

EDITOR'S CHOICE

HI-FI CHOICE  
magazine



CLASSE



CDP-202

CDb-505

# Distinctly Classé

*Classé's new top-of-the-Delta-range CD player is not your average high-end spinner*

**PRODUCT** Classé CDP-202

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

**PRICE** £4,750

**KEY FEATURES** Size (WxHxD): 44.5x12.1x41.9cm

• Weight: 12.3kg • Analogue outputs: balanced and single-ended (variable) • Digital outputs: coaxial S/PDIF, AES/EBU, Toslink • Touchscreen video display

**CONTACT** ☎ 01903 221500 🌐 www.classeaudio.com

**B**&W-owned Classé from Canada makes a very, er, classy product. Its latest CD players in the Delta range put many expensive alternatives to shame with their standard of finish and plethora of features. The CDP-202 is the more expensive of two new high-end, stereo-only disc spinners that are first and foremost dedicated to CD music replay, but have DVD-Video and DVD-Audio replay capabilities thrown in to boot.

It achieves this unusual combination (for a stereo player) by using a DVD-ROM drive behind its neat slot-loading mechanism and features video as well as audio outputs – albeit not as comprehensive as those you'll find on a well-stocked video-oriented player. There's no component or HDMI output, so although the CDP-202 plays video, this is not what it is primarily designed for. If you need a top-notch DVD player that also does a good job with CD, rather than the other way round, then the CDP-300 with its 1080-line progressive scan video output via HDMI is the Classé of choice.

DVD playback isn't the only feature here that's unusual for a CD-optimised stereo player – the front panel display screen is distinctly individual, too. Common throughout Classé's Delta range, this screen is touch-sensitive and may be used (along with the remote handset) to access the player's functions. It also acts as

a small monitor screen, which aside from looking extremely cool, is useful for navigating music DVDs without the need for a separate TV or video display – a very 'music first' sort of feature, when you think about it.

Like the equally new and slightly more affordable CDP-102 player, the '202 utilises technology that makes every effort to eliminate jitter "at its source" (see the Q&A sidebar on the following page). Both players also use a CPLD (complex programmable logic device), which is a block of programmable logic that interfaces signals to the different devices within the design, to re-synchronise and buffer clocks and data, and control clock distribution. After this, the signal is upsampled to 24-bit/192kHz, prior to re-clocking and being sent on to the digital converters.

As far as differences between the two new players go, we are told that the CDP-202 has a



## “DVD playback isn’t the only feature that’s unusual for a CD-optimised stereo player – there’s the front panel display screen, too.”

“greater number and cost of parts” compared to the CDP-102. This means double the number of Burr-Brown PCM1792 converters, each channel operating in double balanced mode, with each half of each channel’s signal being converted differentially. This eliminates noise, but requires great precision of manufacture to ensure things don’t get out of sync in the process. It’s not hard to see why Classé is keen that this player should be listened to via its balanced outputs. That said, the single-ended circuits have their own DACs and filtering, too. This means they remain completely independent, which is useful if your amp doesn’t have balanced inputs.

On the connections front, you’ll find analogue outputs in balanced and single-ended form, digital in all three flavours and video in coaxial and S-Video varieties. Thanks to an on-board volume control, the players’ analogue output can be used directly into a power amp and there are various parameters that can be set for this feature, via the touchscreen menu system.

This control system is pretty wild. It contains a number of menus that allow the user to adjust a broad array of parameters. These include variations on digital output, lip sync for video, format preference, ‘teach IR’ (which sends a signal from the player to a third party remote) and programming for the four ‘F’ keys on the supplied remote, the latter making it easier to access the more obscure features of the player. There is even a data display that tells you the internal temperature of the player and the voltage coming in from the mains, plus much more.

In fact, some of these readings are so obscure that it’s difficult to see a rationale behind them. For example, a display for the front channel level (as you would find in a multichannel processor) is seemingly pointless in the context of a two-channel device. In fairness, though, there is a digital output for Dolby and DTS streams, so surround can be achieved if you have a processor.

We asked Classé why it had chosen a slot rather than drawer loading drive and the main reason given is that it was chosen to “complement the industrial design of the Classé Delta series”. Classé claims that there are no sonic pros or cons to this approach, but consider reliability to be higher than the drawer approach. One practical drawback with the slot drive is that once a disc is ejected the player is unable to suck it back in – you have to push it in manually, but we’d guess that ▶



## Q&A

We spoke to Alan Clark, Classé's chief development officer, about the design of the CDP-202



**HFC** Your literature refers to "killing jitter at its source".

How do you achieve this?

