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Pathos Endorphin

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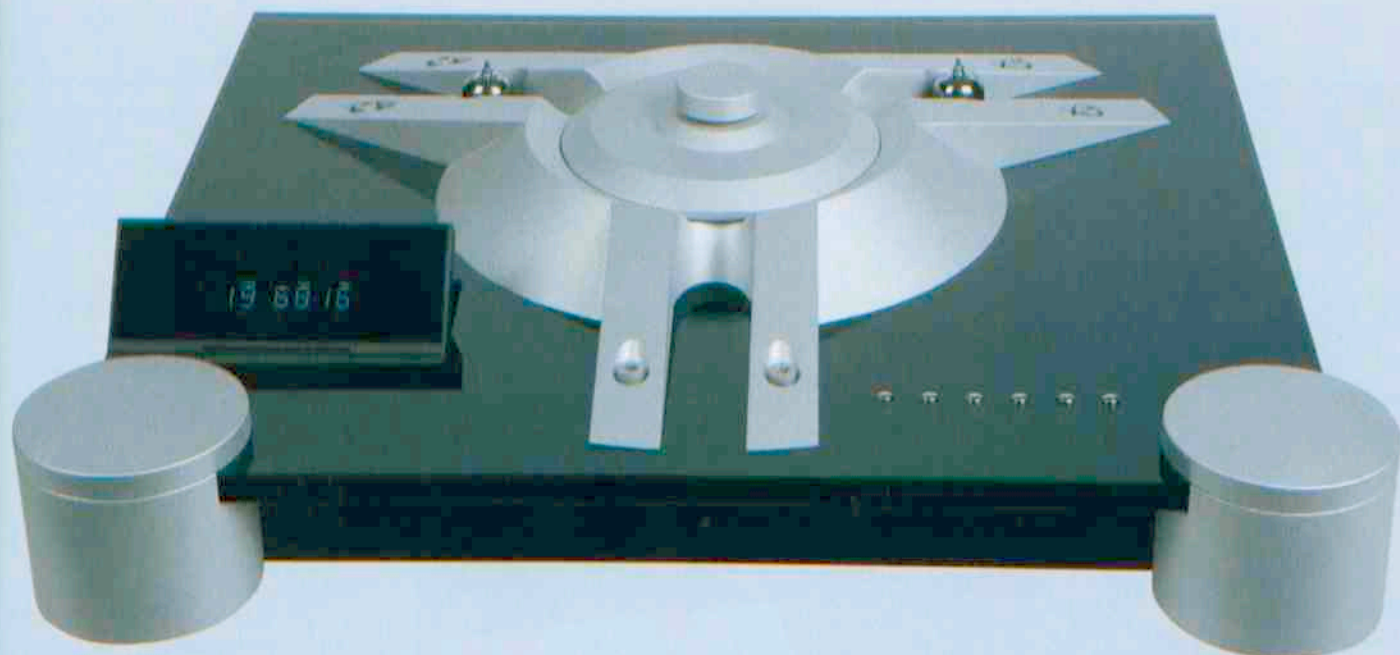
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Flying high

PATHOS ENDORPHIN (£4500)

You'd be hard pushed to find a Pathos product that didn't appeal to the eye, but with the Endorphin CD player the Italian-based company has created one of the most covetable pieces of kit since the first Oracle turntable. And it sounds, well, astonishing...





TESTED BY KEN KESSLER

In the pantheon of truly stupid product names comes a new contender to rival 'Nimbly' and 'Glowy': the Pathos Endorphin. It's bad enough that the company's name – which my dictionary defines as 'the quality that raises pity' – is in itself utterly ludicrous for an audio manufacturer. But 'Endorphin'?

Those of us who were awake the day that they were teaching peptides in biology class know that endorphin is a chemical occurring naturally in the brain – the very substance that turns fitness fanatics into, well, addicts. By encouraging the release of dopamine, it produces feelings of enjoyment and pleasure, a sensation that has been likened to certain recreational drugs.

You can see where Pathos is going with this: the combined name, in addition to suggesting the aforementioned pity (I?) now evokes a sense of well-being. But, as English is not the company's first language (and you really do have to name products in English if you wish to sell anything globally), they probably didn't see the sheer clumsiness, the linguistic thuggery of the nomenclature. It's bad enough that the Japanese have made an art of ruining English.

