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## WONDER WADIA

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Wadia 781i CD/SACD player

by Roy Gregory

In the world of product marketing, brand value is hard won and should be jealously guarded. It's something that Wadia have done well and few products are as instantly or unmistakably identifiable as those emanating from their factory. The 860 CD player that first appeared in Issue 4 of *Hi-Fi+* was not a new product then, but it is virtually indistinguishable from this model under review. My own 860 evolved through 861 and 861SE guises without so much as turning a hair, surviving for many a year at the top of my own personal digital tree, seldom surpassed (and then only by players at a far higher price) and only once equalled by a machine that might be considered a serious competitor. But whilst that longevity and upgradeability are both commendable and reassuring, they also masked a worrying reality. As good as the 861 is, should it really take ten years to better its performance? And while that reflects a degree of design atrophy on the part of the competition, it also reflects something of a hiatus for Wadia itself, a decade of uncertainty and shifting fortunes that created the first cracks in what had been an industry edifice. Things were moving fast and the digital landscape was shifting rapidly – only Wadia wasn't. Suddenly, that four-square casework didn't seem quite such a virtue. Stuck with aging if still impressive products, the sharks began to circle – only to receive a bloody nose. Wadia is back and in a big way; and best of all it's still the Wadia that was.

First indication was the 581 CD/SACD player reviewed in Issue 60, which quickly re-established its benchmark status. Pure Wadia, it shared the casework, essential operating principles and functional versatility on which its predecessors

built their considerable reputations. It added an entirely new clock design, a massively reengineered and heavily regulated power supply section, SACD replay (with its own dedicated decoding algorithm) and a new discrete Class A analogue output stage. Add in the optional digital inputs and outputs along with the necessary switching and a cleverly executed digital volume control, and you had a thorough going update on everything that made Wadia what it was – including the sound. But the really sly move, the sucker punch if you like, was the i170 transport, a neat little iPod dock with a difference; it didn't just connect a portable player to your system, it was able to extract a digital signal from the little beast, transforming it in one fell swoop into a potential audiophile plaything. After all, WAV files encoded on a solid-state memory combined with the 581's decoding capabilities make for pretty serious sound quality.

And just when you thought it was safe to revisit your record collection, along comes the 781i, essentially a tuned and tweaked 581 that offers the latter's input, output and switching options as standard, adds a larger power transformer, more reservoir capacitance and regulation, and tops that off

by extending the inductive filtering to embrace the analogue sections as well, whilst also adding additional mechanical damping to deal with the vibrational energy generated by all those extra PSU components. This is as good as it gets in a single box, at least as far as Wadia are concerned.

Digitally speaking, the heart of the DAC remains a dual processor driven gate-array, running Wadia's Digimaster 2.5 decoding software. With a sampling rate of 1.4112 GHz and 24bit resolution, this offers three alternative algorithms for CD replay (which could be summed up as A – standard, B – crisp and dry and C – warmer and a little rounded) and Wadia's own SACD algorithm, which they claim restores rise-time deficiencies in the original encoding. In current production the AT&T glass optical input has been replaced with the now essential USB connection, making the Wadia more computer audio compatible and, therefore, future-proofed.

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Consider the 781i as a DAC, digital pre-amp and control centre, which happens to have a darned good transport section tacked on and you start to get the picture. It really has got pretty much everything you could require. Wadia even offer a separate A to D converter that could be used to route the signal from an occasionally used turntable through your digital pre-amp and, who knows, onto a hard-drive or server-based system – such is the way of the hi-fi of tomorrow.

But the real question remains, does it justify the price hike over a 581ise on sonic grounds? The answer to that is a resounding, “Yes!” All that work on the power supply has really paid off, with the 781 delivering a noticeably lower noise floor, expressed as greater transparency, focus and dimensionality. Backgrounds are blacker, stages deeper and more dimensional. But what really tells is the increased sense of stability, both in the way that images and the acoustic stay anchored in space and the added jump and faster rise time on dynamics, large and small. These differences are neither particularly subtle nor unimportant. Indeed. Anybody familiar with the 581 is going to immediately recognize the significant increase in musical authority and communication that flows from the 781's output sockets. Straight from cold its qualities are manifest (although they do blossom over the first 48 hours or so, and the review machine was already well run-in) hardly requiring side by side comparison. Having said that, I've been fortunate enough to have the 581 in-house for quite some time and it stayed throughout the 781's extended visit too. Do you get the sense of a certain reluctance to part with these players?

