

TEAC VRDS-701T CD Transport

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Recently, my wife asked me what I was working on at the moment, and I froze for a second. I should have answered, “A review of TEAC’s VRDS-701T CD transport” (\$2699.99, all prices USD). What actually came out of my mouth was, “That raises an interesting question: Do you, as a normie, have any clue what a CD transport is? As opposed to a CD player?”



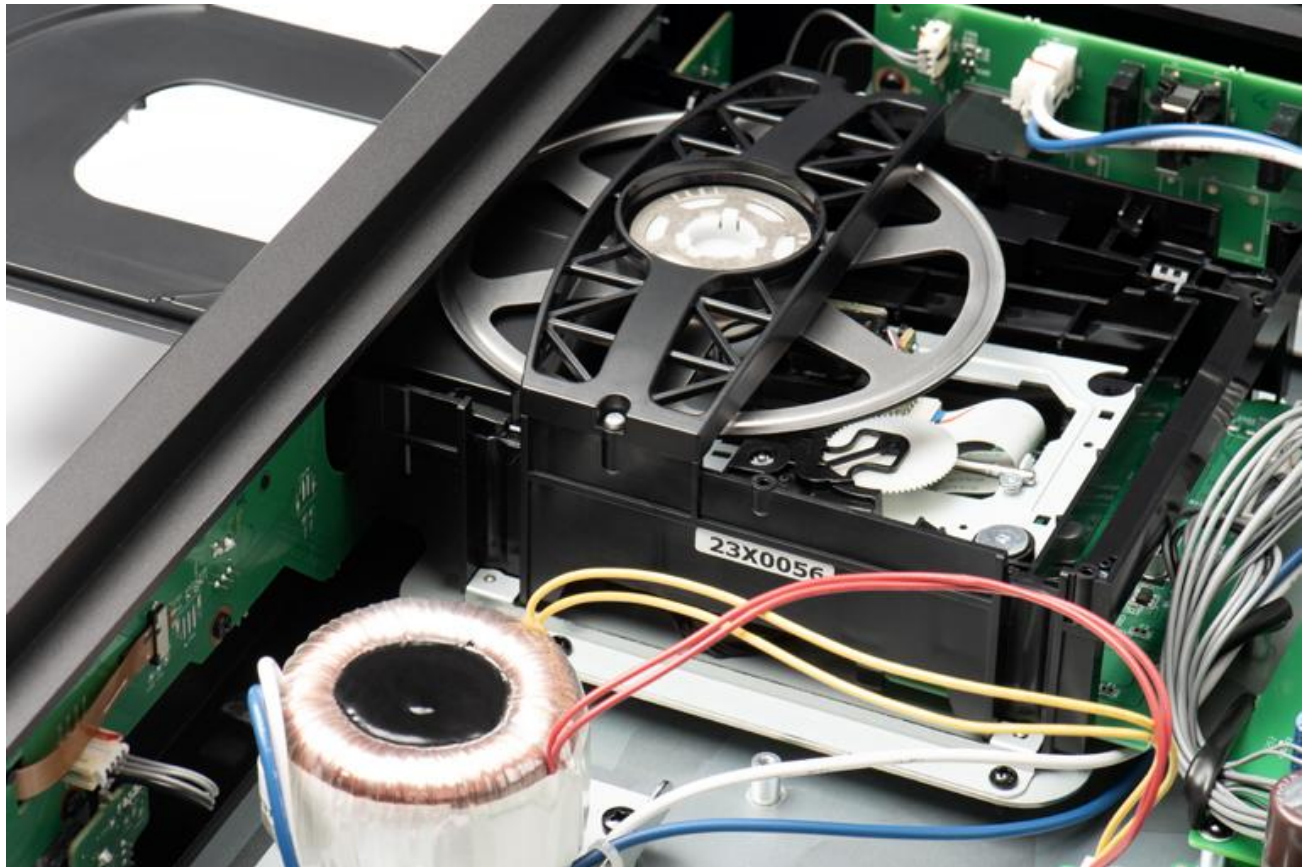
“Is this one of those audiophile things?” she asked. I confirmed it kinda was. “I dunno. I guess maybe it’s some complex Rube Goldberg mechanism designed to transport a CD from your shelf to the player itself so you don’t get fingerprints on the edges of the disc, or some similarly ridiculous crap along those lines.”

A completely off-base guess, of course, but is it any more far-fetched than some legitimate audiophile obsessions? I’d argue not. At any rate, if you’re in my wife’s shoes and you don’t know what a CD transport is, it’s simply a CD player without a DAC built in.

