



Department of transport

Audiolab's 6000CDT is a rarity – a great value CD transport – says **David Price**

Funny how fashions come and go. A separate CD transport and DAC was the coolest thing on the planet in the late eighties, almost more impressive than having a brick-sized cellular portable telephone or hot hatchback with the letters GTI emblazoned on the back. Then, 10 years later, few seemed interested in this sort of needless extravagance. Less was more, and there were some fine-sounding one-box CD players around, so what was the point? Then, DACs came back into fashion and we marvelled at hi-res for the first time.

A sizeable number of integrated amplifiers now come with built-in

DACs – some very good, others not so. Audiolab's new £379 6000CDT has been built to partner the excellent 6000A integrated (HFC 446) – the company's starter amp – but I reckon it has wider appeal even than that. It is slim, unobtrusive, slinky to use and sounds very good indeed. If you have a decent DAC, it's worth considering.

Like its 6000A stablemate, the 6000CDT is obviously built to a price – but has been cost-cut very cleverly. Instead of the beautifully finished aluminium of the more expensive 8300CD (HFC 404), the cheaper range gets painted steel casework and a less expensive display. It's interesting that the company has chosen this route, as

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Audiolab 6000CDT
- ORIGIN**
UK/China
- TYPE**
CD transport
- WEIGHT**
5.4kg
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
445 x 66 x 300mm
- FEATURES**
 - Slot-loading CD mechanism
 - Digital outputs: 1x optical; 1x coaxial
- DISTRIBUTOR**
IAG Ltd.
- TELEPHONE**
01480 447700
- WEBSITE**
audiolab.co.uk

many brands would keep the fancy casing and skimp on the internal components, whereas Audiolab has done precisely the opposite.

Whether you choose the silver or black finish, the 6000CDT looks crisp, modern and purposeful. Better still, the slick slot-loading CD mechanism sounds smooth every time a disc is fed in or ejected. The display is crisp and informative, and a row of buttons to control the transport functions and the on/standby button are all to the right. It's all so simple and intuitive to use that it's a real pleasure to operate.

It uses exactly the same transport mechanism as Audiolab's flagship 8300CD silver disc spinner, mounted inside its own electromagnetically shielded enclosure. It additionally has a read-ahead digital buffer to reduce disc-reading failures, and the master clock is controlled by a temperature-compensated crystal oscillator, which we're informed makes for very low claimed jitter figures.

The coaxial output is fed from a differential line driver for a high-quality digital datastream. Round the back, it sports an optical Toslink and digital coaxial output, plus trigger sockets, an IEC power in and a main power switch. Audiolab says its power

consumption is 15W in use, and less than 0.5W in standby mode.

It loads discs smoothly, isn't noisy while doing so, and then reads the CD's table of contents speedily. This done, it offers swift track access – maybe not quite up there with a top-class nineties Sony player, for example, but way better than many modern rivals. This feels like a quality product, and not like you're slumming it in the cheap seats in any way.

There may still be some diehards who insist that "a bit is a bit" and

therefore all CD transports sound the same, but this certainly is not my experience. Jitter seems to affect the sound subtly, as does poor mechanical isolation and the quality of the power supplies and digital outputs. The 6000CDT is superb for the money and turns in a great performance – not just with its partnering 6000A integrated, but with a host of other DACs that cost multiples of the matching amp's price.

Sound quality

Scritti Politti's *Perfect Way* is a classic slice of eighties pop and not the greatest hi-fi recording I have ever heard. Yet the Audiolab digs deep into what is on the disc to serve up a great big soundstage with lots of detail inside. There is a sense of

This player has crisp and detailed sound with a controlled yet insightful character

being able to hear all the various tracks in the mix play along simultaneously, especially via my high-end reference dCS Debussy DAC. It seems able to eke right down into the mix, and carry all the different strands forth without tripping over its own shadow.

Another impressive facet is its soundstaging. Change's *Lover's Holiday* – some lovely soul/funk from the late seventies – has impressive scale and space. Instruments are precisely located in the stereo mix, and there is a good deal of depth perspective too. The Audiolab seems to have a lot of control, putting out an orderly recorded acoustic with everything in its correct place, separated out nicely from other strands of the mix. In absolute terms higher end transports do better, with

a real 'out-of-the-box' feeling, but this is still impressive nonetheless.

Rhythmically and dynamically it's a good performer too. Cue up some classic rock from Rush in the form of *Red Barchetta*, and the 6000CDT delivers a lively and pacy sound with lots going on within the broad three-dimensional canvas. The driving bass guitar is particularly evident, alongside the drummer's memorable pan rolls and sweeps, all keeping to perfectly metronomic timing. Indeed, this transport has a crisp and detailed sound with a controlled yet insightful character that proves great fun to listen to during the audition period. More expensive designs do better in the bass with greater grip and power, but this Audiolab is no slouch here either. At the other end of the frequency range, the beautifully crisp and delicate yet detailed hi-hat and ride cymbal work are very enjoyable.

Conclusion

No two ways about it, the Audiolab 6000CDT is a CD transport bargain – a true quality item at a price that often doesn't buy you very much of anything. Everything from its look and feel to the way it plays compact discs is worthy of respect ●



There aren't many CD transports on sale right now, which nearly puts the Audiolab in a gang of one. Still, there's always the £299 Cambridge Audio CXC (HFC 401). The Audiolab feels a classier product; its slot-loading disc mech is nicer than the Cambridge's wobbly tray, and the whole thing seems swisher. Sonically there's not that much in it, but the Audiolab wins with a fraction more detail and a slightly crisper nature. It seems slightly less fussy with discs, too. It wins, but the CXC is great value all the same.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Mains on/off power switch
- 2 12V trigger in and outputs
- 3 Optical digital output
- 4 Coaxial digital output

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ | LIKE: Great design; decent build; good sound |
| VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ | DISLIKE: Nothing at the price |
| BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ | WE SAY: Superb affordable audiophile CD transport |

FEATURES

- ★★★★★

OVERALL

- ★★★★★