

REFERENCE  
DIGITAL DISC  
PLAYER | **AMS**

by MUSICAL FIDELITY

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# Musical Fidelity

## AMS CD

*'Signature' CD player/DAC with fully balanced analogue electronics*

**Price** £7,000 **Contact** Musical Fidelity ☉ 020 8900 2866 ☉ www.musicalfidelity.com

**A**MS stands for Antony Michaelson Signature, a new range of high-end electronics from Musical Fidelity. Each product in the range enjoys lavish, no-compromise design, intended to compete with the best, regardless of cost. While not inexpensive, prices are quite reasonable by high-end standards, given the impressive build quality.

Common to all AMS products is pure Class A, fully balanced circuit topology, mil-spec aluminium casework, and advanced circuit designs with zero feedback. The AMS CD is no exception. It's a compact disc player featuring 24-bit Delta-Sigma quad-differential 192kHz fully-balanced oversampling DACs. It has a pure Class A solid-state output stage and employs a high-quality Philips CD Pro mechanism – reckoned by many to be one of the best transports ever made.

The Philips CD Pro transport offers fast track access times (though fast-search is a bit slow) and silent operation. Even with an ear pressed close to the front plate you hear nothing; no cyclic clunks and clicks; no annoying swishing noises. The disc-spinner is also breathtakingly quiet electronically, achieving a signal-to-noise ratio of 117dB.

Casework is in the luxury class. Made from solid aluminium, the top plate is around 0.5mm thick, while the sides are 1.25mm thick. The 1.5mm thick, brushed alloy front panel is nothing short of superb, and looks very classy.

To maintain isolation between individual circuits, no less than 12 power supplies are used. To reduce stray fields, mu-metal screening is employed at key points. There's a choice of balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs; balanced/unbalanced digital outputs; plus SPDIF/Toslink/AES inputs so the DAC can be used independently.

### SOUND QUALITY

Ultimately, it's the sound that counts. While this player is blessed with a near-perfect, on-paper specification, does this translate to audibly superior results?

First impressions are of a smooth, open sound that has clean treble and a full deep bass. Music sounds detailed and immediate, with much better than average dynamic separation between voices and instruments. At the same time, the sound is surprisingly relaxed and effortlessly natural.

Nearly all CD players – even the best ones – exhibit some 'hardness' in the upper registers. Tonally, the sound comes over as slightly pinched, lacking the airy openness you get with analogue LPs or good master tapes. Allied to this is a slight grittiness that emphasises sibilance on voices, and makes violins sound edgy. These faults are so pervasive with CD, one almost ceases to notice them. It's not until you hear something that doesn't suffer such problems that your ear becomes aware of what's wrong. The AMS CD is one of the few players that doesn't have a slightly pinched, hard, slightly gritty, top end. This is very noticeable on violins – there's a smooth, silky quality one rarely encounters from CD.

Hi-fi creates plenty of brilliance and immediacy, but almost invariably this comes at the expense of warmth and sweetness. The more you improve things like impact and transient attack,

the harder it is to maintain a sweet, natural tonal balance that sounds smooth and effortlessly natural. Getting a hi-fi system to recreate the incisive, yet mellow, tonality produced by many acoustic instruments is extremely difficult. And, sadly, many listeners, brought up on a constant diet of amplified music, fail to appreciate the difference and how vitally important it is. That said, everything's relative.

While the AMS CD is superior to most CD players when it comes to smoothness and lack of grunge, it's still not quite as open and clean-sounding as a good SACD player. When we made comparisons to the McIntosh MCD500 playing SACD (see p28), the latter was just a tad cleaner and more dynamic.

Nevertheless, this sounds closer to a good SACD player than most. Given CD's dominance in terms of discs available, it's arguably preferable to have superior performance in this

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format, rather than going for an SACD player that's great on SACD, but slightly less good on CD.

The palette of tone colours and dynamic inflections is much broader than you'll usually find. It's an unusually truthful component, giving you pretty much exactly what's on each disc – nothing added, nothing removed. Consequently, on simply-miked natural recordings the results are stunning.

That said, this disc-spinner is also no slouch when it comes to brilliance and immediacy. It's not the least bit lacking in bite or attack, and produces crisp vivid results that have plenty of impact. At the same time, there's an innate sweetness and purity that's unmistakable; the treble sounds unusually open and natural.

The most vivid results are obtained using the player's XLR balanced outputs rather than the unbalanced RCA outputs. The balanced presentation is slightly bigger and more spacious, with greater depth/width, a more holographic soundstage, plus increased presence and immediacy.

For Red Book CD, the AMS CD is probably about as good as it gets. Quite a few expensive players offer comparable clarity and separation, but you'll search long and hard to find something that combines this sort of immediacy and detail with such smooth effortlessly natural tonality. ☼

Jimmy Hughes

