

Lector CDP-0.6T (£1100)

Lector's CDP-0.6T is a valve-hybrid player that allows the buyer to specify its outputs and aesthetic trim level. But the best news – aside from the sound – may be its price
Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

This late in the CD era, it warms my heart to see new players with valve output sections. That they continue to appear (not least an array of science fiction-y models from China) vindicates Neil Sinclair's founding of California Audio Lab 25 years ago. A chance remark about the inclusion of tubes in a CD player's output stage, to ameliorate the then-nasty sound of the nascent format, led to the world's first-ever tube'd CD player. Its appearance was greeted with much head-scratching, guffaws and/or now-I've-seen-everything cynicism.

To the sceptics' dismay, in the wake of CAL's Tempest followed some of the best-sounding CD players of them all. Working in that tradition, Lector, an Italian manufacturer proudly addicted to the valve, has enjoyed great acclaim across the Pond for its costly top-loading model. What we have here is an offering from the other end of the scale, a player that I used for some time without knowing its price. When I finally phoned The Emporium, they had to repeat it a couple of times. I was expecting them to say £2500. I was told, '£1100'.

To say that it's 'a lot of player for the money' or some such cliché doesn't apply: what Marantz, Sony, Denon and quite a few others offer for the same money, or less, will shame the Lector in terms of build quality, fit-and-finish, the feel of the controls, the tidiness of the innards. Lector's CDP-0.6T, while boasting a nicely-made acrylic front panel and beautifully formed metal feet, substantial phono sockets and sufficient heft, punctures the illusion by having its rear-panel legends applied as a sheet of sticky-backed paper. Such are the details that differentiate between the slick professionalism of the major manufacturers and the cottage industry of the high-end.

But fine finishing and attention to detail have never been the impetus for buying

audiophile components. If they had been, the speciality audio industry would be in far better shape. No, we turn to smaller concerns for one thing only: sound quality. So, it is more important in the context of this review to look at the innards than the enclosure which houses them.

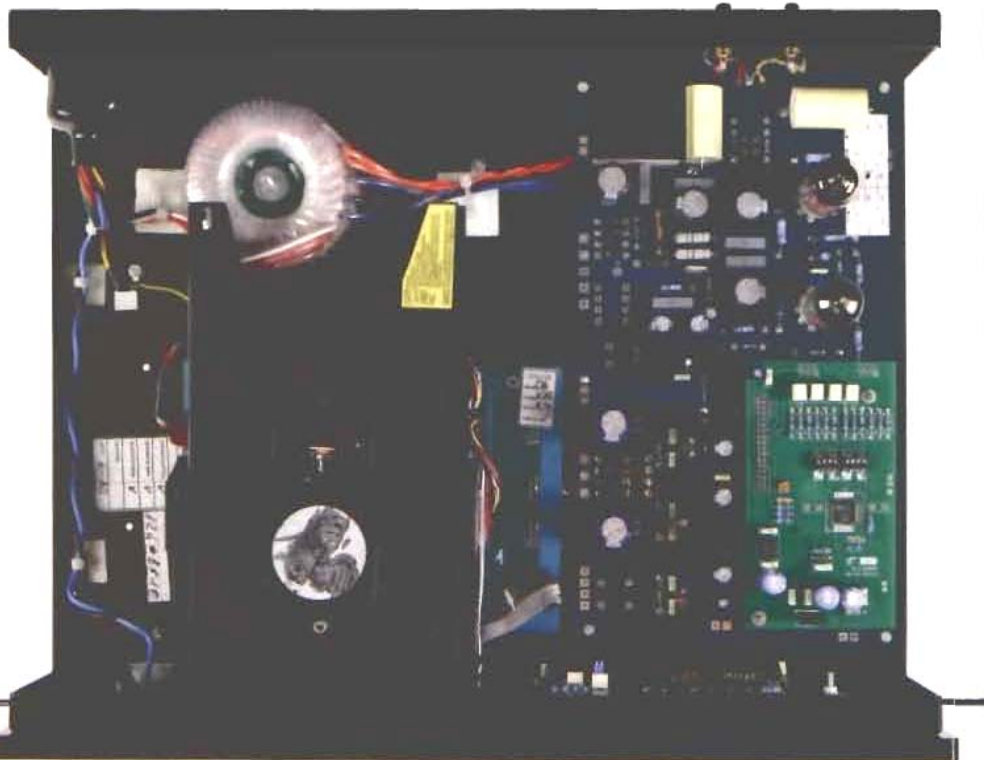
PROPRIETARY FACTORS

Lector describes the CDP-0.6T as a 24-bit/96kHz tube analogue Class-A front loading CD player. While its actual transport is OEM – it has been divested of any identifying marks – the innards are entirely 'in-house', a far cry from many 'audiophile' CD players that are merely re-boxed players from major suppliers, with the odd tweak to legitimise them.

