

Budget esoterica

TEAC's new CD player and amplifier give aspiring audiophiles a taste of the high end at less exotic prices, says *Jason Kennedy*...

TEAC often confuses me, as there's often little rhyme or reason to its UK product portfolio.

On the one hand it has a range of basic two-channel audio products, including some modest little mini-components, and on the other it promotes breathtakingly expensive designer hi-fi under the Esoteric brand – with apparently not that much in-between!

Could you imagine, for example, Honda selling just 125cc scooters and its stunning NSX supercar? No, me neither... So, enter the new Distinction series, designed to bridge that gap and offering the hi-fi equivalent of a large executive automobile. It consists of two integrated amplifiers and two CD players, with the 3000 series reviewed here being the larger and more expensive.

The CD-3000 is one of a dwindling number of silver disc spinners that play SACDs and, more significantly perhaps in the age of the music file, it also has a USB input alongside a digital connection of the traditional variety. The USB is no mere input either. Plug it in to a live Mac and iTunes opens itself, then you can use the remote control to navigate through the tracks in your library.

It has the usual CD-type next/previous, play/pause functions, and is nice to use. Under the lid the big TEAC sports a pair of Cirrus Logic DACs, one for each channel, which run up to the now compulsory 24-bit/192kHz resolution.

On the front panel and the handset there is an upsampling button, which I kept on for the listening. The drawer action is nice, but there's no sign of the company's VRDS logo found in the Esoteric players; still, even cooking TEAC optical disc transports have a fine reputation.

The chassis is very similar in style and execution to the Esoteric

players that start at significantly higher prices. It uses anodised aluminium on both top and sides, as well as a good thick slab on the front. Build really is exemplary and this message is reinforced by the high-quality RCA phono sockets on the back panel that sit between balanced XLR outputs.

The remote handset operates both components, but you have to select each before being able to do so, as both have input select – this makes sense but takes a bit of getting used to. Likewise the volume and input controls are identical, and I accidentally changed input when hoping to change volume on more than one occasion. Like the separates, it has an aluminium face and the buttons are appealingly tactile – none of your rubbery plastic nonsense here!

There's a clean and natural balance that's attractively transparent and open

The matching AI-3000 is a brute of an integrated that weighs in at 32 kilos and is claimed to deliver up to 200W per side into 8 ohms. If appearance is any measure, then I don't doubt it; its bulk is such that it makes even the largest and most rotund Krell look like it's been on a nice sensible balanced diet. Regard those cooling fins on the sides for heaven's sake – one kilowatt public address amplifiers seem positively under cooled by comparison! So what gives? Is this just the Tokyo Electro Acoustic Company reminding us that it can make muscle amps at real world prices, or is there more to the AI-3000 than sheer bulk?

Well, the majority of the weight comes from a semi-toroidal



DETAILS

PRODUCT:
TEAC CD-3000
and AI-3000

Origin:
Japan/China

Type:
CD/SACD player and
integrated amplifier

Weight:
CD-3000 10.3kg,
AI-3000 31.3kg

DIMENSIONS:
CD-3000 (WxHxD)
435x116x371mm,
AI-3000 (WxHxD)
435x230x520mm

FEATURES:
• (CD-3000)
Analogue outputs:
RCA phono,
XLR balanced
• Digital inputs:
coaxial, USB
• DAC: Cirrus Logic
upsampling to
24-bit/192kHz
• (AI-3000)
Headphone output:
6.3mm jack
• Analogue inputs:
5x RCA phono,
2x XLR
• Speaker outputs:
2 pairs
• Rated output: 300
watts/4 ohms
DISTRIBUTOR:
TEAC UK
TELEPHONE:
0845 1302511
WEBSITE:
teac.co.uk





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Q&A...

JASON KENNEDY SPOKE WITH NEIL WELLS OF TEAC UK ABOUT ITS NEW DISTINCTION RANGE...



JK: *The AI-3000 doesn't sound like your average 300-watt amp; it's more like a Class A in character. Is this what you were aiming for?*

NW: Through consultation with the Esoteric design team, the brief was to create an amplifier that had enough power to drive the most demanding speaker loads, but with the finesse of a Class A design.

JK: *What type of circuit and output stage does it have? What's a 'semi-toroidal' transformer?*

NW: The circuit employed by the AI-3000 is push-pull: A semi-toroidal (or hum bucking, as it is sometimes called) transformer employs two 'C shape' magnets that face each other, rather than the single 'doughnut' magnet of standard toroidal transformers. This design reduces stray field emissions, which is essential within audio design.

JK: *The heatsinks never seem to get very warm – is that because we're not playing loud enough? What's the inspiration for their distinctive look?*

NW: With the design being push/pull, the amplifier does not generate as much heat as Class A designs. For this product range, a new design team (in consultation with Esoteric) was given a free-reign to try new ideas. Through extensive R&D and with the ability to try new ideas, they found that this design of heatsink was the most efficient for the design.

JK: *Do either of these share components with Esoteric models?*

NW: Although no parts are shared with Esoteric products, the Esoteric team reviewed the design with specific input into the sonic character.

IN SIGHT: AI-3000



- 1 full aluminium housing screens from extraneous noise pick-up
- 2 massive 'semi-toroidal' power transformer
- 3 huge cooling fins for optimal running temperature
- 4 2 pairs of balanced audio inputs
- 5 4 output devices per channel deliver 300w claimed per side into 8 ohms

HOW IT COMPARES

HI-FI IS LIKE FINE cuisine, very much an issue of national taste. For example, American audio is often high in fat and served in huge portions, whereas Japanese high end is meticulously well presented – some say it's smooth almost to the point of sounding bland.

