

# AUDIOLAB 8000CD REBORN AUDIOPHILE BRAND REVEALS FIRST NEW MODEL

Most products in the latest range are recognisable from the past, but while this CD player may look familiar, inside it's all-new, says Tony Williams



The 8000CD stands just 7.4cm tall and looks familiar – even the remote is the same as in the past – but is actually an all-new machine

## Audiolab 8000CD

**Type** CD player

**Price** £600

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

**Digital to analogue conversion** 24-bit/192kHz

**Analogue outputs** Two sets of RCA phonos

**Digital outputs** BNC/phono electrical, optical

**Accessories supplied**

Audiolab 8000RC system remote handset

**Dimensions** (WxHxD)

44.5x7.4x33.5cm

**Made by** Audiolab, IAG

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THE DEMISE OF TAG McLaren Audio left some who'd invested heavily in its equipment feeling rather short-changed: they'd become used to regular upgrades, and were looking forward to growing their systems within the line-up. The news that the company's audio interests had been sold to the International Audio Group, and that Audiolab – the company TAG originally bought as the basis of its operation – was to be revived, further dismayed enthusiasts who were going to see 'their' brand vanish.

McLaren was never going to allow another company to make products carrying its name – indeed, IAG was only allowed to use the brand for a limited time, principally to clear existing stock – and, after all, the new owners were guaranteeing support for existing models. Not the endless software upgrades, agreed, but at least it's possible to get equipment repaired; if TAG McLaren Audio had simply disappeared, owners would have been left high and dry.

Old TMA models such as the high-end AV32R and AV192R processors have disappeared, as have DVD players, monobloc amps and speakers. What we're left with is essentially the old Audiolab range as it was when that name was absorbed some seven years ago, with the TAG McLaren tuning work carried out in those – plus the TMA-designed AV30R/700:7R AV products, now called the 8000AV and 8000X7 – retained.

But there's more to the revived Audiolab than old wine in new bottles, as Andrew Everard reported from the factory in China where the equipment is made (A/05). The new owners are committed to developing new models, and here we have the first sign of that in the £600 8000CD CD player. The name may be familiar from the old line-up, but this machine is all-new.

The explanation is simple: while amplifier technology hasn't moved on much in the past few years, meaning that amplifiers such as the 8000S integrated and 8000Q/P/M pre/power combinations are still viable, CD players have improved a lot. So what we have is an improved vacuum fluorescent display panel, a bespoke transport mechanism designed for accurate reading and transmission of data from disc to digital section, and latest-generation 24-bit/192kHz digital-to-analogue conversion from Crystal Semiconductor. The internal layout has separate digital and analogue stages, using twin power supply transformers, one for each section. The intention? 'The performance of a two-box player from an integrated machine,' says the firm.

## Performance

The player offers two sets of analogue outputs – handy for multiroom systems – and digital outputs on BNC and phono electrical sockets, plus an optical Toslink connection. It's possible to turn off the digital outputs if they're not required, which the company claims brings 'a marginal improvement' to the sound, while there's also switchable digital filtering. The default 'slow' setting offers better group delay characteristics – in other words it tackles better the way different frequencies travel through the player at very slightly different speeds – but with reduced attenuation of spurious signals; while the 'fast' setting offers enhanced technical performance and better attenuation of these spurious. It's a personal choice, but I found the 'fast' setting a little bright and clinical, and the 'slow' a shade richer and warmer, particularly with strings. The differences were slight, however, and the preference could well be altered with a change of amplifier and speakers. To ensure compatibility with older Audiolab systems, the company has retained a familiar handset, which will drive a complete Audiolab set-up of mixed vintage.

Those expecting the bright, fast, analytical sound of the old Audiolab player will be disappointed – or should that be pleased? – to discover the new machine has a more generous and musical sound, combining weight and detail in the bass with a treble that's clean, sweet and informative.

This isn't a relaxing 'background music' type of player, but one that demands attention to the music, which is just as it should be, and rewards that attention with fine insight into recording and performance. It's at this level that CD players start to become characterful, as designers' personal views of how music should be heard come into play and 'house sounds' begin to become obvious – from the 'refined' (lush) to the 'exciting and dynamic', which can be too bright to some ears. The Audiolab avoids the temptation to impose any overt character on the sound and sticks to a relatively neutral path.

'Neutral' can also mean 'bland' in audio circles, and there's many an 'accurate' player that sounds dead dull. But the 8000CD is never found wanting when it comes to delivering the drama of a performance, be it a solo instrument or a large ensemble. The bass is taut and tuneful, which may make it sound a little lightweight in systems needing some warmth from that source to keep them in check; but used with a full-range amp and speakers it's clear this isn't achieved at the expense of extension. That clean treble delivers plenty of atmosphere and presence, and the midband is explicit with solo instruments and voices.

Put it all together and this is a fine debut for 'new Audiolab', and bodes well for future products designed in-house. I can imagine it working well with the firm's latest amplifiers, and in a wide variety of modern systems, as well as with 'original' Audiolab equipment. If only it came in black as well as silver, it would be the perfect answer for Audiolab enthusiasts old and new. ©