The selling point of the Lector may be its all-valve Class A analogue output stage, but it also features a servo mechanism with proprietary software control, modifications to the laser pick-up, a claimed customised DAC solution with its own 'DSP resampling' alongside other custom-made components. Noteworthy under the lid, besides the PCBs that fill the case, and the still-surprising

juxtaposition of two valves, is a beefy power supply not unlike some I've seen in integrated amplifiers: the CDP-0.6T boasts a hefty 70W toroidal transformer. While CD players can be housed in cases a mere inch-tall, and the idea of a 400x308x85mm enclosure is a tradition we can't escape from (even allowing for valves), Lector does use the space to separate the various elements, to avoid noise or other unwanted interaction due to proximity. The lid, by the way, is slotted for ventilation.

Lector states that, 'From the digital chipset DAC pin to output pin, the signal in the analogue domain has no transistors or ICs in its path – only a genuine premium tube circuit'. The output stage uses premium-grade polypropylene capacitors and two double triodes in Class A configuration. Lector's chosen tubes are ECC-81s (equivalents are 12AT7), and one can imagine audiophile tweekers changing the stock valves for new-old-stock Mullards or Telefunken's or other favourites. It isn't, however, necessary, as Lector already uses fine valves, individually selected for low noise before tuning and trimming for



RIGHT: Plenty of PSU regulation on the main (blue) PCB for the triode-based analogue output while, on the green daughter board, the AK4397 '32-bit DAC' is the digital heart of the player



precision tracking of the voltage output.

Aside from a shapely remote that offers the usual transport and programming functions, the CDP-0.6T is shamelessly minimalist. A front blue-lit display, on/off, open/close, and a lone multi-purpose button for play/skip/stop are all you get. At the back, there's an IEC mains input and gold-plated phono sockets for the analogue output. On the other hand, a sticker on the back of the Lector denotes the space for an optional digital output. If you want it, you can order the player with any of the available optional types [see boxout].

I can just imagine the designers defending the absence of a digital output as standard with, 'if you want a DAC, buy a DAC!'. They have a point: certain authorities have argued for years the merits of a 'closed' system for playing CDs. In a player, the transport 'knows' the DAC that it's feeding. While countless manufacturers, from Nagra to Metronome to pretty much all of them, offer transports, DACs and single-chassis models, the need to separate a player into its constituent parts is entirely down to the customer. All I know is that if funds allowed, my dream CD player would be the all-in-one Nagra CDC – with the company's preamp as well.

As you'd expect, the CDP-0.6T worked faultlessly with an array of line inputs, including the Quad 99 and Audio Research REF 5 preamplifiers, driving the Quad 909 or Quad II-eighty power amps, into Tannoy Mini-Autograph, LS3/5A and larger Wilson Sophia 2 speakers. Cables were

Yter between the pre and power amps, and Transparent between CD and preamp. Speaker cables were my favoured Kimbers.

TOUCH OF NOSTALGIA

As I have no idea how many hours were on the review sample before it reached me, I can't comment on running-in time from new. As this is a valve player, however, I can state that unlike its solid-state counterparts it needs warming-up for daily use. I'd say that 15 minutes are enough, judging by the sound when it's 'cold' and after that period has elapsed. As for long-term running-in, the sound didn't change at all during the period I had it for review.

Through a mix of discs ranging from Neil Young's newest, *Le Noise* – which I loved, despite mixed reviews – to the Kodo Drummers' *Warabe* to Nat 'King' Cole on hybrid SACD, the Lector exhibited with unerring consistency a personality that reminded me quite nostalgically of the California Audio Lab Tempest II.

Mine died many years ago, alas irreparable, but the nature of the CAL's sound was scarily similar to that of the (non-valve) Marantz CD12/DA12 two-box player – which is why the Marantz remains my all-time favourite. That the £1100 Lector resembled it so closely immediately put me in a positive frame of mind. If the Kodo recordings provide one area of

ABOVE: Play, stop and eject functions are available on Lector's minimalist front panel. Disc handling and track access times are first rate

unmatched test fodder, it has to be the rich lower registers. Even through small speakers, the massive Japanese drums possess power and weight simply not available from synthetic sources; the trick is to get your system to move even a scaled-down facsimile of the amounts of air those drums must excite. With roundness that recalled, yes, *vinyl*, the '0.6 went wa-a-ay down and dragged forth the cavernous, room-filling notes that issued from those most mystifying of percussive instruments.

I have no idea what the Kodo tradition means, so I can approach the material solely on sonic grounds. What I *can* say is that I have heard these drums live, and no audio system on earth – at least none I know of – can reproduce the live event. But if we accept that the best that we can ever achieve of Kodo in the home is a scale

'The richness was palpable, as indeed was the scale'

model in the manner of whatever TV you use compared to the screen at a cinema, then it is possible to have a more than satisfactory experience.

CORRECT SCALE

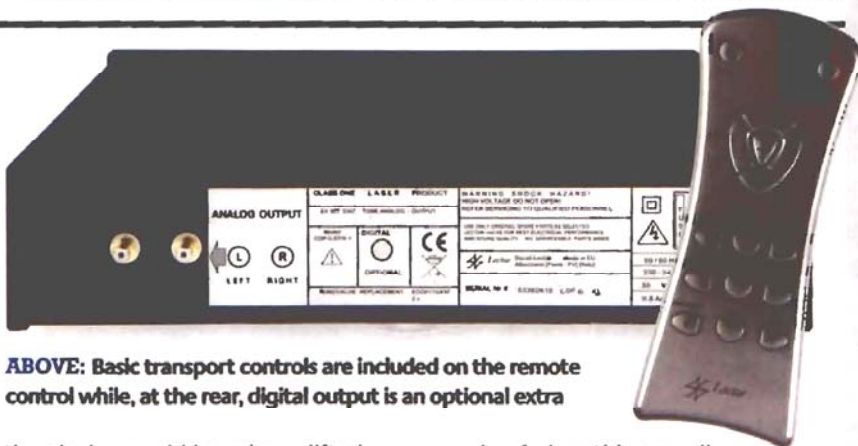
Even through the teeny Tannoys, it was possible to hear the force of the drums, with the solid initial percussive slap and the elongated decay suggesting mallets and stretched membranes and massive wooden cylinders. Weedier, weaker players will either truncate the sound, or the decay will end abruptly, or the sense of mass will not convince. Via the Lector, the richness was palpable, as indeed was the scale. This CD player reproduces space with precisely the set of virtues we so cherish in analogue sources: open, airy, authentic.

Turning to Neil Young, those who regard as his best solo work the early material he produced with Crazy Horse, will find *Le Noise* a tad mystifying: it's pretty much Neil plus guitar and nothing else. But some of

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

If you loved Lector's phono stage, reviewed in our July '10 group test, the CDP-0.6T holds similar 'adventurous' appeal, with a whiff of luxury and ample Italianate charm. We've reviewed it here in minimalist form, without the wooden side cheeks, yet remain unclear about the precise name: it appears as CDP-06, CDP-0.6T and other forms depending on where you look. What you should keep straight are the suffixes that denote optional extras: CDP-06T – standard basic version with analogue output only; CDP-06T WOOD – with cherry wood side panel; CDP-06T S/D – with RCA or BNC S/PDIF digital output; CDP-06T T/D – with Toslink optical digital output; CDP-06T ST/D – with ST-II professional optical digital output; CDP-06T AE/D – with AES/EBU digital output via XLR connector and, finally, the CDP-06T XLR – with an XLR analogue output.

CD PLAYER



ABOVE: Basic transport controls are included on the remote control while, at the rear, digital output is an optional extra

the playing could have been lifted from *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*, the raw, jangling, electric fuzz recalling Seasick Steve's low-rent boogie. After the unplugged refinement of *Kodo*, *Le Noise* almost dares the system to sound natural or real. It's so clearly a product of the studio, yet it's Young *al fresco*.

To this end, the Lector fills the listening room with a solo singer-songwriter and his guitar. Daniel Lanois ensured that the sound is fleshy and grandiose when amplified, with broad stereo effects, so one is allowed to marvel at the undeniably majestic presence of Young even when *sans* band.

FINE DELICACY

When you reach the quieter moments, such as the acoustic 'Love and War', the Lector then exercises its authority and sheer competence by demonstrating delicacy of the finest weft. This is music that ranges from angry to poignant to wistful to contemplative, and the Lector presents the various emotions without any hindrance.

Moving, though, to the exquisite recordings of Nat 'King' Cole from the 1950s, with their silkiness, their arch realism, their freedom from artifice, the CDP-0.6T betrays its Italian origins. Could a hi-fi component have too much heart? Is this even possible? Maybe the lushness of the Lector's sound is too much for the already-lush sound of Capitol recordings of the early stereo years?

Make no mistake: this slight character flaw is hardly offensive. If anything, it might be regarded as too much of a good thing, like Nigella's *embonpoint*. Not saccharine, not sickly, not even 'tube-y' – just a bit warmer, softer, cosier than CD players that place accuracy above musicality. It

even beefed up thin-sounding mono masterpieces, like Buffalo Springfield's 'Go and Say Goodbye'. This, of course, has never bothered me, with my track record of loving Radford valve amps and Decca cartridges and full-range ribbons. As Oscar Wilde famously opined, 'Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess'.

Which means that maybe, just maybe, the Lector is a touch larger than life. It is a robust player, with precisely the heady influence of one sip too many of Amaro. And just as wine might cloud one's judgement toward the positive, so is the Lector wholly guilty of utter euphony. But if that's a crime, a negative, then, boy, do we have our priorities in a muddle.

If anything, the Lector is providing a service that we all demanded back in the 1980s: to make the sound of CD not just palatable, but attractive. How ironic – or, perhaps, cruel – it is that such a musical player, blessed with a realistic price, should arrive at a time when not just a few industry gurus are discussing in earnest the demise of the CD. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While the dearth of front panel controls is a design conceit too far – God forbid you should lose the remote – the Lector CDP-0.6T player proved a joy to use and savour. The sound was on the warm side of the dial, analogue-ish as it were, with no onset of fatigue after many hours of uninterrupted listening. And I'm still reeling from the unexpected joy of finding that it bears a price half of what I imagined.

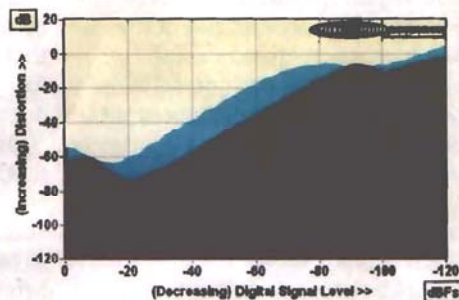
Sound Quality: 81%



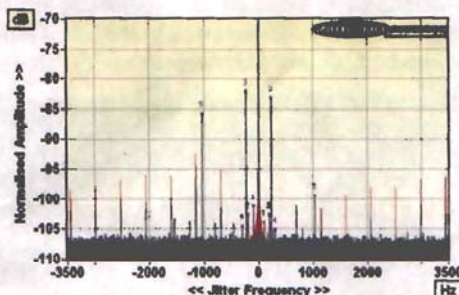
LECTOR CDP-0.6T (£1100)

AKM's AK4397 DAC includes a slow roll-off filter, offering a stopband rejection some -66.5dB below the player's 2.12V peak output. In this instance, its combination with lower-level high frequency signals through the valve output stage results in intermodulation distortion travelling back down into the audio range, a feature evident on many of the on-line graphs (via our website). The main jitter component, contributing a full 4500psec to the 5100psec total, is a simple 2nd-order data-induced pattern marked by the '3s' on Graph 2, below. This is 10-20x higher than I'd like to see and is atypical of the AK4397 but is at least partially masked by proximity to the driving (audio) signal and the high level of analogue white noise.

In fact the claimed '100dBA signal-to-noise ratio' is closer to 81dB in practice, a feature also reflected in the player's compressive linearity trend which has audio signals destined for -80dBfs appearing slightly higher at -76dB, for example. The boosted low-level trend is magnified still further at higher frequencies. Distortion is largely determined by the valve filter and output stage and is just about within the broad '0.1%' specification offered by Lector. Nevertheless, as Graph 1 illustrates, this is not a simple trend of distortion increasing linearly with decreasing digital level. Readers might care to compare Graph 1 with those obtained for the seven CD players in last month's Group Test. However you spin the dice, the CDP-0.6T is evidently a very colourful player albeit one very secure in its disc handling. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for this Lector CD player by navigating to www.hifinews.com and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Distortion vs. digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plot showing high 4500psec data-induced jitter (mkrs 3)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level/Impedance	2.12Vrms / 705-284ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	81.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.045% / 0.11%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs)	0.19%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.25dB
Digital Jitter	5090psec
Resolution @ -100dB	+7.8dB
Power consumption	13W
Dimensions (WHD)	400x85x308mm