

# Car Stereo

## Shopper

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### CD RECEIVER TEST

Heads for the Hills



### THE GEAR BOX

New Equipment for the Road



Factory System Upgrades for Your Explorer or Accord

# New Beginnings

## A CD Receiver Gives Your Car Stereo a Fresh Start



by Micah Sheveloff

item only found in BMWs and limousines. CD receivers are out on the road with all those who love the sound of crisp, digital audio as their traveling companion.

This rigorous test includes four full-fledged CD receivers and two CD preamplifiers. The CD receivers incorporate everything necessary to drive off with great sound (except the speakers, of course). The CD preamps, on the other hand, include a CD player, radio, and preamplifier, but have no internal amplifiers of their own. These units require one or more separate car amplifiers.

Before you shop, you should know that with most CD receivers, the onboard amplifiers are rated differently from the stereo amplifier or receiver you have in your house.

**D**riving is a mandatory segment of the day for nearly everyone. Traffic, gridlock, and an angry blast of the horn are the traditional routine for many of us. If you've never used a compact disc player in your car, what better reason to leap forward and take hold of this wondrous technology than to reduce the stress and discord of commuting? And once you install a CD player, you'll enjoy it even more during leisure time: Nothing could be more exhilarating than hearing your favorite tunes on the open road with the kind of detail and impact that CDs deliver.

Once you've decided to go after the luxury of great sound and immediate access to the music that CDs afford, your best option is a CD receiver, or "head unit." These all-inclusive units house a tuner, pream-

plifier and amplifier, and a road-ready CD player in a compact package that slips into your dash in the same place now occupied by the factory radio. Your local car audio professional should stock the necessary installation parts for virtually any

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vehicle you might own and can also provide detailed explanations of various CD receivers at different prices and their respective features. As you'll see, this is no longer the prohibitively expensive luxury

Head unit amps are typically rated for "peak" or "maximum" power, which is considerably less than the more realistic "continuous" or "rms" rating applied to home stereo equipment—a 35-watt peak output,



for example, might be equivalent to 15 watts rms. Unless it's specifically rated for rms or continuous output, don't be misled into thinking a car CD receiver has the equivalent power of that receiver in your living room. And if you do plan on adding an outboard amplifier at a later date, look for preamp outputs and pay attention to their voltage rating. Typical pre outs deliver around 2 volts, but 4-volt outputs are becoming popular. The higher voltage translates to a quieter signal at the amp, and therefore less hiss and noise behind the music.

With one exception, all of the units tested have removable front faceplates that snap out of a base unit mounted firmly in the dashboard. With the faceplate taken and tucked into the provided case, a would-be thief is left looking at a blank front panel. This system has proven to be an excellent deterrent; pilferers usually run off in search of easier prey.

### Methodology

Each receiver was wired to a pair of Pioneer 4- by 6-inch coaxial speakers (\$120/pair) and a pair of ADS 5.25-inch coaxials (\$280/pair), which are vastly different sounding and provided a solid workout for all the units. Joni Mitchell provided some challenging vocal and acoustic guitar work in the song "Last Chance Lost" from her album *Turbulent Indigo*. In order to provide some harrowing bass passages, I enlisted Patti Austin's *That Secret Place*. Track two, called "Ability to Swing," does just that with a punishing bass line and violent kick drum. After the listening tests, I scrutinized each player for feature assortment, button layout, and installation friendliness. I then set them aside in a quiet place to recover from their unreasonable duress.

### Denon DCT-670

At this price, you're going to make some sacrifices, and in this case that means giving up CD changer controls: The Denon is alone among this group in not allowing the operation of an add-on, multidisc player.

power to keep up with some road noise, and for lower listening levels there's the traditional loudness control. All installation parts were neat and well thought out, with the possible exception of the rear-panel-mounted RCA preamp output jacks,



Denon DCT-670 \$320

That said, it's got most of the basics down pat. The four-channel onboard amp is rated at 30 watts (max) per channel, while a preamp output for the rear channels is rated at the typical 2 volts. The tuner will store 18 FM and six AM stations and has a mono button for assisting in the capture of weaker signals.

