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CEC double belt drive CD Player CD 3N

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Review from HIFI STARS - 2013



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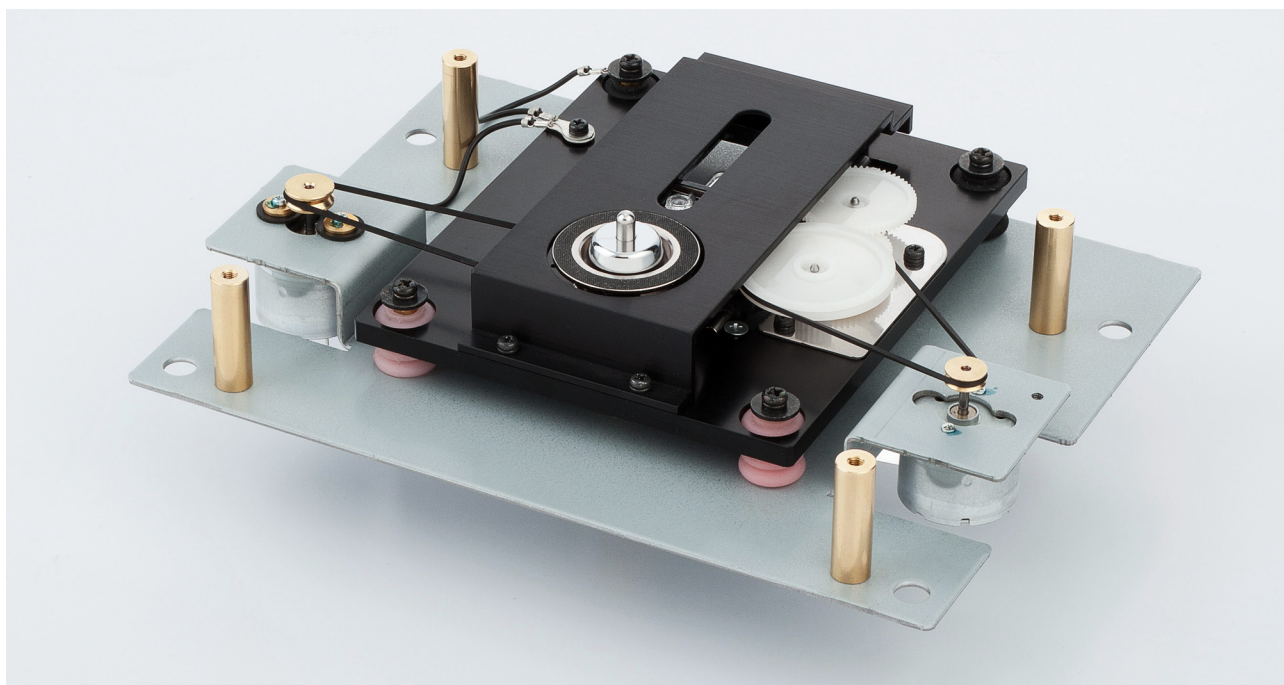
Does it work out?

Just a few months ago, a combination of a CD drive and D/A converter from the big Japanese producer CEC played very impressive music in my listening room: the CD belt-drive TL3N and the first D/A converter released, the DA3N. Readers of HIFI-STARS will perhaps remember that in my article in issue 17, I left readers in no doubt as to how much I like these latest CEC developments. At that time the manufacturer announced a CD player that combined the drive technology of the TL3N and the new D/A converter into one device – the CEC CD3N. It is particularly interesting because the new D/A converter houses the Hyperstream DAC ESS 9008 chip, which until recently could only be found in professional audio technology, allowing it to process music signals up to 24 bit / 192 kHz. Now the CEC CD3N is sitting in my listening room. Can the new device be just as good as the combination

of the DA3N and TL3N? What are the differences in terms of features, connectivity and operation.

Connections and Appearance

On the outside, the CD3N CD player is the spitting image of the TL3N drive. The centre of the front panel houses the display with blue digits and letters, to the left of which is the power button, which is illuminated by a blue field when the player is in use. On the right of the display window there are four function buttons: skip forwards, skip backwards, stop and play/pause. Additional functions can be controlled using the remote, including selecting the desired digital filter – but I'll get to that later. In comparison to the separate DA3N converter, the CD3N lacks the Toslink mini-socket, the USB Mini B connection and the headphones socket. At the rear of the CD3N there are analogue,



The heart of the CEC CD 3N. The new double belt drive.



