



Audio File Disclift CD tongs

Influence).

The Disclift's user picks up the CD from wherever it's lying by inserting the tongs into the center hole, spring action then holding the precious disc safe. It is also possible to remove the disc from its jewelcase with the Disclift rather than with old-fashioned fingers, by gripping the edge of the disc. (The Disclift has profiled recesses on the inside edges of its "fingers" to make this easier.)

I tested the Disclift one night while in the throes of a six-pack of Pete's Wicked Ale and a pint flask of Martell V.S. cognac. I had tried the Disclift while sober, finding it relatively easy to use—but not as easy as simply using my hands to pick up a CD. Just to be scientific, while sober I compared the Disclift's performance with my manual technique on 50 CDs.

Three beers and three chasers of cognac later,¹ I conducted the same test. Using the Disclift (which should probably be renamed "the Drunken CD Flipper"), I dropped all 50 CDs. I'd grab the CD with the Disclift

¹ Steven, Steven . . . serious imbibers *never* mix grape and grain. —JA

and lift it, after which it would sort of wriggle off the Disclift (or so it seemed to me at the time).

With my manual method of disc removal and insertion, however, I achieved a 94% success rate, dropping, scratching, or smearing only three of the 50 discs.

So I guess the Disclift is not the panacea for drunken audiophiles that I hoped it might be. Unfortunately, the Disclift does nothing to improve its user's hand-eye coordination, so it's of little value to those whose abilities are impaired and are thus most in need of some sort of aid while handling CDs. Perhaps an improved version of the Disclift could be reintroduced with its own bionic arm to ensure consistent physical dexterity.

While \$4.99 is certainly not an exorbitant price, the Disclift is not a great value. If you know you're going to "go for a really liquid sound" during a particular listening session, perhaps you should designate a CD handler for the evening (to be certain that nobody cheats, everyone else must wear mittens all night)—or hire a neighborhood out-of-work teenager to change CDs for you. **S**

PS AUDIO LAMBDA CD TRANSPORT

Robert Harley

CD transport with one coaxial (RCA jack) output as standard. Optional outputs: AT&T ST-type optical and AES/EBU (each adds \$200; both are available for an extra \$400). Dimensions: 17" W by 3.25" D by 15" H. Warranty: 3 years parts and labor (electronics), 1 year parts and labor (drive mechanism and laser). Price: \$1695. Approximate number of dealers: 125. Manufacturer: PS Audio, P.O. Box 1119, Grover City, CA 93483. Tel: (805) 481-4844. Fax: (805) 481-6892.



PS Audio Lambda CD transport

It's easy for reviewers to become jaded by the high prices of some audio products. We get the products in our listening rooms—albeit temporarily—without having to part with our own money. Consequently, we get enthusiastic about products that offer real breakthroughs without, perhaps, fully considering their cost.

Reviewers should consciously try to avoid this tendency. Although we *should* report on cost-no-object components, the bulk of our readers want high musical performance at an affordable price. That's why I get most excited about reviewing sensibly priced components that offer sonic performance that is exceptional by *any* measure. These products may not be state-of-the-art, but they come very close—and for a lot less money.

Some of the best examples of such high-value products are the CS3.6 and CS2 2 loudspeakers from Thiel (\$3900 and \$2750), Audio Research LS2 and LS3 preamplifiers (\$2500 and \$1500), Sonic Frontiers SFP-1 phono stage (\$1095), McCormack DNA-1 power amplifier (\$1995), and the PS Audio UltraLink digital processor (\$1995). While not inexpensive, all these products offer very high performance/price ratios.

I've just discovered another high-value product we can add to this exclusive list: the new PS Audio Lambda CD transport. Just as the UltraLink redefined what we can expect from a \$2000 digital processor, the \$1695 Lambda sets a new benchmark in affordable transport sound quality. In fact, if I had to name the five best transports I've heard—regardless of price—the Lambda would easily make the list. As we shall see, the Lambda easily outperforms much more expensive

transports—and nips at the heels of the state of the art.

TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The Lambda is a very attractive, sturdy-looking component. It shares similar cosmetics with other PS Audio products: black faceplate, large PS Audio logo in the center, and an engraved line around the faceplate perimeter. Closer examination reveals the Lambda to have a thicker front panel than previous PS Audio products ($\frac{3}{8}$ " compared to the UltraLink's $\frac{1}{4}$ "), and a more solid build quality. The Lambda's larger height and deeper chassis further convey the impression of a higher-end product. Although the remote control is standard Philips issue, it does say "Lambda CD Drive" on it.

