

There are some cracking entry-level **CD players** new to the market, meeting your music needs at a price that's most certainly right. Each of these would do you proud

Group Test

CD PLAYERS **£150-£170**

Budget belters fly the flag and make a great case for CD

What's new?

This year we've tested two cracking five-star CD players from Cambridge Audio and NAD – so we thought we should take the chance to pit them against each other. The entry-level CD player market has been quiet of late – evidenced by the fact that we're testing the newcomers against the only CD player under £200 we've really enjoyed in the last 18 months – Marantz's excellent CD5001.

What do you get for your money?

Solid build quality and coherent, cohesive sound. You should also expect digital outputs alongside the RCA outputs – that way you can easily transfer CDs to your computer. Spending less than £200 on a CD player really shouldn't mean too much in the way of compromise. For more advice on the basics of CD players, read *Instant Expert* p42.

"For the money, expect solid build quality and coherent, cohesive sound"

SAVVY SHOPPER

1 Count the features

Whatever the equipment you are auditioning, make sure you listen to music you're familiar with. If you're listening to CD players, show up at the shop with a few of your own discs – and take a range of styles.

2 Don't forget accessories

Make sure you have budgeted for interconnects, speaker cable, speaker stands and the like. The temptation to economise after you've totted up the cost of your electronics is always strong, and that's doubly true at the entry level we're dealing with here – but it must be resisted. We've suggested some particularly appropriate accessories on page 63.

3 Give it a long audition

Don't be afraid to take your time in the demo room. While we've pointed up the fundamental differences between these three players, the variance can be quite subtle on first listen.

RATINGS EXPLAINED

A five-star score indicates a product with a hatful of talent and ability. That covers every product in this test, but it's worth recapping: four-star products may prove more suitable than a five-star test winner for customers with specific requirements. In terms of three stars and below, let's not talk about the average and disappointing right now.

★★★★★
Excellent

★★★★☆
Very good

★★★☆☆
Average

★★☆☆☆
Below par

★☆☆☆☆
Don't bother



DAC: digital-to-analogue converters turn strings of bits into audio. For more CD explanations, see Jargon Buster on p178.



Marantz CD5001



£170

ORDINARILY, A PRODUCT that's been around as long as this one – the last time we looked at it, in February 2006, was by no means the first – is one step away from the knacker's yard. The market for inexpensive CD players being what it is, though – moribund – the Marantz is still soldiering on. That's not a bad thing in this case, because the CD5001 is as impressive now as it was during its 2005 debut.

"The key to the CD5001's performance is its exceptional timing"

There's a solid functionality about the way the Marantz is built. It's not quite as chunkily purposeful as the Cambridge Audio, and it's lacking the NAD's couldn't-give-a-toss-about-fashion bearing but, for all its rough edges, the most expensive player in the test looks decent value. The remote control, on the other hand, feels about as robust in your hand as an egg.

Load a CD, though – Bongwater's *Double Bummer* is a stern test – and any

↑ FOR
Lively, gregarious sound with all types of music

↓ AGAINST
Some may hanker after a more assertive sound

→ VERDICT
An all-rounder, rather than a specialist – we reckon that's what most customers at this price are after

The CD5001 performs well across the board

sniping about perceived value becomes irrelevant. The CD5001's genius is to embrace the virtues of both other competitors in this test without getting bogged down by their shortcomings. The Marantz offers plenty of attack but is able to regiment the soundstage with more authority than most.

Timing is everything

The key to the '5001's performance is its exceptional timing – recordings hang together just so, each instrumental strand separated from, but sympathetic to, its partners. There's not the out-and-out brio of the Cambridge Audio player, but neither is there that player's occasional impression of barely controlled attack. Low frequencies are substantial and expressive, the midrange communicates immodestly and the top end stays the right side of bright.

Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* gives further weight to the Marantz's case. The size of the orchestra is explicit here, and each player's position on the stage unmistakable. The dynamic peaks and troughs of the piece are handled with assurance, the emotional sweep delivered intact. The CD5001 may struggle to wring the last drop of detail from the recording, but it nonetheless imparts the message fluently.

If we may mix our metaphors, it's not easy to have a foot in both camps and not fall between stools. The Marantz may not have the outright verve of the Cambridge machine, and it may not extract the same level of detail as the NAD player can, but it gets most of the way there without any of its rivals' drawbacks. If you want a genuine all-rounder at the heart of your CD system, this is (still) it.



