

SA Equipment

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Shanling CD-T300

Museum Quality Design

Review By Phil Gold

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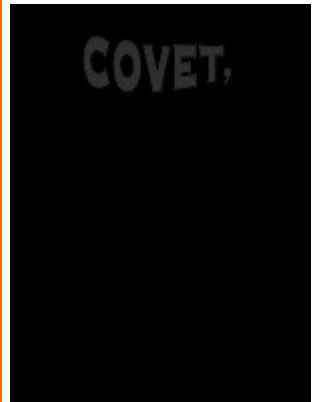
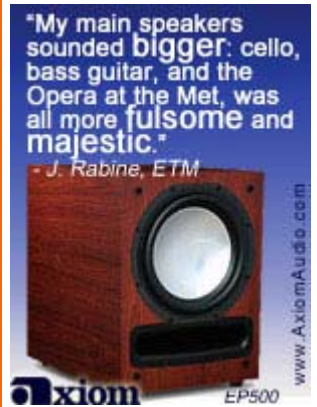


About ten miles from my house sits a strange construction — a movieplex no less — in the shape of the alien spaceship from Close Encounters. I have no idea if that particular shape is conducive to its function in life. But the subject of today's review, which shares much the same overall shape and propensity for cool lights, is very much the case of form following function. After all, a CD is circular, so why shouldn't a CD player follow suit. There are some obvious advantages. The structural integrity of a circular machine and its lack of parallel sides help to minimize resonance, and you can easily fit the optimal number of feet — three of course. Three feet under a rectangular object might be problematic, but not here. The major drawback is that with the platter centrally located, the machine has to be very large to contain and isolate the all important power supply. No problem, just move the power supply outboard, and while you're at it, make sure that doesn't sit in a rectangular box either.



Back to the drive mechanism, you'll want that located dead

<http://www.enjoythemusic.com/superioraudio/equipment/0705/shanlingcdt300.htm>



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centre, which makes any kind of sliding drawer mechanism problematic. So let's use a top loader, and while we're at it, let's find the best one ever made. Will the venerable Philips CDM-4 reference grade *King of the Rockers* do? So what if it's no longer in production. Lucky we bought a bunch of them years ago and set them aside for a day like this. Let's offer a limited edition of just 300 units (with 30 allocated to the US).

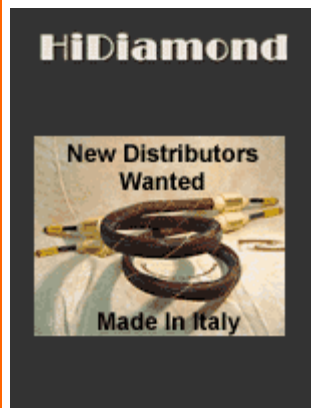
Thus begins the design process and that's before deciding on a balanced tube output stage, twelve Burr-Brown OPA627 chips for I/V conversion and low pass filtering. and eight, count'em eight Burr-Brown PCM1704K D/A converter chips. The most dramatic design decision is sure to amuse your friends. When you remove the heavy disc cover, which normally glows with a blue sheen, Shanling provides a base to set it down on. Do so and it glows blue again, thanks to a battery in the base. Cool!

Not so cool are the remote controls — yes there are two! One is large and complex, the other slim and modest in its feature set. Both are made of high quality materials but the way the text is embossed make it very difficult to read the purpose of each button, unless the light falls just so. Strange how so many companies fall down on this simple point. This is the main user interface. It should be simple to use, easy to read and comprehensive. I don't much care if it's plastic or metal. Back to the drawing board please. A third party remote will probably do the trick but won't necessarily give you access to all the features. For example on the big remote there is a button to switch between 44.1kbps and 96kbps oversampling.



But Shanling has done a much better job with the unit itself. The connections are all neatly inset in the rear of the circular frame, not crowded too

closely together as often happens, and the top mounted controls are clear with a high quality feel to them. They sit above a discreet front-facing LED status panel. Best of all, the four tubes (2 for unbalanced, 4 for balanced) are set into the bevel and are easily replaceable without tools. The on off switch is the large knob sitting atop the rearmost of the three illuminated feet. You can choose rubber feet, metal feet or spikes, all included in the Shanling's magnificent carrying case. The fit and finish of this player is absolutely exemplary.



