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& Record Review

PLAYING IT COOL!

Exclusive – MBL’s Corona C31 CD player

CAROLE KING
TAPESTRY – UNPICKED

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With its latest Corona Line Germany’s MBL has made its prestigious high-end components a little more affordable, but no less exclusive or meticulously engineered

Review  
**John Bamford**  
Lab:  
**Paul Miller**

**MBL Corona Line C31 (£6200)**

Never failing to create oohs and aahs from enthusiasts attending hi-fi shows, Berlin’s MBL Akustikeräte company is renowned for its unique Radialstrahler omni-directional loudspeakers, and luxuriously appointed electronics that wouldn’t look out of place in a prince’s palace – with suitably heady price tags too.

This C31 CD player/DAC is one of the latest series of components from MBL dubbed the Corona Line. No less exotic, Corona Line components do, however, bring down the cost of MBL electronics to the merely luxury class, rather than the preserve of the super-rich. Rarely will you have seen test reports on any of the MBL’s exclusive, hand-built electronics outside of Germany. As ever, HFN readers are privileged to read about them here first.

(In addition to the C31 we also have on test a partnering C51 integrated amplifier, so watch out for our forthcoming review.)

The Corona Line further includes an FM/DAB+/DVB-S tuner and, moving up the price ladder, a separate preamp and both stereo and monoblock power amps.

**A DAC WITH DRIVE**

As with the majority of CD players designed and manufactured today, the C31 is best considered as a DAC with the added convenience of a built-in CD drive. It has three digital inputs: S/PDIF via coaxial RCA and optical Toslink, plus USB for convenient connection of computer audio sources. All digital inputs will accommodate playback of downloaded hi-res audio files up to 24-bit/96kHz. Wha-at? No 192kHz capability? Well, before discounting the C31 as ‘behind the times’, any self-respecting audiophile should take stock and ask themselves a glaringly obvious question. What is preferable: so-so performance all the way up to maximum hi-res capability, or state-of-the-art performance at 24/96?

**CLEAN LINES**

MBL’s more costly Noble Line and Reference Line components boast battleship construction and these ‘entry level’ Corona products continue this tradition, albeit with restraint. It’s a case-within-a-case design comprising a steel chassis with aluminium skin (black or white finish options), with no visible screw fixings to detract from the clean lines. The C31’s power supplies, digital and analogue stages are screened by magnetically shielded partitions, the regulated linear supply’s toroidal transformer employing isolated windings for the unit’s display, control, disc transport and analogue and digital sections. A separate SMPS – disabled once the C31 is switched on – ensures less than 1W power consumption when in standby, it is claimed.

As our photograph shows, there are no legends on the fascia’s row of five control buttons. They act as ‘soft keys’, their respective context-sensitive functions shown in the display panel once the machine is powered up. CD replay is via a slot-loading disc drive mechanism that Jürgen Reis, MBL’s chief development engineer informs us is specially designed for audio. The mechanism is made by Sanyo, its laser head and decoder is from Sony, and the driver ICs from Philips.

MBL employs what it describes as a ‘nested digital/analog FIFO PLL’: incoming data employs a digital phase lock loop...
with a high (circa 10kHz) low-pass filter frequency in order to quickly lock to the signal. The output of the digital PLL goes into a FIFO buffer and data is rendered via the output of an analogue PLL with a 1Hz low-pass filter.

The MBL insignia logo on the component’s top plate is encircled by an illuminated ring – a corona, no less – that can be pressed to dim the front panel display in four stages, or switch off entirely. Corona Line components can communicate with one another via a proprietary ‘SmartLink’ system using Ethernet cables to ensure common display brightness settings and provide one-touch operation via the company’s unified remote control handset.

Use this C31 with one of its partnering amplifiers from the Corona Line and the amplifier will recognise the C31’s digital inputs, the ‘system’ even intelligently shutting down the crystal oscillator governing CD playback when, for example, the USB input is selected – or vice versa. Only one oscillator is ever active to governing CD playback when, for example, inputs, the ‘system’ even intelligently switching off the crystal oscillator to save power.

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The clarity and finesse of this player appeared to me to be impressive. Based in Berlin, MBL was established in 1979 and is perhaps best known for its trail-blazing Radialstrahler speakers that inventor Wolfgang Meletzy and chief designer Jürgen Reis have continued to refine over the years. These omnidirectional speakers employ multiple segment strips of carbon fibre that act as bending-mode radiators when a signal is applied to their voice-coils. The awesome 101 X-treme flagship Radialstrahler, incorporating separate subwoofer towers, costs £172,000. Fancy a complete suite of MBL’s Reference Line electronics to drive them? You’ll be looking at a cool £300k.

