

The Densen B400 XS CD Player

By Chris Binns



It cannot be mere coincidence that recently three people have made similar observations while listening to music in my living room – there is now less difference between the sound of CD and vinyl reproduction in my system. Due to the of the new Helikon SL cartridge (in this issue) my turntable has recently received plenty of attention and is sounding pretty damn good at the moment, and the acquisition of yet more records has meant that I have spent a lot of time listening to it. But I have not been disappointed while listening to compact discs – far from it in fact as my enthusiasm has been somewhat renewed, and the credit must lie with the Densen B400 XS CD Player that I have been using for the last couple of months.

Without wishing to cover old ground, most people who have suffered reading my previous reviews will know that I use CD because it is here and now, and there is an awful lot of music out there that I want to hear that is not available on vinyl. And so that is why a lot of my more recent taste in music is represented by this format, particularly as there are so many bargain to be had in the budget classical music sector, and I can live with that. I have grown used to the convenience of CD, but for ultimate involvement in music, vinyl is still my preferred medium. Going, further, personally I still think that there are limitations with digital recording, not just CD – you may laugh but I think that to date the best recordings that have ever been made were captured using large format analogue tape.

So surely I should be enthusiastic about the emergence of DVD-A and SACD? Well, yes and no. I cannot help but think that there is a certain irony in the fact that after threatening the very existence of records, CD is, after a brief reign as the most popular commercial medium for music, itself under threat from the supposedly superior formats. With all this new and bewildering array of technology looming, I am not surprised at the reaction of an acquaintance of mine who suggested that spending a lot of money on a high end CD Player was a bit foolish to say the least. It took me a long time to

actually get round to buying a CD player, and it only occurred when I could no longer easily buy the music that I wanted on vinyl – and I suspect that will be that case with anything new such as DVD.

Head in the sand? Well yes, to a degree, as apart from anything else I cannot bear to witness large, greedy conglomerate companies wasting enough money to sort out the third world on legalities and petty squabbling over formats. Remember Betamax versus VHS? I will say no more. And I haven't even started on copy protection and watermarking. So as far as I am concerned, I'm still interested in getting more enjoyment out of my present collection of music on CD, regardless of what the future might bring, which is just as well really.

Densen have been making Hi-Fi equipment for a while now, and certainly their amplification has been well received in this country, as indeed has the less expensive model of the machine I have recently been using. With a name like 'Beat' for a range of equipment and a company motto that states 'Life is too short for boring Hi-Fi', you know to a certain extent where they are coming from. Much like the Naim Audio philosophy in the eighties, the emphasis is on involvement with the music rather than the equipment, to the extent that you should be excited enough to stand up and wave your arms about playing an imaginary guitar or conducting an orchestra. Mmm. The less said about that the better.

But to meet Thomas Sillesen who is Densen Audio Technologies, puts it all in perspective. A man full of infectious enthusiasm, on the various occasions he has been to visit me he has spent most of the time on his hands and knees – nothing funny you understand, he has just been more interested in trawling through my record collection than talking hi-fi. The first mention of his new CD player occurred in an aeroplane somewhere over France on the way to visit JM Labs, where he explained with the aid of diagrams on a paper napkin exactly why it was so good. On his last visit to my house, we spent a pleasant evening talking and listening music, and generally putting the world to rights until the small hours. It wasn't until the following day morning and he was due to leave that he casually mentioned he had the CD player in the car and maybe I should listen to it. So much for the hard sell.

Aesthetically, the B400 XS is both elegant and nicely understated. Constructed from thick aluminium plate, the black casework is well finished off and reassuringly solid, however the edges are extremely sharp; not only does this make them vulnerable to knocks, be warned they are capable of drawing blood. The eight function buttons (gold or silver – your choice) cover basic functions and sit either side of the red LED display, this can be switched to display information when a button is activated and then dim to off while playing.

Two sets of fixed audio outputs are provided, while the BNC digital output is switched, circumnavigating any possible sonic degradation. The remaining connections are communication ports for use with other Densen equipment in multi room installations and the like. There are a couple of couple interesting features like the provision of a phrase switch, and a circuit that produces a high frequency 'pulse' to de magnetise the signal path, every time the draw is opened.