The front panel is well laid out, making the Lambda easy to use. A large display shows track time, track number, and the other usual stuff. A row of buttons beneath the display provides transport control. In a nice but simple touch, the Skip forward and backward pair are linked by a line, as are the Scan buttons. This makes finding the needed button easier.

PS Audio's traditional touch-sensitive switches have been replaced by identical-looking pushbuttons. The older switches operated by sensing 60Hz hum picked up by a person's body. They didn't always activate immediately, and, in the SuperLink processor's case, shut down the unit under certain signal conditions. The new mechanically activated buttons are much more reliable.

The rear panel has coaxial output as standard, with AT&T ST-Type optical and AES/EBU available as \$200 options. A rear-panel

switch powers up the unit; the front-panel On switch merely turns on the display. This way, the Lambda is always warmed up and ready to go.

Inside, the Lambda is impressive. It uses the new Philips CDM9 Pro transport mechanism, a device designed for high-reliability data retrieval. The lens is fitted with an ASM Spatial Filter, a newer version of the Laser Illusions Spatial Filter I reported on in Vol. 15 No. 6. Incidentally, if you try to remove the Spatial Filter to judge its effect, the lens will probably come off, thus voiding the warranty.

The power supply, particularly large for a transport, includes three transformers, more than 19,000 μ F of supply capacitance, and 13 regulation stages. The Lambda started out with a much smaller supply, but adding more transformers, filter caps, and regulation stages kept improving the sound, according to designer Bob Odell. One transformer supplies the front-panel display, another the servos, and yet another the digital circuits. Each servo system (focus, rotational, tracking) is separately regulated, with nearly one regulator used per chip. Similarly, the digital section uses eight regulation stages, virtually one for every chip. The regulators are the quieter 317 and 337 devices (all three-pin TO-220 types), instead of the ubiquitous 7800/7900-series parts. The massive power supply and narrow isolation are aimed at preventing interaction between circuits through the power supply.

The transformers, AC line filter, and a few filter caps are on a 5" by 7" printed circuit board behind the transport mechanism. The other filter caps and regulators are on the main pcb next to the circuits they supply. This board contains the Philips decoder and servo chips, AT&T optical transmitter, and the output driver. Three chips, apparently in the output driver stage, have had their part numbers painted over.

Chassis construction, build quality, and execution are all first-rate. I was impressed, particularly considering the Lambda's \$1695 price.

LISTENING

I auditioned the Lambda driving PS Audio's new Reference Link digital processor and "preamp" (see review elsewhere in this issue), a Mark Levinson No. 30 Reference Digital Processor, and the Meitner IDAT. Digital

interconnects included an AudioQuest Optical Pro II glass fiber, and Aural Symphonics and WonderLink coaxial types. My review sample was fitted with ST-type glass fiber, but not with AES/EBU output.

An Audio Research LS2B line-stage drove VTL 225W monoblocks via a 20' run of AudioQuest Lapis. Alternately, the power amplifier was a Mark Levinson No. 23.5 hooked up with 20' runs of Expressive Technologies IC-1 balanced interconnect. Loudspeakers were Thiel CS3.6es, connected with 3' runs of AudioQuest Dragon or 8' runs of AudioQuest Sterling. Analog interconnects included AudioQuest Lapis (balanced), Diamond, and Monster Cable Sigma. Power to the system (except the power amplifiers) was conditioned by a Tice Power Block and Titan.

The excellent Proceed PDT 3 transport served as a reference near the Lambda's price. The \$2495 PDT 3 sets a benchmark level of performance among mid-priced transports. Also on hand for reference was the \$8500 Mark Levinson No. 31 Reference CD Transport.

Starting with the Lambda driving the No. 30, I was pleasantly surprised by the Lambda's performance in head-to-head comparisons with the excellent (and \$800 more expensive!) PDT 3 (with coaxial connection on both). The Lambda had many of the qualities heard from the Mark Levinson No. 31. In fact, I was taken aback by how good this moderately priced transport sounded.

