

The world's most desirable kit

TEMPTATIONS

“There's much to be said for a forgiving attitude”

■ **Aesthetix Romulus** CD Player/DAC

■ **R89000** ★★★★★☆

Aesthetix is one of the brightest stars of high-end amplification. We've loved every single piece of kit we've heard from this American brand, but still approached its first foray into the digital domain with a sense of trepidation. We needn't have worried. While not flawless, the Romulus CD player is a great piece of kit. It's apparent from the first few seconds of listening.

Serious listening

Our usual practice is to let test equipment warm up overnight before starting serious listening. Our review sample wasn't new, so running-in wasn't an issue. We normally don't take much notice of the sound at this point, apart from making sure everything is working properly. The Aesthetix had other ideas.

The first few bars of Eminem's *Bad Guy* is enough to get us hooked. This

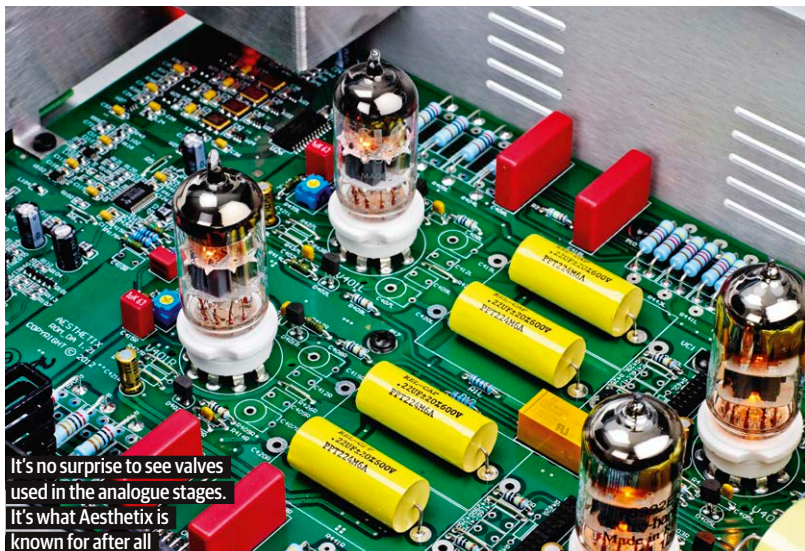
recording can easily sound hard and thin, but that isn't the case here. The Romulus delivers sound with a wonderful sense of space and ease. And detail? There's loads, as the player uncovers subtleties with considerable skill. At this point we're impressed, but we leave the player on repeat and come back to listen the following day. We wonder how the sound will change once the circuitry settles at operating temperature. The answer? A fair bit, all of it good. Listening to the Eminem track again, the presentation proves even

clearer and more fluid. There are gains in transparency and top-end sweetness. Scale improves too.

Communicating the aggression

The Romulus does a pretty good job at tracking rhythms and communicating the aggression in the recording. There's an element of rounding off the edges, though, which makes recordings seem a little easier on the ear than they should be. If you're a rock or hip-hop fan, that may be an issue, but for the most part this Aesthetix delivers enough bite.

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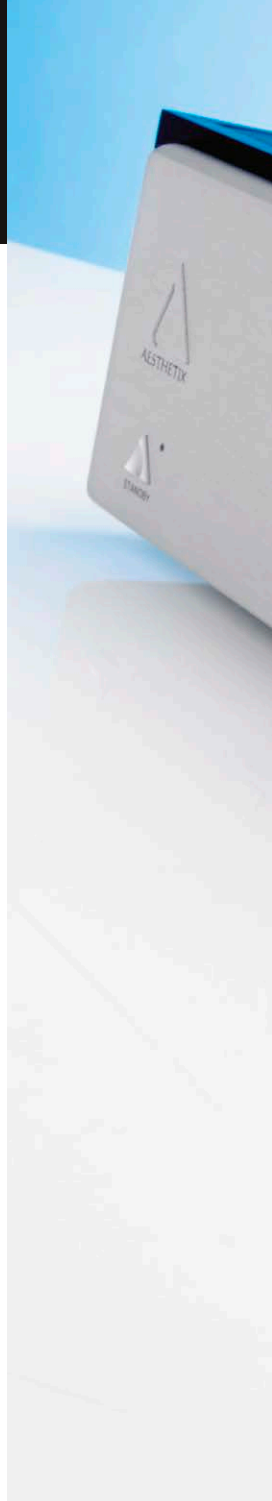
It's no surprise to see valves used in the analogue stages. It's what Aesthetix is known for after all

Switch to Van Morrison's *Moondance* and the Romulus sounds right at home. It captures the jaunty feel of the song brilliantly, rendering that lovely bassline with real dexterity. Tonally, things edge towards richness, but not enough to jar. Instead, the presentation is smooth yet still entertaining. It's a balance that has become something of a trademark for the company's products.