The substantial outboard power supply, which contains three transformers and filtering, boasts a large meter, switchable between voltage and current readings. The power supply has its own separate power switch. You'll need quite a lot of space to accommodate the Shanling, its base for the drive cover, and the power supply.

Tweaking

So there's quite a few ways to audition this player: oversampling on or off, output balanced or unbalanced, stock tubes or your roll your own. I found the oversampling beneficial, tightening up the resolution and soundstage, so I set it on and left it there. I also preferred the balanced output to the unbalanced, but the margin was not large in my system. The biggest improvement was upgrading the stock Electro Harmonic 6922 Gold Pin tubes to Valvo E88CC Red Label tubes from Holland. Shanling's Canadian distributor Charisma Audio supplied me with a pair of these so I could try the unbalanced output only. I preferred unbalanced output with the Valvos to either output with the stock tubes, so I recommend this inexpensive upgrade (\$160 to \$200 a pair). If you want to go all out, Bernard of Charisma Audio recommends the Telefunken CCa tubes for their greater high frequency extension and tighter bass. They will set you back more than \$300 a pair, or \$600 for the balanced setup.

My unit was brand new in the box so I let it run in for a few weeks before serious listening. Unfortunately I ran into a couple of problems with this unit. It seemed to be sensitive to feedback, actually skipping on one or two tracks when played at high volume levels. The second problem was that on jumping to a new track the unit did not always play the track cleanly from the beginning. I requested a second sample to see if these were design limitations. I am happy to report neither problem showed its face on the second sample.

Let The Music Roll

So how is the sound? Let's take it one track at a time, in competition with the formidable Meridian G08 CD Player ([reviewed here](#)). Brahms *Piano Quartet Opus 25* [DG Originals 447 407-2] is rich, powerful and involving on the Meridian. Gilels' piano tone is full and weighty, the focus tight and the attack strong. On the downside, the string tone of the Amadeus Quartet is a touch strident. DG never quite mastered the recording of chamber music as well as the rival engineers at Philips. The Shanling, playing single-ended with stock tubes, offers wider separation and

improved location of the instruments. It reveals the soft pizzicato string playing behind the piano, softening the attack and the stridency of the strings. Bass loses some of its firmness and resolution, while tape hiss becomes noticeable. The Valvo tubes offer better color in the strings and the bass recovers somewhat, but not to the level of the Meridian. Both players are convincing here and there are no winners or losers.

To focus a little closer on the piano sound, consider Chopin's *Funeral March Sonata* [JVC JM-XR24008] played by the remarkable Artur Rubinstein. Here the stock Shanling does not serve the music well. It seems like the leading edge is missing, and the recording betrays all of its forty-four years. Valvos offer improved attack and the sonority of the piano is richer, but now the hiss is intrusive. The Meridian performs at another level altogether. The recording shrugs off the years and comes alive in the room. The clarity in the bass is much improved and the music sounds faster and more menacing - an iron fist in a velvet glove. At the same time, the performance is more intimate and the subtlety of the playing shows greater gradations. No contest here.

Sticking with classical music but moving up to the mid twentieth century, how does the Shanling sound on a new issue of outstanding quality, the Shostakovich Piano Trio opus 67, played by the Wanderer Trio [harmonia mundi HMC 901825]?

Echoing my findings with the Chopin, the Shanling, single ended with stock tubes, does not convey the power of the strong deep bass line, and the piano lid appears down, rather than open. The Shanling does offer superior string tone and better captures the ambiance of the recording. The Valvos bring a strong improvement in piano tone while the plucked cello notes are beautiful, if a bit soft. Separation is wider and the attack is full, with excellent decay on the plucked strings. String tone is best through the Shanling's balanced outputs, which also improve the depth of the acoustical space. The Meridian nails this music through its unbalanced outputs, with more deep bass presence, piano even more open and greater definition and presence in the strings. Rhythm and pace improve, and reach their fullest levels through the Meridian's balanced output, where the bass gains even greater definition, catching subtle changes of pitch within the notes missed in the other configurations. The string tone and the three-dimensionality cannot quite match the best the Shanling has to offer. Deuce.

