

CD PLAYERS  
NAD C 545 BEE

## Better and better

Anyone remotely interested in hi-fi and home entertainment will by now be familiar with the NAD brand, which has sustained a reputation for no-frills, high-quality audio and AV equipment for well over three decades now.

AVSA has reviewed a veritable mountain of NAD gear over the years, with much of it receiving praise for a by now characteristic combination of performance, value and robust build quality.

NAD's no-frills, rather industrial approach to aesthetics has been somewhat more controversial, but to my mind, it remains as much of the brand's specific DNA as any of its other attributes.

In recent years, a growing number of components have been released as tweaked, special versions, usually bearing the 'BEE' moniker. This refers to Bjorn Erik Edvardsen, NAD's much-praised director of advanced development, whose continued influence remains such a core element of the marque's success.

Enter the C 545 BEE – NAD's latest CD player. It replaces the highly regarded C 525 BEE with a package that, NAD claims, provides more features and enhanced sonics, compared to the outgoing model. And yes, it has enjoyed the special attentions of Mr Edvardsen.

The exterior design is pure NAD – which means it's sleek and understated, and finished

in the bluff, battleship grey synonymous with the brand. The front fascia hosts the transport tray on the left, and a fluorescent display on the right, with a scattering of round switchgear directly below and to the right.

No surprises, then – and none on the rear panel, either. It's home to the usual choice of stereo analogue and digital outputs, as well as a 12V trigger switch for remote switch-on, and an infrared repeater input. There is also a proprietary firmware upgrade socket.

The C 545BEE has most of the features expected of a modern-day CD player. It's compatible with CD-R/W discs, and can play back MP3 and WMA files written to those discs. A newly designed remote control handset is provided, and the display can switched off.

But NAD has put most of its efforts into those aspects that matter most: the electronics under the covers.

An oversized power transformer is the first indication that there is more to this NAD than your usual mid-priced CD player. Next, you'll notice the separate power supplies for the analogue and digital circuit boards, which allows the two sections to be electrically isolated in the interests of combating noise and interference.

Indeed, the PC boards themselves have been designed with noise rejection in mind, as well as finding the shortest, most direct signal paths.

Circuit components, too, have come under close scrutiny, and the bits and pieces used

here would be at home in many a true high-end player, including metal-film resistors and polypropylene capacitors. Burr Brown provides not only the C 545BEE's 24-bit D/A converter, but also the sophisticated op amps.

NAD has ensured that a later upgrade to an off-board D/A converter won't be stymied by a poor SPDIF coaxial digital output: the unit on the C 545BEE is fitted with a transformer that isolates the output from the DAC, and buffers the output, while also ensuring that output impedance is exactly 75 ohm – measures that substantially reduce jitter and timing errors.

So: this player has undergone a lot of detail development. And, as NAD has already proven in the past, the sonic results reward those efforts handsomely.

I accumulated a useful stack of software for this review: ECM's superb 'Keith Jarrett Live at the Blue Note' box set, the equally gripping and ethereal 'Visible World' (also on ECM) by Jan Garbarek, the Phil Collins Big Band's 'Live in Paris', classic Rolling Stones on 'Emotional Rescue', the 'From the Age of Swing' CD by Dick Hymans (on Reference Recordings) and the musically compromised but beautifully produced Eagles double set, 'Long Road Out Of Eden'.

Out of such a divergent collection came some common truths regarding the NAD's performance. It is a gripping, entertaining and mostly eloquent player that is up to the sternest musical challenges, and retains



a sense of poise and decorum under even the closest scrutiny.

It has a way of unravelling more complex recordings, allowing the listener a clearer sonic view of the individual elements, but without disturbing the impetus and cohesion of the delivery. It's as if the deck is able to lift a veil you never realised was there before, clearing the way to a more vivid, more intense, and more believable delivery.

I liked the NAD's treatment of the lower frequency register: it's deep and resonant, but never thick or sluggish, with enough low-level detail to add vital texture and tactility to the sonic result. Add that to incisive pace and grip, and you have the ideal foundation for the rest of the tonal ladder.

A slightly lean but smooth and meticulously managed midrange provides the real meat of the music. It's often the most critical tonal parameter, but also the most overlooked, and the NAD gets it just right.

From there, the sound progresses into a slick and expressive treble richly endowed with detail. The accessibility that has always been a part of the NAD formula has been retained, and there is never anything attacking about its delivery.

That makes it a little friendlier than some when it comes to brighter recordings, but without wrapping everything in cotton wool. The bounty of musical information remains plentiful, and the treatment of all that musical information is precise enough to allow the conception of a believable, inherently musical image.

Don't be surprised, then, that the NAD creates an expansive soundstage with almost holographic dimensions, nor that it displays

## Vital Stats

**Digital conversion**  
.....Burr-Brown 24-bit/96 kHz DAC

**Frequency response** .....20 Hz – 20 kHz

**Signal-to-noise ratio** .....118 dB  
(A-weighted, ref 1 kHz)

**Outputs** .....Stereo analogue RCA,  
coaxial digital RCA, Toslink optical digital

**Dimensions (WxDxH)**  
.....435 x 285 x 70 mm

**Weight**.....4,3 kg

**PRICE**.....R6 100

**VERDICT**  
More refined and downright musical than ever before, but with an edge of welcome zest. A player that punches well above its class.

**SUPPLIED BY** AV Specialists  
021-946-1441

**WEBSITE** www.avspecialists.co.za

a certain poise and refinement usually expected of more expensive designs.

Methinks that the C 545BEE benefits more from the technology developed for NAD's Master Series than the company would like to admit. There's certainly a mix of polish and authority here that would usually be more closely associated with higher-end products.

Most of all, the NAD really gets to grips with just about anything you throw at it. The raw-edged Rolling Stones sounded as vital and spontaneous as only they can, bringing Jagger's strutting style and the jagged guitar licks of Keith Richards to vivid life.

Dick Hyman's big band has never sounded more polished and more expansive. The lavishly produced set represents a stern challenge for any system, and few manage to really get to grips with the sheer scale of the recording. But the NAD took it all in its stride, with impressive results.

For all their premeditated riffs and harmonies, The Eagles still raise goose bumps, thanks to the NAD's truthful, transparent reading of the double disc 'Long Road Out of Eden'. And the C 545BEE's considerable talents also allowed the electricity of the Phil Collins Big Band, live on stage, to become almost tangible.

It's this versatility, and the consistent quality of the renditions, that makes the NAD such a satisfying performer. Somehow, it always drills down to the most vital core of the music, regardless of the genre.

In that sense, one could describe the C 545BEE as a truly complete player – a deck that copes equally well with a variety of genres, and that will make the most of the equipment it is partnered. The quality of the musical data delivers is impeccable, and its outright competence will continue to surprise and delight.

The biggest problem facing NAD is how to keep on improving its wares. With the C 545BEE, it has reached a new pinnacle, and one that will be difficult to beat – even by Bjorn Erik Edvardsen himself!

**Deon Schoeman**

