

Audiolab 8000CD and 8000S

Audiolab 8000S amplifier and 8000CD CD player. \$1499 each

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If you're old like me and fear The Reaper, you may recall the name Audiolab, but if you're young and mostly none the wiser, you can be forgiven for not having heard of them before.

The story goes like this: Audiolab, established in 1983, was bought in the late 1990s by TAG McLaren, of Formula 1 fame. The company's revised gear was badged as TAG McLaren for the next seven years, and while it was generally considered to be rather good, it was also rather expensive and failed to take the world by storm. TAG McLaren eventually decided to refocus its energies on building zoomy cars, so Audiolab's old-guard stepped up to take the original product range back. Thus Audiolab, last featured in magazines still taking cassette decks seriously, re-emerges into the brave new world of the video iPod.

So, this new Audiolab is more or less the old Audiolab, but that might not be A Good Thing. The 8000S you see pictured looks suspiciously like

the 8000S that *AudioEnz* reviewed in 1997, and if the same is true of the interior what we may have here is a 2006 review of 1997 product. However, we are assured that the amp was updated during its time as a TAG McLaren, and that Audiolab has further revised it for its re-launch. The 8000CD player, on the other hand, is an entirely new beastie, delivering what Audiolab describe as 'something approaching the theoretical optimum for a CD player'. We shall see.

The hardware

Let's start with the 8000S. This is a remote-controlled 60W integrated design of rare flexibility. On inspecting the front panel you'll find the amp can be configured as a pre- or power-amp, so as to be extended by the addition of additional Audiolab amplifier units.

There are six line-level inputs and three tape loops, so you better hit the classifieds in search of Nakamichis. It



feels heavy and reasonably well-constructed, certainly better than your typical Japanese biscuit-box, but there's nothing exotic about its form or materials. The manufacturer claims the amp can knock out up to 25 amps, which means loudspeakers are held on a very short leash.

The 8000CD continues the Audiolab theme of high audiophile feature-count. The back panel is a lot busier than most players, because there are two analogue outputs, both RCA, and three digital outputs via RCA, optical, and BNC interfaces. Almost disappointingly, there is provision for only one mains lead.

Audiolab isn't giving much away about the interior, but I can tell you the 8000CD uses 24bit 192kHz, 5th order delta sigma DACs by Crystal, which are said to be the latest thing. Explaining the weight of the beast is not one but two toroidal transformers, one for analogue duties and the other for digital. That's certainly above and beyond. The transport also looks to be a high quality affair.

The sounds

From first power-up, and still cold, the 8000S immediately made an impression with its clarity and drive. A little lean at first, it warmed and proved to have a ferocious desire to make sure everything started and stopped exactly as the CD dictated, which meant firmly struck leading edges in the bass and added slap in the percussion. The mid-range is presented with fine neutrality, so it doesn't dominate the soundstage, but is seamlessly integrated therein, while the treble is clear and detailed, yet never obtrusive.

Transparency rates a special mention

for this amp – new information about old favorites is revealed, and nuances of playing style become more obvious. Indeed, the only real flaw I would venture to identify in the 8000S, given its price, is its total lack of romanticism. This amp ticks like a metronome, and has no interest in euphony or rose-tinting – it plays entirely by the book. If your system veers towards a 'cool' sound, this amp won't help.

If the quality of the amp was unsurprising, given its pedigree, the CD player was something else altogether. The last machine I heard playing with this degree of accomplishment cost over \$5K. If you want a simple gauge of the 8000CD's ability, just focus on the treble. CD players traditionally had to sort of make-up the high notes as they went along, thanks to the limitations of CD's 44kHz sampling rate. Thus, treble is not CD's strong point, but no-one seems to have told Audiolab, and the result is a player that can reproduce the finest detail at the top end with enormous precision and subtlety. To me this sounds like the effects attributed to upsampling, but that won't be the case in something so inexpensive.

The (ex-)TAG Team

Together, these components are pretty much the complete package. They performed that rare feat of adding interest to tracks I would usually skip, and could there be a greater compliment to any audio system than that? In effect they're adding to my music collection, so, if I were to be buying them, at these prices they'd virtually pay for themselves. Welcome back, Audiolab, we've missed you.—*Brent Burmester*

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