Front View of CEC CD 3N

balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA outputs, digital connections can be set up using the Toslink and 75-ohm coaxial port as well as through a professional balanced AES/EBU digital audio output for 110-ohm cables with an XLR connector. There is also the network connection and – just like the separate TL3N player – a 44.1-kHz word clock input, allowing the CD3N to be controlled via an external word clock generator.

Open-top and with a belt drive

Just like the TL3N, the CD3N is an open-top machine with the CD tray on the top of the device.

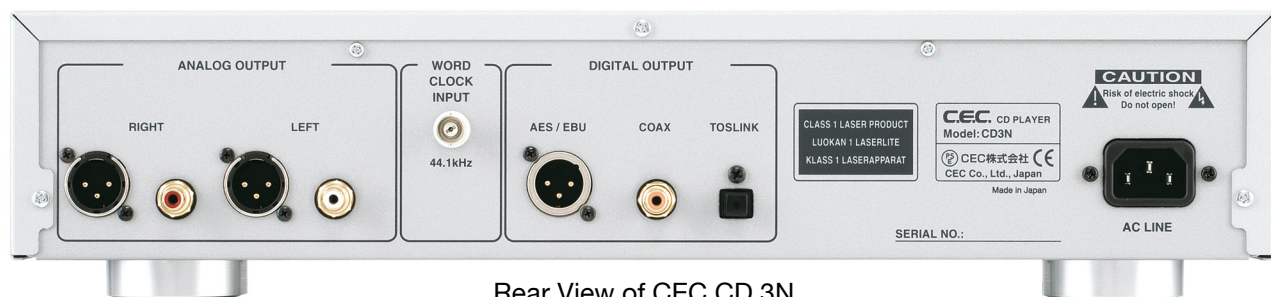
The standard black puck in the new CD3N covers the entire surface of the CD and acts as a stabiliser to let the CD run optimally. The concrete mechanical effects on the CD player are that jitters are significantly reduced and motor vibrations are not transferred onto the CD when scanning a sluggish CD which is running smoothly and is weighted down by a puck.

CEC is the originator of the belt drive system – they introduced it into the analogue record player in