The Lim K2 CD re-master of the Solti/LSO recording *Romantic Russia* is a perfect example of the 781's clear sonic and musical superiority. Even an orchestral pot-boiler like 'Night On The Bare Mountain' benefits from its advantages. As impressively present and dynamic as Solti's reading is on

the 581, the 781 adds a greater sense of acoustic space, orchestral layering and dimensionality. Instruments have more body and shape, with the identity and tonality of the bass instruments in particular being far more natural and floating in a more convincing way, the floor clearly audible beneath them. Timing and phrasing improve too, meaning that even when you know what's coming the drama and impact of the orchestral tuttis still thrill, the dynamic contrasts are still extreme. Solti takes the piece at a fair old clip, contrasting that with pauses between passages, and the torrid, almost frenetic pace which sounds hurried, tumbling and two-dimensional on the 581 gains poise and a driven purpose on the more accomplished player.

While the spatial differences are perhaps the most immediately apparent effect of the 781's internal improvements, it is actually that precision when it comes to the timing, placement and weighting of notes that makes the musical and expressive difference. Take a listening to the Esoteric SACD re-master of Curzon playing Mozart's Piano Concertos 20 and 27 (Britten and the ECO). With the 781 doing the talking, the almost crystalline clarity ▶



▶ and beautifully judged shaping of Mozart's melodic lines are perfectly poised against the orchestral backing of the ECO, Britten conjuring colour and texture from the modest forces available to coax every last ounce of drama from the intricate score of Mozart's final piano masterpiece. Curzon's playing is both brilliant and sensitive, with a delicacy and intimacy that is almost magical. It is the Wadia's ability to reveal this extra depth in the reading and beauty in the playing that sets it apart. Never artificially warm or excessively polite, the brilliance here is clearly artistic, the advantage over the 581 (and other players) in the expressive range it allows the performers. It simply digs deeper into their technique, their playing and the performance as a whole, taking you closer to its sense and purpose.

This ability to unravel the structure and direction that underpin a musical performance is central to the 781's appeal, whatever genre you choose. And whilst there are plenty of machines that will pull a performance apart, the 781 simply reveals its layers and relationships, an exercise in clarity rather than dissection, one that increases musical communication and involvement, qualities that become even more obvious once you start to play SACD discs. As impressive as the 581 when it comes to SACD replay, the lower noise floor and dynamic advantages enjoyed by the 781 really show what the format is capable of; doubters should form an orderly queue...

But the 781i is nothing if not democratic or generous with its abilities. A perfect piece of *pop de jour* like Lady Gaga's 'Poker Face' gains just as much as Puccini or Astor Piazzolla. The heavily layered and manipulated vocals that open the track are easily separated and understood, their manipulation and the almost Meccano like constructional symmetry of the hard-edged techno beats is laid bare, adding momentum to the rhythmic imperative and offering up the perfect lead into that telling hesitation that heralds the Summer's most sublimely catchy pop chorus. That brief pause is what adds barbs to the hook. Now you know – not just that 'Poker Face' is one of those perfect cultural collisions where style, fashion and ennui all combine at a single point in time to create a pop phenomenon (think Britney and 'Baby One More Time'), but now you know the how too. And yes, if the 781i can unearth the drivers and emotional tags of bubblegum pop, then believe it can do the same for

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Beethoven or Brahms, Coltrane or Cannonball Adderley. This is all about access and intent, not the 'definition *über alles*' control freakery that robs music of its life, energy and flow. The slashing guitar riffs that tumble across the Cure's *Head On The Door* carve rents across the soundfield, Basie's brass section rips out in perfect unison. The 781 is one of those all too rare products that deals not just in the what and the where, but also in the how and the why – a level of musical insight that escapes all but the best hi-fi equipment.



