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POWER

# Forbidden Pleasures...

## The Consonance Orfeo CD Player and Tristan Integrated Amp

by Alan Sircom

A surprising thing about Chinese-made products... few take advantage of their Chinese-ness, preferring instead to copy styles and designs from the Golden Age of UK and US hi-fi (the 1950s and 1960s). Of course, this is understandable because a) it was a Golden Age of hi-fi sales and b) the target audience is not strictly Chinese in many cases. But China's rich heritage often seems missing from the many products built there.

Not so the latest range from Consonance. The Beijing-based company looked around its home town for inspiration and the result is the Forbidden City series of products. Comprising two CD players, two integrated amplifiers, plus an all-in-one system and a turntable, they all share the same look; an homage to the gates of the Forbidden City itself. The Orfeo and Tristan are the two £995 entry points to the Forbidden City range, and as a consequence have the choice of either an all-black or all silver finish, while the more up-scale Turandot player and Calaf amp have the right grade of red with black dots as a front panel. Cor!

The design is elegant and shows off just how well parent company Opera (not to be confused with the Italian speaker manufacturer of the same name) builds its Consonance products. Excepting the big, touch sensitive display, these products could pass for Classé, both in looks and build. And yet, they cost just £995 a piece.

In fact, the only real downside to the Forbidden City duo here is they are a touch unfathomable at first jump. The products have a central red LED read-out with a power on switch beneath on the Tristan and a thin transport door on the Orfeo. Beneath these are a series of buttons – six on the Orfeo and four on the Tristan – which are slightly larger, slightly less black and slightly less square than the Forbidden City door pattern.



They also have instructions, written in near-black, dark, dark grey. In other words, unless you know where they are, you can be forgiven for thinking these two products have no controls whatsoever on the front panel.

Fortunately the remotes are somewhat clearer, whilst still reflecting the same rock-solid approach to product build.

Despite the very different finish, the solid black remote shows that the Orfeo is 'simply' a refinement of an old friend – the Consonance CD-120 Linear as tested in issue 44. Like the CD-120, the Orfeo has just the one set of single-

ended phono sockets and a digital coaxial output, as well as a broadly similar internal architecture, with a centre toroidal transformer feeding the relevant digital and analogue stages spread evenly across the box. Both have the same 2.35V output, too. This puts them a notch above the Red Book standard 2V output, but keeps the players in line with modern techniques (a slightly more powerful output will sound more exciting in demonstration... it's a trick many CD manufacturers have been doing since the mid 1980s).

More importantly, the Orfeo and CD-120 share the same basic digital architecture and the same venerable and venerated Philips TDA1543 dual 16-bit chip, although this time four chips to the CD-120's two. This DAC dates back to 1991 (modern designers

have to pay good money to get the TDA1543's application notes translated from the original Latin), and is used here in non-oversampling form. In a time where every other CD player oversamples and up-samples its PCM data stream to seemingly insane levels, it's perhaps refreshing to find a player that sticks resolutely to 16-bit processing and sampling at 44.1kHz, although you can push the sampling frequency to 88.2kHz from the remote.

Where things get really twisty is in the digital filtration stage. Or rather, where the digital filtration stage normally sits, because Opera has taken the bold step of doing

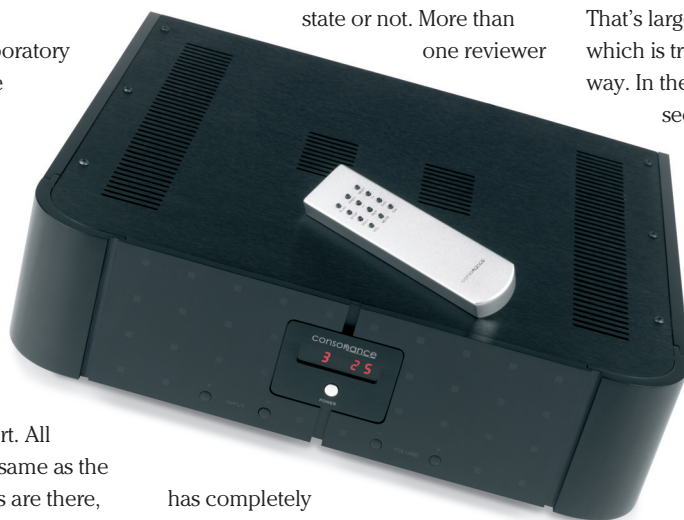
▶ without FIR (finite impulse response) filtration altogether. A FIR filter works by introducing a phase-linear delay to a signal to 'decimate' or 'interpolate' a datastream. If you think of this in purist audio terms, it means the filter essentially trades the time domain for the frequency domain... and that's a trade-off too far. Opera is not the first to think this through – Audio Note has been doing the same for some years and Opera itself cites Ryohei Kusunoki's article (published by Sakura Systems) as the catalyst for the lack of FIR filtration in the CD-120 and Orfeo.