Classical music is not to everyone's taste, so let's move on to other genres. Joan Baez's "Diamonds and Rust" from *Rare, Live and Classic* [Vanguard VCD3-125/27] is an old favorite and a chance to audition a beautiful voice. The

Shanling give Baez a full but nasal sound and exposes the relative weakness of the extension, both upper and lower, in the complex accompaniment. The Valvo tubes offer richer and more varied color in the midrange, and improve the extension in both directions, while increasing the level of detail across the spectrum. Clearly, a worthwhile upgrade. But the Meridian provides a purer, more natural sounding Baez, while giving more life to the percussion and greater bass energy to propel the song along. Advantage Meridian.

To really test the low bass performance of these two machines, let's bring on fellow folkie Leonard Cohen in the title track from *The Future* [Columbia CK 53226]. Don't you just love those lyrics!

*Gimme crack and anal sex
Take the only tree that's left
And stuff it up the hole in your culture
Give me back the Berlin wall
Give me Stalin and St. Paul
I've seen the future, brother: it is murder.*

The Shanling makes it easy to make out the words, the choir is clear, but the music lacks a strong pulse. You hear just hints of the deep bass content. Changing the tubes makes little difference on this track. The Meridian offers a fuller bass, an open top, more focus. The music is at once more relaxed and lighter on its feet, since the speed in the bass is phenomenal. (Note to self. I'm going to have to get a new reference CD player. This one's too good!)

Do you like Dexter Gordon? "Love For Sale" from *Go* [Blue Note 7243 4 9879423] brings irresistible playing. Dexter's tenor sax is clean and focused, hard and precisely pitched. The Shanling (with Valvos) captures all of this close-miked sound. It works well for Dexter but I find the percussion too in-your-face. Bass is firm and the music swings like the devil. I can live with this. The Meridian brings a little more snap to the percussion, clarifying the top end, but since there is little deep bass energy in the recording, it has no special edge over the Shanling.

Is It Right For Me?

This last comparison is very revealing of the strengths of this high-end digital source. One area where transistors routinely beat even the best of tube components is in the tightness and definition of the deep bass, and this is the foundation that often propels the music along. Bring me more tracks like this, or the Brahms Piano Quartet, and this

deficiency is not apparent. And if your speakers, like the excellent Combak Bravos, do not extend to the lowest octaves then you may not miss this deep bass deficiency. I also feel the treble performance of the Shanling is slightly peaky and then rolled off, and once again this may or may not be a problem for you. I was very happy with the rich colorful midrange performance. The Shanling's ability to throw a wide and deep sound stage is enviable and tops even the high performing Meridian. I would certainly be trying out two pairs of Telefunken's to improve the bandwidth of the Shanling.

Does the \$6,995 Shanling T300 represent good value for money? I must say I preferred the Meridian, which at \$3995 US undercuts the Shanling as well as outperforming it on most tracks. But the Meridian looks pedestrian next to this wonder, and you are paying to belong to an exclusive club of 300 T300 owners and to enjoy the fabulous looks.

Whether or not we're in the market for a high end CD player, we should all be grateful to the folks at Shanling for making life interesting. Hunter, my contact at Shanling, tells me to look out for a matching limited-edition tube amplifier later this year and some even more intriguing digital players to come, maybe SACD based.

Specifications

Type: Compact disc player with tubed preamplifier output

Output: unbalanced (RCA)

Frequency Response: 10Hz to 20 kHz (-1dB)

S/N Ratio: > 102dB

Distortion (THD): < .8%

Dynamic Range: > 100dB

Crosstalk: > 100dB

Output: 2.4 V / 100 kOhm

Balanced Output (XLR)

Frequency response: 10Hz to 20kHz (-.5 dB)

S/N Ratio: > 115dB

Distortion (THD): < .03%

Dynamic Range: > 112dB

Crosstalk: > 110dB

Output: 4.4 V / 100 kOhm

Designer: Zhao Yingzhi

Hardware Engineer: Ye Lizhong

Weight: 7 kg for player, 6 kg for power supply

Price: \$6,995 US or \$7,999 Canadian

Company Information

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US Distributor: www.musichallaudio.com

Canadian Distributor: www.charismaaudio.com

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