TEST

Symphonic Line
CD-Player
Reference MK 3

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Symphonic Line The CD Player Reference MK 3

ANALOGUE PERFECTION

Verblüffendes Tuning

Harmonie und Stimmigkeit

The Symphonic Line CD-Player Reference MK 3 features a discreetly tidy front – and yet already makes a visual splash with its external power supply.

Symphonic Line The CD Player Reference MK 3

Analogue Perfection

A CD player with an external power supply? This is what Symphonic Line is counting on for its new flagship, the CD player Reference MK 3. The strong power supply and the integrated Class A amplifier are the basis and – in combination with an optimised digital section – the guarantors for achieving an audiophile-analogue goal: The CD player should play like a superb turntable. At its world premiere in lite magazine, the Reference MK 3 CD player shows its excellence – also as a HiRes DAC.

"I bought a CD player. Initially, the cold, hard, harsh sound was disturbing, but you quickly get used to it." This was roughly what a letter to the editor in an established hi-fi magazine read in the mid-1980s. These fatal sound deficits of the first years have long since been left behind by CD players – yet analogue spoiled ears still struggle with performance even today because it cannot match the naturalness and quality of a vinyl reproduction. To change this was now the goal of Rolf Gemein: The co-initiator of the German high end, who has been producing noble audio components with his Duisburg-based manufacturer Symphonic Line for over forty years, wanted to create a CD player that achieved the coherence and harmony of an analogue top drive. For this purpose, Gemein relies in digital on a first-class digital-to-analogue converter section, in analogue on a complex amplifier section with an output stage in pure Class A – and overall on a highly potent, multi-part power supply with an outsourced extra power supply. What are all these expenses for? Let's explore the reasons...

Know-how transfer from amplifier construction

Um sein Ziel zu erreichen, hat Gemein in den CD-Player To achieve its goal, Gemein has incorporated the experience and expertise of over four decades of amplifier construction into the Reference MK 3 CD player. The power plants from Symphonic Line establish the excellent reputation of the high-end forge, from which we have already tested the full amplifiers RG 14 Edition MK 5 S and RG 10 MK 5 Reference HD Master S as well as the power amplifier Kraft 300 Class A Anniversary Edition MK 3 . The CD player now also has basic features of the amplifiers. This starts with the best and selects components – ranging from an opulent and elaborate circuit to the thoughtful layout and design: If you unscrew the CD player, you won't find a lot of air inside – as with many other manufacturers. Instead you'll discover a case filled

The front panel is made of unusually strong, one centimetre thick aluminium. The metal is gently chamfered, finely brushed and cleanly anodised, reinforcing the high-quality appearance. The freedom from any controls results in a clean look, which emphasises the engravings and the display.

The CD player is designed as a front loader and operates with a low-mass audio-only drive. The front of the drawer is provided with an aluminium cover. Visually, this ensures a harmonious look when the drawer is closed, mechanically this precisely balanced additional weight optimises stability, acoustically this brings about a greater calmness in the sound pattern.

with boards and assemblies – all nevertheless well organised. The structured, compact design enables short signal paths – thus preserving the sound quality and fine resolution achieved.

Front loader system with lightweight drive

The structured structure in modular design has a further advantage: So the CD player is upgradeable. This distinguishes all Symphonic Line components: They can still be brought up to date or enhanced to a higher quality – even after several years. Let's stick to the current situation: The internal power supply fraction is located in the housing on the left, the amplifier section including DAC on the right – while the drive, control unit including microcontroller and digital board with input and output sections are in the middle area. Let's start with the drive: Here, Symphonic Line relies on a front loader system designed purely for CD playback. It is realised in lightweight plastic: Gemein has found that heavy designs

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Model:	**Symphonic Line CD-Player Reference MK 3**
Product category:	CD-Player, DAC
Price:	€10,400.00
Guarantee:	2 years
Versions:	- Housing: Black or silver - Chromed front/complete housing (on request, at extra cost)
Distribution:	**Symphonic Line, Duisburg** **+49 (0) 203 31 56 56** **www.symphonic-line.de**
Dimensions (HWD):	- CD player: 128 mm x 450 mm x 420 mm - Power supply: 112 mm x 201 mm x 391 mm (incl. connection)
Weight:	- CD player: 13.0 kg - Power supply: 8.0 kg
Inputs (digital):	1 x USB (USB-B) 1 x S/PDIF optical (TOSLink) 1 x S/PDIF electrical coaxial (Cinch)
Outputs (analogue):	1 x Line balanced (XLR) 1 x Line unbalanced (Cinch)
Outputs (digital):	1 x S/PDIF electrical coaxial (Cinch)
Maximum sampling rate/resolution:	192 kHz/24 bit
Read formats:	WAV, FLAC, APE, LPCM, MP3, ACC, AC3, WMA (manufacturer's instructions)

Grading:

Overall rating:	**100+**
Class:	Luxury class
Price/performance:	reasonable

have sound-deteriorating energy storage effects due to their mass. Gemein has modified this drive in terms of tonality. What's more, the front of the drawer is provided with an aluminium panel. It provides mechanical stability and tranquillity, which is also acoustically beneficial, and visually brings about a harmonious conclusion with the completely amplifier front.