The Denon's strength was the simplicity of its operation. There's no remote control, but its large faceplate buttons are clearly labeled, and the CD player has a direct-access feature that allows you to request track numbers by depressing the corresponding radio preset button. You want song three? Press the button! Another unique feature of the DCT-670 is the "eject prohibit mode." Once activated, this feature won't allow the compact disc inside the player to be removed. That high school kid working as a valet at the golf club will find this particularly inconvenient.

The sound from the Denon player was rich and full. The internal amplifier seemed to provide enough

which could cause clearance problems in tight quarters.

The Denon DCT-670 is easy to operate and delivers good performance at an attractive price without a lot of bells and whistles. For those who need a basic CD receiver and don't care about CD changer controls, it's worth an audition. Circle Reader Service No. 632.

### Clarion DRX-5375

The Clarion contains a four-channel amplifier rated at 30 watts max per channel. Both sets of test speakers responded well when wired to this unit. The Clarion is equipped with front and rear preamp outputs for feeding a more powerful outboard



Clarion DRX-5375 \$350

amplifier if you choose to add one. And it's worth noting that having both front and rear outputs at this



price is unusual—most units in this range provide only one set. The outputs are rated at 1.8 volts, which is plenty for use with any amp.

The tuner had strong reception and maintained reasonable separation, even on weaker signals. It provides 18 FM and six AM presets, not including an “ISR” (instant station recall) feature that allows the user to access a radio station of choice with the touch of one button, even during CD playback; the CD will pause and the station will instantly be tuned in. Cool—and very convenient for catching that crucial traffic report.

If the single CD player in the DRX-5375 isn't enough for your ever-shifting musical tastes, then you

is neat and the rear-panel-mounted RCA outputs are cleverly recessed to stay out of the way. A cellular mute wire is also provided to interface with a phone so incoming calls will automatically quiet the system.

Despite my minor quibbles, the Clarion delivered the goods when it came to playing music, and that's what it's all about. At \$350, it is inarguably an excellent value. Circle Reader Service No. 633.

## Panasonic CQ-DP875

Although the amplifier in the Panasonic is rated at a whopping 40 watts (max) to four channels, my listening tests revealed performance quite similar to the Clarion and the

seemed strong on both bands. A mono selector is available for weaker FM signals.

When you remove the faceplate from the DP875, a red light flashes in its place, indicating the absence of said faceplate to any nearsighted thief. Although the case provided for the face is among the worst designs I've encountered (you can replace it with a soft case you can buy as an accessory at any car stereo shop), the owner's manual included with this unit is among the best I have seen, clearly explaining the operation of the player to get you up and running quickly—assuming, of course, you read these things.

The DP875 is set up to control a CD changer, and the controls' layout was user friendly, though the blue and purple main control buttons were a bit too luminescent and drowned out the surrounding switches with their glow. Bouncing level meters in both corners of the display are a minor and unnecessary distraction. Included with the DP875 was a tiny wireless remote that you can cradle in your hand and operate without taking your eyes off the road.

The sound of the Panasonic was no disappointment. Although the amplifier power seemed to be rated optimistically, the DP875 played both test tracks clearly and with sharp detail. Installers and do-it-yourselfers will find the wiring-harness arrangement at the back of the unit is very neat and easy to decipher, and all critical installation parts were included. All in all, the DP875 represents a good value, albeit with a touch too much color for some. Circle Reader Service No. 634.



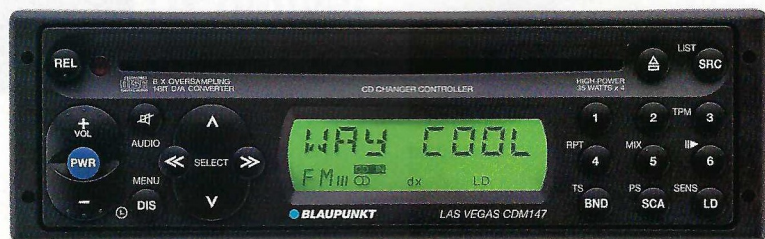
Panasonic CQ-DP875 \$400

can make use of the changer controls provided for the addition of a Clarion multidisc player. Disc and track access buttons are labeled on the face, and all audio controls remain functional.

