

Start ME UP



Arcam FMJ CD17 CD Player and FMJ A28 Integrated Amplifier

Affordable Excellence

Wayne Garcia

Affordable excellence. Funny how sensible, refreshing, and downright sane that phrase seems these days. Don't get me wrong: For those who can afford it, which more or less excludes most of us, owning the finest gear our hobby has to offer most assuredly rewards with intense musical satisfaction and aural pleasure. But most of us don't play in the Big Leagues, and there's many a tale to be told about those who jeopardized financial security for the latest object of desire. (Fess up, guys: Ever smuggled a new piece of gear into the house hoping the wife wouldn't notice?)

But thanks to companies like Arcam—and there are plenty of others—it is possible to enjoy mighty fine sound and real musical pleasure without threatening financial and marital stability.

Priced at a respective \$999 and \$1699, Arcam's new FMJ CD17 compact disc player and 75Wpc FMJ A28 integrated amp quite frankly astonished me by their performance. Not that I don't expect good sound from Arcam. This 30+-year-old company long ago earned a solid reputation for affordable excellence. And while I'll hit the specifics soon enough, what especially impressed me about this Arcam tandem is the way they grab your attention and pull you into the music. Ultimately, for me, this is what separates really good audio from the pack. And I'm not talking about razzle-dazzle, exaggerated, "hi-fi" sound, but a musical

delivery that's natural and emotionally compelling. Curiously, this trait isn't necessarily reflective of price. I've heard more than a few expensive items that have excelled at the sonic stuff (loads of detail, accurate frequency and dynamic response, wide open soundstaging, etc.), yet for whatever reason have failed to engage me on an emotional level.

These Arcam components do.

Before sitting down to "seriously" evaluate review samples, I generally like to start by casually playing a few tunes while puttering away at the computer in my office next to the listening room. The day I first fired up the Arcam gear—and Mike Marko, Senior Product Manager for Arcam in America, was kind enough to supply already broken-in samples—I happened to receive a few Mobile Fidelity CDs and LPs for an upcoming feature on that company. Among them was The Band's *Music From Big Pink*. Having just written about the group's drummer and vocalist Levon Helm's *Electric Dirt* (reviewed in this issue), and being a big fan of The Band's debut effort, I slid the disc into the CD17's drawer, hit play, set the volume, and walked back to the computer. Not for long, however.

Shortly after the opening strains of "Tears of Rage" I found my concentration was broken; I was completely distracted by the music. Now, kudos to MoFi for doing such a fine job remastering



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this terrific record—it has a clarity, air, detail, bass extension, and dynamic wallop that outshine my old Capitol rainbow-label LP, as a later direct comparison would reveal. And that excellence no doubt played a factor in the music's pull. But that doesn't detract from Arcam's achievement—within seconds my mind was wandering to the music, my shoulders swayed as I typed, and I was soon in the listening room completely pulled into a record I know as well as any other, yet riveted as if I'd never heard it before. No wonder deadlines get blown!

The more I listened, the more evident it was that both of these Arcam components possess unusual transparency, tonal accuracy, and dynamic resolve. For instance, listening to Telarc's recent release of *The Planets* (also reviewed in this issue) revealed impressive instrumental timbres and textures, a deep sense of hall ambience, air around instruments, and delightful dynamic nimbleness as well as dynamic range, which is ultimately restricted, if not hugely, by the integrated amp's honest 75Wpc rating.

By the way, the FMJ A28 falls in the middle of Arcam's integrated amplifier series, sandwiched between the FMJ A18 (50Wpc) and FMJ A38 (105Wpc). As with most of the company's designs, the chassis, which comes in black or silver, is slim and functionally straightforward. The A28 offers six line-level inputs and a moving-magnet phono input, as well as the standard tape and preamp outputs. Unlike the more expensive Rega Elicit integrated reviewed in this issue, Arcam does not offer an optional mc card for the A28. Two sets of binding posts allow for single- or bi-wiring, as well as bi-amping when the A28 is mated with another Arcam power amp such as the A38. (My evaluations were conducted in the single-wire mode.)

Input and volume selection are achieved through all-electronic controls, which Arcam says allow for very short signal paths. You can also customize the volume settings for each input in order to match them when switching sources. The supplied CR90 remote wand is "universal" and also operates Arcam CD players.

Arcam boasts of "ultra low noise performance" due to the unit's high-quality internal components, and something the company calls, "Mask of Silence" technology, which is said to damp EMI (electromagnetic interference). While the term comes across as sales babble, there's something to this "Mask of Silence" thing, which is also used in Arcam CD players, along with the "Stealth Mat" a metal-fiber mat that is said to further reduce EMI.

The low-noise of these components was evident in the air and dynamics of *The Planets*, and also in another MoFi release, Sinatra's *Only The Lonely* (in a fine mono transfer). One of Sinatra's

best, *Only The Lonely* is something of a "downer" collection of tunes mostly about broken love. Playing the Mobile Fidelity version through the Arcam duo not only bathed Sinatra's voice in a gorgeous glow of studio air, and really laid out the Nelson Riddle orchestra, it brought forth the way Sinatra weaved his voice like another instrument with, say, the boozy percussiveness of the piano, the fluttering of a horn, or the flourish of strings. And throughout, the anguish that Old Blue Eyes brought to his phrasing! One example from "What's New" is when he sings, "I

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haven't changed/I still love you so." His voice dips and almost cracks as the line winds down. It's emotionally charged stuff and beautifully delivered here.

If I sound a bit over the top about these new Arcam pieces it's because, while a lot of gear comes and goes through my doors and most of it is very good, it's not everyday that I plug in something that is this musically compelling. Especially when you're talking \$2700 for a CD player and integrated amp that were designed to perform so well together. While that figure still strikes non-audiophiles as a lot for stereo gear, if you add in speakers you're looking at a \$3700–\$5000 system. When you consider the years of deep musical satisfaction that money will buy, it suddenly seems like dollars very wisely spent. Moreover, you won't need to hide the credit card statement from the wife.... just be sure to have her pick the first disc you play. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

FMJ CD17 compact disc player

Type of outputs: Two pairs
RCA analog, one coax and one optical digital
Dimensions: 17.3" x 3.3" x 11.4"
Weight: 11.2 lbs.
Price: \$999

FMJ A28 integrated amplifier

Power output: 75Wpc into 8 ohms
Number and types of inputs: Six line level, mm phono
Number and types of outputs: Preamp, tape, bi-wire speaker terminals
Dimensions: 17" x 3.3" x 10.8"
Weight: 18.7 lbs.
Price: \$1699

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
TW-Acoustic Raven One turntable; Tri-Planar Ultimate VII arm; Transfiguration Orpheus moving-coil cartridge; Nagra BPS and Artemis PL-1 phonostages; Rega R3 and Kharma Mini Exquisite loudspeakers; Tara Labs Zero interconnects, Omega speaker cables, The One power cords, and AD-10B Power Screen; Finite Element Spider equipment racks