The first thing that struck me about the Lambda was its tremendous punch and dynamic drive. The bottom end was powerful, extended, and tight. Kick drum had a weight and power not heard from any other transport on hand except the No. 31. The bass was taut, deep, articulate, and driving. The combination of superlative dynamics and terrific bass reproduction imbued music with a powerful rhythmic intensity. I've recently discovered the *Speaking in Melodies* CD by Michael Ruff (Sheffield Lab CD-35), a record with a terrific bottom end—drums and bass really work together to drive the rhythm. "Wishing Well" is particularly revealing of a component's pace, drive, and rhythmic abilities. The Lambda conveyed this track's powerful rhythmic drive better than the PDT 3, and came

1 Although the Lambda appears to cost \$800 less than the PDT 3, remember that the Proceed transport includes all four interfaces (coax, AES/EBU, TosLink, and ST-type optical) as standard. The Lambda has only coax output, with AES/EBU and ST-type optical each adding \$200 to the price.

very close to the No.31. The No.31 still had the edge in speed and tautness, the Lambda sounding a little fatter and slower in the bass. But not by much.

Not only did the Lambda have a thrilling sense of slam, it also reproduced microdynamics extraordinarily well. Transients were sharply defined, quick, and delineated. This is a transport that makes you sit up and take notice. The presentation was the antithesis of slow, laid-back, soft, or blurred. Instead, the music was infused with detail and information. Despite the Lambda's high resolution, the presentation wasn't etched or unnaturally forward. The Lambda walked the fine line between presenting plenty of musical information and becoming overly etched or aggressive. In fact, the treble was a little smoother than the PDT 3, yet contained more information—much like the No.31.

The treble performance was superb in other ways. The top octaves were refined and tidy, without grain and hash. Although the Lambda didn't have the sense of ease, smoothness, and liquidity of the C.E.C. TL 1, it was musical and enjoyable nevertheless. As I mentioned in a response to a reader's letter in September (Vol.16 No.9, p.25), the TL 1 has a beautiful presentation, but one that errs on the side of smoothness at the expense of detail and dynamics. The Lambda struck a good balance between detail and smoothness.

As good as the Lambda was in all these areas, it was even better at soundstaging. The system driven by the Lambda threw a huge, three-dimensional soundstage in my listening room. Not only was that vast soundstage transparent, but image focus was tight and sharp. Each instrument seemed to exist apart from the presentation, surrounded by a cushion of transparent air. The instruments and voices had room to breathe and exist, rather than sounding squashed together in a synthetic continuum. The Lambda's imaging was the antithesis of what JA calls "cardboard cutouts." Music had a life, air, and palpability

that were stunning. It was clearly better than the excellent PDT 3 in this respect, and came very close to the No.31's spectacular soundstaging.

To find fault with the Lambda, I must compare it with the \$8500 Levinson No.31. The reference No.31 had tighter, deeper, and leaner bass. The Lambda was a little slower and fatter, particularly in the midbass. The No.31 also had more bottom-octave punch. As good as the Lambda's ability to differentiate instrumental images was, it didn't match the No.31's extraordinary soundstaging and impression of air and space between image outlines. Soundstage depth was also better through the No.31. Finally, the No.31 had finer resolution of detail, conveying more music to the listener. Despite these differences, the Lambda's sound was very similar to the No.31: smooth yet detailed, tight, punchy, with terrific soundstaging and a solid bottom end. The PDT 3 had many of the No.31's and the Lambda's attributes, but to a lesser degree than either one.

CONCLUSION

The PS Audio Lambda is a terrific transport regardless of price. Considering that it costs \$1695 in its basic form—much less than its competitors—the Lambda is simply a steal. It was significantly better than any transport I've heard, except for the \$8500 Mark Levinson No.31 Reference CD Transport and the \$4650 C.E.C. TL 1. The Lambda had better bass tautness, depth, power, rhythmic drive, and dynamic slam than the TL 1, but the latter was smoother and more liquid.

It's difficult to find fault with the Lambda, particularly considering its price. Though not quite up to the standards set by the Mark Levinson No.31, at \$1695 it comes far closer than you'd expect.

In short, the Lambda sounds terrific, is well-made, ergonomically friendly, and very affordable. What more could one ask? **S**

PS AUDIO REFERENCE LINK DIGITAL PROCESSOR/PREAMPLIFIER

Robert Harley

Remote-controlled digital/analog converter with integral preamplifier and analog/digital converter. Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz \pm 0.3dB. D/A decoding: 8x-oversampling digital filter and 20-bit UltraAnalog DAC. A/D encoding: 18-bit oversampling ADC.