

Roma Romance

A CD player with valve output stage. Noel Keywood listens to the Synthesis Roma 14DC+

Not a new idea, but a nice one all the same. Fit a valve output stage to a CD player to give its sound some depth and organic warmth,

better emulating the sound of analogue. That's what Synthesis (Italy) do with their Roma 14DC+ (£2499) player I'm reviewing here.

Once you start on this path then other design features suggest

themselves. For a sense of analogue depth and smoothness best to use a linear power supply rather than a cheaper switch-mode, and that is what you can see here in our internal shot. Teac (Japan) make top



quality parts and Synthesis use one of their transports.

Then comes the digital convertor and the most obvious choice for smooth analogue sound is ESS (California) or – following close behind – AKM (Japan) with their Velvet Sound DACs. Synthesis go for the latter, using a premium AK4495SEQ. Put this little lot together and you have a CD player that has an easy-on-the-ear sound – unlike most.

So as not to waste the abilities of the AKM chip, it can be accessed externally, making this a DAC too. Inputs are S/PDIF via electrical (phono socket) and optical (Toslink) connections, as well as USB. No problem sending DSD over via DoP I found, using an Audirvana+ software player on a Mac. As you might expect the AKM chip plays anything thrown at it.

The Roma 14DC+ is large, measuring 410mm wide, 390mm deep and 95mm high. With a

toroidal mains transformer inside it is also weighty, coming in at 8kg no less. Having a low output of 1.5V I suspect Synthesis use a board delivering standard 2V and place an ECC88 double-triode valve on each channel configured as a cathode follower that, with a gain less than 1, reduces output. They feed just one pair of RCA phono socket unbalanced outputs at rear and there's remote control (only) of volume, on a coarse scale of 0-50, which I found a little odd. Modern DAC chips come with inbuilt 0.5dB step control of volume that usually translates out to 0-100 volume scale for 50dB range, but not here; the steps measured 1dB.

And all DAC chips come with balanced output that needs extra circuitry to go unbalanced to phono sockets. So it's easy to include a balanced XLR output socket – but Synthesis have not done it here. It would bypass the valve stage and be out of idiom

I guess, unless more valves were fitted for this connection alone. A bit of a missed opportunity, within an expensive high quality player where XLR may be expected/required by potential purchasers.

I was also a bit baffled by the remote control's controls. Er – the volume buttons don't change volume! Interesting. To perform this feat the Mode button had to be pressed twice and the track-skip buttons used to change volume. If volume wasn't then altered within seconds the player would exit this function. It was confusing and awkward, leading me to think that this facility is best seen as a pre-set output control rather than a remote volume control, which these days is found in most amplifiers. The Mute function did not work, suggesting that perhaps the unit was not originally intended for this player.

The remote's operating behaviour just didn't make sense,



although it got the job done. And the player's small low-res screen was hardly inviting to look at. The player was clunky at the vital user interface, yet the remote was nicely machined and physically solid, just like the player. Curiously contradictory.

SOUND QUALITY

I paired the Roma 14DC+ with our Creek Voyage i20 amplifier but this wasn't an ideal match, coming across as a bit too laid back even for me. The Synthesis better suited our PrimaLuna EVO300 Hybrid amplifier with sonically fast, powerful FET output stage fronted by valve preamplifier stage. This was a match made in heaven, showing clearly what the CD player was capable of. I also input hi-res from a MacBook Pro, running an Audirvana+ software player able to send in DSD as well as PCM. Loudspeakers were Martin Logan ESL-X hybrid electrostatics connected through Chord Company screened Signature Reference cables.

Rimsky-Korsakov's Dance of the Tumblers (24/96) well displayed this player's great strengths, the Minnesota Orchestra occupying a huge sound stage with conspicuous air and space around instruments like occasional kettle drum strikes, a lone clarinet and massed brass.



At left a toroidal mains transformer to provide power and at top-centre two ECC88 low noise double-triode output valves that deliver a lower than common 1.5V output. At bottom centre, a high quality Teac CD transport mechanism.

Strings were fast and vivacious and here I felt the valves being used were good ones as there were no soft edges to be heard, nor any cloudiness. A very pure and insightful sound.

A sense of well etched insight also made itself known with Diana



The remote control: Volume and Mute buttons inactive.