VISUALLY ARRESTING

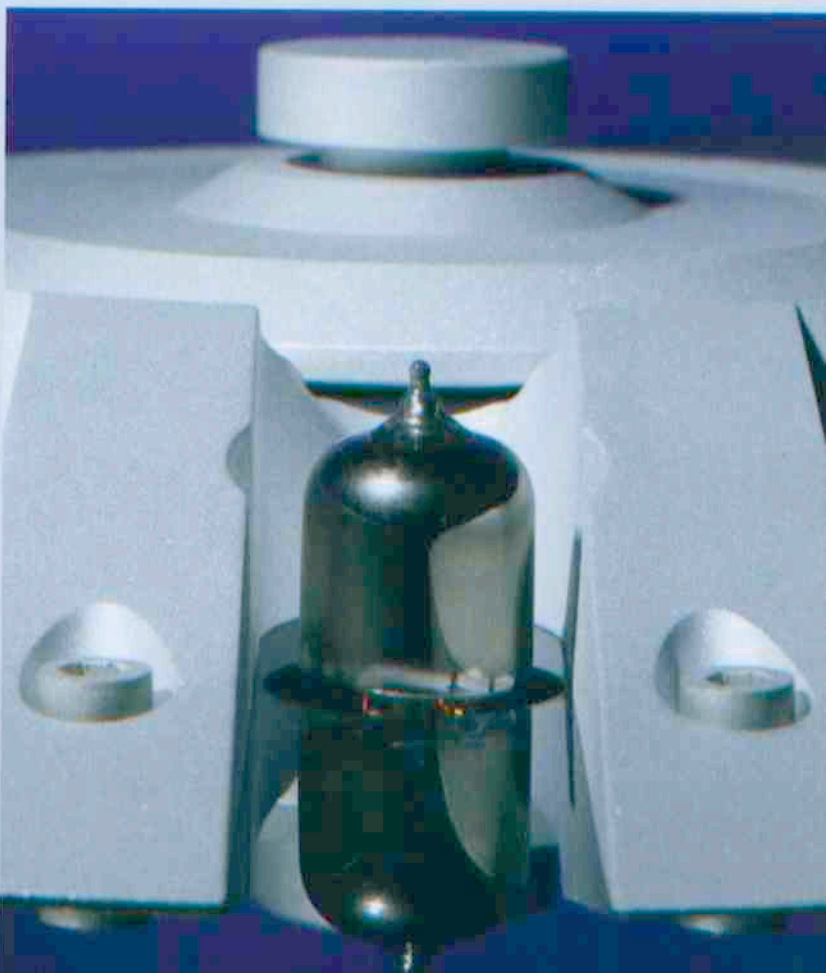
Why this preamble? Because, name aside, this CD player is blindingly good, and I would hate to think that the more sophisticated among you might be put off by the unit's moniker. In fact, the Pathos Endorphin is simply one of the most fetching, most desirable, most attractive, most exhilarating pieces of hi-fi equipment to come down the pike since the first Oracle turntable. To see it is to want it... if you're an audiophile. And if you're not, you will at least go, 'What the hell is that?' Boring it most certainly is not. In fact, I would say it is as visually arresting as a watch by F.P. Journe, a pen from Marlen, or Angelina Jolie.

Pathos, however, would never release a component that offered only looks. This is no footballer's wife, devoid of any merit or function beyond that of exercising a credit card or one's bedsprings. Pathos has made a name for itself for marrying the best of solid-state and the best of tubes. In the rather witty owner's manual (one instruction says 'Don't skip the BS, please'), the presence of two valves is described

"Those of us who were awake the day that they were teaching peptides in biology know that endorphin is a chemical occurring in the brain"

BELOW: Sovtek 6H30PI triode tubes used in output stage

succinctly as follows: 'For years, a common belief within the audiophile community has been that of tubes "warming up" the cold and sharp digital sound. Today, with the ultimate digital technology – and you can stay sure we are using the very ultimate – this is no longer the case. ☺





ABOVE: Beautifully made lid is held tight over CD with magnets

'So what are those tubes for? The fact is tubes are, still today, the very best device available for amplifying voltage. And that's the one and only reason why we use tubes in our analogue stage of the Endorphin. No fashion, no nostalgia.'

Now that is a seriously cool message, and it's hard to believe it was probably written by the guy who came up with the name. But there are two Sovtek 6H30PIs peeping out between the rear aluminium struts, a juxtaposition that would cause you to do a double-take had you not been pre-warned that this is a hybrid. A vast expanse of gleaming black Perspex accented by aluminium pillars, CD aperture surround and disc cover, a flip-up display – and then this abject, unashamed modernism is punctuated by a brace of valves pointing upward like, well, a pair of pert nipples. But deliberate sexuality or not, the effect is like fitting a wind-up clock to the dash of a Ferrari 599.

HOT OFF THE LINE

Because the Endorphin is hot off the assembly line – the owner's manual even has 'provisional' written across its cover in red ink – information is in short supply. This is par for the Pathos course, as it does like to play its cards close to its collective chest, but I can at least tell you that the player offers both single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) outputs and both coaxial and optical digital outputs should you wish to use it solely as a transport.

Which would seem rather wasteful, as the unit contains dual-differential 24-bit delta-sigma DACs with conversion up to 192kHz and the Class A, zero-feedback analogue stage is, as you now know from the above clues, fully-balanced and valve-equipped.

Fine on-board processing or not, I still tried it through a few DACs of varying vintages, pedigrees and levels of sophistication, and found – as is so often the case with well-conceived, single-chassis players not burdened by the compromises of economy – that the Pathos transport works perfectly with its own DAC. I think the word one would borrow from an oenophile is *l'abbinamento*. However, it did reveal its own unique signature through whatever DAC I fed it – from the affordable Quad CDP99II to the Marantz DA-12 – so I could see Pathos one



day offering it solely as a transport should the savings sans DAC be large enough to justify its removal.

Aside from the irritating lack of button identification, operation was utterly straightforward. The beautifully-designed-and-made lid was easily re-positioned over the CD, the magnets snapping it into place, and not once did I lift it off to find myself scythed by a flying CD – or *disco volante*, given the provenance of the Endorphin.

Neither did I encounter any mismatches with the various systems I employed. The bulk of the listening, however, consisted of the Pathos fed through the McIntosh C2200 pre-amp and MC2102 power amp via Yter interconnects for single-ended use and Kimbers for balanced. The McIntosh in turn drove the Sonus faber Guarneris (original rather than current) through Yter speaker cable.

Maybe it's because I let the unit warm up sufficiently before giving it a whirl, but my initial exposure was positively revelatory. I slipped in Keb' Mo's sublime *Peace...Back by Popular Demand*. Bam! He was in the room, sound free of artefacts, living and breathing and... natural. I was so shocked by the sound that I can only describe myself as 'taken aback.' Obviously, by that I mean 'good' taken aback. It wasn't the usual audio schizophrenia of yet another expensive, poorly-made piece of crap that delivered killer sound. You can see that I was falling prey to that vile audiophilic prejudice which dictates that If A Product Looks Good, It Must Sound Dire Because The Money Was Spent On Cosmetics Rather Than Internals. I was ashamed of myself for pre-judging the Pathos in a style-vs-substance face-off. Just like its automotive brethren from Modena and environs, the Pathos is

quick to prove that it's not merely pretty. Its performance is on a par with its styling.

IT'S AN ITALIAN THING

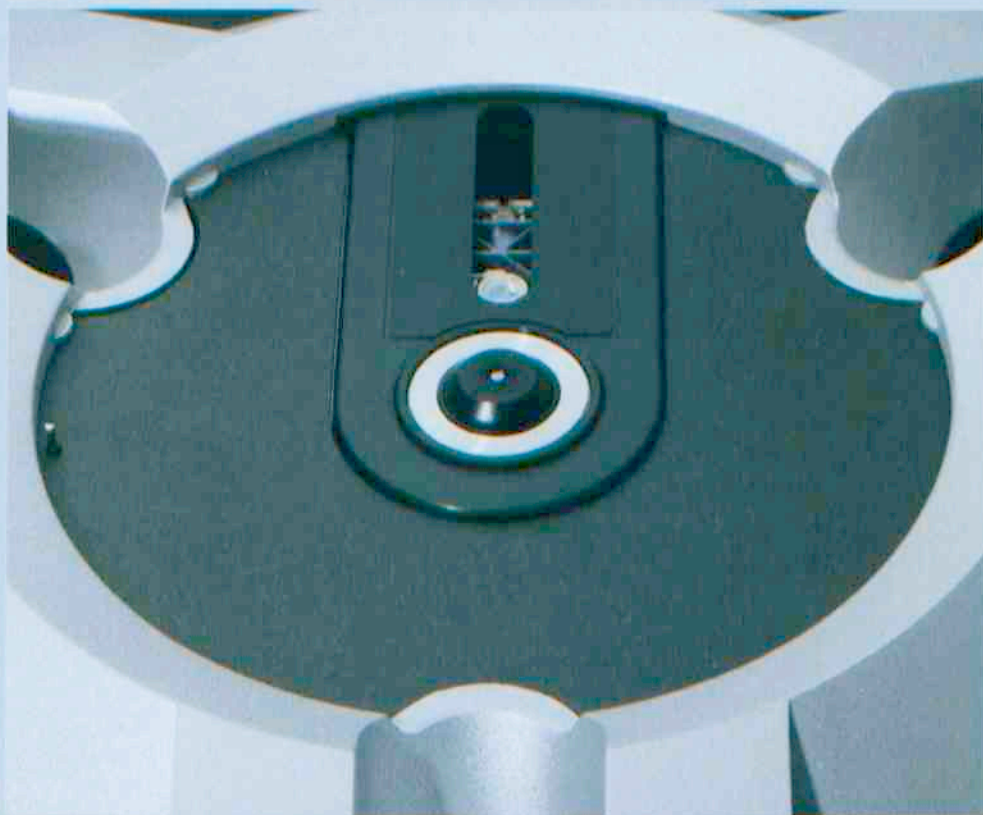
Further listening confirmed the first impression. Although I tend to concentrate on the midband, the Pathos showed both its mettle and its personality at the frequency extremes. It was a toothsome mix of old and new, whatever their mission statement about tubes might argue, a layer of tight, rock-solid bass at one end, and silky-smooth highs at the other. This sandwiched a warm, life-like mid-section that floated above and against one of the most silent and 'black' backgrounds I've heard from any device carrying tubes. It reminded me immediately

'The Pathos is no footballer's wife, devoid of any merit or function beyond that of exercising a credit card or one's bedsprings'

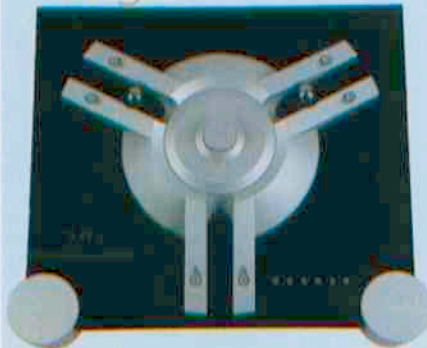
of the Musical Fidelity kW DM25, but with even fewer vestiges of forwardness or aggression. (And the MF is so welcoming that I actually bought the review sample.)

Just as the Pathos' physical shape is all about presence and presentation, so is it with music. The Endorphin sounds large and wide open, exploiting the fabulous 3D portrayal of the Guarneris by @

BELOW:
Top-loading
mechanism
includes a
magnetically-
secured lid



Flying High



filling the room with one of the most coherent soundscapes one could hope to hear. More impressive than the stage width was the front-to-back depth, which will have some of you feeding it a diet of huge orchestral works or majestic soundtracks such as *Glory*.

ACE WITH BASS

Equally, some of you will treasure this for the bass alone. It respected completely the gentle yet prominent bass that underscores the Keb' Mo' masterwork; equally it boogied along with Blind Melon and their greatest hits, and Leslie West via a trio of recent blues-based releases. As the latter performers' works are electric-guitar-driven, there was also an opportunity to assess the Pathos' attack; the transients were nearly Krell-like. This spoke more of the unit's solid-state DNA than its tube element.

But, as ever, I was seduced by the middle, and what this player does for vocals is simply, well, beguiling. Keb' Mo's voice is rich and textured; Art Garfunkel's is as ethereal as a whiff of Balenciaga on a passer-by. The Pathos caressed

both voices, retrieved their form, presented them squarely in the room with authentic sibilance, with hints of breathing.

Temperature rising, I turned to my preferred gender – Brenda Lee belting out 'Break It To Me Gently', followed by Juice Newton's take on the same song. The Pathos followed the entire range of their full-pelt torch singing, conveying the sheer vocal power; conversely, its true background silences ensured that the more intimate moments in the same song were treated like fragile buds.

This was all getting way to hot and smouldering for me, given that I would rather not suggest any sexual affiliation with audio. Suffice it to say that the experience was as an Italian would have it: ripe, sensual, emotional. A ripe Barolo and a plate of prosciutto and figs. And we're talking about CD, for goodness sake.

