking: Easy

Condition of component received: Flawless.

Completeness of delivery: Includes remote controls, power cords and a special iPod cable but not the necessary iPod dock.

Human interactions: International sales manager very responsive and helpful.

Pricing: High value for money.

Final comments & suggestions: *As good as it gets* is a particularly male obsession on which audiophiles squander colossal amounts. Back in the real world, these components are as good as it needs to get to be perfectly happy. All the necessary socketry to expand is provided and the amp is so powerful that it'll drive even speakers which most people shopping these leagues would never have. In short, end-of-the-road stuff for all but extremists.



April Music [website](#)



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