Competence plus: Use as HiRes-DAC

The data read from the drive is then converted by a proven, well-reputed digital-to-analogue converter, which is specially designed for audiophile music playback. A precise clock section ensures the correct clock rate and thus low jitter conversion. So with an excellent DAC on board anyway, Symphonic Line uses it to expand the capabilities of the CD player: At the back, it offers a complete digital input section with an optical and a coaxial electrical S/PDIF input as well as a USB-B port. This player can also be used as a standalone Hi-Res DAC for files up to 192 kilohertz/24 bit. Switching between the individual digital inputs and CD operation is done with the source button on the back. If you now want to play the data read from the drive digitally, you can forward it to a DAT recorder or an external DAC via the S/PDIF out. The latter, however, would be unwise, because this player offers a fabulous signal processing – especially after conversion – which distinguishes it from a normal CD player.

The input and output section: With the three inputs, the RefeOpulent output stage in purest Class Acal coaxial S/PDIF input and the USB port are available for this purpose. As can be seen here, the digital out is terminated with a RCA plug, which holds a resistor inside, in order to ensure maximum freedom from interference.

Opulente Ausgangsstufe in reinstem Class A

This signal conditioning is done in the amplifier section. It is one of the factors that determines how a CD player sounds. That's why Symphonic Line has implemented a sumptuous and elaborate amplification here: The double-level amplifier section occupies almost the entire right third in the housing. It's discreetly constructed with individual components and completely in a double mono design – in other words, with separate amplifier cables for each channel. The final output stage operates in the purest class A. This is the cleanest type of amplification because the transistors then operate exclusively in the linear characteristic range. As usual with Symphonic Line,

A look inside: Packed full inside, the DC player reveals the complex nature of its circuitry, assemblies and components. The sumptuous power supply section can be seen on the left and the opulent amplifier section on the right – and the modular design of the player as a whole. With the external power supply, we see the imposing mu-metal transformer, which serves solely to power the audio circuit.

excellent original Toshiba bipolar transistors are used here. The two output stages are constructed as plug-in modules. Again, a future update or upgrade is easily possible. With this opulent-audiophile output stage, the CD player has a real, almost adult amplifier – and this is clearly noticeable tonally. The output signal is adjustable in level from 0 to 26 and is finally available at a balanced and an unbalanced output.

Powerful and multiple: the power supply

Let's finally get to our opening question: A CD player with an external power supply? Yes, because for each component: Only a potent power supply can feed the subsequent circuit continuously and without delivery problems – and only then can the component acoustically deliver its best possible performance. Thus, even with a normal CD player, there are already enough functional units and assemblies that register demand. This is especially true for the Reference MK 3 CD player with its full-blown amplifier section. That's why this player works with separate power supplies. A power supply is responsible for the drive, controller, microcontroller and display and is operated by an internal smaller toroidal transformer. It would already be the stately but only transformer with usual players. The second power supply of the CD player Reference MK 3 is used solely for audio circuitry, i.e. also for feeding the Class A amplifier output stage. It is even more true that a potent, always deliverable power supply provides peace and resolution in the soundscape..

Extra power supply with potent premium transformer

That's why the Reference MK 3 CD player uses a powerful 350 volt toroidal transformer, which is housed in the external housing simply because of its size. This transformer is extremely expensive: It was elaborately wound by hand and ultimately realised as a specially fired mu-metal transformer. With its nickel-iron coating, it offers excellent radiation shielding. This and outsourcing from the player prevent any interference with the audio circuit.

The LED display provides all important information with blue bars and symbols that are easy to read. In CD operation, as here, the number of the track currently playing and the elapsed time can typically be read. The display and other assemblies are powered by a separate power supply, so the audio-only circuit is not affected.

The CD player Reference MK 3 can only be operated via the supplied transmitter.

