



Top of the SACD Food Chain

The Wadia 781i

By Jeff Dorgay

As you can see from the other gear and music reviews in this issue, the SACD format is far from dead. While there aren't many new releases outside of the classical arena, Mobile Fidelity and a few other audiophile labels keep flying the SACD flag for one main reason: higher performance. John Shaffer, the president of Wadia Digital put it quite simply: "As long as the discs are available, we will stay committed to the format."

Keeping an eye on the future, Wadia offers the “i” model of the 781 player, reviewed here, which includes a full complement of digital inputs (AES/EBU-XLR, S/PDIF-BNC, Glass Fiber (ST) and Toslink) that to allow you to use the 781i as a 24bit/96khz DAC as well. This will greatly benefit those with music servers and Wadia’s 170i iPod dock, and it will add functionality to your digital system.

If you are a completely “digital” person and have no need for a turntable, you may have no need for a preamplifier. Wadia is the only company that has truly mastered the art of a digital volume control that does not lose resolution as the level goes down, so the 781i can serve as the preamplifier in your system as well. It features single ended RCA and balanced XLR outputs and with its Class A output stage had no problem driving 25-foot lengths of cable. My only complaint is that I would love to see one analog input, so that the vinyl lover assembling a minimalist system could take advantage of using the 781i as a preamp as well. *(continued)*

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The Wadia 781i has an MSRP of \$14,995. Considering the amount of change in the digital world, and so many high-resolution digital files available for download, I can't imagine why anyone would want a player this good and *not* want to take advantage of the DAC capabilities.

Unlike most other disc players that use a variety of chipsets to convert the digital bitstream to analog output, Wadia takes a different approach with their Digimaster software, utilizing a high speed processor (not unlike having a PC inside) running at 31.8Mhz. This additional digital-processing hardware is the reason for some of the extra circuitry you see when removing the 781i's cover. This is certainly not one of those expensive CD players with a lot of empty space inside a big box.

Power Supply Updates

Sounding slightly congested out of the box, the 781i will take about 300 hours to reveal its full potential, like most other high-quality HiFi components. The first 48 hours will show a dramatic improvement, tapering off gradually until about the 300-hour mark.

Some of this is a direct result of the massive power-supply upgrades that a 7 series Wadia player receives over the 5 series. There is a larger transformer and some larger power supply capacitors under the hood, easily visible when you pop it open on both machines. In addition to the bulk, Wadia has added a few more stages of local regulation, and some extra attention has been paid to vibration control.

(continued)

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Aesthetics

Wadia players are built like tanks; the 781i weighs 55 pounds. The casework is a fantastic work of industrial art, with a rather spartan appearance. Our test player came in the standard Wadia black anodized finish, with a dark grey and silver color scheme available at no extra cost.

The 781i comes a proper rubberized-metal remote with nice buttons, it features 1-point type. It looks and feels great, but anyone over 25 will probably need reading glasses. Not to single Wadia out, but I wish all the manufacturers of this sort of remote control would color code the play, stop and pause functions, so the rest of us could easily operate the deck in moderate lighting situations without reading glasses.

The clean front panel of the 781i has five buttons, but their use is vague until you get the hang of it. A quick perusal of the owner's manual will give you the complete layout, so it's no big deal. Personally, I'll take the cool aesthetics over a front panel covered with writing.

Make the 781 the center of your digital hub

If you have more than one digital source, the 781i would be a great control center. In addition to the

plethora of outputs, Wadia has just announced that all current 781i's will have the same USB input that their newest player, the 381i does. With so many people using their computer as a source for digital files, this is smart thinking indeed.

While I'm telling the folks at Wadia how to redesign the 781i, I'd can the Glass Fiber input and add an extra RCA S/PDIF input. I'm quite sure Wadia is the only company that ever used this form of connectivity, so why not make the 781i more accommodating to other sources? Perhaps the next generation of iPod dock will have a Glass Fiber output. Who knows?

For the duration of our review, I used my Sooloos Music server through the S/PDIF input and occasionally swapped it out for the Wadia 170i iPod dock, which was our digital product of the year last year. While the iPod/170i combination sounds better than an iPod has a right to, it does not have the ultimate performance of the internal transport. Very handy, though.

Sans preamplifier

I started the test without a linestage in the system because Wadia's digital volume control is so accurate. Thanks to their Digimaster software, it does not throw away critical information at low signal levels, muddying resolution provided you keep the volume level above 69 on the numeric scale. *(continued)*



This should work just fine with most power amplifiers, but should you require more or less gain, the 781i can be adjusted internally to keep the volume control within the required range. You can find an in-depth explanation of how this works on the Wadia website, but the short explanation is that it works. Perfectly.

The first system configuration utilized the 781i with my BAT VK55SE power amplifier, running through the Verity Audio Sarastro II speakers. The system was connected with a 20-foot pair of balanced Shunyata Aurora interconnects and Shunyata Stratos SP speaker cables. The Sooloos Music Server was connected to the 781i's S/PDIF as an additional source. If analog playback is not a requirement, this could be a system you could easily live with, requiring a minimum amount of rack space and very high versatility.