Why would you want that? Well, if you’re anything like me, there’s a good chance that, even if you have a CD player already (an increasingly unlikely assumption), you’re connecting it via an optical or coaxial digital cable, so you’re using it as a transport to begin with. You might also have your eyes set on something like TEAC’s swanky VRDS-701 CD player/preamp (\$3799.99), and you’d like to save \$1100 because that’s a lot to pay for a disc-spinner.

Hell, even \$2700 is a lot to pay for a disc-spinner, but the price starts to make more sense when you realize that the first four letters of the VRDS-701T’s designation stand for something meaningful: TEAC’s proprietary **V**ibration-free **R**igid **D**isc-clamping **S**ystem, a mechanism that

“reduces rotation vibration and other unwanted vibration by clamping the CD to an aluminum turntable with the same diameter in order to maximize inertial mass,” and that is “mounted on the sub-chassis in a semi-floating state.”



There aren't a lot of CD drive mechanisms being manufactured these days, so the fact that TEAC builds its own, and a decidedly unique one at that, is interesting. The fact that a version of the VRDS mechanism is also used in the \$25,000 Esoteric K-01XD SE SACD transport also hints at a noteworthy pedigree.

But even if you don't know any of the history or understand what makes this disc-clamping mechanism a bit special, the VRDS-701T stands out as a sort of funky bit of kit that would exude personality even if the market were still flooded with as many CD players as it was in decades past. Its three (not four!) feet rely on a pinpoint self-leveling mechanism that I described in my unboxing blog post as working on a principle not wholly unlike a sort of tensegrity, in a way. In short, they make minimal contact with the chassis itself, further isolating the transport from external vibrations.

The VRDS-701T can also play MQA CDs when paired with a compatible DAC (the company suggests its own \$4299.99 UD-701N, of course), and can play CD-R/CD-RW discs that are in audio CD format (CD-DA).

Setting up and dialing in the VRDS-701T

Given that this is a CD transport and not a CD player, there isn't much to fuss with in terms of connectivity. You have your choice between coaxial and optical digital outputs. Since my Oppo



BDP-93 was already connected to my NAD C 3050 integrated amplifier via an optical connection, I connected the TEAC with a coaxial cable. I didn't make use of the 12V trigger connections, the RS-232 control connection, or the 10MHz clock input, which you could connect to TEAC's CG-10M Master Clock Generator (\$1799.99) if your system requires an external clock. But I can't see a lot of *SoundStage! Access* readers taking this approach.



The VRDS-701T has all of the setup functions you might expect for a source device in its class, as well as a few you might not expect, including screen dimming, the ability to toggle individual outputs on or off, external clock sync on/off, and auto-standby timing (from 1 to 255 minutes in one-minute increments). Accessing and modifying the setup options is easy from the front panel, largely thanks to the rotary track-skip button, which also serves as the navigation control. Twist to select and change options, boop the button to select, and you'll be done with setup in under a minute.

Try that trick with the included RC-1338 remote control, though, and you'll likely sling the thing across the room after a few frustrating minutes, not only because you have to use the play/pause button unintuitively to make selections, but also because the remote has approximately 985,432 too many buttons ($\pm 985,420$). In my unboxing blog post, I said the remote "feels OK in the hand and gets the job done, despite not being super ergonomic." After having spent a few months with the thing, I'm not feeling so generous. It doesn't feel great in the hand after a few hours, and I simply never got to the point where I could feel my way around the remote for the transport buttons I needed without putting on my readers and turning up the lights.



At any rate, for the duration of this review the VRDS-701T was connected to the aforementioned NAD C 3050, which was itself connected to my reference Paradigm Studio 100 v.5 tower speakers. I briefly also connected my iFi Zen One Signature DAC for some A/B testing since level-matching with the NAD alone proved a little tricky, but I quickly realized that the NAD and the iFi use different sorts of reconstruction filters, so I scrapped that quickly and focused on pitting the Oppo and TEAC head-to-head.

How does the TEAC VRDS-701T CD transport perform?

Problem, though: how do you compare one CD transport to another directly without letting your eyes influence your ears? I say that because—as I mentioned in a recent editorial—my perception of sound quality is influenced by my mood, just as it is with literally everyone else in the world.

And the VRDS-701T, despite its odd remote, puts me in one hell of a good mood. The whole vibe of the player is just swanky AF: the flip-toggle standby button, the fancy rack handles, the fins down both sides of the chassis, the gorgeous tootsies, and the aforementioned transport knob. And as such, as soon as I loaded up the latest Grateful Dead CD release—*Dave's Picks, Volume 51: Scranton Catholic Youth Center, Scranton, PA - 4/13/71* (Rhino Records R2 726106)—I giggled in delight at the detail, the imaging, the soundstage, the sheer scale of Jerry Garcia's voice on tracks like "Bertha."