Thus, the playback remains free of buzz or hum effects. However, the capacity of the power supply is also determined by the capacitors used for voltage smoothing and energy storage. Fist-sized electrolytic capacitors manufactured especially for Symphonic Line – which are complex to contact and minimise loss – as well as also expensive film capacitors with special dielectric operate here. The total capacity is 140,000 microfarads – which is also a downright crazy dimensioning for a CD player. But this power supply effort, like the general design and output stage, is part of the expertise that Symphonic Line has transferred from amplifier construction.

Filtering and tuning

With all goodness and large dimensions: The correct balance and especially the tuning is then ultimately important for the sonic quality. This starts right from the power supply, where there must be a proportionality between transformer power and capacitor capacity. In the case of a component acting with digital-to-analogue conversion – such as the CD player Reference MK 3 – filtering continues, which is crucial in the reconstruction of the analogue signal. Here, Symphonic Line has invested a lot of time in achieving just the right filtering – Gemein thinks nothing of different filter options. According to Gemein, for a coherent, natural, non-cut-off sound reproduction, the filter must run out as far and slowly as possible. Here he tested the frequency responses to the limit in countless hearing tests and achieved an expansion of the filter frequency range to 100,000 Hertz. With precisely this CD player in his sights, he also optimised the rise time for all frequencies until the envelope of the reconstructed analogue signal is correct as a whole.

Exclusive and individual optimisation

Since Symphonic Line is a manufactory, Rolf Gemein coordinates every single copy – personally. That makes each CD player Reference MK 3 truly unique. This is also proven by the serial number engraved on the front. This exclusive and individual optimisation is always done empirically with fine hearing – and with the help of Symphonic Line specialties. These include adhesive pads, one of which is applied to the transformer of the external power supply. This also includes the C37 paint applied spot-on to numerous components. With these measures, Gemein expels unwanted vibrations, resonances and disturbances from the components and promotes their natural sound. Gemein refers to this final tuning as "resonance pattern tuning". The high-end pioneer undertakes this until the device – in this case the CD player Reference MK 3 – plays harmoniously in its sense and has achieved the Symphonic Line typical musicality.

Freedom from switches and controllers

All this effort now goes into a case with familiar Symphonic Line design: The front panel is made of strong, one centimetre thick aluminium, the metal is noble brushed and finely anodised. Our test model was kept in black, which makes the engravings on this front stand out. Alternatively, the CD player is also available in silver or, at an additional cost, chromed. Besides the engraving, the display – which informs about the current status with blue segments and signs – is a real eye-catcher. This is achieved by the complete freedom of the front from any controls: The CD player can only be commanded via the supplied, simple plastic remote control. It performs the usual basic functions, plus direct track selection, residual playback display of the track or CD, display dimming, intro function (the CD player plays the first ten seconds of each track), A-B playback, programmable tack order – and finally a rarity: a "Vol" control that allows the signal level of the output to be set between 0 and 26.

The Symphonic Line CD-Player Reference MK 3 in practice

Gehen wir mit dem CD-Player endlich in den Hörraum. Let's finally go into the listening room with the CD player. Here it is later combined with a perfectly matching playing partner, the Symphonic Line RG 10 MK 5 Reference. However, this full amplifier must first act with a very good but also very normal CD player: We want to see the differences. For music we choose Eva Cassidy's wonderful version of "Bridge Over Troubled Water" from her great

The engraving on the front promises: This high-end CD player is handmade. Its serial number also identifies it as unique. Each player is individually and personally voted for by Symphonic Line boss Rolf Gemein.

live recording from Washington's "Blues Alley" club. That already sounds great. But the switch to the CD player Reference MK 3 really opens our eyes wide: Cassidy's beautiful finger picking on the undistorted electric guitar has a completely different warmth. This should not be confused with softness or understood as filtered heights: The guitar now has its wonderfully brilliant tone – yet the plucked chords now have a completely different sonority. The former hardness is now gone, but we hear a wonderful mingling of tones and overtones.

No sonic hardness, more spatial depth

This absence of hardness is also beneficial for the background noise captured in this recording. You can clearly hear the slight clinking of glasses from the audience area. This greatly enhances the live character of this rendition and thereby our sense of being present at this legendary performance at the famous club. The clinking of the glasses had an unsightly aggressiveness before – with the result that the background noise was slightly irritating. Now that harshness is gone. From these background noises we also notice the now also changed spatiality: Before, the glasses banged near the guitar, now they sound further away. So the "Blues Alley" club has become bigger – the playback now exhibiting a more impressive three-dimensionality. We also experience this on stage: Here Eva Cassidy is supported by a second guitar as well as keyboard, bass and drums – and here too the representation has gained depth: Now it is noticeable that the playback was a little flat before.