The Clarion fared well during the listening tests, sounding smooth and detailed until the loudest levels. Even the challenging bass passages were well defined. The overall layout was my least favorite aspect of this machine. The face and control panel were too glossy and reflected too much ambient light, and the patented Alpha Touch control felt a little flimsy during operation. Fortunately, a wireless remote is included with the Clarion CD receiver and is easier to use. On the other hand, the LCD display was large and easy to see.

Installing the 5375 should be simple in most situations. The wiring harness

Denon, both rated at 10 watts less per channel. The DP875 has 2-volt front, rear, and subwoofer preamp outputs for the ultimate in upgrade flexibility. The subwoofer output feeds a separate signal to an amp and subwoofer or a powered sub. You can control the subwoofer volume from the face, like a tone control, which is an excellent way to adjust for the huge differences in bass content from disc to disc. The tuner, meanwhile, provides the traditional 18 FM and six AM presets, and reception characteristics



Blaupunkt Las Vegas \$400



## Blaupunkt Las Vegas

The amplifier in the Las Vegas (\$400) is rated at 35 watts (max) to four channels, with a single stereo preamp output rated at 3 volts. The Blaupunkt did not play louder than the other CD receiver units, but it was more musical and less fatiguing to listen to. The tuner also sounded superb, and stored the typical 24 stations in its memory. The radio offers a unique feature called a tuner timer, which you can program to automatically interrupt whatever is playing at a specified time, even a CD, and activate a predetermined station. If you tend to get lost in Mozart but don't

The unit comes with a thin, credit-card wireless remote that operates the basic functions. But the Thummer, a \$100 optional remote that straps to the steering wheel, handles many features and truly affords the driver the most convenient operation.

Aside from the CD preamps I tested, which cost considerably more and benefitted from their mating with a powerful outboard amplifier, the Las Vegas was the best-sounding unit of this group. There was a distinct effortlessness that made it more pleasant than the competition to listen to, and it maintained this quality even when played loudly. The but-

should be removable. The owner's manual was a bit disorganized.

But forget all that: You won't be doing much reading or installing while you're out on the road, and that's where the Blaupunkt Las Vegas hits the jackpot. If good sound quality, some unique and helpful features, and enough title memory to rival a laptop computer are your desire, this is one to consider. Circle Reader Service No. 635.

## Sony CDX-C910

There's no question that \$900 is a lot to spend on a head unit, and with the Sony CDX-C910, you don't even get an internal amplifier! At this level, it's assumed you're serious about your autosound, and that you'll demand the superior sonics a powerful outboard amplification can deliver. The C910 provides two pairs of preamp outputs rated at a hefty 4 volts to feed those amps or other components used in high-end car systems.

This is a serious piece, indeed. The sophisticated CD portion of the C910 uses the same type of electronic shock protection (ESP)

66 **Aside from the CD preamps I tested, the Las Vegas was the best-sounding unit of the group**

care to miss the beginning of that championship ballgame or the daily stock market report, this might be just the ticket.

There are some other clever user features, as well. Bass and treble controls memorize their settings pertaining to each audio source, so when you toggle from the CD to the radio, the bass and treble will be set precisely as you left it last time you listened to that source. Yet another excellent feature is the adjustable limit, or "governor," which monitors turn-on volume. Even if the system is cranked up on the way home from a softball game, the levels will automatically return to a reasonable hush the next time you hop in the car and turn the key.

The Las Vegas can control an optional CD changer, and the unit has a staggering storage capacity for programming disc titles and other information into the unit's memory, though you'll need plenty of patience to program in the names of all your discs if you're so inclined. There are also a couple of remote-control options.

tons and controls also felt very solid, although I found the display characters too small, and all the program functions can't help but make the face seem a bit busy.