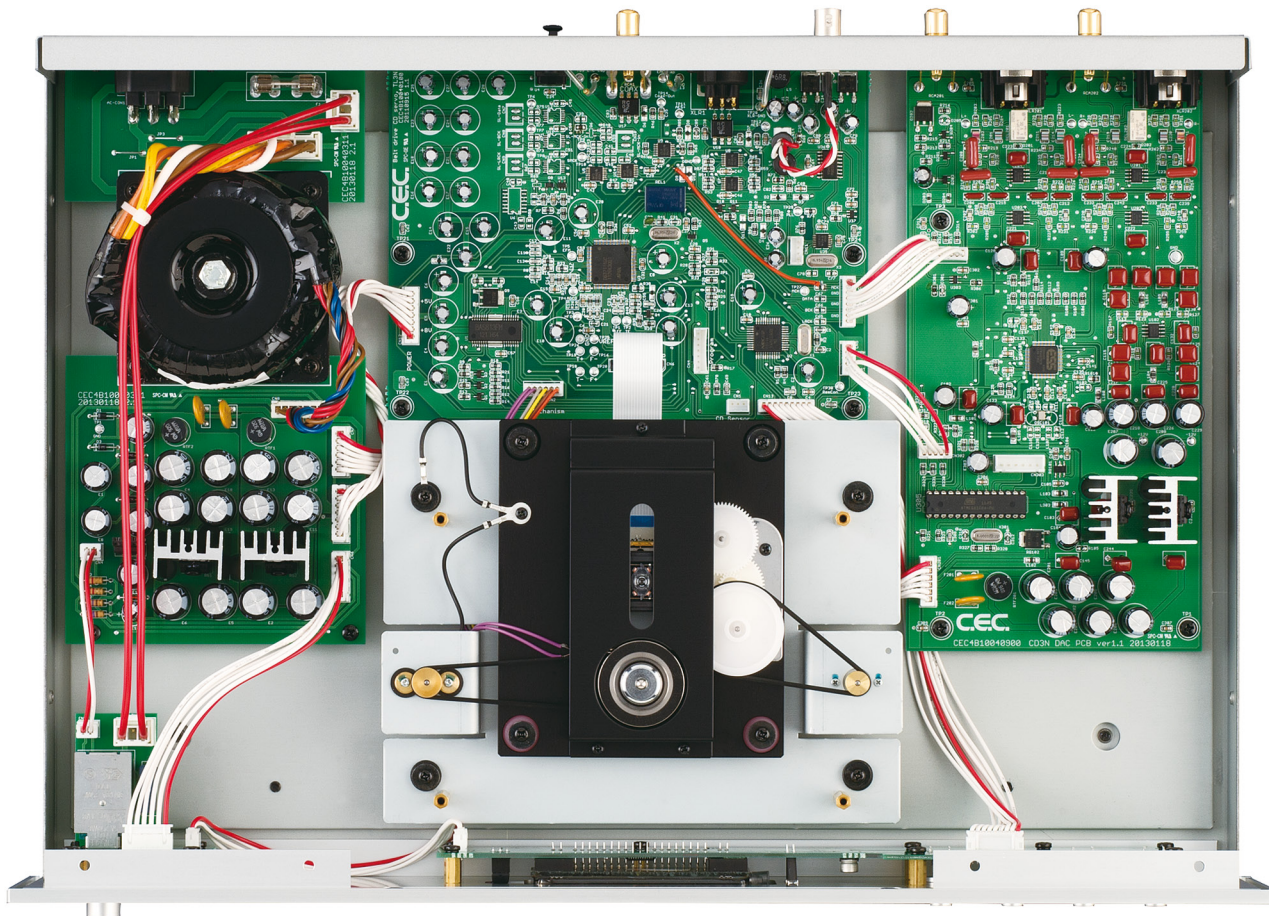
1954 and in 1991 they developed the world's first belt drive in a CD player. It eliminates vibrations and electromagnetic noise and the CD3N even features a dual-belt system: both as a drive for the turntable axis and for the laser. This prevents disruptive influences and improves overall music playback. Everything in the processing quality seems to be up to the usual high standard, and this is reflected in the weight: this 43.5 cm wide, 32 cm deep and 10.9 cm tall device weighs in at 11 kilograms. Also, all devices in the range – the CD3N, TL3N and DA3N – are now available in both the standard CEC silver look and black.

Top conversion

A highlight of the CD3N is the D/A converter component, which also features in the separate DA3N. The integrated chip – a Hyperstream DAC called ESS 9008 – brings truly professional digital audio to your living room. It is currently the best available DAC for audiophile devices and it processes S/PDIF and PCM signals from 16 to 24 bits with up to 192 kHz sampling frequency. Just like in the DA3N, the built-in digital filter in the CD3N allows



Rear View of CEC CD 3N



Inside View of CEC CD 3N - confirmed the excellent processing

to easily select between ‘flat’ and ‘pulse’ by remote control. Most CD converters on the market work in the ‘flat’ setting, with the result that an almost perfect frequency response has been attained. However, you are buying this smooth frequency response with the appearance of ‘ringing’, i.e. the pre- and post-pulse oscillation in impulse signals. In the ‘pulse’ setting, this ‘ringing’ is avoided. This results in an albeit negligible high-frequency loss. Based on my experience, I recommend the ‘pulse’ setting. It is simply better at reproducing musical structures, whereas playback in the ‘flat’ setting is slightly sharper and less harmonic.

It’s about the music

After the ‘duty’ – a several-hour preparatory phase – the CD3N gets underway. The auditory transition begins with piano music, just as a few minutes ago

with the combo. I select a CD with a recording by Vladimir Horowitz shortly before his death in 1989 (Horowitz – The Last Recording, Sony Classical SK 45818). Why piano music? Simply because reproducing this instrument is particularly demanding for a CD player. The CD3N passes this initial test with flying colours. The outstanding recording is reproduced very three-dimensionally and I can perceive the dimensions of the great grand piano.

