

BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



CLASSE



STANDBY

MENU

EJECT

CDP-102

Club Classé

If you want first class performance at a business class price, this player is just the ticket

PRODUCT Classé CDP-102

TYPE CD player (with two-channel DVD-A/V playback)

PRICE £2,950

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44.5x12.1x41.9cm
• Weight: 12.3kg • Analogue outputs: balanced and single ended (variable) • Formats supported: CD, CD-R, CD-RW, DVD-Audio/Video, VCD, SVCD, MP3, AAC, WMA, DTS CD, DVD-R, DVD+R, DVD-RW, DVD+RW

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In HFC 284, we found the Classé CDP-202 to be an extremely refined and beautifully constructed CD player. The CDP-102 is that machine's doppelganger. It's built into the same casework and supports the same features, but with different components and a price tag that's nearly two grand lower. The CDP-102 is essentially the platform from which the CDP-202 was created and you get a lot of the 'big' player for 'medium' player money.

Though high-quality, two-channel CD playback is their primary goal, both machines will also play DVD-Audio and Video discs alongside a plethora of other formats including

DVD-Video, MP3 and WMA. They also share a touch-screen display that allows you to navigate DVDs without the need for a monitor. This touch-screen gives access to a huge variety of other functions too, including some useful features for the two-channel enthusiast.

The CDP-102 has stereo-only analogue outputs in both balanced and single-ended form, but you can hook up the coaxial digital output to a processor for Dolby or DTS surround. The only thing you can't do is get hi-res multichannel signals from DVD-A discs, as that would require a Firewire/i.Link type digital interface or a 5.1 analogue output, and neither is fitted. We expect Classé surmised that people wanting to get the best from multichannel DVD-A would buy a player made for that job.

Video performance is a secondary function of the CDP-102 and its outputs reflect as much. You can choose composite or S-Video, but don't expect either to prove stunning on an HD monitor or projector. For that, you need component or DVI/HDMI outputs.

The player features a TEAC slot-loading disc drive selected for "superior disc handling

characteristics, reliability and control flexibility". It also makes for quick disc changes and a sleeker look to the front of the machine. Because the drive is flush mounted, the remote conveniently features an eject button as does the player, which is minimalist in the extreme thanks to its touch-screen controls.

Inside the curvy box, Classé has done its best to eliminate jitter as early in the signal path as possible, explaining that this timing error in digital signals "increases distortion and robs the playback system of resolution if allowed to get as far as the digital to analogue conversion process". The signal is passed through a block of programmable logic that acts as an interface between components in the circuit and controls clock distribution. The signal is also upsampled to 24-bit/192kHz and then converted using a Cirrus Logic CS4398 DAC. This is one area where the CDP-202 (with its separate Burr Brown DACs for each channel) has a concrete advantage over this player. As far as the Classé specs go, the only measured advantage this confers is greater channel separation, but we suspect that its unpublished tests reveal more.

The CDP-102's stereo DAC produces a differential signal, which feeds the balanced outputs and a single-ended output. This is said to be fully optimised and independent in order to give the best results with either connection. Indeed, it is also derived from a differential signal that is combined at the output in order to benefit from the noise reducing advantages of balanced topology.

As with the more costly CDP-202, you can connect the player directly to a power amp and use an onboard volume control, or set it at full output for conventional operation. The casework is not only superbly finished but also extremely solid in order to keep resonance at bay. This is further assisted by large Sorbothane feet.

SOUND QUALITY

Although we were unable to compare the CDP-102 and CDP-202 directly, by using Townshend's TA 565 CD as a common reference point, it's clear that the two are rather more different sonically than they are in appearance. The CDP-102 is close to the Townshend in terms of detail retrieval and imaging, but has the upper hand when it comes to dynamics, at the expense of a slight shortfall in speed and absolute resolution. This means that, when given a decent system with which to strut its stuff, the CD-102 turns in a beguiling and revealing performance.

As with any decent source component, the CDP-102 does a great job of reflecting the material it's playing. This means it's easy to enjoy the off-beat percussion of the Be Good Tanya's *Littlest Birds* and then recoil at the dirty sound of the Stranglers' *Nice and Sleazy*.

Engineers no longer have to resort to these sorts of devices to make bands sound fashionable (instead they just compress things and hope that the iPod users won't notice). But look a little harder and you'll find music that is both great and sounds good, such as the Schidlof Quartet playing Shostakovich. Okay, it ain't pop, but it bites harder than the Stranglers and delivers torment alongside some beautiful string tone – a true beauty and the beast combination that brings home the sheer horror of Stalinism with little difficulty.

In marginally happier times, Muddy Waters made his *Folk Singer* recording and thirty years later it got onto HDAD, a variation on DVD-A. Fortunately, this process does little to diminish the power and dynamic range of his voice,



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which the Classé serves up to the point where you wonder how the microphone could cope. Less of an audio challenge is Rickie Lee Jones and her slightly nasal, dulcet tones. But even here, the CDP-102 shows that she also covers some range in level terms, allowing the player to get you right in close when she sings *Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most*.

Listening to both balanced and single-ended outputs, there is a small advantage to be had from using the bigger plugged alternative, if your amplifier is also balanced. The XLR connection provides a slightly more refined and relaxed result. That said, much of our listening was done with an RCA phono-terminated Living Voice cable, and this produced some stunning results. If anything, the CDP-102 is a bit more fond of the bottom end than it is of the top, and it will therefore suit systems with components near its price point. In more expensive systems that are full bandwidth and wide open, the CDP-202 is more at home. This is not a criticism of either player, but an

observation that the CDP-102 makes sure that the highs never become inappropriately aggressive and that the bass is fully figured. This is a balance that will suit many speakers extremely well.

The CDP-102 brings you the build and features of its sibling alongside a degree of resolution and tonal balance that gets you right in close to the heart of the music. That seems like a pretty good deal to us. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



VERDICT

SOUND >> 92% [Progress bar]	PRO Great features, superb build, funky touch screen controls and a lovely remote combined with a smooth but powerful sound. Stereo DVD-Audio functionality a bonus, too.
FEATURES >> 92% [Progress bar]	CON As with the CDP-202, video output is basic, bass is not as tight as some of the competition, which means that speed is a hint relaxed.
BUILD >> 94% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 88% [Progress bar]	

CONCLUSION
You get an awful lot of build quality and features for your money. In fact, you get the same as you do in a player that's nearly two grand more. Its sound is rich and dynamic with a full bottom end and impressive power for such a smooth player.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 90%