The Romulus isn't just a CD player, either. It's equipped with digital inputs too, as is becoming common. There's the usual option of USB, optical and coax, and the less-common AES/EBU connection too. The USB can be switched between Class 1.0 and 2.0 modes at the press of a little button on the rear panel. Using Class 2.0 - as we did for most of our test - extends the input

TECH SPECS

Type DAC
Inputs Coaxial digital, Optical digital, AES/EBU, USB
Outputs XLR, RCA
CD text No
Memory No
Display off Yes
Finishes 1
Dimensions (hwd) 11 x 46 x 45cm



If we're being picky, those distinctive triangular buttons feel imprecise to use

See overleaf for more detail...



capability to 24bit/192kHz music files. Macs with OS X version 10.6.4 or higher will work right away, but if you have a PC you'll need dedicated software drivers.

Bodes well for sound quality

USB Class 1.0 should work with most computers as standard but limits the input data streams to a 96kHz sampling rate. Regardless of mode, the USB input works asynchronously - so the DAC, rather than the computer connected to it, has control of information flow - which usually bodes well for sound quality.

We play a range of music from our MacBook (which runs a Pure Music media-playing software) with really good results. There's the same large-scale, spacious presentation that we hear when playing CDs, and similar levels of

resolution. We're impressed by the Romulus's refinement and its ability to make low bitrate files listenable - there's much to be said for such a forgiving attitude towards recordings. But, give it something really well-recorded like a CD rip of Nick Cave's *Push the Sky Away* or a 24-bit/192kHz rendition of Mahler's *Symphony No.4* and it shines.

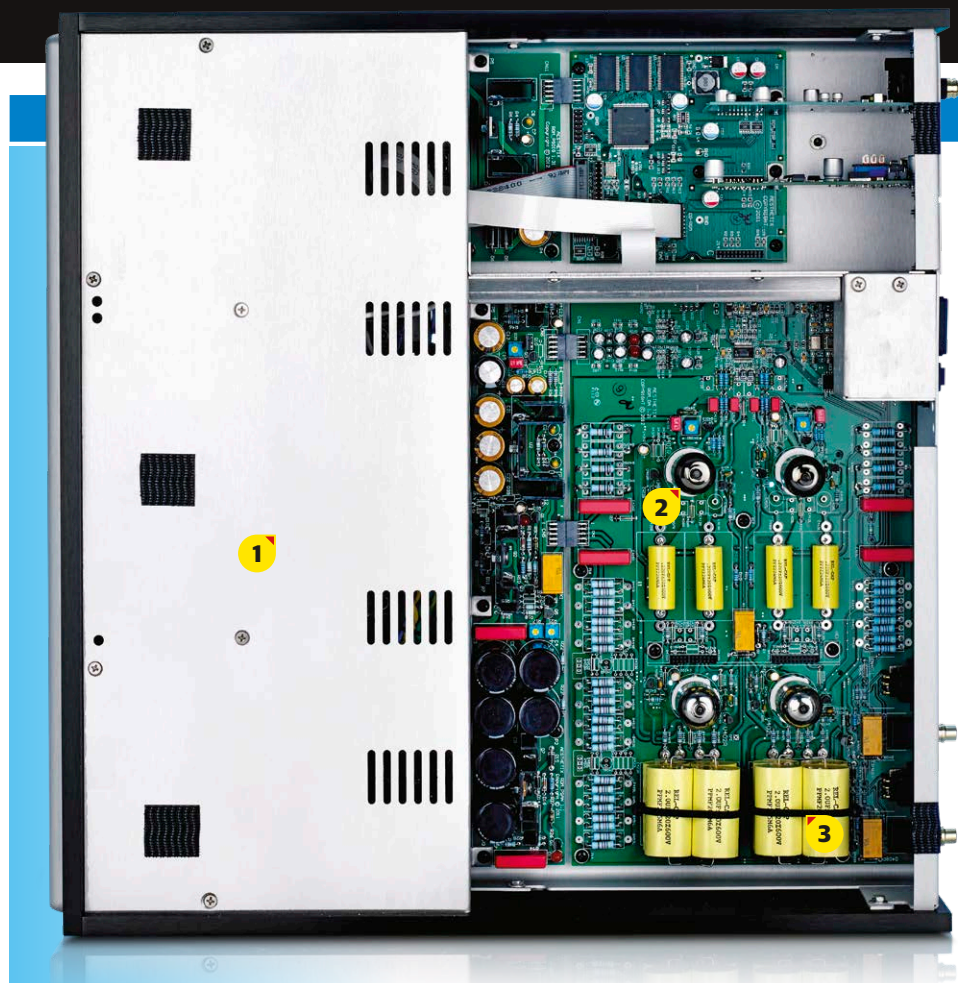
Comparing the Aesthetix to a top-class, stand-alone high-end DAC such as Chord's QBD 76 is interesting. The Chord certainly shows that more timing precision is available and delivers dynamic contrasts in a more