Possible enhancements?

Together with the CD3N, CEC sent me another test object. CEC Wellfloat is the Japanese company’s recently developed device base and it is expected to have a very positive impact on the playback quality of hi-fi devices. As a base for amplifiers, speakers, CD players and analogue turntables, the Wellfloat Board dampens all types of vibration.

Impact noise, other vibrations and microphonics are successfully suppressed thanks to a patented 'tri-spring' dampening system. Its weight-bearing capacity is between 5 and 90 kilograms and the 58-mm tall Wellfloat Board is available in 350 x 450 mm and 450 x 600 mm sizes. The article about the CD3N will help me find out whether this investment of around 1,000 euros is worth it. Therefore, I place the Wellfloat base, which consists of two overlaid panels, on the highest shelf

Living Presence' production on the CEC duo (Byron Janis Plays Moussorgsky/Mercury 434 346-2). This time, however, I skip the piano version since I don't expect to find any additional information, and immediately start with the orchestral version by Maurice Ravel included on the same CD, performed by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra under Antal Dorati. The live character of this recording – recorded on just three microphones – continues to fascinate me. And the CEC CD3N does not



View of CEC Wellfloat Board

of my rack and place the device on top of it. The Vladimir Horowitz recording plays again and I actually think I can detect differences compared to the first playing. The individual piano notes are a little clearer and are reproduced more distinctly. The body of the grand piano also seems more voluminous to me.

More critical listening and tests

Now it is 'Modest Mussorgsky's turn'. Naturally, I had also listened to this 50+ year old 'Mercury

disappoint. I feel exactly the same emotions as when I listened on the CEC duo. You can perceive the painstaking movement of the oxcart in 'Bydlo' through the music, the whip crack in 'Gnomus', the splendid Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks and the tremendous dynamics of the finale. Now I play the section again – without the CEC Wellfloat – and afterwards I am certain: without a doubt, the CD3N plays at absolutely the highest level – but the Wellfloat makes it just a little better!

That's to say: the basses sound more controlled, resulting in airier middle registers and high-frequency range, and the precision in the playback increases. The somewhat clichéd comparison of the veil cast off by the sound stage makes sense to me. It applies here!

I continue with recordings from the audiophile label 'Reference Recordings' (Reference Jazz Etc., RR-S2CD). In 'Tropic Affair', the piano notes stand out very precisely from the entire orchestra, but with the CEC Wellfloat as a base it becomes a little bit clearer and the overall sound becomes more three-dimensional. So now I want to know: without hesitation, I place my 40+ year old Revox A77 tape recorder on the Wellfloat. I never would have imagined that I'd hear what I did: increased three-dimensionality, more bass control, better middles and finely drawn highs. My beloved old faithful has never played so beautifully.

Inevitable questions

As good as the CD3N is, the question arises of whether this individual device can replace the TL3N player and DA3N D/A converter duo on its own. In terms of sound, both variants are well-matched. However, taking other requirements into account is also important. Are the available connections good enough? Or are you perhaps thinking of using the DA3N as a Pre-amplifier with a high-quality headphone connection? However, anyone who prefers an individual device will be well-served by the new CD3N. And anyone who wants the absolute utmost in terms of sound should invest in the CEC Wellfloat as a base for this CD player. In any case, it will work out.

addendum

The CD 3N received the 2013 Hi-Fi Stars Award!
„wholeheartedly recommend“



The CEC CD3N, TL3N and DA3N are now also available in black.

In a nutshell

Just a few months ago, I was really excited by the combination of the TL3N player and the DA3N D/A converter from CEC. The playback reminded me of an analogue turntable, which I mean as a great compliment. The technical subtleties packed into both devices – including the new Hyperstream DAC ESS 9008 converter chip – are now available in a single device for the first time. It is called the CEC CD3N and I wholeheartedly recommend it. In terms of sound, it is evenly matched with the player and D/A converter duo, and the price-performance ratio is also good. The CEC Wellfloat described in this article will set you back around 1,000 euros, but the benefits of this base are perceptible and make the CD3N sound that little bit better.

Harald Obst | HIFI STARS | 2013

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