

Totally tubular

Vincent combines visible valves with tiny transistors in a CD player that's big on bling

PRODUCT Vincent CD-S6 MkII

TYPE CD player

PRICE £999

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x12.5x33cm
● Weight: 9kg ● Analogue outputs: single-ended phono, balanced XLR ● Digital outputs: S/PDIF electrical ● Triple valve output stage

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Vincent's product development and engineering is done in Iffeheim, Germany and the manufacture in China. This is a business model that has only recently gained a foothold in the aspirational market.

Vincent is now distributed by Essex-based speaker maker Ruark. Apparently, Ruark boss Alan O'Rourke was looking for electronics to go with the company's speakers and found Vincent to be just the ticket. Ruark just imports the Design Line Three components from Vincent's large portfolio of products, which includes AV components, loudspeakers and some heavy-duty amplification.

The range coming into the UK consists of two variations on the CD-S6 CD player theme: the one tested here with balanced outputs and another that's £100 less expensive with only single-ended outputs. There is also a preamp, stereo and monoblock power amps, a

headphone amp and an FM/AM RDS tuner. All the components use a hybrid of valve and solid state components – even the tuner, albeit presumably only in the output stage if the £599 asking price is any indicator.

But nothing in the range is more expensive than the CD-S6 MkII player, a machine that incorporates plenty of hardcore technology for the price. The DAC is a Burr-Brown 24/96 type, although the exact model isn't specified, while the filter is from Pacific Microsonics and thus includes HDCD decoding. The player also contains a Philips VAM 1202 transport – a dedicated audio drive for a change.

A 12AU7 valve is on display through the circular window in the front panel and may be illuminated with varying degrees of bling via a switch at the back. But it's not alone – there are three more 12AX7 tubes hidden away that complete the analogue output stage. Elsewhere, there is a beefy mains transformer and shielded compartments for the input relays and remote control circuitry to minimise the effect of stray radiation from these components. The chassis itself is damped to minimise vibration and this combined with the power supply builds the player up to a decent nine-kilo fighting weight.

You can see from the front panel that the CD-S6 has the unusual addition of a volume controlled headphone output – which is still

quite uncommon on even an ambitious CD player. This makes a convenient change if you want to play loud without risking sonic leakage (soon to be outlawed by another EU diktat).

Among the shiny buttons on the front, there's a blue light dubbed 'warm up'. This flicks on and off when actually warming up, for about 20 seconds, and then stays on when warm. To be picky, it should really be labelled 'warmed up', or 'hot to trot' or something similar. Twenty seconds seems pretty quick for a warm up, but that's where tubes have the edge over transistors, which take closer to twenty minutes to come on song thermally – but you wouldn't want to watch a blinking light for that long.

Build quality is typically Chinese, by which we mean better than small scale manufacture almost anywhere else in the world at its price point. A £1,000 DVD player is likely to have a better quality finish, but that's because of economies of scale rather than anything else. Rear panel connections are standard-quality RCA phonos and XLRs, with another phono socket to provide an electrical digital output.

SOUND QUALITY

Using valves to build an output stage will always have a significant influence on the sound of a CD player. Most likely, it will add



Vincent COMPACT DISC PLAYER CD-S6MK





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colour to the proceedings and smooth off the high frequencies. This proved to be the case with the Vincent, and is likely to be a major source of the differences between this player and the alternatives. The treble is smooth, which makes the Vincent well suited to more revealing loudspeakers. It also gives the player a tonal balance that is closer in style to vinyl than is usually the case.

It is not easy to build a CD player even at this price that has a clean, smooth high frequency performance and Vincent should be congratulated for achieving this. The downside is that you forego some precision.

Another attractive aspect of the sound that is undoubtedly valve derived is the sense of dynamics or energy that emanates from acoustic sound sources especially. Instruments sound timbrally rich and full of depth, while well-recorded voices have body and vitality that you rarely get with solid-state electronics in this price range. Valves can be used to produce an overly warm and relaxed sound

that some assume to be a facet of Class A. When used properly, however, you get a lovely balance between fluidity and definition that suits most music down to the ground.

The Vincent also adds a little bit of space to the sound, opening things out a little in a vinyl-like fashion. As a result, a piano will sound like it's in a slightly more reverberant room and the highest notes are just a shade rounded but full of shine and strength. Timing is also better than average, and there seems to be no shortfall next to a Rega Apollo – although less expensive than the Vincent, it is particularly good in this respect. Inevitably, the Vincent has the upper hand tonally, with a rich and texturally deep character by comparison.

Because this player's limitations are ones of omission rather than of its own making, you can play it through a highly revealing system without anything nasty making itself heard. Players with flatter responses but less pristine output stages can sound uncomfortable when played in anger.

To get the best out of the Vincent, we'd recommend a loudspeaker with a balanced tone, but efficient enough to make the most of the dynamics on offer. Something that can render tonal character well, too.

The Vincent CDS6 MkII combines solid and stylish build quality (with an all-metal remote) alongside an engaging and revealing sound that will appeal to anyone who enjoys analogue sources. While the character of its tube output stage is not the most precise or neutral, it is subtle enough not to get in the way of the music. It pulls the impressive trick of making digital audio sound 'musical' at a price point where that's still a difficult task. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 87% [Progress bar]	PRO Valves help to deliver an analogue-like quality that makes for easy, open and engaging listening. A rich and effusive sounding player, and a nice remote too!
FEATURES >> 85% [Progress bar]	
BUILD >> 87% [Progress bar]	CON Not quite as slick as the best around this price. Valve output stage brings colour to the sound, at the expense of precision and accuracy.
VALUE >> 87% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION Vincent's valve output stage helps to deliver a beguiling midrange, sweet highs and attractively figured lows, combined with fine dynamics. The headphone output is a nice touch and the remote could seal it, so the big brains better watch out.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 87%	