forceful manner. It even digs up a touch more detail, but the Aesthetix counters with its more spacious presentation, a nicely layered sound stage and a much more forgiving attitude.

Moving away from sound, there's much to be impressed with here. Build quality is terrific, as it has been with all Aesthetix products we've seen. The

The unit's aluminium casework feels solid and is finished to a high standard





In detail

1 Power supply arrangement

A capable power supply is the foundation of any talented hi-fi component, and this one is no different. It uses three transformers: one each for the analogue and digital sections, leaving the third to power the control circuitry. Isolating the sections in this way reduces interference and improves sound quality. The power supply (along with the CD transport) is shielded for the same reason.

2 Valves, obviously

Aesthetix is well known for making great-sounding valve-based products, so it comes as no surprise to find them in the audio stages of this CD player. It uses a combination of two 12AX7 valves (fed straight from the DAC section) and a pair of 6922s in the output stage. These are relatively low-power valves so they don't tend to get particularly hot. They should have a long life too, if you don't leave the player powered on all the time.

3 High-quality internal components

The Romulus uses highly-regarded Rel-Cap polypropylene capacitors and Roederstein metal film resistors to get the most performance from the circuit layout.

Behind the music Jim White founder



Early in my career I worked for a well-known, high-end digital audio company. When I left and

formed Aesthetix in the early 1990s, I could have produced a DAC then. But I decided that every Aesthetix product had to be truly special and unique, so over the next decade I amassed ideas that would eventually be realised in the Romulus and Pandora DAC (which is essentially the Romulus with the disc drive removed).

Universal product

My concept was for an adaptable, universal product that contained unique and unforeseen technologies, which would break new ground in natural reproduction from digital audio. As we progressed in our development work and the prototypes were being created, I could see my vision being gradually realised, as the technology was implemented.

unit's aluminium casework feels solid and it's all finished to a high standard.

If we're being picky, those distinctive triangular buttons on the front panel feel imprecise to use. We'd like a slicker drawer operation too: it feels no classier than many a budget player. The same thing can be said about the remote handset.

Faraday cage

Take a look inside and you'll be greeted by neatly laid-out circuit boards. It's no surprise to see valves used in the analogue stages (after all that is what the brand is known for) and we're impressed by the high-quality internal components. As is usual for a product at this level, attention is given to preventing damaging interactions between the digital and analogue sections. This extends to the TEAC-sourced transport, which is enclosed in a Faraday cage to isolate it electrically from other parts of the player.

The power supply is suitably elaborate and makes use of three transformers: one for analogue, the second for digital and the third for the control circuitry.

If you fancy having a stripped-out system, you can even connect the Romulus directly to a power amplifier or

a pair of active speakers. To do this you'll need to specify a version with a built-in volume control (our review sample didn't come with one) which adds another R12000 to the price. That's a large chunk of money, but does mean you won't need to stump up for an even pricier dedicated pre-amp.

Dive right in

The Romulus is a talented machine. It's a very fine CD player and a talented unit if used as a DAC. If its refined, yet still entertaining, approach to playing music appeals, dive right in - and enjoy a smooth and elegant sound.

Consider if You want a high-quality CD player with digital inputs

Highlight We love the Romulus's sonic refinement and spacious sound stage

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Refined yet still entertaining sound; full-bodied presentation; terrific as a DAC

AGAINST Lacks a little timing precision; remote could be smarter

VERDICT The Romulus is a fine performer that draws in the listener