The TEACs show this; they have a soft, subtle sound that headbangers used to spicier sources might think bland. Indeed, in some ways high-end Japanese solid-state is becoming increasingly tube-like, voiced to give a sweet and open sound. It's the opposite, say, of some Brit brands such as Naim, yet intriguingly both are strong at timing – proving that this elusive, but critical quality has little to do with tonal balance.

transformer of substantial proportions that sits behind the fascia of the amp – something that is very apparent when you try to lift the flipping thing. Mind you, those heatsinks are pretty meaty and there's an awful lot of them, eight per flank, and they do a very good job of keeping the amp cool. In fact, they hardly get hot at all, which kind of begs the question whether this amp needs so much cooling capacity in the first place? Oh, and there's further heatsinking on the PCBs within.

For an integrated amplifier, the AI-3000 has an impressive array of socketry. There are four single-ended line inputs, a phono input, preamp output sockets and a bypass input, which turns it into a power amp for use in multichannel set-ups. There are also two balanced inputs, although this is not a balanced amplifier as such. It has two pairs of speaker outputs, which can be used separately via front panel switches.

It feels a lovely thing to use – this is the sort of thing the Japanese do so well, making their foreign rivals look a bit wanting. The largely aluminium casework is of a standard that you find on boutique brands at

considerably higher prices. And rivals are rarely able to execute a front panel as well as TEAC; the blue rings that light up the active input and speaker output are redolent of a dashboard on a premium car. But one other light that would be useful is something on the volume control that lets you gauge the listening level when the room lighting is low.

Sound quality

Once I had managed to wrestle the IA-3000 out of its box and onto a Townshend Seismic Sink platform (it's too big to go in a rack), it was connected up to Bowers and Wilkins 802 Diamond loudspeakers and instructed to strut its stuff. This it does in a manner that is frankly at odds with its appearance; you'd expect copious power, grip and muscle, but what I got was more akin to a Class A sound that's open, relaxed and super-smooth.

Bass is surprisingly short on grip, considering the muscular power transformer, but still the TEAC works well with acoustic material and goes down low in a natural, easy and undemonstrative fashion. Ultimately then, the

CONNECTIONS



- 1 XLR socketry: compulsory fitment on Japanese high end
- 2 RCA phono inputs for non-balanced sources
- 3 S/PDIF digital inputs, *de rigueur* on Japanese preamps these days
- 4 2 pairs of chunky speaker binding posts for bi-wiring
- 5 IEC mains input; bundled power lead is well worth upgrading
- 6 chunky heatsinking barely gets hot, but looks the part!

whole presentation is on the soft side, which isn't such a bad thing with many crisp sounding modern loudspeakers I suppose, although headbangers should look elsewhere.

One highlight was its remarkably good sense of timing. It comes as quite a shock to discover that it's possible to make an amp that times without leaning on the leading edges, but this TEAC does just that. The lack of any grain also means that you can play at high levels with not the slightest hint of glare. It's a combination of skills that encourages extended listening because you hear more of the music and less of the hardware.

The CD-3000 has a similar inclination, but is a bit more assertive; its intrinsic character is relaxed but the bass has plenty of power and the timing is once again very encouraging. It does string tone well, which is uncommon for CD players even at this price, and presents lots of detail in a very clean and smooth fashion. It's a balance that works well with a more grippy amp such as the Leema Tucana II that I use as a reference; the combination of the relaxed TEAC sound and the powerful Leema amp results in an enthralling presentation. I really enjoyed the Rainer CD Live at the Performance Centre, where his acoustic guitar sounded vibrant and dynamic with lots of texture.

The fun continued when I hooked the CD-3000 up to an iMac running Audirvana Plus software. With a streamed input the character remains slightly soft, yet distinctly radiant with

great music, piano retaining much of its dynamic energy in the context of a refined, revealing soundstage.

At one point I accidentally pushed the previous track button rather too many times and ended up having Kraftwerk's remixes of Yello pumped out at a punishing level, but because the DAC and output stage are so clean it proved an energising experience that distracted me for longer than it should.

Combining the two components increases the relaxation factor, but also upgrades the timing of the music. Once you get used to the smoothness, it makes for a distinctly enjoyable experience. That's the joy of hi-fi; there's something for everyone.

Conclusion

While the amplifier in this pairing is a little soft in the bass for some tastes, its skills in the timing department make up for this. Like good Japanese high end, it has a clean and natural balance that's attractively transparent and open, and this is also true of the CD player. The latter, however, will be easier to accommodate in many UK systems, and fights above its weight when it comes to detail resolution and finesse.

Both units are very well put together for the asking price and will go a long way to re-establishing TEAC as a force to be reckoned with in the mid market. TEAC needed some serious new separates to bolster its UK range, and with these top Distinctions it now has them. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - CD-3000

- SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Relaxed, yet timely and revealing in a substantial case, with useful USB input
- VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not as much focus as some and possibly too laid-back for some tastes
- BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Svelte, sophisticated and clean sound, but yes sir, it can boogie!
- FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT - AI-3000

- SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lots of metal for your money; open, relaxed sound with fine tuning
- VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Loose lower bass; immense weight will please osteopaths only
- BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Vast integrated amplifier with superlative build and finish, allied to commendably soft, smooth and sweet sound
- FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

