



## EQUIPMENT REPORT

# Jungson Impression II CD Player

Good Impression

Jacob Heilbrunn

**F**or a medium that's been written off as dead more than once, the compact disc seems to be a remarkably hardy survivor. Even as the autopsies are written and the obituaries pile up, a flood of new CDs appears each month, many featuring remarkably fine performances, often of music that has never previously been recorded. Granted, the much-lamented disappearance of Tower Records and sagging sales do suggest that, at some point, the CD will incontrovertibly go the way of the dodo bird. But that point has scarcely arrived. It's particularly notable that smaller labels such as Hyperion seem to be producing elegant new recordings, not to mention the reissues from the vaults of the jazz and classical greats that once seemed destined for oblivion. Toss in the fact that many music lovers have accumulated substantial CD collections over the years, and there are still firm grounds for purchasing a new player—particularly if it's priced reasonably and produces gobsmackingly good sound.

Which is exactly what the Jungson Impression II CD player does. The Jungson is manufactured in China and its snazzy appearance and performance should send shivers down the backs of Western manufacturers. (The Impression II is sold in North America through distributor Grant Fidelity as the Grant Fidelity CD-1000. The Grant Fidelity Web site has detailed information in English.)

This is no tacky imitation, but the real thing: an elegant top-loading CD player that offers a multitude of features, including upsampling to 24-bit/192kHz, that make it something of a

dream to use and enjoy. The fit 'n' finish of this player, which is made of a steel and aluminum alloy, is simply impeccable, and the Impression's chassis is loaded with Burr-Brown chips and other impressive circuitry. The top-loading lid is simplicity itself to use, and there was no disc that the Impression balked at playing. My only real nit to pick is that the owner's manual that comes with the player is wholly inadequate, supplying very little information about how to operate the unit. But if the Impression II is anything to go by, China is going to be a major contender in the audio market, yet another area where it could even emerge a major—perhaps even dominant—player.

Jungson itself sells a battery of products, ranging from preamps to CD players. Its company logo is a gong—the instrument in the orchestra that usually signals a grand entrance or some portentous event. But a gong can also be hauntingly evocative, shimmering in its decays that seem to stretch on forever. And so it is with the Impression II player, which, among other things, offers the choice of tube output from its single-ended jacks or solid-state output from its balanced jacks. I (mildly) preferred the tube output for its touch of delicacy and refinement and bloom. This valve buffer, to use British lingo, features two EH6922 tubes. I should note that it also thoughtfully provides a dedicated headphone amplifier featuring two EL84 tubes in the left front pod. The headphone output is ideal for those evenings when you might want to listen without disturbing others—or for those who simply prefer the sound of headphones.

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With either the Wilson MAXX 3 or the Magnepan 20.1, the sound of the Jungson was captivating. Perhaps the first and most notable feature was the level of fine detail that the Impression II delivered, coupled with jet-black backgrounds. My dear friend and colleague Jonathan Valin bridled a few years ago when I made bold to mention at a Rocky Mountain Audio Fest dinner that a certain piece of equipment produced excellent black background. His response was something on the lines of: "Everyone uses that term—'black backgrounds'—but what does it actually mean? I've never heard it in a concert hall, save perhaps from a pit orchestra." Fair enough. But I still think that the absence of noise and grit, a sense of a deeply silent background, is what we associate with a performance, whether it is "black" or not, and that it supplies the impression that the instruments are emerging from space as opposed to being imposed upon it. And that is what I thought the Impression did remarkably well.

But the Impression II's virtues were not confined to those silent backgrounds. Oh, no. High, perhaps highest, among its qualities were the sheen and sheer sumptuousness of the sound. Seldom has the Andante of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor [Sony SACD/CD] sounded more plangent in my room—the Impression II captured the poignancy of Hilary Hahn's supremely self-assured performance with exceptional fidelity. The Impression seemed to dig into the marrow of the note, rendering more believable the rich timbre of Hahn's violin. Indeed, it displayed exceptional timbral accuracy on a number of recordings, making it less of an intellectual exercise in listening to orchestral works and more of an emotional pleasure. Any component that can deliver emotional impact scores big with

me. Detail and more detail are all well and good, but if it comes in an etched manner it doesn't really pass muster. If you listen at a concert, the treble, in some ways, doesn't even seem to exist because it's so integrated with what audiophiles term the "midrange." That may be another word for continuity. Whatever term you might employ to describe that quality, the Jungson had it.