The back reveals a number of advantages: The CD player offers both balanced and unbalanced output. This is realised with high-quality gold-plated contact surfaces and is favoured by Symphonic Line mastermind Rolf Gemein as superior. The white "source" button is used to switch between CD operation and the selection of digital inputs. The digital output allows the connection of a DAT recorder. On the right we see the on/off switch with built-in power plug and the socket for connecting the external power supply.

Harmony and coherence

When the instruments interact, we also experience amazing things: Without the harshness, Eva Cassidy's voice also sounds noticeably more relaxed in the very high altitudes and loud passages: The intensity has remained, but the slightly glaring effect of the peak tones has disappeared. This makes Cassidy's singing and her great voice an acoustic delight. The same applies to the drum cymbals: Depending on the impact hardness, they were previously too prominent and somewhat strenuous. Now it is an exciting event to listen to these cymbals at the end: Especially when drummer Raice McLeod touches the bell of the cymbals, the traversing of the vibrating and fading metal has an almost magical fascination. Here we also hear in particular what distinguishes the entire reproduction: a perfect harmony and harmony. The inter-

play of vocals and instruments, the interaction of drums, bass, keyboard and guitars has a wonderful self-evident – as if it could not be otherwise.

Presence and vibrancy

Does this work on a large scale? To answer the question, we go to the opera: At Henry Wood Hall Cecilia Bartoli, accompanied by the Academy Of Ancient Music, intones the aria "Lascia ch'io pianga" from Handel's opera "Rinaldo". Here the question is quickly resolved: On a large scale, the enjoyment gain is all the more impressive. Right with the famous introductory phrase, the voice of the star soprano unfolds a completely different presence: Cecilia Bartoli now has a veritable physicality. If the vocals sounded a bit hollowed out and anaemic before, they now have a pleasant finish in the root. Especially: The previously somewhat dull voice now has vibrancy. This makes the heart-softening complaint sound more intense, more poignant. So this chant for kneeling down is beautiful. The orchestra also gains: The Academy Of Ancient Music has more space in Henry Wood Hall, the group of musicians has a more generous gradation of depth and can now be heard more clearly than sound bodies.

Relaxation and perfection

Here, too, the musical instruments appear more vivid – and this is particularly worthwhile when recording: The musicians of the Academy play on historical instruments or exact replicas. So here you can hear a gently plucked theorbo as accompaniment – in the second part a silvery harpsichord sets in. It is a pleasure to hear these instruments with their very own timbres, which are unfamiliar to our present ears. The CD player Reference MK 3 gives these instruments the space to unfold. Despite the large number of musicians, the playback has a wonderful calm. Again we experience this relaxed and relaxing self-evident naturalness and harmony. So we involuntarily close our eyes and sink completely into this music. This makes the illusion perfect: Thanks to the high degree of resolution, we perceive the reflections of the former church space intensively and in deep immersion beyond the subtleties of musical events. This relaxation and perfection actually reminds us of listening to music via record.

Noble air: The CD player exudes extreme quality with its material quality and workmanship.

Amazing tuning

Can this be bettered? Yes! With superb loudspeakers – in this case it's the PS Audio aspen FR20 and then the Diesis Aura – just one amazing trick Rolf Gemein told us: If you utilise the external power supply, the playback experiences an increase – and the last slight thickening, which her voice is prone to, has already disappeared. The second way is to upgrade the power cord. Instead of the included standard cable, we tried Symphonic Line's High End Music Electric – achieving an amazing gain in openness, airiness and vibrancy. Again, it shows how much the power supply section contributes to the sound quality. This also works when using the Reference MK 3 CD player as a DAC: We also experience a harmonious reproduction with analogue perfection when playing a laptop via the USB port.

Conclusion

With the CD player Reference MK 3, Symphonic Line has created an excellent CD player: It delivers an absolutely harmonious and natural, relaxed and calm reproduction free of any hardness and harshness, dullness and flatness. Symphonic Line achieves this in particular through know-how from amplifier construction: The player thus offers a highly potent multiple power supply in which the audio circuit is operated solely via the extra transformer of the outsourced power supply. In addition, there is the newly tuned filter section with expanded filter frequency range. The audiophile freestyle is then the extremely sumptuously dimensioned amplifier circuit in the double mono design with Class A output stage as well as the final personal-exclusive sound optimisation. Thanks to these merits, the CD player impresses with clarity and detail. The playback offers wonderful agility, vibrancy and freshness. The image shines with superb plasticity, immersive spatiality and excellent depth staggering. Thus, the CD player Reference MK 3 achieves overall a harmonious reproduction in analogue perfection.

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