The B400 does not come with a remote control as standard, unfortunately this will cost an extra £250, which seems a bit steep, unless you are using the Densen amplification in which case it will control that as well. Called the Gizmo, it is not the most intuitive device I have used, as it requires a degree of concentration to find the desired function, although once there the small buttons are

positive to the touch. But it really works. Upside down, from the depths of the settee, facing any direction you like it works – every time. The only remote system I have used with similar efficiency is the B&O system I have in my bedroom, which is funnily enough Danish – you can draw your own conclusions.

The electronics are based around a Sony transport, which utilises glass rather than the more usual plastic for the optical assembly, it is controlled by circuitry designed in house by Densen. Internally, construction is neat and tidy, with two large circuit boards either side of the transport, one of which is exclusively for the PlusBit converter. Extensive use is made of surface mount technology, my only area of concern is with the use of self adhesive clips to support the boards, a year or two down the line I suspect they will lose their grip allowing the boards to slop around. It is with the digital to analogue converter however that the B400 XS claims to be radically different. Christened 'PlusBit' technology, apparently it can mathematically improve the digital signal by adding bits to the original source material, and effectively double the resolution of the CD. I am going to gracefully back out of this one by saying that my understanding of digital technology is patchy to say the least, and despite diagrams and technoblurbs I am none the wiser. The proof of the pudding.

Given a few days to run in, the XS was substituted for the Meridian 508.24 CD Player that I usually use in my system. The main reason I have stuck with this player for the last three years is because it is extremely comfortable to listen to. Other players have highlighted its shortcomings, in particular when it comes to rhythm and timing; bottom and slam is something that it just doesn't. But given that a large part of my CD collection consists of orchestral and string music, I have been unwilling to sacrifice its highly natural and spacious presentation in preference to a player which makes rock music sound good. By comparison, most of the machines I have tried that major on dynamics and timings are not as relaxing to listen to when playing string quartets, and have to me, sounded artificial. I have always felt that in an ideal world, I would have a machine for each type of music.

Well the B-400 XS went a long way to satisfying all of my musical tastes. Using it on a day to day basis, I was constantly struck by how engaging it was, regardless of material. The top end was smooth and sweet, plenty of openness and detail, and while being somewhat more forward and having extra bite than the Meridian, though it was never in your face or oppressive. Strings had a very natural feel to them, and while sounding delicate where required there was an agility that endowed the music with more vitality than I had previously heard. The Bartok string quartets sounded a little more alive, more believable, and more dynamic, while the sultry opening of the first quartet was exactly that, a little dark and full of misgiving. But as it progresses, the music begins to lift and soar, and the change of temperament was well conveyed by the Densen. Presentation and imagery were good, and although the soundstage did not project behind the loudspeakers in the way that it did with the Meridian, it was altogether tighter and better focused with less of the vague lushness that the 508 had.

Balanced against this, results with rock and pop music were equally rewarding.

Over Christmas I found myself pulling out CD's that I had previously dismissed as being unlistenable, due I suspect to poor transfers from the master tapes. One such example was Marvin Gaye 'Whats going on' – having lost my original some years ago I replaced it with the CD, and never listened to it again. Much to the credit of the Densen, it managed to actually inject some life into this anaemic disc, and made it worth listening to. Given better material work with, the results were wholly

engaging, the precision and timing of the bottom end laying a firm foundation for the openness of the mid and top. In this respect, I was reminded of the Resolution Audio CD player reviews in this magazine some months ago, and in a similar fashion the Densen really had the ability to pick up the groove and run with it. Any number of tracks that I played served to demonstrate this, but the first Jeff Buckley album stands out as being memorable, the drums and percussion were awesome in their dynamics and impact. There was such a sense of coherence and solidity that made music really enjoyable, and much as I hate to say it, more analogue in its presentation, which can only be a good thing.

For me the B400 XS has achieved something rather special. To date, most CD players I have used and have any chance of affording have been good in one particular area, to the detriment of others. The Densen is a cake – and eat it product – it has sophisticated refinement alongside the dynamic and rhythmic capabilities that allow me to enjoy the wide range of music that I listen to. It has all too easily become ignorable as a piece of hi-fi equipment. Unfortunately its performance is going to be sorely missed.