The ECC88 double triode output valves, used as cathode followers to act as low output impedance line drivers. They also impart the 'valve sound', bringing air and space to the sound stage.

Krall's Narrow Daylight (DSD) where plucked guitar strings were vividly fast yet sweet in nature. OK, this was DSD where oft-edgy sound of PCM is banished and highs are noticeably more natural, but the Roma made this very apparent by not smothering the sound in warmth.

Yet at the same time, torture tracks like Neils Lofgren's Keith Don't Go (CD), where treble content is unusually powerful and sometimes overwhelmingly sharp-to-excruciating, slid through sounding vivid yet amenable.

Many tracks revealed this layer has deep, powerful bass. With Dadawa's Canton Story (CD) the shuddering drum strikes had tremendous weight yet there was also good timbral resolution of the instrument, giving more character than is common.



At rear a pair of analogue phono sockets. Above them USB, optical and coaxial digital inputs. There is also a digital output for connection to an external DAC.

"cymbals shimmered either side of the wide sound stage in what came across as a spacious performance"

Similarly, Fleetwood Mac's Dreams (24/96) had a meaty bass line and powerful input from Mick Fleetwood's kick drum, whilst cymbals shimmered either side of the wide sound stage in what came across as a spacious performance.

Whatever I played, CD or hi-res, the Roma 14DC+ was a delight to hear. It worked synergistically with the PrimaLuna amplifier and there was more space if less speed with our Icon Audio Stereo 30SE single-ended valve amplifier.

CONCLUSION

This player is a bit of a mixed bag. Its user-interface was poor by any standard. A little cheap remote that had buttons linked to function would have been preferable to the unit supplied. But at the other end of the scale, sound quality was superb, with a huge sound stage, glorious

imaging and powerful yet well resolved bass.

I was drawn into listening not only by all this but also by an easy natural quality that made it enjoyable, rather than a task. A lovely sound in every aspect. For sound quality most definitely 5 Globes. A great listen.



The Teac transport has a normal plastic tray, in the Synthesis fronted by a solid aluminium slab.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Synthesis Roma 14DC+ measured flat from 4Hz to 30kHz our analysis shows, with a slow roll-off up to the 96kHz upper limit set by a 192kHz sample rate signal. With CD response was flat to 21kHz.

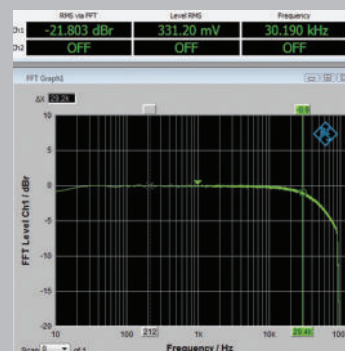
With valves in the output stage there is a balancing act between high output distortion and low level noise. At full level (0dB FS) distortion rose to 0.2% but it was innocuous sounding second harmonic. Running the valves into slight output distortion at peak level resulted in a dynamic range of 109dB being achieved – good for valves. This also helped keep distortion at -60dB reasonably low at 0.07% with 24bit digital, well below the 0.22% figure from 16bit (CD), allowing the DAC to exploit the benefits of hi-res.

Output was low at 1.5V, likely due to cathode followers being used after

a standard 2V output from the AKM chip's drive amplifiers. There is no balanced XLR output nor headphone jack.

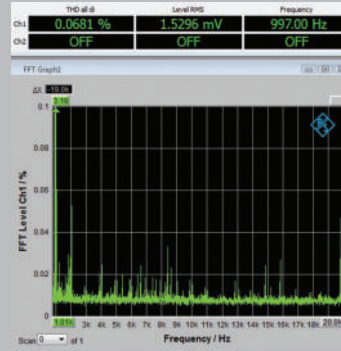
The Roma 14DC+ delivered a good set of figures as a valve-output DAC/CD player goes, able to exploit the benefits of hi-res digital as well as CD. **NK**

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Frequency response	4Hz- 30kHz
Distortion (-60dB)	0.07%
Separation	94dB
Dynamic range	109dB
Noise	-106dB
Output	1.5V

DISTORTION



SYNTHESIS ROMA 14DC+ £2499



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VERDICT

Lovely sound, if poor remote control and on-board display panel.

FOR

- spacious sound
- excellent bass
- hi-res and DSD

AGAINST

- awkward volume control
- no mute function
- no balanced XLR output

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