



Hi-Fi
Choice

EDITOR'S
CHOICE

Creek

Evolution 50CD

This neat CD player incorporates DAC and preamp capabilities, breathing new life and versatility into the format

Once a vestigial box with no inputs and a single pair of analogue outputs, the humble CD player is increasingly becoming a preamp with a DAC and optical disc transport built in. Gone are the days when it was seen as an end in itself, now it is to all intents and purposes a digital music centre. Creek's Evolution 50CD silver disc spinner is precisely this, and is perfectly placed to take on the market leader, Audiolab's 8200CD.

To basic CD playing, it adds several digital inputs, a Bluetooth option and source switching allied to a volume control, so you can plug it straight into a power amplifier. It also offers a degree of operational refinement that Creek hasn't previously been able to give. To wit, you get a slot-loading

mechanism, backlit control buttons and rather nice OLED display. It comes with a system remote control that integrates with other Creek components too.

Although a real ergonomic success, some may wonder why there is no front panel volume control facility on that handsome front panel. Designed to form the centre of a digitally connected system, if you mistakenly lose the remote control suddenly you've lost one of this machine's most important functions.

As you'd imagine, the back panel is bristling with features like its five digital inputs (two optically isolated Toslinks, one galvanically isolated USB, two transformer isolated coaxial), and two digital outputs plus a Creek RC remote control bus. You'll

DETAILS

PRICE

£950

ORIGIN

UK/China

WEIGHT

5.5kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
430 x 60 x 280mm

FEATURES

- 2x Toslink;
- 2x coaxial digital inputs
- 1x USB input;
- 1x aptX Bluetooth input (optional)
- 2x digital outputs
- 1x RCA phono out;
- 1x balanced XLR out
- Wolfson WM8742 DACs

DISTRIBUTOR

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REVIEWED

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also like its choice of RCA phono and balanced XLR outputs. You can toggle through the digital inputs on the front panel SRC (source) button.

Under the hood, there's more than the usual attention to detail that you'd expect to find in a good mid-priced machine such as this. There's a 25W toroidal mains transformer, with three separate secondary voltage windings for analogue and digital circuitry. Low-impedance, specially chosen power supply capacitors and voltage regulators are fitted for the best possible sound, and organic polymer capacitors pop up at key points in the analogue and digital circuitry, along with high-grade WIMA polypropylene capacitors in the output filters. Two Wolfson WM8742 24-bit DACs run in dual differential mode, and Creek says that special low-jitter clocks are fitted. The analogue reconstruction filters in the output of the DAC use high-grade OPA2134 op-amps in each channel, configured in balanced mode. This offers symmetrical filtering and both single-ended and balanced output capability with low impedance high-current output capability. The slot-loading mechanism is an amalgam of ruggedised specialist parts that were chosen specifically for their durability and good sound quality. It gets custom



The Evo 50CD is to all intents and purposes a superb digital music centre

servo control software, to which much effort was devoted to write, says Michael Creek.

Sound quality

The sound is very well rounded and enjoyable across the board. Tonally, it's unmistakably a Creek, which means the bass is a little warmer and more sumptuous than some leaner, meaner rivals – while the midband is a tad smoother and more spacious. But this also means the player is less intense in the upper midband, giving a more laid back sound than some. Where CD is concerned, many will think this to be no bad thing. Overall, it gives it a marginally more 'analogue' feel than immediate rivals such as the Audiolab 8200CD, which comes over as obviously less beguiling to listen to – albeit it no less fun.

Push REM's *Welcome To The Occupation* into the slot-loading drive and you'll be greeted by a very nice noise. Overall, the sound is well balanced with the slightest warmth in the upper bass, which gives things a pleasing body. More valuable, though, is the fluidity of the bass guitar work, which modulates up and down with an ease that you don't expect from digital. It integrates beautifully into the music and underpins Peter Buck's ringing Rickenbacker guitars further up. Michael Stipe's vocals sound

highly impassioned as if he's really pushing himself, and the 50CD captures the urgency brilliantly without ever sounding raucous. It picks through the wall of multi-tracked guitars with ease, placing them in a wide soundstage and giving them space. The drum and cymbal work is also excellent, with a light, airy top end that's decently smooth.

This essential musicality isn't lost when you move to electronic music either, showing the player is basically very well balanced. Yello's *Of Course I'm Lying* is a deep, brooding song done on soft, smooth analogue synthesisers and the Creek captures their timbre nicely, showing its skill at conveying subtle, low-level details. Tonally it's smooth with that big fat bass showing itself off again, as does its nice airy upper midband; Billy Mackenzie's backing vocals are wonderfully carried, sounding eerily pure and natural. It's also good at

You'll need to spend upwards of 10 times the Creek's cost to get an improvement

rhythms, but here you begin to notice it doesn't have the rottweiler instincts of the Audiolab 8200CD, which seems to drill down into the interplay between the snare and hi-hat with more energy and commitment, making the Creek sound just a little laid back by comparison. Dynamically it is very good and it captures the accenting on peaks slightly better.

Moving to the digital inputs, and via USB it proves a fine partner to a MacBook Pro running Audirvana Plus. It's worth noting that – in its current version – the Evo 50CD only offers decoding at up to 24/96 using this input, rather than the 192kHz sampling frequency that's possible (any higher sampling frequencies will be downsampled to 96 or 88.2). This doesn't seem to adversely affect the sound, though, and The Scorpions' *China White* at 24/96 is as powerful and punchy as we would hope, with wonderful texture to the cranked-up electric guitars. The soundstage is suitably vast, the speakers seemingly disappear into the room as we are assaulted by those power chords, making for a visceral sound. At the same time, the stinging cymbal crashes and wailing vocals never quite step over the breach into harshness, while still making a real impression. We can hear the typical Wolfson DAC sound – a big but

slightly loose bass allied to a spacious midband that extends up to a well-lit treble that gives cymbals a satisfyingly metallic feel – and it works well here.

The Eroica Quartet's reading of Mendelssohn's *Octet Op.20* at 24/96 is a delight, the fine DAC section is well able to convey the delicacy of string tone. It's with this sort of music that hi-res digital really comes into its own; suddenly CD doesn't seem fit for purpose any more. Here, the Evolution 50CD serves up a spacious recorded acoustic with satisfying depth, convincing scale and a fine sense of the feel of the concert hall. The music flows in an enjoyable and tuneful way, giving an immersive listening experience. Again, it doesn't quite have the searching, forensic low-level detailing of the Audiolab, but it sounds no worse for it – indeed tonally it is sweeter and more palatable with the 8200CD sounding a little sandpappy. In absolute terms, there's a slight diffuseness to the sound and a lack of true three-dimensional image projection, but you'll need to spend many times the Creek's cost on an exotic high-end DAC to get a dramatic improvement. Yes, this talented new machine really is rather good.

Conclusion

Creek's avowed intention is to produce an excellent package that manages to combine real operational flexibility with convenience and top-notch sound. And overall it has succeeded – sonically this new machine is excellent, proving a great long-term listen. It's also highly flexible and is rather nice to use too – thanks to the sleek slot-loading CD drive, backlit buttons and fine OLED display. As such, if you're looking for an excellent do-it-all digital device, this is an absolutely essential audition. It makes a great case for the continued existence of compact disc players, no less! ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Slot-loading mech and backlit buttons; sweet, musical sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: No fascia mounted volume controls
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Excellent sounding, highly versatile silver disc spinner
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

