

## REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

# Arcam CDS50

A new look to go with the changed ownership of this celebrated British brand – so how does its latest network player measure up to the competition?

Of late, it's been all change at Arcam, for many years one of the best-known names in mainstream British audio. After some time as part of a Canadian group, JAM Industries, which saw its high-end products such as the A49 amplifier being built in the USA, since last July it's been a wholly owned subsidiary of US company Harman. And Harman, of course, is part of Korean giant Samsung, which acquired the US multibrand company in an \$8bn deal in November 2016.

We've come a long way since Arcam was based in a somewhat rambling factory in Waterbeach, Cambridgeshire, with a celebrated electric milkfloat – inevitably called Ernie – used to ferry components and completed products around the site. After a brief swansong on eBay, the milkfloat went to a new home, and so did Arcam – into an office suite in a building across the road from the old factory, which premises are now used by the UK operations of Harman Luxury Brands, a stable Arcam shares with the likes of JBL, Lexicon, Mark Levinson and Revel.

For as long as I can remember there have been Arcam products. As an impoverished student I recall staring at the original A&R A60 amplifier in a hi-fi dealer's window, just as I have memories of 1986, when company founder John Dawson dragged me to the Arcam stand at a major London show – yes, we used to have those – showed me the Alpha One CD player and told me that this British-built machine was the product to see off the Japanese brands then dominating the market.

### ARCAM CDS50

**Type** SACD/CD/network player

**Price** £699

**Disc formats played** SACD, CD, CD-R/RW

**File formats played** AIFF/FLAC/WAV up to 192kHz/24-bit, AAC, MP3, OGG, WMA

**Digital inputs** Optical/coaxial/USB

Type A

**Digital outputs** Optical/coaxial

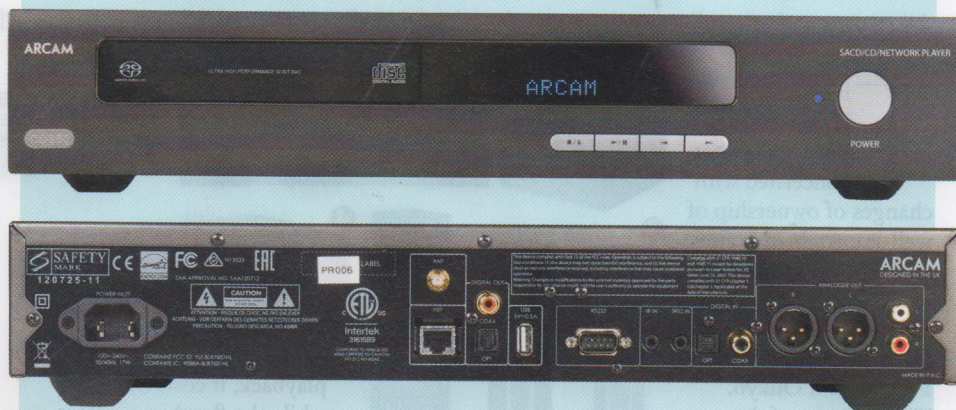
**Analogue outputs** Balanced XLR, RCA phono

**Other connections** Ethernet/Wi-Fi, infrared in, 12V trigger in, RS232 (control)

**Accessories supplied** Wi-Fi antenna, remote control

**Dimensions** (WxHxD) 43.3x8.7x32.3cm

[arcam.co.uk](http://arcam.co.uk)



As a solid part of the British hi-fi market for over 40 years, Arcam has a significant number of firsts to its name – quite apart from selling over 30,000 units of that first amplifier. Its 1988 Black Box was the first stand-alone DAC for CD playback, while two years later it launched an audiophile tuner for the then-popular Nicon TV sound, following that in 1999 with the first high-quality DAB radio tuner, the Alpha 10.

With all that heritage behind it, it's good to see that under the new owners – and,

indeed, the new owners' owners – the Arcam brand isn't going the way of some 'acquired' British names, which end up as little more than badges on products from factories unknown. Instead, the company has a new range of products, slotting in under the higher-end FMJ line-up. Three models make up the initial offering: the CDS50 SACD/CD/network music player (£699) and two integrated amplifiers, the SA10 (also £699) and the SA20 (£999).

All three offer a subtly updated take on Arcam styling that has merely evolved

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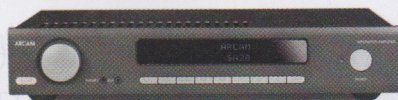


## SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The Arcam's smooth, mature sound demands the use of similarly accomplished partners ...

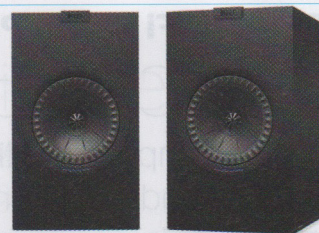
### ARCAM SA20 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

Arcam's new integrated amplifiers are a fine match with the CDS50 – the powerful SA20 would work very well indeed.



### KEF'S Q350 SPEAKERS

KEF's Q350 speakers keep things compact while delivering a big sound from their celebrated UniQ drive unit.



over some 20 years. The differences may be in the details, with slightly softer lines and improved controls giving a more contemporary feel, but the company has managed to pull off the trick of creating a product that looks thoroughly modern without alienating its established customer-base.