There's a lot of 47 Laboratory style technology inside the Orfeo, even if the Sakura Systems team were not directly involved in the product development. The analogue filtering (as distinct from the digital stage) and I/V stages use discrete components (the I/V stage is passive) and the whole signal path is kept mercifully short. All of which is essentially the same as the CD-120, but the differences are there, if you scratch the surface. Well, in fact, the surface – or rather the case – forms a large chunk of the differences, because the extra rigidity of the thick Forbidden City case helps. It's this along with the dual-differential DAC layout, a beefier transformer, a slightly more discerning sift through the components that upgrades critical elements and replacing the LCD panel of the CD-120 with a less noisy LED read-out that delivers the performance improvements over the cheaper model. But given the architectural similarities, perhaps it's better to think of the Orfeo as a CD-120 in evening dress rather than a wholly new CD design per se. No bad thing, given that the CD-120 was a *Hi-Fi+ Product of the Year* in 2006.

The Tristan also shares its genome with other products in the Consonance line-up... but this time it's more distant

relative than bigger brother. The Tristan is a scaled down, solid-state only, half the power version of the 200 watt Calaf, but still with relay switched sources. It's also about half the size, half the weight, with no ugly hand-lacerating heatsinks down the sides and no balanced input. What the 100 Watt Tristan does have is just three line and one phono input, this last switchable from MM to MC at the touch of a toggle on the rear panel.

Opera can get a bit blurry about technology in this range, specifically whether a product is completely solid-state or not. More than one reviewer



has completely failed to notice a pair of input triodes buried inside the Calaf. Here though, both Orfeo and Tristan are distinctly solid-state in construction. The other blurry bit is the concept of Cool Class A, which is said to be derived from the Calaf. As best we can ascertain, this simply means the amp runs in Class A for the first few watts, before dropping into Class AB thereafter. Like the Orfeo, it is impeccably well built, not just for the money... just well built full stop.

Things have a habit of twisting and turning in hi-fi. One moment, the market is flooded with good new CD players at a price point and then it's the turn of amplifiers. Therein lies a problem for the Tristan; it's a very good amplifier in a sea of very good amplifiers. It's no simple placeholder, but one can't help feeling that on its own it lacks that special sparkle that will make it stand out from

the crowd. Which is a shame because this is that rarest of things, a great all-rounder, an amp where absence of character is a virtue rather than a vice. It is extremely musical in a dry, tight and controlled way, with a very good level of detail and lots of focused, deep between-the-speakers imaging. It also has extremely good bass, an open midrange and a gently extended treble. It is not the most rhythmically obvious amplifier around, but neither does it lack for rhythmic drive when required.

So, why does this seem so negative? That's largely down to the CD player, which is truly excellent – in its own way. In the light of the Orfeo, the Tristan seems merely good and that sets it up for damning with faint praise. But, that's not the whole story; the Orfeo is a love it or hate it product, where the Tristan is a far more balanced performer. As a result the buying decision for both is likely to rest upon the individual's like or dislike of the CD player.

So, what's to like or dislike? The sound of the Orfeo is one of the most singularly alive and dynamic you'll hear from CD. Virtually any CD. Ever. Other CD players that come close to being this dynamic and involving all take pretty much the same filterless approach (such as the 47 Labs, Audio Note, Zanden and other Opera/Consonance models). It's a topology that makes the CD player sound more unforced and musical than almost all the other players on the market today – especially at this price. The Orfeo adds detail, dynamic authority and transparency to the CD-120 mix, qualities that make it more revealing but also reveal its character more clearly. You trade finesse – especially in terms of air and detail at the top end – for that easy musical flow and directness of communication. The question is whether you see that ▶

► trade as a no-brainer or a dangerous hint of anarchy...