The 581 retains its benchmark status because of its price-point. It's not that it is necessarily better than players like the Audio Research CD8 or dCS Puccini, but it is the mark against which they should be measured or assessed. The 781 sits on a higher step altogether and yes, in this case it is better than these other machines: it needs to be better than the 581 and easily justifies the difference in price; the Puccini is perhaps closest in style and also offers the option of an external clock to bridge the price and quality gap; but perhaps ironically it's the Red Book only CD8 that offers the most enlightening comparison.

Take something that's played with real passion; the BBC live broadcast recording of du Pre and Barbirolli performing the Elgar Cello Concerto in Prague is a perfect example. At first it's easy to conclude that the CD8 delivers more body, a richer woodier tone to du Pre's instrument, but as attractive as that rounded warmth and body is, you'd be wrong. The clue lies in the clarity and ▶

► sense that the Wadia makes of the acoustic space, something you'll pick up in the air as the mics come up, in the incidental noises and shuffles of the orchestra and audience. With the 781 there's much, much more information – about the hall, about what made that noise and where exactly it was. du Pre's opening notes are focussed and held in space, not leaner or paler than the CD8 delivers, but more concentrated and with greater texture and attack, a fact that becomes abundantly clear in the pizzicato sections. So as impressive as the CD8 is – and when it comes to sheer orchestral sweep it's impressive indeed, with real weight, colour and body, the 781 matches it and builds on those qualities. Colour and harmonic tone may fall short of good analogue sources but are more than a match for any of the players mentioned here. Likewise, absolute immediacy isn't in the same league as a good record on a good record player. But having said that the stability, resolution, transparency and dynamic contrasts are up there with the best. So, despite initial impressions (and possible assumptions) while the Audio Research has romance running through its veins, the Wadia tempers it with a little less excess and more finesse, texture and dynamic discrimination, allowing the orchestra and soloist a wider emotional palette, a more sophisticated range of expression.

It is this ability to deliver both detail and the sort of instrumental identity and warmth that makes players like the CD8 so appealing that moves the 781 so close to the digital ideal. Switch to SACD hybrid discs and the Wadia's superiority over standard Red Book replay becomes even more apparent. Yes, there will always be even more detail, more natural colours and more immediate, more lifelike micro-dynamics; we are, after all, a long way from the live event. But the 781's innate sense of balance and unexaggerated presentation belie its capabilities. It doesn't sound warm or rich until you compare it directly to a player like the CD8. It doesn't sound massively dynamic until you hear other machines struggling to match its sense of musical purpose. It doesn't sound like it's digging deep, deep into the recording until you realize just how much



detail and insight other players are leaving behind. What it does sound is right – and that makes it engaging and satisfying in equal measure. The whys and wherefores might take some working out but the immediate musical appeal of the 781, the absolute authority with which it delivers a musical performance, cuts straight to the heart of both that performance and what hi-fi should be all about – the music rather than the means by which it arrives.

If you are in the market for a top one-box optical disc player then the Wadia 781i should be on your must hear list. It ticks all the musical boxes,

offers significant added value in terms of its versatility and ability to handle more than one digital source... and it plays SACD too. Having been happy for so long with the 861se, the GNSC mods giving it a timely boost in performance to match the challenge of the 581, it is sobering to acknowledge just how soundly both machines are trounced by the musical dexterity and expressive range of the 781i. I guess negotiations start now... +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** One-box CD/SACD player

**Decoding:** Wadia Digimaster 2.5 Algorithm running on a dual processor gate array with 24bit resolution and a sample rate of 1.4112 GHz

**Digital Inputs:** 1x S/PDIF (BNC)

1x USB (B type)

1x Toslink Optical

1x AES/EBU (XLR)

**Input Data Rate:** <96kHz

**Digital Outputs:** 1x S/PDIF (BNC)

1x Glass Optic (ST)

1x Toslink Optical

1x AES/EBU (XLR)

**Output Impedance:** 51 Ohms

**Output Level:** 0.3V – 4.25V internally adjustable

Digital volume control

**Weight:** 25kg

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 432 x 184 x 420mm

**Finishes:** Black or silver

**Price:** £14,999

**Manufacturer:**

Wadia

URL: [www.wadia.com](http://www.wadia.com)

**UK Distributor:**

Musical Design Company

URL: [www.mdc-hifi.co.uk](http://www.mdc-hifi.co.uk)

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