So I popped the same disc into my Oppo, pressed play, and felt . . . well, honestly, I felt the same with my eyes closed, despite the fact that the BDP-93 decodes HDCD and the TEAC doesn't. But the Oppo just doesn't have as much swagger. Its cool white LED readout doesn't have the same warm vibes as the orange glow of the TEAC's screen, and somehow in the process of listening and looking, I managed to convince myself that the Oppo's output just didn't sound as sweet.

But swapping outputs and swapping discs takes a bit of time, and auditory memory is notoriously short. What I really needed was two copies of the exact same CD—same master and everything—and I just so happened to have exactly that in the form of Joanna Newsom's *Ys* (Drag City DC303CD), a second copy of which I bought ages ago for a friend, who had unbeknownst to me purchased her own copy.

Loading one into the Oppo and the other into the TEAC, I tinkered around with getting the playback synced up—not easy at first, since the Oppo starts playing a CD instantly upon pressing Play,

whereas the TEAC takes about five seconds to get up to speed—and sat back for some direct comparisons by switching back and forth between the optical and coaxial inputs of the C 3050, and also having my wife do the same while I wasn't looking.



I couldn't tell a bit of difference between them when I didn't know which player was which. And I don't simply mean that I couldn't reliably identify which was which; I mean I couldn't even conceive of imagining a difference between the two. And I mean that down to the tiniest of details, such as the subtle tape hiss that permeates the mix, the intimate soundstage, and the odd transients resulting from the breakup of Newsom's voice at the beginning of "Only Skin." Every tiny little nuanced detail was perceptually identical between the two.

All of which is to say that both perform every bit as well as you could want a CD transport to perform, with no audible jitter (or distortion/noise of any form, for that matter) added to the signal, no loss of dynamics, and of course no coloration.

What other CD transports in this price class should you consider?

TEAC has done a pretty good job of carving out a unique spot in a rather sparse market for CD transports, in that it offers meaningful engineering and distinctive styling for the money, but there aren't many similarly priced CD transports out there.

Something like the Schiit Audio Urd (\$1299) could be considered a contender, and a neat one at that. It lacks TEAC's bulletproof build quality and, of course, its brand-specific look. It also supports Red Book CD and Red Book CD alone. But it does feature something I've never seen on any other CD transport: a USB output. That's in addition to its AES and coaxial digital outputs. It also serves as a Unison USB hub (Unison being Schiit's own USB controller).

Granted, as I said in the intro, almost any CD player can also function as a CD transport if you simply ignore the analog outs and connect it to a separate DAC or a digital input in your integrated amp, receiver, or preamp. So you could opt for something like the Rotel Diamond Series DT-6000 (\$2299.99) and ignore the way-overengineered DAC built into it. It supports MQA and MQA Studio, although looking over the specs, I think that's just via its USB input and doesn't cover MQA CDs. (Although, seriously, how many of those are there?)

TL;DR: Should you buy the TEAC VRDS-701T CD transport?

TEAC's VRDS-701T is, without question in my mind, proof that you can get into really esoteric (heh!) audiophile territory without going bat-crap bananas in terms of price. Yes, you could argue all day long that things like the semi-floating VRDS mechanism, pinpoint self-leveling feet, dual high-capacity toroidal transformers, and external clock capabilities are overkill. And I would argue that you'd be right in that respect.



But I grew up in an era when you could dip your toes into such tweaky territory without a second mortgage, and I'm happy to see TEAC still carrying that torch, here in its 71st year of existence. Yes, the VRDS-701T can be a little quirky in day-to-day operation. Little things like the fact that the toggle standby switch has to be manually flipped down and then back up again to power on the unit if you've allowed it to go into auto-standby, not to mention the less-than-ergonomic layout of the remote, do somewhat draw attention to themselves.

But they also serve as a reminder that this isn't just a cookie-cutter product thrown together from third-party components with a recognizable badge slapped on the chassis. I went into this review expecting to find all manner of nits to pick. I came out the other side utterly charmed by this gorgeous little piece of kit and eager to explore more of what TEAC has to offer. . .

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Associated Equipment

- **Integrated amplifier:** NAD C 3050
- **Speakers:** Paradigm Studio 100 v.5
- **Headphones:** Audeze LCD-2
- **Speaker cables:** Elac Sensible
- **Digital interconnect:** Monoprice
- **Power conditioner:** SurgeX XR115

TEAC VRDS-701T CD transport

Price: \$2699.99

Warranty: One year, parts and labor

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