



Micromega CD-20 **£1,222**

Something of a quirky machine in looks and feel, but sonically this is a far more mainstream proposition...

DETAILS

- ORIGIN:** France
- TYPE:** CD player
- WEIGHT:** 4.5kg
- DIMENSIONS:** (WxHxD) 430x265x69mm
- FEATURES:**
 - R-Core transformer
 - coaxial digital output
 - RCA phono outputs
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Micromega
- TELEPHONE:** 020 8971 3909
- WEBSITE:** micromega-hifi.com

Micromega's range of affordable audiophile hi-fi separates has been slowly winning friends for several years now, building a fine reputation for sound quality.

The CD-20 is rather quirky in its appearance and operation. The casework is lavishly finished metal and duly looks glamorous, but is actually rather resonant and insubstantial. The deep blue fluorescent display feels primitive, especially compared to the likes of the Yamaha, while the control buttons feel cheap. Ditto the disc tray which is noisy, while loading is slower than average, again compromising the overall feel.

Inside however, Micromega has obviously spent money; the Sony mech isn't special, but the R-Core power transformer for the digital section is pretty exotic for a player of this price; there's also a specially designed UI type for the analogue section. That's your lot, however; the rear panel is an exercise in studied minimalism, with just a single coaxial digital output as the only concession to luxury of any possible type. Not the Yamaha, then...

Sound quality

The panel agreed that the CD-20 was distinctly different to everything that had come before, offering some of the warmth of the Astin Trew with a

good deal of the insight and grip of the Cyrus, plus a bit of its own magic to boot...

If the Astin Trew was Barry White on a sofa and the Cyrus was The Smiths live in concert, then this was Sade in a wine bar! One panelist said "its tonal balance is almost perfect, but it's not as rhythmically cohesive" (as the Cyrus). Another said that in the bass, it was very similar (to the Cyrus) "but with more bass weight". The other thought it "slightly overblown or flabby in the bass", which just goes to show how preferences differ. Generally though, it was felt to be nicely warm and rounded down south.

Across the midband it was complemented for its fine detailing, but the plaudits didn't flow as strongly as with the Cyrus. "Essentially competent, but rather bland; tried to turn everything into background music, but not in an unpleasant way", said one panelist. Others were kinder; "there's nothing wrong here", one opined, referring to the smooth and sophisticated way it handled the Sinatra track, which frankly had grated via some other machines here. The Who excerpt caused one listener to comment that it had "a better sense of rhythm to all the other CD players here, except (the Cyrus)", no less.

The silky treble certainly helped it; sweet and seductive, it made for a



very moody, atmospheric rendition of the Mary Black track; imaging was spacious and hi hats sparkled in a way traditionally associated with pricier CD spinners. "Not mega punchy or engaging but super smooth with fine tone", one listener reported definitively.

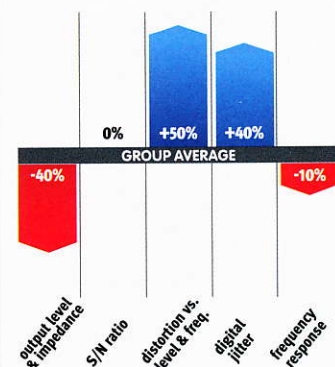
The overall effect was of a highly capable and enjoyable machine, but one that didn't excel in any particular way. No one disliked this one bit, and most felt it close to the top of the tree in terms of sonic performance, if not build.

ON TEST

Comparing our lab data with that on record for Micromega's other players suggests the CD-20 is closer in performance to the top CD-30 model than the entry-level CD-10. The 2.1V output is identical as is the 108dB A-wtd S/N ratio while jitter is at the limit of measurement with 16-bit audio at just 115psec. Distortion is very low at just 0.0003% through bass and midrange and barely increases at the highest frequencies – a rare feat for a digital player at any price.

