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I have used a Wadia 800-series CD player as a digital reference source for many years. I started with an 860, which was upgraded to an 861. My player is now an 861se. Since I have lived with each one I thought readers would be interested in my experiences and Wadia's progression in performance.

The CD As a Source

The "Red Book" compact disc is inadequate as a high quality source for audio. This has become glaringly apparent in recent years with the introduction of high-resolution digital formats and the final realization by



many music lovers that an analog turntable, playing "obsolete" vinyl records, simply sounds better.

In spite of this I have a wall covered with a large selection of CDs. In many cases the music I want to hear is available in no other format. CDs are the most popular almost-high fidelity source available and will be for some time. And they play in my car.

I have published a number of eulogies for the compact disc with "I told you so" glee because, well, I told you so. I disliked the format when it first arrived more than twenty years ago because I recognized it as a giant step backward in fidelity. I tried to get people to buy records and turntables instead of the con-

venient new compact discs and players and suffered financially because of it. Compact discs were definitely more user-friendly and the ads told us that they offered "perfect sound forever." Most people fell for it.

I resigned myself to the CD format, and both the players and the recordings improved immensely over the years. I continued to use records and SACD discs for evaluation and demonstration because the sound was so much better but I often listened to CDs for pleasure because much of the music I wanted to enjoy was available only on compact discs. Then something happened that changed my formerly ridged position.

"This player changes everything!"

Wadia introduced a new player, the 861se. It might slip by as just another upgrade to a familiar product because it still has the old number with only an se designation added, but believe me, this is more than a Special Edition of an old standby. This player changes everything!

Wadia Changes the Picture

I have used a Wadia CD player for many years and compared it to every contender that came along, including separate transport/DAC combinations. It started as an 860 and was upgraded to an 861. When Wadia introduced the 861se, a Special Edition version of the 861 with an entirely new transport, they were eager for me to hear it. I agreed to let them upgrade my player yet again, well aware of the risk that I might not like it better.

I felt that my experience with the three versions of this machine would make interesting reading and was worth the gamble on the sonic expertise of the engineers at Wadia. I wasn't prepared for what I got back—it's hard to imagine that a mechanical change could make such a difference! The 861se makes listening to compact discs a generally satisfying musical experience at last.

My History with the Wadia CD Players

I got my Wadia 860 in the 1990s. It was the best available CD player then and it has remained the best performer ever since due to a series of improvements described below. I was momentarily seduced by some performance aspects of other offerings but always returned to the Wadia because it proved to be the most enjoyable player for compact discs.

There are some common traits shared by all three models described here so we'll start with those. All three versions have monolithic aluminum construction, dual isolated power transformers, the DigiMaster™ filtering system, and the ClockLink™ jitter elimination system utilizing full-clamping disc transports slaved to master clocks placed near the DAC chips.

Monolithic Chassis

The Wadia chassis is robust to say the least. The fifty-pound unit feels like a solid block of steel but is made entirely of machined aluminum. This beautiful enclosure provides a highly effective shield against radio frequency interference and vibrations that might adversely affect the delicate electrical and mechanical components. There is a separate isolated chamber for the transformers, which provides shielding for stray magnetic fields and mechanical damping for transformer vibration while allowing a low-impedance path for instantaneous power delivery from transformers to power supplies within the main chassis.

Dual Transformers

The Wadia players have two transformers. One transformer powers the transport and servo controller and the other one drives the digital-to-analog circuitry. This prevents digital noise from contaminating the analog circuits. The transformers "float" in a machined aluminum isolation chamber and are clamped into position by neoprene damping material. They are not otherwise mechanically attached to the chassis. You can't hear them in the room or through the circuitry.

DigiMaster™ Upsampling Filter

The patented DigiMaster™ software runs on a powerful DSP computer and offers 24-bit resolution. It upsamples to 1.4112MHz (32x) and provides a digital reconstruction filter with superior time and phase performance. Long before "upsampling" became a buzzword Wadia was doing it. The Wadia machines always delivered superior imaging with greater depth information and a more musical sound compared to ordinary CD players because they perform better in the time domain.

ClockLink™ Jitter Elimination System

Most CD players have a single clock placed near the transport and the clock signal is transmitted to the DAC chips, which may induce jitter. Jitter is a well-known source of distortion because the digital code must provide the amplitude of the analog signal at exactly the right time or disaster ensues. Wadia's ClockLink™ system locates the master clock at the DAC chips and slaves the transport to it, virtually eliminating the problem of transmission-induced jitter. Full clamping transport mechanisms reduce mechanically induced jitter.

Transport Superiority

The 800-series has always used a transport mechanism that clamps the entire disc to the platter for vastly superior mechanical integrity. This makes a bigger difference than I thought and my eyes were opened (wide) by the audible improvement still possible through mechanical means.

The dCS Verdi, the ARC CD3 MkII and the new se version of the Wadia 861 have convinced me of the importance of the transport



mechanism. No, you can't use just any old CD player as a transport and get great sound. The Wadia transport is the most impressive in terms of mechanical integrity and sounds the best in my opinion.

The Wadia players are not simply modified mass-market machines. They are thoroughly engineered products where every detail has been considered. Let me offer my impressions



of the three stages of development that I've observed with the Wadia 800-series CD players. I've lived with each one for an extended period now and my opinions are well considered.

The 860

The Wadia 860 was clearly a superior player in its day. It delivered a more three-dimensional image and a consistently more musical presentation than other CD players. Shane and I used it as a reference for comparison as we auditioned dozens of other players. Then along came the Ayre D-1x. The Ayre player offered a more detailed presentation and provided the first real challenge to the superiority of the Wadia 860. The Ayre had the new Burr-Brown 1704 DACs and a zero feedback current-to-voltage converter. This challenge was answered by the Wadia 861.

The 861

The Wadia 861 retained the musicality of the 860 and added the detail and dynamics of the finest players, some of which had surpassed the 860 in those areas. The 861 had new Burr-Brown 1704 DACs, a revised DigiMaster™ filtering system (version 2.4) and Wadia's patented Swift Current™ current-to-voltage converter with no negative feedback. This player stood alone at the top of the heap and still would—but the Special Edition was introduced anyway.

The 861se

The Wadia 861se sets a whole new standard! The most significant change offered by the Special Edition is an entirely new transport mechanism. This transport has improved engineering precision on all surfaces including the clamping device and

platter, which is now an aluminum and brass hybrid stained green to reduce undesirable laser reflections.

The platter is supported by a composite bridge composed of 20mm-thick machined aluminum and 5mm-thick carbon tool steel. This new transport allows the 861se to deliver blacker backgrounds, even better imaging than before, and resolution of detail that I previously didn't believe was on the recording.

Conclusion

If you have a collection of CDs—and who doesn't—you'll be glad to learn that there actually is satisfying music hidden on them. If you have a Wadia 860 or 861, an upgrade to the Special Edition version is a no-brainer. If you want the best available CD player, buy a Wadia 861se. [APJ](#)