TEST RESULT

You won't go wrong with any of these players, but the **Marantz** takes it for best all-round performance

THREE BUDGET CD players, three five star verdicts. We'll admit it: at first glance this test doesn't seem to offer much in the way of guidance. But, as usual, we've done the hard work for you. The most important information to take from the test is this: there aren't that many proper CD players around at this kind of money, but if you choose one of these, you won't go far wrong.

If your tastes are for the subtleties and details of recordings, for instance, and especially if you enjoy the last scrap of expression from a vocalist's performance, you'll find the NAD C515BEE right up your street. This unit is as happy to dish the details as Dot Cotton in her prime, and has a genuine talent for integrating the finest points of a recording with the broad strokes. We return to our Nina Simone CDs time and again in our listening rooms, and the NAD lets you know about the turmoil in her soul unambiguously. When it comes to properly cutting loose and getting down, though, there are better players here.

The Cambridge Audio Azur 340C, for instance. "It's the CD5001's facility with timing, and the natural fluency with results, which cements its pole position"

The best all-rounder

If it was our money, mind, we'd spend the whole £170 and buy the Marantz CD5001. It may seem strange, given that we've acknowledged the supremacy of NAD and Cambridge in different, important areas, but the Marantz isn't far behind the NAD with expression and detail retrieval, and it's noticeably more proficient dynamically. Equally, it's not disgraced by the Cambridge when it comes to drive, attack and low-frequency authority and is better able to keep control during extended crescendos.

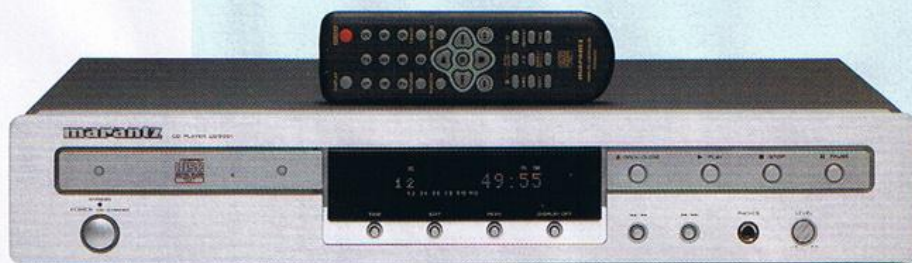
It's the CD5001's facility with timing, though, and the natural fluency which results, which cements its position.

Marantz CD5001



£170

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION
GROUP TEST WINNER



NOW ADD THESE



AMPLIFIER
CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR
340A SE



£180

January 2008

For build and sound quality, this is streets ahead of what the price tag suggests. That tiny reticence in the Marantz's sound will be cured by the 340A SE's sheer verve.



SPEAKERS
MONITOR AUDIO BRONZE
BR2



£200

April 2008

These able BR2s will complete a budget system with ability across the board. They're slightly larger than average, but hey, you can always make room.

SPEAKER STANDS
SOUNDSTYLE Z2



£60

Awards 2007

Lovely detail, dynamics and rhythmic snap – and two Awards to boot. What can we say – other than the Z2s are an authentic bargain?

TOTAL SYSTEM £610

FACTS AND FIGURES

	PRICE RANGE £150-170	CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 340C	MARANTZ CD5001	NAD C515BEE
SPECIFICATION				
PRICE		£150	£170	£165
TYPE		Integrated	Integrated	Integrated
INPUTS		Digital coaxial, digital optical, RCA	Digital coaxial, digital optical, RCA	Digital coaxial, digital optical, RCA
HDCD		No	No	No
CDTEXT		No	Yes	No
MEMORY		Yes	Yes	Yes
DISPLAY OFF		No	Yes	Yes
FINISHES		2	2	2
HOW THEY RATED				
SOUND		★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD		★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES		★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VERDICT		★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

INPUTS There are two types of digital audio connectors: coaxial and digital. Coaxial generally offers better performance, other than with very long runs. RCA is the analogue phono input.

TRANSIENTS Short, sudden events in music such as a cymbal crash or the crack of a stick on a drum. Difficult for hi-fi to reproduce.

MIDRANGE The frequency range where most voices and instruments are heard. Must be of high quality for a natural sound.