**AC** Jitter is always present in a digital signal propagation path. For example, in a mixed signal design (digital and analogue electronics) the instant of data conversion into the analogue domain is a key point in determining the quality of the converted audio. If jitter has been allowed to accumulate in the digital domain to this point, conversion will be compromised, resulting in an audible reduction of fidelity. Killing jitter at its source is a simple way of saying that at each stage of the circuit, measures are taken to ensure that jitter is controlled.

**Given its potential as a preamp, why doesn't the CDP-202 include a digital input?**

We find so few two-channel digital sources being used that we didn't feel it would have justified the development effort to do it properly. Most people today use surround processors in the role formerly filled by outboard digital converters. A digital input that cannot also handle multichannel signals (even if they are to be downmixed for two-channel playback) is of limited value. In this context, you can see that we would have felt the need to do more than simply add an S/PDIF digital receiver and connector to the chassis.

**Why doesn't it have a high-quality video output such as component or HDMI/DVI?**

We now have four players in the Delta range: two focus on two-channel audio (CDP-202 and CDP-102), the other two (CDP-300 and CDT-300) are more home cinema focussed. Our CDP-300 and CDT-300 support component video output and HDMI up to and including 1080p. In other words, if you want component and HDMI, you will also want deinterlacing and scaling. With the CDP-102 and 202, the money is spent on audio. For about \$10 in parts, it was a simple matter to offer S-Video and composite outputs, as the unit is capable of decoding video. This feature can be handy for DVD-Audio, if the unit's front panel isn't close by. It also lets the user watch an occasional DVD movie if there is a TV as part of the audio system.

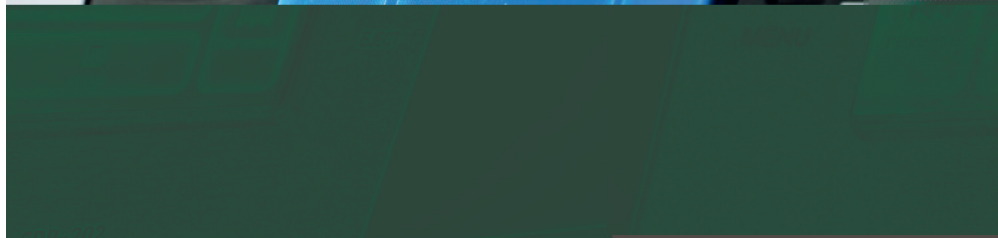


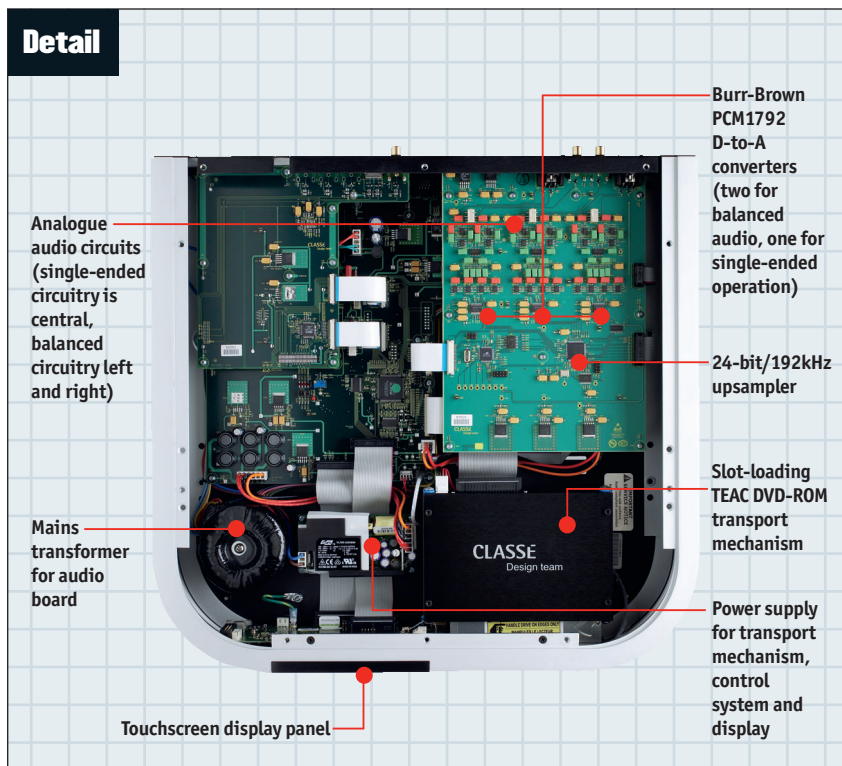
non-reviewers won't be too concerned about this. The remote handset is a chunky tube of aluminium with keys that illuminate every time you use one, and the usual array of functions you'd find on a DVD remote – plus volume, mute and the aforementioned F keys.

