

CEC TL5 CD transport

by Roy Gregory



Okay, I admit it: I still listen to CD. But far from apologising for that fact; instead, I'd argue that CD doesn't just remain relevant: for a number of reasons CD users have never had it so good. The rush by record companies to monetise their back catalogues while they still can means that music on CD has never been more available, nor more affordable, but there are also very real sonic and musical developments appearing on a regular basis, which many music lovers are either discovering or rediscovering. So, not only are there more CDs than ever before, they sound better too...

Listen to the chattering classes and nobody in their right mind would invest in CD replay – either as a manufacturer or an end-user. In a world where it seems to be impossible to sell a CD player that doesn't offer a USB input, it seems sensible to conclude that file-replay is well on the way to eradicating

optical disc – and in overall market terms you might even be right. But, if you are primarily concerned with performance, then you are facing a very different reality. The simple fact is that, irrespective of how big the numbers on your download are, or how many times you up-sample the signal, it's no guarantee of musical performance. Listening to the lamentable results that issue forth from the vast majority of highly touted file-replay systems – systems that invariably boast the biggest numbers and latest software – it soon becomes obvious that in this instance size really doesn't do it. What actually matters is data integrity, and that's where file replay struggles, both in the provenance of the files themselves and how they are handled in the replay chain – and where optical disc offers a host of very real advantages.

For starters, play a CD and you can instantly define several performance critical factors: the physical medium itself is of course, closely defined, but so too is the data rate ▶

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▶ coming off the disc. Replay and decoding may well be two separate problems, but at least they’re singular in nature and both depend on mature, targeted technologies. Likewise, data transfer standards are clearly defined and the cables and connectors employed benefit from 30-years of development. Compare that to the computer derived hardware, multiple file types, and system topologies that constitute a file replay system. If you also factor in the volatility of the replay chain itself, you can begin to understand why even the best sounding file replay solutions are so frustratingly inconsistent.

When it comes to high-end systems, file replay is not only a long, long way from the premium source so many claim and assume it to be, but it’s also generally well off the pace. So what are we to make of those ubiquitous USB inputs? File replay may not be all that just yet – but it’s coming. More to the point, its impending arrival as a genuine, high-end source (while it might not be as imminent as some would have you believe) has driven the development of multi-input DACs and that in turn, opens up the opportunities for other digital sources, be that CD or an A-to-D bringing digital versatility to record replay. Opportunities? Indeed, because as I noted earlier, optical disc replay and decoding are discrete operations and there are sound reasons why putting them in separate boxes can deliver serious advantages.

This rather circuitous route brings us to CEC’s TL5 CD transport; a product that offers a fascinating take on the advantages, practical and sonic, currently enjoyed by optical disc based systems, a chance to not only put file-replay in context, but to appreciate and acknowledge the on-going development of optical disc reading. I’ve been using the

(outwardly almost identical) TL-3N for some years so a new model from CEC was always going to be of interest. That earlier model was built around CEC’s twin-belt drive mechanism, a dedicated CD transport as opposed to a repurposed DVD or ROM drive. Round the back it also featured a row of four BNC sockets, as well as a fifth for an external clock, all part of CEC’s proprietary Superlink data transfer standard. Look at the back panel of the TL5 and the absence of those five BNCs might suggest that this is nothing more than a cut-back version of the TL-3N, but in fact it’s an entirely new machine, built around a newly developed single belt transport – a transport that CEC claims outperforms the twin-belt version in the earlier unit. By stepping outside of the CEC eco-system, the company is also able to dispense with the Superlink hardware that can only be used with their own DACs. That facility still exists on the new TL-2N, a comprehensive update of the TL-3N with a revised twin-belt transport. But the TL5 is a completely different animal, a pared-back, hair-shirt transport that’s both genuinely universal in design and considerably more affordable than previous CEC machines.

CEC also offers the CD5, a full-facilities player based around the same single-belt transport used in the TL5, one that sits surprisingly adjacent to the transport in terms of price. On paper at least, that makes it a tempting alternative, even if only as a standby option in a DAC-based system. Unfortunately it’s not quite that simple. The CD5 does more than just add a DAC to the basic architecture of the TL5. Like most CD players on the market these days, it also offers USB, co-axial and digital inputs, as well as a headphone output (with its own, dedicated volume control) and both balanced and ▶



▶ single-ended analogue outputs. All that extra hardware comes at a price: the CD5 offers no AES/EBU digital output, which although I found myself preferring the TL5's co-axial option, is still a very worthwhile facility that will definitely play in certain systems. It also ends up sharing its power supply across all those extra functions. Try using the CD5 as a transport and the TL5 buries it, offering greater detail, transparency, dynamic range, and a superior sense of musical flow... the whole point of owning a dedicated transport in the first place. Used as a CD player, the CD5 puts in a creditable performance for its reasonable price, one that's full of musical life and energy. Just don't confuse it with a dedicated transport like the TL5, or you'll be selling your system short.

