



# The Wadia 581i

A Fantastic Multipurpose Digital Player

— Jeff Dorgay

I've always been a fan of Wadia's products. They have consistently been an industry innovator and make CD players that offer up great digital playback as well as being built like a bank vault. The classic Wadia styling has been with us for some time now, but it never looks dated to me.

I was fortunate to get one of the very first pre-production Wadia 581s last fall, so I have had a lot of time to evaluate this player thoroughly. Most pre-production units have their share of glitches, but the 581 did a fantastic job from day one. My only issue with this unit was that it did not have SACD capability. This was not a deal breaker for me, as I only have about 100 SACDs, but as time goes on, one tends to miss them...



Moving right along, the production versions made their way to the consumers and the initial response has been great. I was more than happy enough with the 581 to make it a permanent fixture here at TONE and the folks at Wadia were nice enough to replace my 581 with the 581i, which features full digital inputs and outputs in addition to variable outputs. Yep, you can use this as a preamplifier if you were a strictly digital person. Retail price on the 581i is \$9450 and the standard 581 is \$7950.

Thanks to all those digital inputs, you can now use your 581i with a music server, or other digital device. I've been using mine with the new Sooloos music server and a test DAC for all of the other things I've been experimenting with in this vein, like the Transporter, Squeezebox and a few others. It really ramps up the sound of the Squeezebox to play it back through the 581i, but that's another article!!

One other really nice touch that was implemented in the current version, is that the minute you hit the play button, the display dims to about 50% brightness. While we are on the subject, I really enjoy the size of the display, being very easy to read from across the room. *(continued)*

## A Slightly Different Approach

Where Wadia differs from most of the other players is their approach to D/A conversion and filtering.

**Instead of using off the shelf chipsets, it is all done with their proprietary Digimaster software (currently at version 2.5).**

This costs a lot more than a chipset, but offers higher performance as well as field upgradeability. It also gives them the ability to offer 32x oversampling and we can argue till the cows come home if that is THE WAY TO GO or not, but it works damn good here. Over the years, Wadia has also done an excellent job of providing software and firmware upgrades to their players, so again, you can feel very secure in making this investment.

### Initial Setup

For those of you on the edge of your seat, I'll come clean. The final production model sounded even better than the one I had lived with for about six months! I was over the moon with the prototype, but this has reached another level of refinement indeed. It's a good thing in retrospect, that I did not jump the gun and report sooner.

During the last six months, the 581 spent rack time in my main system, with the ACT2/ Series 2 and Premier 350. It took about two weeks of continuous play to fully break in. Right out of the box it had a little bit of upper end glare, but a few weeks later was doing just fine. It had also managed to gain a little more ultimate bass slam and control after break in too! *(continued)*

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Two weeks of continuous play in my garage system and it was ready to bring in the studio and get down to serious listening.

I used the 581i on the bottom shelf of one of my Finite Elemente Pagode Signature rack with a set of Cerepucs underneath it. I highly suggest a set of these and they have tightened up the sound of every CD player I've managed to use them with enough to justify their existence.

Because this is a fully balanced player, I did use it in balanced mode in my second system exclusively, but through the RCAs in my main system. In both cases, I used Cardas Neutral Reference interconnects and an Essential Sound Products The "Essence" Reference power cord. Running Springs power conditioning was used in both cases.

### The Sound

The more time I spend with high performance digital gear, the more I'm impressed with how much better it has become. In my opinion, on a good system, the jump from the 2-4000 dollar players to the 7-10,000 (and up) players is not subtle. As I said in my review of the Meridian 808 in TONEAudio No.7, if you want superlative digital playback, it's going to cost some serious coin, just as it would if you wanted superlative analog playback. As Michael Fremer is fond of saying, 'Don't

shoot the messenger!' I have to tell you that every time I get another warped 40 dollar record from the UPS man, my 581i looks better and better!

Fortunately, the cost of excellence here is still a bit lower than my other reference player. My only complaint with the 581i, is the same one I have with my Meridian player: I wish they played all three formats and I'd be happy to pay a little more to get all three!

Until now, I have been somewhat uninterested in the SACD format, but in true collector fashion, I kept buying the discs here and there thinking 'well someday I'll have the right player!' The Wadia 581i is THAT player and it has made me want to keep pursuing this medium! Sure enough, I've been out on Ebay, picking up more discs, taking advantage of those that have lost interest in the medium. Just as my Meridian 808 has rekindled my excitement for DVD-a, the Wadia has done the same for me with SACD. Where will this madness end? This is supposed to be fun right?

As with any medium, it all depends on the recording and the mastering, but I assure you if you have any kind of SACD collection at all, you will be very pleased with the SACD playback portion of the 581i. The overall sound character of this player is the same, no matter what kind of disc you have in the tray, a well recorded SACD just has some more dynamic range. *(continued)*

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This is where I hand the kudos to Wadia; granted, I have not heard every top echelon SACD player out there, but this is the first one that the SACD presentation has really grabbed me.

