

# Multipurpose Digital

## The McIntosh MCD500

By Jeff Dorgay

McIntosh  
MCD500 SACD/CD PLAYER

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Handwritten text on CD surface, including "McIntosh" and "MCD500".





can hear that loudmouth guy who advertises OxyClean on TV screaming at the top of his lungs: "It's a CD player! It's a DAC! It even plays SACDs!" But what *really* makes the latest digital hardware from McIntosh so exciting is its subtlety and its versatility. This is a serious CD/SACD player. For \$6,500, you get a CD player, SACD player and a DAC with two inputs. "Don't wait! If you buy now, we'll throw in a volume control!" I can still hear that guy screaming in the background.

Making use of the latest DAC chips from SABRE technologies, this device takes a big leap forward, raising the performance benchmark in its class and offering full 192kHz sampling. Ron Cornelius at McIntosh told me that they use the 24-bit version of the Sabre Reference, model No. ES9008. "Our specs are better than they list; we use 4 DAC's per channel in a parallel balanced configuration to increase signal-to-noise ratio by an additional 6 db." McIntosh engineer Ted Saito gave this player a master clock to sync the D/A process independently of the incoming data stream to minimize jitter and increase the quality of out-board digital sources.

McIntosh didn't stop there. Careful attention was paid to the analog section in terms of parts selection, component layout and power-supply design. They didn't scrimp on the mechanical construction either; this is a beefy player, weighing almost 30 pounds. I was particularly impressed with the steel CD drawer in the mechanism, something absent on my \$17,000 Wadia 781i SE or the recently reviewed \$16,000 Meridian 808.2. Cornelius went on to say, "The MCD500 is one of if not the best selling player we make and feel that it should be partnered with the C500 preamp and the MC1.2k, MC 501 or MC2301 amplifiers, so the whole system can be run fully balanced."





**The big change that MCD301 owners will notice is the compliment of digital inputs.**

The good news is that the OxyClean guy was a bad dream, but the MCD500 is a sweet dream that really exists. When you wake up, you can go right down to your local McIntosh dealer and buy one. The styling is old-school McIntosh: a nice glossy-glass front panel with backlit green lettering and blue LED displays. I'm sure the loyal McIntosh customers in the crowd are saying, "So what's the matter with that?" Nothing, in my book. I've been a fan of McIntosh look since the early '70's, and I think it's very cool that while it's been slightly upgraded over the past 10 years, it still looks great. And should you have any older vintage Mc gear, they look right at home together.

#### Setup

Most McIntosh components require precious little burn-in time, and the MCD500 was no exception. It sounded fine out of the box and opened up in the upper registers slightly during the first 50 hours of playing time. Part of that may have been a result of it being so cold outside when it was delivered. It felt like a brick of black ice when we unboxed it!

The MCD500 is very well-equipped for an SACD player. The rear panel reveals variable and fixed RCA and XLR outputs, which are selectable from the front panel. The big change that MCD301 owners will notice is the compliment of digital *inputs*. The MCD500 features an optical digital input as well as a SPDIF (RCA), also selectable from the front panel. My only regret with this player is that it does not feature a USB input, which is becoming the preference for computer audio users. Not a deal breaker, but I think this will be an essential option for the next revision of this player, considering how many people use their computers as digital sources.

#### System Combinations

Fully equipped with a low-voltage trigger circuit, the MCD500 can integrate into your remote-controlled system, and it makes for a simple yet high-performance system when teamed up with the McIntosh power amplifier of your choice. The supplied remote will then control your entire system. (Unless you pair the MCD500 with an MC275, which can not be triggered remotely) *(continued)*



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If you are part of the new breed of audiophiles who does not have an LP collection or hasn't gotten around to it yet, the MCD500 works great as a stand-alone control center for digital sources. Its variable level outputs deliver six volts in unbalanced mode and 12 volts balanced, which should be more than enough to drive any power amplifier. I had no problem driving a 20-foot run of balanced or unbalanced cable to the MC252 while it was here.

**Using the MCD500 with the McIntosh MS300 music server and the MC252 amplifier proved to be the ultimate in simplicity and flexibility.**

I could take advantage of my SACD library, play extended playlists with the MS300 and use my laptop via optical to play downloads. You could also use the optical connection for a digital cable box if you were integrating your television into this system. Best of all, you can control it with one remote. I would highly suggest this combination for anyone with space at a premium who does not want to sacrifice performance.

While I am still a fan of a high-quality linestage as the front end of your system, I tried the MCD500 with a number of non-McIntosh power amplifiers with excellent results. Interestingly enough, I really liked the MCD500 with the MC275 tube power amplifier. Mated with my Harbeth Monitor 40.1's, I definitely had a substantial slice of audio heaven in the room.

#### The Sound

All of the specs and engineering wizardry goes straight out the window the minute you push the play button and the MCD500 delivers the goods. *(continued)*





I spent a fair amount of time comparing discs that I had ripped on the MS300 to playing from the drawer of the MCD500, and I can happily report that the difference was negligible, even non-existent. A few of my informal listeners even preferred the hard-disc playback to the CD player, but it was always a close race.