German High-End

You need only visit Munich’s High End show to appreciate that audio manufacturing continues to thrive in Germany, with brands such as Burmester, T+A and MBL – to name only three – creating world-class, cost-no-object components for audiophiles. Based in Berlin, MBL was established in 1979 and is perhaps best known for its trail-blazing Radialstrahler speakers that inventor Wolfgang Meletzy and chief designer Jürgen Reis have continued to refine over the years. These omnidirectional speakers employ multiple segment strips of carbon fibre that act as bending-mode radiators when a signal is applied to their voice-coils. The awesome 101 X-treme flagship Radialstrahler, incorporating separate subwoofer towers, costs £172,000. Fancy a complete suite of MBL’s Reference Line electronics to drive them? You’ll be looking at a cool £300k.

Instant Appeal

It took only a brief audition to identify the C31’s sonic character. Not wholly dissimilar to the megabucks TAD D300 player/DAC that I had the pleasure of hearing earlier this year [Hi-Fi News ‘12], it sounds extraordinarily ‘analogue’ in nature: creamy, rich, full-bodied and deliciously smooth. It sounds airy and spacious too – uncommonly so, in fact – serving up expansive sonic images with well-produced recordings. It’s a relaxed, confident and luscious sound that I found instantly appealing.

Patricia Barber’s 1999 album Companion [Blue Note/Premonition 724352 29632], recorded live in an intimate jazz club in Chicago with the trumpet solos. The record is built on a tight, driving foundation, with Barber’s warm, breathy voice and creative phrasing. The C31’s ability to draw you in to the mood of a real musical event. Barber’s warm, breathy voice and creative phrasing were portrayed wonderfully by the C31, its tonally warm and inviting sound character full of colour and texture.

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CD PLAYER/USB DAC

where this C31 delivers more of a swell of creamy bass – full of texture and detail, but more rolling than rollicking. More listening only served to confirm my initial observation – that the C31 delivers a warm, sensuous sound character that majors on supreme listenability. But this doesn’t mean it’s all syrupy-smooth and soporific. Given the right material it’s an exciting listen. With up-tempo dance music and electronica the C31 delivers a sound that’s effortlessly entertaining, with a sense of rhythm and punch that never fails to get you involved in the music. Bass lines have immense depth while the player’s ‘widescreen’ image and delightful sense of air helps create spellbinding sonic landscapes.

SPACE: REAL OR NOT
I reached for I Syv Sind from the young Danish music producer Mike Sheridan [Playground Music Scandinavia, MIKEDCD1] in which sampled sounds – floating above a deep, pumping bass line typical of the electronica genre – are mixed with the recorded voice of guest singer Maya Albana in ‘Med Små Skridt’ ('With A Small Step'). The deep bass sounds had a superb combination of weight and low-frequency extension, the C31 completely disguised, the MBL recording’s inadequacies weren’t fleshed out and robust with the C31.

So while the Vollenweider recording’s inadequacies weren’t completely disguised, the MBL CD player certainly made the brashness more bearable. Thanks to its bold, powerful bass character and smooth high frequencies, the civilised C31 never failed to make the most of the music.

Hi-Fi News Verdict
Yes it’s expensive, but in the realms of high-end audio MBL’s Corona C31 can be considered a relative bargain given its solid engineering and outstanding performance. Sound quality is sumptuous and beguiling – simultaneously balmy and energetic with airy delicacy and finesse. Any audiophile investing in a luxurious digital front end should put the gorgeous C31 CD player/DAC on their shortlist.

Sound Quality: 86%

Hi-Fi News Specifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximum Output Level</td>
<td>3.95Vrms at 96ohm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-wtd S/N Ratio</td>
<td>112.86dB/113.0dB/113.0dB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS–30dBFS)</td>
<td>0.00028% / 0.00025%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distortion &amp; Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS–30dBFS)</td>
<td>0.00038% / 0.00026%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency response (20Hz–20kHz)</td>
<td>+0.0dB to –0.50dB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digital jitter (CD / LPCM in / USB in)</td>
<td>115psRC / 100psRC / 15psRC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resolution @ –10dB (CD / LPCM in)</td>
<td>20.28B / ±0.1dB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power consumption</td>
<td>13W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions (WHD)</td>
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Above: There are three 24/96-capable digital inputs: USB and S/PDIF via RCA and Toslink. Balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) outputs are provided alongside a coaxial S/PDIF output. Remote controls complete MBL system