It is worth noting here that even when using the single ended RCA outputs of the 781i, I could still drive a 20-foot pair of unbalanced inputs without any consequence.

I was also impressed that both the XLR and RCA outputs could be driven simultaneously, so a powered subwoofer could be incorporated into the system.

This system was very dynamic, and played to the strong suits of the 781i. It has a tremendous amount of weight and slam, giving a very forceful presentation. I suspect heavy-rock and classical-music lovers alike will enjoy the large musical image this player portrays, with effortless dynamics. When rocking out with the MoFi SACD of Edgar Winter's *They Only Come Out At Night*, I was playing "Frankenstein" at ear splitting levels without loss of image clarity. *(continued)*

When switching to an SACD of David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*, the piano in the title track floated in mid air between and just slightly behind the speakers, as it does with a good analog pressing of this record. So the 781's presentation is not without finesse. The more discs I listened to, the more I grew accustomed to the sound of the 781i, which was always dynamic, expansive and neutral tonally. Acoustic instruments had the proper timbre and natural decay, which is somewhat lacking in all but the best digital players.

While the Wadia is not clinical, harsh or edgy sounding, it would never be mistaken for warm or euphonic. When using it as a standalone control center/linestage, I must admit I enjoyed it most when paired it up with one of my favorite tube power amplifiers, which injected a small helping of richness into the sound. Of course, your mileage may vary. And starting with such a neutral component will allow you considerable latitude in fine-tuning your system.

In the traditional position

The rest of my listening was with the 781i in my reference system as a conventional disc player, and a DAC for my Sooloos Music Server, as well as the other music servers we've had in for review from McIntosh and QSonix. I also made it a point to use the TOSLINK input to stream some 24/96 files from the Naim Music Store via my Mac Book Pro.

While I got great results with the 781i as a pre-amplifier, I got even better results feeding it into my reference preamplifiers from Burmester and Conrad-Johnson. This gave the overall sound even more air and delicacy. At the end of "Who's Afraid of The Art of Noise" on the *Daft* disc, when the vocalists scream "Boo, Boo" and break into laughter, it all sounded incredibly realistic and bounced from about six feet beyond the left speaker to about six feet beyond the right speaker, filling the room. Another current favorite on SACD is John Hammond's *Rough and Tough*. This straight-ahead blues album was recorded by Chesky and captures a ton of ambient hall feel. On lesser players, the soundfield collapses, but on the 781i, this is invading on analog territory. *(continued)*

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Bigger is Better, at Least More

A year ago, I mentioned in the review of the Wadia 581SE that it was one of the only players to really do justice to the SACD format. Think of the 781i as a super-sized 581. Still having the 581SE on hand for most of the review period enabled me to compare both players with the same software and cables in a highly resolving system.

Both players are almost identical tonally, but the 781i throws a bigger soundfield in all three dimensions and has the most powerful bass response of any digital player I've ever heard in my system, including my \$32,000 Naim CD555. This became more evident towards the end of the review, when the JL Audio Gotham replaced the JL F110 subwoofers I was using previously. If dynamics and weight are your hot buttons, you will enjoy the 781i.

Many multifunction digital players can only play back one type of digital really well,

often sacrificing redbook performance to concentrate on high-resolution playback. I am pleased to report that the 781i is equally capable in both formats. Most of you probably have more standard CD's than SACD's, so rest assured, this player can easily function as a great CD player too.

What's in an algorithm?

Another benefit of high-speed, software-based DSP processing is that it allowed Wadia's engineers to create three different decoding algorithms to optimize the playback sound. Their DSP processing also takes care of pre and post echo artifacts quite handily, which contributes greatly to the very clean, open sound that this player presents.

Position A is the standard Wadia decoding that they have used for years, with position B appearing to have a slightly harder edge and position C slightly softer. I must point out that while I ended up in the end preferring the standard setting the best,

the other two did work on recordings that were too soft (rare in the digital world) or a bit harsh. I wouldn't mind seeing this taken a step further in the future. Perhaps an Algorithm D that filters out all the harshness of my favorite CD's from the mid 1980s, so I can enjoy the Pet Shop Boys in their full glory?

Conclusion

The Wadia 781i is at the top of its class in every aspect, but its ability to serve as a DAC as well as a preamplifier makes it a much more viable component than just a stand-alone CD player. Wadia's commitment to software upgrades for legacy models assures that it can stay there for the future, and its exceptional SACD performance will satisfy anyone with a good collection of these discs. I have been using the 781i as a reference component for the better part of the year, trading up from my past 581i.

Highly recommended. ●

The Wadia 781i

MSRP: \$14,995

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers Burmester 011, Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra PLL

Power Amplifiers BAT VK-55SE, Burmester 911mk. 3, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, McIntosh MC252, Nagra PSA, PrimaLuna Dialog 7

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco, Running Springs Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Hydra 2, Shunyata Anaconda and Python CX power cords

Interconnects Cardas Golden Reference, Furutech Reference III, Shunyata Aurora

Speaker Cable Shunyata Orion, Shunyata Stratos SP

Accessories Burmester V1 and V3 racks, Finite Elemente Ceraballs and Cerapucs, Shunyata DarkField cable elevators