We've come a long way since Arcam was based in a rambling Cambridge factory with a milkfloat to ferry components around the site

Like the £800 CDS27, launched in 2015 as part of Arcam's FMJ range, the CDS50 combines an SACD/CD player with both Ethernet and Wi-Fi streaming, allowing it to play music stored on a home computer running UPnP server software or on a suitable Network Attached Storage device. In addition, the player has both optical and coaxial digital input connections, and you can also attach a USB memory device via a rear-panel USB Type A socket and play music directly from that. Control of the streaming functions is via Arcam's own MusicLife app (for iOS only). Under the lid the CDS50 uses 32-bit digital-to-analogue conversion, enabling it to handle FLAC, WAV and AIFF file formats up to 192kHz/24-bit, as well as MP3, AAC, OGG and WMA.

This, then, is another of those 'bridge' devices, designed to smooth the transition from playing CDs to listening to computer-stored music, and in this it does rather a fine job. It may lack the extended format range of some rival devices, in which playback of files up to multi-DSD level isn't uncommon, but it also offers a selection of streaming services via the MusicLife app, including Deezer, Tidal, Qobuz and internet radio; and, of course, it is rather more affordable than some rival designs.

In recent months these pages have looked at the Marantz ND8006, for example, which offers a wider range of capabilities – but then the Marantz is a full £400 more expensive than the Arcam. Not that there's not going to be increased competition in the next few

months, with both Denon and Marantz launching network players at or around the price of the Arcam, and with DSD playback capability – but then those models won't offer the CDS50's disc playback capabilities. As the saying goes, you pay your money and take your choice.

### PERFORMANCE

If the styling is a little new, albeit still recognisably Arcam, then the sound of the CDS50 – which, like the other models in its range carries the 'Designed in the UK' label but also has a small 'Made in PRC' legend on the rear panel – also conforms to expectations of the way the company's products play music. That means the presentation is smooth and rich, with no nasty shocks to offend the ear, but can be a little lazy in the treble, meaning spatial clues are ultimately slightly diminished.

All of which means that, while it may lack that edge of aggression favoured by lovers of rock or pop music, the Arcam is rather well suited to the needs of the classical listener, and indeed will please those who find some discs (or indeed files) rather hard-edged and forward. The mellow balance of the player – whether with CDs, SACDs or streamed content – covers very well its slight high-frequency softening, meaning that sound-stage pictures are compelling and realistic, with fine placement of elements within large-ensemble recordings and convincing ambience with smaller forces.

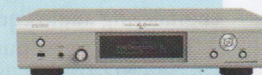
Yes, the additional information available on SACDs or higher-resolution PCM files is clearly apparent as an increase in dynamics and information, but the Arcam never has that effect of putting the hi-fi ahead of the music and always proves an extremely easy listen. The absence of sharp edges to the sound avoids the stress sometimes encountered on soprano or violin top notes, while the slight softness means the more overtly 'hi-fi' nuances are often overlooked, focusing the attention more reliably on the performance. And that, I suspect, will suit many listeners very well indeed. This is a player not only to unite physical and computer-stored media but also to please the listener over the long term, not simply to impress on a fleeting audition. **G**

## Or you could try ...

**The arrival of the Arcam CDS50 is well timed, as the market for network audio products is burgeoning, but it faces stiff competition both from above and below. There are new rivals coming from both Denon and Marantz: the latter is offering the NA6006 at £549 and the former the DNP-800AE, now on sale at £449.**

### Denon DNP-800AE

The Denon network player features hi-res music streaming, Apple Airplay 2 and the company's HEOS multiroom music system. Find out more at [denon.co.uk](http://denon.co.uk)



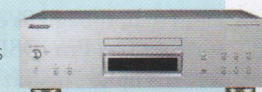
### Marantz ND8006

Marantz also offers the more comprehensively equipped ND8006 (6/18), which combines full network audio capability, HEOS and CD playback, and is designed to be 'The Complete Digital Music Source Player'. With wide-ranging format and streaming service compatibility plus superb build and sound quality, it's certainly a very attractive prospect for those migrating from discs to computer-stored music. It sells for £1099: details at [marantz.co.uk](http://marantz.co.uk)



### Pioneer PD-70AE

Pioneer ups the stakes further with its £2199 PD-70AE. You'll need a computer to stream music to it via its USB input but it is a superior 'battleship' CD/SACD player with a remarkable sound. If your interest is mainly in keeping your disc collection alive, you can find more information at [pioneer-audiovisual.eu](http://pioneer-audiovisual.eu)



### Naim ND5 XS2

Finally, a simple-looking high-end player from Naim. The new ND5 XS2 (£2299) doesn't even have a display, being designed for operation using the Naim app on a tablet or phone. Yet it offers ultra-hi-res streaming, compatibility with a huge range of streaming services and more, and the ability to function as a Roon endpoint. It's the new entry-level model of Naim's network player line-up: find out more at [naimaudio.com](http://naimaudio.com)