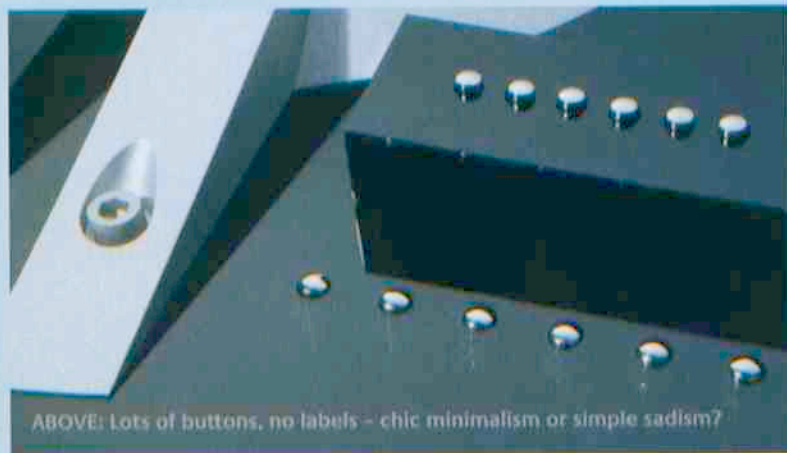
I doubt that anybody would attribute the above to the hissy-fit we call the iPod. On the other hand, I am not suggesting that the Pathos Endorphin is a substitute for the LP.

FOR:
Solid bass,
silky highs,
warm mid

AGAINST: Unlabelled buttons

And at £4500, it's expensive enough to strike some of you as wholly offensive. (In which case, you should go back to reading *The Big Issue* and leave the rest of us sybarites alone.) While I refuse to create a pecking order, I will state emphatically that this joins my current two faves – the Musical Fidelity kW25 and the Audio Research CD7 – for its utterly masterful CD playback.

But it pretty much slaughters everything for style. ☺



ABOVE: Lots of buttons, no labels – chic minimalism or simple sadism?

Hi-fi news
VerdictPATHOS ENDORPHIN
£4500

When you reach this level you're into the realm of audio jewellery. As nobody does upscale like the Italians, then yes, this is the Buccellati of CD players, imparting – beyond its sonic capabilities – a sense of occasion. This isn't a just CD player, it's sculpture. And if you appreciate that, you'll never again want to look at a 430mm-wide box with vertical front panel.

SPEC/FEATURES



SOUND QUALITY



BUILD QUALITY

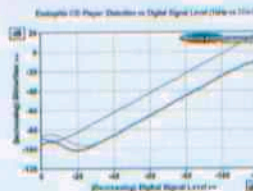


VALUE FOR MONEY

Hi-fi news
OVERALL RATING 14/20

Lab report

This player offers excellent low-level linearity with errors of just $\pm 0.2\text{dB}$ at -100dBfs , stereo separation in excess of 100dB and a response that rolls away progressively through the upper mid and treble to reach -0.4dB at 10kHz and -1.2dB at 20kHz . It's the difference in distortion between channels that puzzles. Through the right channel (single-ended or balanced), distortion falls as low as 0.0008% at 1kHz , rising to 0.0019% at 20kHz but via the left this increases to 0.004% and 0.02% . This increase also influences the jitter spectrum, although the correlated jitter of $\sim 130\text{psec}$ is very creditable. The difference in noise-like jitter is not reflected in the measurement, but may still exert some subjective impact.



Specifications

MAXIMUM OUTPUT LEVEL	2.17V
A-WTD S/N RATIO	108dB
DISTORTION, 1kHz @ 0dBfs/-30dBfs	0.004%/0.004%
DISTORTION, 20kHz @ 0dBfs	0.02%
FREQUENCY RESPONSE 20Hz-20kHz	+0.0 to -1.2dB
DIGITAL JITTER	130psec
RESOLUTION @ -90dBfs	+0.0/-0.1dB
STEREO SEPARATION, 20Hz-20kHz	>100dB
DIMENSIONS	480x400x100mm (wdh)

Contact numbers

TEL: +44 (0)1753 652669 WEB: www.pathosacoustics.com

Review system breakdown

SOURCES: Quad CDP99 II CD player/pre-amp, Musical Fidelity kW DM25 CD transport/DAC
AMPS: McIntosh C2200 pre-amp, McIntosh MC2102 power amp, Melody/Onix SP3 integrated amp, Moscode 401HR power amplifier
SPEAKERS: Apogee Scintilla, Sonus Faber Guarneri Homage, Tannoy Autograph Mini
CABLES: Yter speaker cables and interconnects

We listened to

BLIND MELON
Tones Of Home
– The Best Of Blind Melon
(Capitol 72348-63709-2-1) CD

ART GARFUNKEL
Breakaway
(Columbia 468873-2) CD

MR. BIG
Lean Into It
(Atlantic 7567-82209-2) CD