### SOUND QUALITY

It took a while, a week or so, for this player to come on song and deliver a sound that was commensurate with its price tag. But, once it got there, we had a grand time revelling in fine detail and textures that are rarely encountered with CD.

Initial impressions are of a smooth and luxurious sound that reflects the build quality, but doesn't suggest tremendous transparency. Indeed, early comparisons with our Townshend TA 565 CD reference player made the newcomer seem rather lacking in definition. Some of this, it turned out, was due to limitations in the transparency of the amplification and not a function of the player itself. Once that had been sorted, the Classé began to come into its own, revealing a degree of finesse and smoothness that delivers music in a relaxed and natural fashion, without seeming to add any emphasis of its own.





The player is unusual in that it doesn't have any tendency to try and etch out the image or time signature of the music, but rather fills in more of the 'steps' in the signal and provides a more complete and refined soundscape. There are those who will prefer a more emphatic and distinctly defined soundstage, but in a high-resolution system, the extra detail provided by the Classé makes a strong case for its more subtle approach. To draw an artistic analogy, a line drawing produces a more strongly defined image than a painting of the same subject, because the latter doesn't have a distinct line between objects, but a change in colour and shade. This is what the Classé makes other players sound like; as if they are telling you where the line is, but failing to fill in the fine detail of the shading.

The CDP-202 does a remarkable job of tracking level. It clearly brings out differences between tracks that other players make less of. This is probably due to the noise reducing abilities of the balanced output that was used for most of our listening. It can also be played louder than average without discomfort, which is a sure sign of very low distortion. We found ourselves winding up the wick on Fink's 'alt.folk' tunes rather further than is the norm, which is a lot of fun. It also works at the other end of the scale too, tracking the level of different notes and voices within the music to provide a more complete picture of the ebb and flow of the entire piece.

Moving over to DVD-Audio replay did nothing to undermine the confidence this player inspires, an orchestral piece (Beethoven *Symphony No.6*, Barenboim, Berlin Staatskapelle) providing the impetus for the player to revel in the depth and space of the

**“In a high-resolution system, the extra detail provided by the Classé CDP-202 makes a strong case for its more subtle approach.”**

recording. This made it easy to hear where each section of the orchestra was sitting in both lateral and stage depth terms. This format really brings out the best in the Classé, widening the divide between it and our reference considerably. Its degree of refinement goes significantly beyond the resolve that's available from a CD, something that is probably the case with other high-end players, but which is emphasised here by the relative quality of a higher resolution format. It clearly extends further than usual at high frequencies and has a naturalness through the midband that is totally 'un-digital' in its finesse and lack of even a hint of grain.

So, is the CDP-202 really a world beater? Well, it's certainly an exceptional beast in many respects and among the very best audio players we've heard in the £5,000 ballpark. There's plenty of high-quality competition at this level, of course, and in the end it is largely a matter of sonic preference. Those who like a more direct, clear-cut sort of sound may lean more towards the likes of Naim, for example. But if smooth refinement, power and poise sounds like your bag, the chances are you'll be hugely impressed by this Classé.

The last thing we'd want to suggest is that the CDP-202 glosses over fine detail in the quest for a smooth result. There are plenty of players that do just that, but not the Classé. Present it with a hard-sounding disc and it

sounds just that – hard. But give it a good quality recording and it will astonish you with its natural sense of musical texture, light and shade. It delivers CDs with the skill of an accomplished artist, and offers the bonus of excellent two-channel DVD-Audio/Video replay, too. For the depth of its sonic resolve, this player is almost in a Classé of its own. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy



<b>VERDICT</b>	
<b>SOUND &gt;&gt; 94%</b> [Progress bar]	<b>PRO</b> High-resolution CD player with exceptional smooth and refined sound, plus the added bonus of DVD-Audio/Video replay. Great roster of features via touchscreen control.
<b>FEATURES &gt;&gt; 92%</b> [Progress bar]	<b>CON</b> Some may find the sound a little too relaxed. Facilities on the video side are limited – but this player is all about two-channel audio.
<b>BUILD &gt;&gt; 94%</b> [Progress bar]	
<b>VALUE &gt;&gt; 85%</b> [Progress bar]	
<b>CONCLUSION</b> The CDP-202 is principally a high-end CD player, with DVD-Audio and Video playback included as a bonus. It's beautifully built and bristling with unusual features, plus a sound that is refined and resolute. If sophistication is your bag, it's hard to beat.	
<b>HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE &gt;&gt; 90%</b>	