Standard redbook playback is still one of my favorite SACD player tests. With so few new SACD's being pressed, chances are most of you will be using your SACD player as a CD player at least half of the time. I'm happy to report that the MCD500 passed this test with flying colors. On well-recorded SACD's, such as my latest jazz favorite from Eastwind Imports, *Blue Minor: The Great Jazz Trio* by Hank Jones, George Mraz and Billy Kilson. Even though the high-resolution layer of the disk had more air and slam, the CD portion sounded excellent. A number of other jazz favorites that were redbook only spent a lot of time in the MCD500's tray and I never felt limited. But when the occasional SACD came along, it was nice to ratchet up the presentation a notch.

My major complaint about the player is that it does not sense SACD automatically, forcing you to set it manually. This led to confusion on a few occasions, and I'd love to see that changed on the next version. I'm sure the fussy audiophiles in the crowd wouldn't mind the ability to switch from CD to SACD on the fly as well. At present, when you switch formats, it mutes and stops the player. On the grand scale, pretty minor gripes about a fantastic player.

Having a few other SACD players around to compare and contrast, I felt the MCD500 had its own sound. Compared with the Luxman Du7 and Marantz XA-11, the Mac player sounded more open, dynamic and less grainy, even a touch forward at times. It had a *HUGE* soundstage as well, throwing an image way beyond the outer boundaries of my MartinLogan CLX speakers. This was a very engaging player that I could listen to for hours without fatigue, and though it is obviously voiced to use with an all McIntosh system, it was a perfect compliment to whatever system we chose to use it in. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

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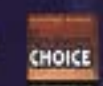
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**This player does not embellish the presentation of whatever you put in the tray.**

My Japanese imports sounded exquisite, David Bowie's *Scary Monsters* sounded harsh, and *Every Breath You Take* from the Police sounded crunchy and compressed. However, great SACD's (like the new Marvin Gaye discs from MoFi) will keep you so engaged that you'll spend less time with your turntable.

Bouncing between old favorites (Pink Floyd and Genesis) and new (Fleet Foxes and the new Prince disc), I was consistently impressed with the low-end grunt and slam that this player had to offer. The lower registers were well represented with excellent texture, not merely one-note bass. Dynamics and attack were powerful and controlled. Going back to Michael Hedges *Aerial Boundaries* on Windham Hill made for a great torture test trying to capture Hedges plucky guitar style, another test that the MCD500 aced.

Frequency extremes are where all but the best digital hardware reveal their true natures, and this is where the MCD500 falls a little short when compared with reference players such as the Naim 555 or the Wadia 781i SE. But these players cost two-to-three times as much. Compared with its equally priced (or slightly more expensive) peers, the MCD is without fault.

Where the MCD500 played closest to the big-bucks boxes was in low-level detail retrieval. Switching back and forth between the \$18,000 Wadia player and the MCD500, I was impressed with how much of Sinatra's vocal inflections came through on both players. (continued)



### I Keep Coming Back to the DAC

As great as the MCD500 is as a disc player, it's a stellar DAC. Every digital source that I paired it with was a great combination, from the Wadia 170i up to the Sooloos music server. So you can look at the MCD500 as a great disc player with a free DAC thrown in or vice versa. I would go as far as to say that I would pay \$6,500 just for the MCD500's DAC, even if I rarely need the disc player.

I hope the McIntosh people won't mind me prodding them for new products, but this DAC with a USB input without the transport at say \$3,995 would be a world-beater!

### The Last CD Player Many of You Will Need, Equipped for the Future

While the Compact Disc is close to the end of its lifespan, (like all other physical media) the majors are still pressing 500 million discs a year, so you still need something to play them on and the used market will probably remain strong for the next 20-50 years. I can highly recommend the McIntosh MCD500 because regardless of your shiny disc preferences, the DAC inputs should carry you forward quite nicely. And there has never been a better time than the present to make some great deals on the remaining SACD's that are floating around on the used market. ●



The McIntosh MCD 500  
MSRP: \$6,500

#### MANUFACTURER

McIntosh Laboratories  
www.mcintoshlabs.com

#### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Sources** Luxman Du7, McIntosh MS 300, Naim CD555, Wadia 170i, Sooloos Music Server

**Analog Source** Rega P9w/ RB1000 arm, Lyra Skala cartridge and Nagra BPS phono stage

**Preamplifier** Burmester 011, Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2

**Power Amplifier** Burmester 911mk. 3, Conrad Johnson Premier 350, McIntosh MC252, McIntosh MC275

**Speakers** Harbeth Monitor 40.1, Martin Logan CLX w/ Descent i Subwoofers, Verity Audio Sarastro II

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora Interconnects, Shunyata Orion Speaker cable

**Power Management** Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco Line Conditioners, Running Springs Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Hydra 2 Line Conditioner, Shunyata Anaconda VX power cords

**Accessories** Burmester V4 and V1 Equipment racks, Furutech DeMag, Finite Elemente Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators