

The Cutting Edge

Another mitigating factor is the Wadia's current and future capabilities. The Series 9 is not presently limited to CD source material; it will accommodate any digital signal up to 96/24. And those signals, no matter how humble (XM radio, anyone?) receive the full Wadia digital treatment. Further, the Series 9 was built with upgradeability in mind, and Wadia promises support for any higher-

resolution formats that may come along.

But I suspect all this value-oriented talk is largely beside the point for those in the market for such a costly component. For them, the Wadia is first and foremost a product of superb craftsmanship, extravagant design, flawless operation, and performance that stands as a benchmark within its chosen philosophy. Just like a Patek Philippe timepiece.

581 CD Player

If Wadia's flagship Series 9 is the family patriarch, the new 581 CD/SACD player is the renegade son. The two bear obvious physical similarities and both are built around massive, chiseled-from-solid-aluminum chassis. Internally, too, it is clear that these components were spawned from the same gene pool: They share identical digital volume circuitry and Class A output stages; they use the same DACs, though the \$27,850 Series 9, in its characteristic over-the-top manner, employs *eight* per channel while the \$6950 581 gets by with a mere two; and ClockLink jitter reduction is standard on both. As for Wadia's crown jewel, its DigiMaster upsampling filter software, the 581 gets a less sophisticated but conceptually identical version.

There are virtually no operational differences, either. The 581 I tested was a pre-production prototype that exhibited a few tics, but Wadia is aware of these and promises they'll be corrected in production units. As expected, given the price spread, the 581 can't quite match the polished smoothness of the \$9950 270se dedicated transport's drawer. Nor would anyone mistake the more affordable machine's remote for the flagship's brick-like hunk. But the user interfaces are identical, and the remotes are functionally interchangeable right down to the handy reverse-polarity button.

Yet despite all these physical, operational, and topological similarities, the Series 9 and 581 offer radically different presentations of music. To be sure, the 581 retains many of the Series 9's qualities. Both share a marvelously unhurried sense of "inevitable" pace, as well as resolution not only of primary details, but of subtle events taking place in the deep background. And both illuminate the rear of the soundstage like nothing else. But this is where the two diverge, for the Series 9 is all about purity, refinement, and control. It presents music with modest scale and dynamics in order to ensure that nothing gets out of hand. Within these self-imposed bounds, it is exquisitely intricate.

In contrast, the 581's sound is big and

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boisterous, with a penchant for grand gestures—even if that means things occasionally become a tad unruly. Because this player takes itself less seriously, it possesses a musical ease that the Series 9 lacks. All of which translates to very different listening experiences. The Series 9 is rather shy about its charms, and requires the listener to make the initial approach. The 581, on the other hand, grabs you immediately, effortlessly, and relentlessly. Overall, it bears a far closer resemblance to my reference Goldmund transport and DAC than to its own elder.

These distinctions were made plain when I listened to my favorite choral piece, the Durufé *Requiem* [Telarc], on all three front ends. The recording isn't bad—choruses are notoriously difficult to capture with anything approaching realistic scale and sonority—and there is no beating Robert Shaw and the Atlanta Chorus' complete mastery of the form. Through the Series 9, every line of the "Kyrie" was perfectly delineated, as was every orchestral and vocal nuance. The piece was a cerebral feast. However, when

I listened to the same track through my reference player, I found that I didn't care about any of that. Instead, I was completely taken over by the movement's sublime beauty. I sat riveted, afraid even to swallow lest I spoil the moment.

The 581, though, gave a performance I'll not soon forget. The nuance of the Series 9 was fully intact, but along with it came the full emotional wallop the reference had delivered, and even more so. As the movement progressed, it became apparent that the 581's dynamic range is *so* broad, it makes my reference—which I'd thought irreproachable in this area—sound almost compressed in comparison. Likewise, the 581 is so open, the reference—which isn't remotely closed-in—sounds nearly cloudy. Consequently, when the final orchestral and choral lines swelled and dovetailed beyond anything I'd imaged possible, the effect was literally breathtaking. We are all aware that CDs theoretically possess tremendous dynamic range, but we hardly ever hear it. Listening to the 581's phenomenal dynamics, I felt for the first time that the format's promise was fulfilled.

At this point, I was running the 581 and all other sources through my lineage to facilitate comparisons. In such a configuration, the 581 has some sonic limitations worth noting. Compared to both the reference and the Series 9, the 581's imaging is more approximate, and its soundstage narrower. It also has a distinct "white" bias to its tonal coloration; there is not quite enough oomph and warmth at the low end to balance the ultra-clear top. The sound is in no way thin, but pianos, for instance, have less weight than they might have, and orchestras do not sound quite as ravishing. The 581 can also get a little ragged when, say, a full-throated Anita Baker cuts loose. So although the 581 is a near dead-ringer for my reference player, and though both get the music right, in a direct comparison the reference sounds more realistic and is smoother and easier to listen to.

However, all of my quibbles with the 581 vanish when it is connected directly to power amps. Like the Series 9, and unlike the myriad CD players that support but fail to benefit from such an arrangement, the 581 incorporates an absolutely superb output stage and a completely benign

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This player is happiest when there is no linestage standing between it and a good amp

digital volume control. This player is happiest when there is no linestage standing between it and a good amp. The sound becomes far more natural and pure, with greater air and imaging authority. The whitish cast, too, is gone, replaced by warmer, more true-to-life colors. And the narrowish soundstage now stretches comfortably across the room. In this configuration, the 581 rivals any CD player I have heard.

The 581 also plays SACDs. Based on serial disappointments, I have come to expect multi-format players to founder with one medium or another. In particular, many SACD players fail to sound as good as a top-notch CD player. The 581 is itself a top-notch CD player, so it has its work cut out for it if SACDs are to sound even better. But they do. Listening, for example, to the Telarc hybrid disc of Vaughan Williams' *Sea Symphony*, the SACD layer was quieter, more expressive, and lovelier than the CD layer, though it did have a slightly more distant perspective. And when things got loud and complex, nothing collapsed or broke up as CDs are wont to do. If you are collecting discs in this format, the 581 is one of the few players I've heard that will do them justice, albeit in two channels only.

In sum, Wadia's new 581 is a landmark release. It incorporates the strengths of the company's most sophisticated designs, but combines them with a newfound sense of musical freedom. The result is irresistibly compelling, especially if you use the 581 as its own linestage and hook it directly to a power amp. Need another digital source? Consider the 581i (\$8450), which is identical to the 581 but offers four digital inputs in four formats (glass fiber, BNC coax, TosLink, and AES/EBU), as well as a digital out. Need some analog inputs, too? Well, you're stuck buying a linestage. Even then, the 581 richly deserves a serious audition. **TAS**