There will always be those who question the sonic costs of this approach. Those who want their CD sound clean and analytical, with carved from solid bass and vice-like control will find the Orfeo wanting. Similarly those who think the key to CD greatness is a bright, zesty presentation won't even consider the Orfeo, simply because it integrates its musical information rather than volley firing it at you. It's also possible to catch this player out. With the wrong recording the Orfeo can sound (bizarrely) both stark and listless at the same time. In extending the envelope the Orfeo also shows its edges, meaning that just occasionally a disc will lift the player's skirt, revealing its underwear. In this respect the smoother sound of the CD-120 is better able to cover its tracks (and its dignity). But such recordings are rare and for the rest you are handed a sound that reminds you just why you got into hi-fi in the first place.

There's some small sense of what it can do from the very outset, in that it makes music very open and enticing. It just doesn't do it in the most forthright manner. But as you listen more and more, you find yourself drawn into the music's warp and woof, instead of just its surface nature. Even those who hate the sound of the Orfeo will admire its musicality – in rather the same way that those who cannot stomach the Rega CD players generally at least respect what they do. They just know they do it for other people.

For me though, the sheer musicality of the Orfeo drives a system in the right direction. And it will do this with any system. What the Tristan brings to the party is honesty and neutrality, the perfect foil for the potentially brilliant

but possibly frustrating Orfeo. Of course, that makes the Tristan sound like it's a sort of audio Switzerland, with visions of Orson Welles doing the cuckoo clock speech from *The Third Man*. Nothing could be further from the truth; the Tristan is a dynamic and capable amp, more than handy enough to keep up with the expressive freedom of the CD player without keeping it too much in check.



The amp also has enough power behind it to make music spring to life, something that happens often with the Orfeo.

Opera's ability to blur the lines between valve and solid-state might have been better used here. The Tristan cries out for a valve or two in the input stage to add that last degree of sparkle to an already dynamic and powerful presentation. It would then loft the Tristan from being a very good front-runner to being on the podium at every audition. There again, it would also turn it into a little Calaf, with a price to match.

Let's put this into some kind of perspective. In the Orfeo, Opera has produced one of the most exciting CD players available, and in the Tristan an extremely good amplifier to go with it. The CD player's sparky personality is tempered by the amp's calm neutrality, Katherin Hepburn to the Tristan's Keira Knightly, Pablo Casals playing the Bach *Cello Suites* as opposed to Yo Yo Ma. Together the contrast works, but apart there are those who might find the amp

a little too "pale and interesting", the CD player a little too characterful for their taste. Of the two, the CD player is the star – it wears its heart well and truly on its sleeve, but assuming you want what it does, there's nothing near the price that does it better. The amp is more of a sleeper, and easier to overlook. Taken together and rather like the styling, these products make perfect sense as a pair.

The CD player will find its way into more systems as a stand alone unit than the amp, where its individual appearance will make as bold a statement as its musicality. The Chinese invented fireworks, the Orfeo continues the tradition...



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

##### Consonance Forbidden City Orfeo

Type:	Integrated CD player
DAC:	Dual differential 16bit TDA1543X4
Outputs:	1pr. unbalanced RCA phonos 1x co-axial SPDif digital
Output Voltage:	2.35V
Remote Control:	Philips RC-5 compatible
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 110 x 330mm
Weight:	18kg
Price:	£995

##### Consonance Forbidden City Tristan

Type:	Integrated amplifier
Inputs:	3x line-level 1x phono (MM/MC)
Input Sensitivity:	300mV
Power Output:	100 Watts into 8 Ohms
Minimum Load:	4 Ohms
Remote Control:	Philips RC-5 compatible
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 110 x 390mm
Weight:	22kg
Price:	£995
Guarantee:	1yr
Number Of UK Dealers:	14

##### UK Distributor:

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