Take a look at the TL5 though, and it becomes apparent that it ticks an awful lot of boxes when it comes to top-flight CD replay. Since the dawn of digital disc, the top-loading transport has been an almost ubiquitous part of the best performing players. Even those state-of-the-art disc players that use drawer-loading mechanisms are internally arranged to mimic a top-loading topology. But there's no drawer and the TL5's simple sliding cover eliminates not just the drawer but the motors and circuitry associated with mechanical loading. Likewise, belt-driven CD mechs have built an enviable reputation, being used in some of the best and most musical CD replay systems. Putting the DAC in a separate box also removes all the noise generated by the decoding process,

as well as protecting it from the vibration and electrical interference generated by the transport and its various servos. Of course, you only realise those potential benefits if you can maintain data integrity when the signal passes from one box to the other. CEC provides an AES/EBU connection via XLR and a TosLink optical. They also include an S/PDIF co-axial connection, but inexplicably it's via RCA rather than BNC – one of the few serious criticisms I have of the TL5's physical arrangements. Other than that, it's all business: four push buttons for basic transport functions; a simple, moulded remote that offers comprehensive functionality; a manual transport cover and a large diameter puck/weight to keep the disc in place.

The thing that kept the TL3-N in my system for so long was the combination of temporal and dynamic expression it brought to music, qualities that so often escape many of the most expensive and heavily engineered digital replay solutions. Light on its feet, it managed to offer pace and momentum, while also allowing performers and performances to breathe. When any company withdraws a much-loved product, its replacement is always met with a degree of trepidation – especially when it's claimed to be both better and cheaper! Thankfully, even the briefest listen to the TL5 demonstrated that I needn't have worried, as it immediately displayed a beautiful sense of pace and timing, musical shape, and structure. Its ability to separate both spatially and tonally was better than the TL3-N while it ▶

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Top-loading, belt-drive CD transport

Outputs: S/PDIF (coaxial RCA), AES/EBU (XLR), Optical (TOSlink)

Finish: Silver or Black

Dimensions (W×H×D): 435 × 109 × 335mm

Weight: 8.3kg

Manufactured by: CEC

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UK Distributor: Definitive Audio

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▶ also offered a greater degree of textural and acoustic detail. The music of Sibelius, with its fractured, kaleidoscope structure, interlocking instrumental voices and hesitant tempi has long been a challenge to the most accomplished of conductors, let alone the average CD player. Yet it presents the perfect opportunity for the TL5 to strut its stuff. Barbirolli’s reading of the 2nd Symphony is masterful and the CEC (driving Wadax, Wadia, or Mytek DACs) delivered every last ounce of his beautifully structured sense of purpose and authority, scale, and drama. The crescendos built, inexorably and without stumble or constraint, the pauses were positively pregnant. This is music making with gusto, a performance with an almost irresistible sense of ebb and flow that starts with Barbirolli but finishes, emphatically with the CEC.

After that, the sort of kick required to bring rock or pop to life, the subtle texture and intimacy to make a vocal connect, or keep track of an extended instrumental line – they’re all child’s play. If you really want to hear what this transport does, just choose something that depends on phrasing and compare its performance to the competition. Whether it’s Argerich or Arvo, Ella or Eminem, the way the CEC flows effortlessly through the music makes most alternatives sound clumsy and disjointed,

mechanical and stilted. Of the available outputs I found the S/PDIF lighter and livelier, more transparent and engaging than the AES/EBU, which while impressively solid and stable also sounded a little dynamically flat and distant. Other systems and other listeners may disagree, but I loved the extra air and immediacy that came from the coaxial connection – which somewhat invites the question as to how much better it might be with a BNC socket instead of the RCA?

Refreshingly – almost bloody-mindedly – simple in concept and operation, CEC’s TL5 transport is living, breathing proof that less really can be more. This is good old Red Book, with the emphasis on the ‘good’. No elevated sample rates or super bit depth, no DSD or dual-digital connection: Just plain old 16bit, 44.1KHz – done right. If you needed convincing that there’s still life in the old dog yet, one look at the online CD offerings and one listen to the TL5 should ram that message home. For those still using CD, one of the best available transports just got better AND cheaper. For those who’ve moved over to file replay, even a brief listen with this CEC will serve to remind you just what you are missing.

The CEC TL5 serves notice that it’s not how big the numbers are but how you read them that matters. It offers a timely reminder of the benefits of dedicated CD transports when it comes to optical disc replay, but most important of all, it does a remarkably fine, musically un-intrusive job of rekindling all those musical performances stored on CD. If that all-singing, all-dancing, multi-input DAC you just bought still isn’t delivering, you know exactly what to do... +