The wiring for the Las Vegas is accomplished with three very tidy



Sony CDX-C910 \$900

plugs. Each snaps securely into place at the rear of the unit for a nice, organized install. Also tucked on the rear of the Blaupunkt is a 3.5mm auxiliary input jack—perhaps someone will want to hear a tape and plug in their Walkman. The trim ring around the unit's face has to be cut off if it's being installed in one of the many cars with an ISO-style mount; it

memory circuit found in Sony's portable CD players to virtually eliminate any pothole skipping. More important, the devices that convert the digital information back to analog (called, simply, "digital-to-analog converters") are the best quality available. Even the chassis of the C910 is special, being constructed of solid copper to



shield noise from the sensitive circuitry. Furthermore, the unit has its own power supply dangling off the back of the player, isolated so as not to add noise to the FM tuner. The tuner is indeed excellent sounding, and stores 20 FM and 10

Joni's vocals leaped out from center stage, and all the instruments were clear and precise. Installation for a unit like this is a snap: There are very few wires to terminate because there is no amplifier inside, and all related parts are provided.

'60s. The knobs are actually made of metal, and the feel of the operating controls is quite elegant. Most of the modern convenience features found even on inexpensive CD players were left off the "Mac," and the highest quality internal parts were installed in their place. It doesn't even have a removable faceplate—the MX406 mounts permanently in the dash. A flashing security light and its "retro" cosmetics are the only line of defense against thieves.



McIntosh MX406 \$1,000

AM presets. CD changer controls for a Sony changer are provided.

The clever features on the Sony are numerous. The face gently folds down and out to accept a disc, and the faceplate's viewing angle has three adjustable positions, allowing you to minimize glare. There is also a contrast adjustment

The Sony CDX-C910 looks, feels, and sounds elegant. It's expensive, especially when you add in the associated components you'll need to really make this baby sing. But if you've got a bulging wallet and a priority for high-end sound, it would clearly be an excellent choice as the centerpiece for a

The preamp has a 3-volt output to minimize noise, and volume is controlled with a genuine rotating analog knob. The tuner has 18 FM and six AM presets. CD changer controls are provided for an optional six-CD changer, and because of the wonderful digital processing inside the MX406, the changer feeds all of its information back to the radio in the digital domain using fiber-optic cables!

The sparse layout of knobs and buttons make the MX406 extremely easy to operate while driving. Although there is no track scan, no disc-title memory, or remote control, the shortage of bells and whistles makes for blissful simplicity. The other obvious reward is stunning sound quality. The McIntosh boasts that traditionally smooth, detailed clarity found most often in better home audio components. The signal path is uncluttered, and there's no equalization or fancy processing. There is a remotely mounted power supply harnessed to the rear of the MX406, which largely contributes to its sonic superiority. All mounting hardware included with the unit is excellent, and the owner's manual is one of the most clearly written I've seen. All in all, a remarkable unit. If you've ever doubted your ability to discern one compact disc player from another, audition the McIntosh MX406 against the competition. Circle Reader Service No. 637. Ⓢ

**66 The McIntosh has stunning sound quality. It boasts that smooth, detailed clarity found most often in better home components**

for the large digital display. The volume knob is just slightly smaller than a Frisbee, and a wired remote makes operation even simpler (a wireless remote is optional).

To do the listening tests, I wired the preamp outputs to an XTANT 4180c amplifier rated at 45 watts per channel (rms). That naturally gave the system some authority, but the detail and warmth was striking—essentially what one would expect of the best-quality components.

refined car audio system. Circle Reader Service No. 636.

### McIntosh MX406

And you thought the Sony was pricey? The McIntosh MX406 just about takes the award for highest ticket, but then, this is a most unusual CD preamplifier. Visually, the MX406 looks nothing like any other car radio. The face is glass with a blue digital display reminiscent of McIntosh home equipment from the