



Budget Components

The Fifth Element #52

By John Marks • February, 2009

I've been chipping away for some time at the task of trying to put together a music lover's stereo system for about half the money of my last such effort: US\$2500 to US\$3750 now, vs around US\$7500 back in 2005. My timing was good: CD and DVD receivers are a hot product category, with several attractive new entries at various prices.

A CD receiver is a single chassis comprising a CD or DVD player, a terrestrial radio tuner (often AM/FM, but usually only FM), a preamplifier, and a power amplifier, all operated by a single remote control. All you need to provide are speaker cables and speakers, and you're in business (footnote 1).

My self-imposed goals, which remain the same, are ambitious: I not only want to find a system or systems that a music lover can derive musical pleasure from, I also want to find a system that I can heartily recommend on the basis of "buy it once and buy it right"—in other words, a system that can fulfill the promise of long-term enrapturement.

As this and the next column will reveal, I think I've been more successful at meeting my first goal. It's possible that I may have set myself the task of designing a square circle: spend half the money or less than on the last system I put together, yet have it still be a buy-it-once-and-buy-it-right system that lets you get off the audio merry-go-round. Although this time the laws of physics, psychoacoustics, economics, and perhaps even human nature just might be against me, there are still lots of very worthwhile products out there. Here are a few.

Carat I57 CD receiver

If the appearance of Primare's DVDI10 (see later) can be called Scandinavian Contemporary, then perhaps the I57 (US\$1995) from Carat, a division of the French firm InoVadis, can be described as Early Franco-Sino Dork. And the Carat's ergonomics are, shall we say, *vive la différence*? Those who have owned a Citroën or a Peugeot may get a nostalgic twinge or two. With the Primare, as you increase the volume, the indicator numerals increase. With the Carat, as things get louder, the numbers *decrease*. It's kind of like putting the horn button on the end of the turn-signal stalk. Indeed, the Carat's joystick CD-function controller is a bit like that: to get it to eject a disc, you push the joystick straight in.



The 50Wpc Carat is of standard component size and proportions, with a front-loading CD tray on the right side of its front panel. The styling is overall black, with touches of blue, green, silver, and gray. That the front panel appears to be of some sort of clear acrylic with a black background, and that the illuminated control legends are ultramarine blue, and the display readouts for track and time are green, might make the cynic

suspect that a meeting ended with some Big Cheese saying, "Okay, you can go for the McIntosh Laboratory Tribute look, but don't spend a lot on it."

Carat's website is a bit bling-bling; I gather the Photoshopped images of big diamonds dropped here and there are clues to the origins of the line's name (which I pronounce to rhyme with *hurrah* rather than *carrot*). "Carat" appears in muted-gray caps 1" high on the top panel, which also holds two rows of ventilation slots.

From left to right, the front panel has an On switch (actually a standby switch; the master power switch is on the rear); a ¼" headphone jack; the display window, below it a 1/8" MP3 player jack; the Function button; a large, silver, centrally mounted volume-control and selector knob; the CD joystick controller; and the disc drawer.

The Carat logo appears in muted gray above the volume-control knob; "I57" appears in the front panel's upper-right corner, and above the disc drawer, a gray HDCD logo lights up blue when an HDCD-encoded CD is played. The Function button allows the volume control to select sources and also enables adjustment of bass, treble, and balance.

The rear panel has good- but not boutique-quality EC-compliant speaker binding posts, the master power switch and power-cord inlet, stereo RCA outputs for preamp and record out, and stereo inputs for TV, Aux, and Tape. The plasticky remote control is, as far as I can tell, identical to the one that comes with Music Hall's Trio CD receiver. Packing materials and owner's manual were adequate but not exemplary. All listening was done with GutWire's B16 power cord and Cardas's Neutral Reference speaker cables.

The Carat sounded quite "analog": coherent and continuous, and a little bit on the warm side. Its strong suit was tone; its dynamics were a touch restrained. Putting a few John Marks Records HDCD-encoded CDs in the I57 triggered feelings of rueful chagrin that such a good format as HDCD (mangled metaphor alert) was eclipsed by the false dawns—at least as far as the mainstream market is concerned - of SACD and DVD-Audio.

That the I57 bothers with HDCD at all is a tribute to its audiophile origins and aspirations. The D/A converter chips in question are Burr-Brown PCM1732s, running at 24-bit/96kHz. I don't know how much credit they should get for the I57's engaging sound, but of the six or so one-box CD receivers I auditioned during this hunt, the Carat I57 is, in terms of sound quality, the winner by a nose—not head and shoulders, but a large nose nonetheless.

The Carat's ergonomics weren't bad at all. I like the intuitive feel of a volume-control knob, but I got used to the shifty feel of the joystick. The I57's looks are a bit busy for my taste, but aren't a deal-breaker. An all-around good show, and \$\$\$ for excellent value for money.

http://www.stereophile.com/budgetcomponents/the_fifth_element/index.html