**If I had to characterize the sound of the 581i, it would be powerful.**

It is very quiet and dynamic, possessing a lot of weight to the overall picture. The high end performance is very neutral and extended without being harsh. I was freaking out listening to the SACD of Aerosmith's **Toys in the Attic**, with that old warhorse of FM airplay *Sweet Emotion*. Wow, Joe Perry's talkbox on the intro was just huge, extending way beyond the speakers and engulfing the room!!

Moving along to the excellent *Guitarra de Pasion* SACD from Juan Carlos Quintero, I was really enjoying the air around the guitar work, with the percussion floating all over the place. This is one of those discs that sounds very good on the CD layer, but the SACD playback just gave it so much more of a three dimensional feel. But I had to go back and rock out some more, so it was back to Aerosmith again and some Rolling Stones. Should you enjoy popular music from the 60s and 70s as much as I do, all of the Bob Dylan SACDs and the Rolling Stones CDs are a sonic treat!

The other thing I noticed about all of the SACDs I listened to, they seemed to have a bit more of an illusion of height than all but the best CDs. This was a very nice surprise! *(continued)*



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I hinted earlier about the weight this player has on tap. The more selections I played with a lot of bass, the more I was impressed with the authority and control in the lower registers that was just not available with the lesser players. Whether I was listening to music with a solo upright bass, or pounding synth bass, the amount and the texture was very impressive indeed. Symphony orchestra or Public Enemy, it was all very good. Again, this is what you pay the big money for!

Speaking of symphonic music, listening to the Mozart box set we wrote up last issue on Brilliant Classics was fantastic. Have no fear, the tonality of the 581i is excellent and does a great job with natural instruments as well. Again, Wadia does not throw the baby out with the bath on redbook performance. After the better part of the year listening, it does not compromise either and if you are not a collector of SACDs, rest assured this is an outstanding CD player too!

### A Versatile Performer, Indeed

If you any inclination of getting some kind of music server in the next five years, spend the extra cash and procure the 581i. Trust me, you are going to kick yourself if you don't! And besides, it will really blow your friends away when they see a Squeezebox sitting on top of your rack playing through your 581i!

And it will sound great! I used the 581i for my final testing of the Squeezebox and Transporter. It took both of these devices to a much higher level of playback and with all the music server reviews we have in the pipeline, the 581i will become my standard DAC for all of these systems.

Should you be someone who is not an analog listener, the 581i becomes a downright BARGAIN, when you consider it uses Wadia's digital volume control, which to the best of my knowledge and experience, has been the only one I've heard that works in the digital domain, not degrading the output signal. I tried this with a number of different amplifiers and it worked well with most and spectacularly with the Manley 250 Monoblocks which are all tubes as well as the new Conrad Johnson ME250 which is a tube hybrid.

If you have the extra money, I still prefer a separate line stage, but only if you can use something really fantastic. Otherwise, you might have better luck just jacking this right in to the power amp of your choice.

### Make This The Center Of Your Digital Universe

Thanks to the tremendous versatility of the 581i, you can use it as a high quality DAC, CD player and SACD player for not much more than the cost of just one of these three components alone. Considering Wadia's phenomenal build quality along with the ability to easily upgrade the software, makes this a player you should put at the top of your list. Enthusiastically recommended for the digital lover! ●

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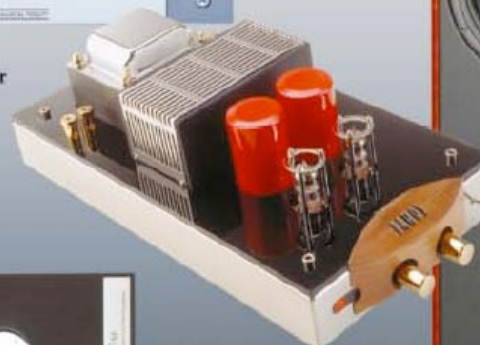


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### The Wadia 581/581i

MSRP: (581) \$7950, (581i) \$9450

### MANUFACTURER

**Wadia**  
1556 Woodland Drive  
Saline, MI 48176  
734-786-9611  
www.wadia.com

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier:** Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Aesthetix Callisto Signature

**Power Amplifier:** Conrad Johnson Premier 350, Conrad Johnson ME250, Manley 250 monoblocks, McIntosh MC275

**Other Digital Sources:** Sooloos Music Server, McIntosh MS300, Squeezebox, Transporter

**Speakers:** Tetra 506 Custom, Penaudio Serenade, Martin Logan Summit

**Interconnects:** Cardas Golden Reference, Audience AU24

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