The rejection of stopband images is an impressive >110dB while ultrasonic noise is very low indeed, reducing the strain on amplifier stages downstream. However, while the player's response is very flat to within -0.2dB/20kHz, the analogue stage's output impedance is a little higher than average at ~480ohm, which might make the CD-20 slightly more sensitive to your choice of interconnect cable and preamp. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Silky sound that charms and beguiles
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks ultimate grip and dynamics; unlovely disc loading and control buttons
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Endearing machine with very fine sonics, but fussy to use and patchily built
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



Blind-listening verdicts

David Price puts the this month's group testing into context. How do the contenders fare in the great scheme of things?

Unlike some group tests, where panelists are in complete agreement about everything to the point of monotony, this event didn't produce complete consensus. Everyone agreed on their favourite machine, and which players were generally good and which weren't – but the exact rankings of the lower three differed. This reflected the individual tastes of the listeners; while they agreed about what they heard, their interpretation was different.

Overall though, the Onix SACD-15A was the least favoured. It wasn't offensive sounding, just nondescript; not the sort of machine that would inspire you to embark on a marathon

listening session, it proved signally unable to connect you to the beauty of your music. Factor in so-so build and snail-like disc access times and it didn't do well.

The Yamaha was the quintessential middle ranking machine, one that people tended to quite like, but have no strong preference for. It did lots of things fairly well, but didn't shine sonically. In all other respects though it was a revelation – many will buy it just for that superlative build, styling and feature count.

The Shanling and Astin Trew came next; one was a little too explicit and bracing to the panel's ears, and the other the reverse. Yet both were felt to

be appealing machines with real strengths. They're the sort of devices you buy knowing full well *why* you're buying them; to pep up a system or smooth it out. In this context they're very able, and indeed have already won many friends.

Ah, the Micromega! What's not to like? Well, a lot actually. A cheap plasticky disc tray, fiddly buttons and a general sense that this is operationally a long way from a slick Japanese machine like the Yamaha. But it's sonically capable, with a wonderfully charming and seductive sound that we couldn't fail to enjoy. It's got real across the board ability, something that's hard to ignore...



If the panelists expressed one single strong preference, it was for the Cyrus CD 8 SE2. As soon as it started playing, feet began to tap, smiles appeared on faces and there was a palpable sense of relief in the room. Rhythmic like no others here, yet sophisticated, too, it was a brilliant showing from one of the cheapest machines in the group. Now that's what we call music!

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	Astin Trew AT3500+	Cyrus CD8SE2	Micromega CD-20	Onix Electronics SACD15A	Shanling CD-T1000SE	Yamaha CD-S2000
Price	£1,495	£1,200	£1,222	£1,725	£1,695	£1,200
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Key features	Big, warm, fulsome sounding machine that's just great for taming bright systems	Musically captivating, yet highly sophisticated, too. This was the standout winner of the group	Smooth, relaxed, beguiling sounding machine with a charm of its very own	Dull and uninspiring sonically, and little fun to use, the panel didn't find this very convincing	A light, bright, spry sound with plenty of pep, this player will appeal to many listeners	Wonderful build and styling, but sadly the meandering sound couldn't keep up
Digital output elec/opt	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Balanced outputs	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Switchable upsampling	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Tube-buffered output	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Remote	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

TRY WITH THESE

AMPLIFIER: Roksan Caspian M2 **£1,649**

If you're in the market for a seriously smooth and sweet sounding integrated, this is the one. Sonically it's superb, with a wonderfully musical feel and oodles of detail, too. And being a fairly powerful solid-stater it will easily drive most modern loudspeakers.



AMPLIFIER: Unison Research Simply Italy **£1,500**

Those craving the magic of valves will love this affordable mid-price tube integrated, although you'll have to partner it to sensitive speakers. This done, it will sing with most of the CD players here, even fairly light and bright designs such as the Shanling; the Onix may sound dull.



AMPLIFIER: Arcam FMJ-A38 **£1,595**

If it's a big, powerful do-it-all integrated you want then this is a great choice. Not the most romantic performer, it's nevertheless open and smooth, and will be a great partner to the warmer sounding CD players here; the Astin Trew, Cyrus and Micromega. And with power to spare it can drive pretty much any modern speaker.