This isn't to suggest that the Impression faltered when it came to delivering musical information. Quite the contrary. It extracted a few details that I hadn't been familiar with on Renée Fleming's lovely *Bel Canto* [Decca SACD/CD], which is a real treat for opera lovers. (There's nothing more moving or intimate than bel canto singing and, while I can't claim to a comprehensive knowledge of opera, I do enjoy listening to it.) But most of all I was taken by the silkiness of the Impression—its analog-like delivery of Bellini's *La sonambula*, which certainly will *not* put you to sleep. The Impression, in many ways, might be called a bel canto machine, so luscious and smooth is its sound.

Lurking beneath this velvety veneer, however, is a real powerhouse. The Impression was able to dish out the goods on heavyweight orchestral or jazz pieces. The Impression can deliver the weight and sonic heft of a full trombone section blazing away in a Mahler symphony, that sheer depth of burnished sound that has such a riveting quality. Or consider *Babatune Olatunji*, which was recorded by Chesky records. The sound of the vocal chants and drums is enchanting; you feel like you've truly merged with the cosmic rhythm vibrations. Each slap is palpable as the drum skin resounds. You feel as if you are peering into the soundstage. Of course David Chesky always does a bang-

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up job of recording, but the Impression gave a high degree of verisimilitude to the proceedings. Mesmerizing, in fact. Listening to various instruments zoom in and out was never less than a head-swiveling experience with the Impression.

In enumerating the virtues of the Impression, I don't mean to give the, well, impression that it's the perfect CD player (whatever that might be). But it's pretty obvious that more expensive units will surpass it in certain areas. Go all the way up to the megabuck dCS Scarlatti, a four-box unit, and you'll hear a rhythmic solidity and level of interstitial detail that probably no other player can rival. But it will cost you some \$80,000. If you have the cash, it is a most formidable product. Less pricey but also very good is the Playback Designs unit, which has just one degree of transparency more than the Impression. But what scared me about the Impression was just how good it was—not that it might not match the top-dollar units. The truth is that technology in the area of digital reproduction seems to be improving at a breakneck pace. The benefits of trickledown economics may be dubious, but in the area of audio they aren't. My guess is that to acquire a player at the level of the Jungson even a scant five years ago would have cost you an arm and a leg.

So if you're in the market for a CD player and aren't interested in futzing with a music server, the Jungson is a more than credible contender for your attention. It shined in my system. The Wilson MAXX 3 is a very fine speaker, capable of revealing shortcomings upstream with ruthless honesty, but it really couldn't reveal all that much amiss with the Jungson and showed what was right. It could be that my unit was already broken-in when it arrived, but I couldn't detect any change in the sound

quality over time. It took off like a rocket from go, and never stopped streaking. The Impression's excellent build-quality and superb sound indicate that the Chinese aren't on the verge of arriving in the audio business. They're already here. **tms**

### SPECS & PRICING

#### Jungson Impression II CD Player

**Analog outputs:** Balanced on XLR jacks (solid-state), unbalanced on RCA jacks (tube); headphone output (tube).

**Digital outputs:** AES/EBU, coaxial on RCA, TosLink optical

**Dimensions:** 17" x 14" x 7"

**Weight:** 50 lbs.

**Price:** \$3200

#### NORTH AMERICAN DISTRIBUTOR

Grant Fidelity  
(888) 477-5378  
grantfidelity.com

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Continuum Caliburn Turntable with Cobra tonearms; Playback Designs CD/SACD player; AirTight Supreme and Lyra Titan cartridges; Messenger preamplifier and phono stage; Classé Omega and VTL Wotan mono block amplifiers; Tom Tutay four-chassis active crossover; Jena Labs cabling and Isoclean Supreme Focus power cords; Wilson MAXX 3 and Magnepan 20.1 loudspeakers