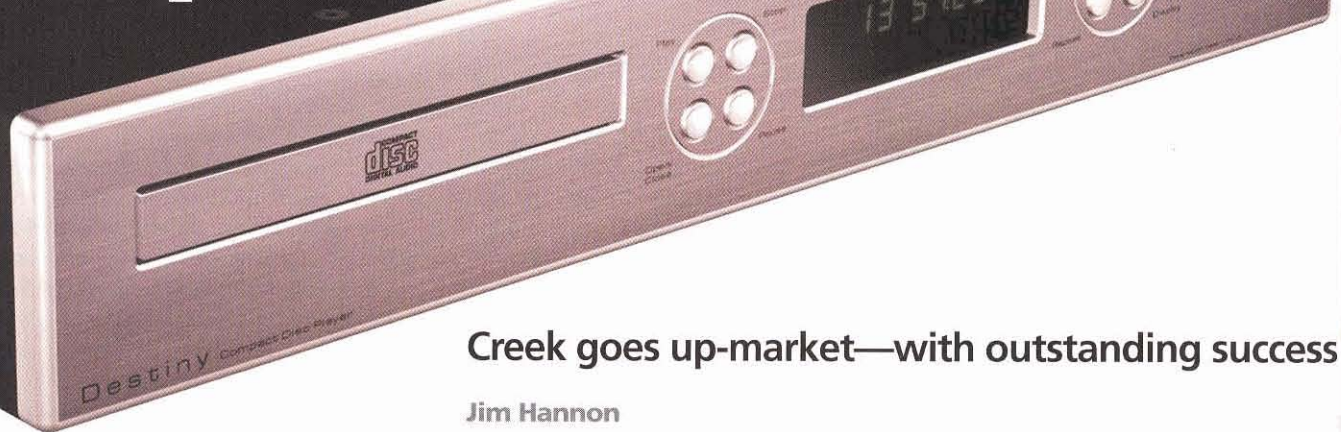


Creek Destiny CD Player and Integrated Amplifier



Creek goes up-market—with outstanding success

Jim Hannon

Many years ago, I purchased a Creek integrated amplifier as a birthday present for my wife to use as the centerpiece in an affordable, easy-to-use, yet engaging second system for our house. Although she'd complained that my reference system was too complex for her, she failed to appreciate all the "research" I'd done to find her the most musically satisfying piece within our modest budget. Although that Creek amp remains the occasion of endless ridicule whenever the subject of inappropriate birthday presents comes up, we spent many years enjoying its surprisingly satisfying sound in our "family" system.

Producing highly musical products at a low price is one of the toughest design challenges in audio, and when a company like Creek does it so well for so long, you can't help wondering what Creek's engineers could do with a larger budget. Well, wonder no longer. At \$2395 each, the Destiny CD player and integrated amplifier are Creek Audio's most "up-market" products yet. They've given Creek's engineers the opportunity to stretch out, but do their sonics justify their price?

Hooking the Destiny units up to the new Quad ESL-2805 convinced me that these were not overachieving budget electronics with fancy faceplates and a few extra features. I won't mince words—the Destiny units rival the performance of more expensive separates and do some things better than any other digital and solid-state combo that I have heard at anywhere near their price. No, the

The Creek Destiny duo rivals more expensive separates

Creeks don't have all the bloom and body of some tube units, nor the effortless power and control of some gargantuan solid-state amplifiers, but they come surprisingly close to both. Indeed, on the brilliantly recorded *Musica Sacra* [Opus 3 CD], massed voices sounded so gorgeous, and so many of the ambient cues were

maintained from the recording venue (the Örnäset Church in Sweden), that I thought tubes and a good analog front-end *were* in the chain. (And, indeed, they were, but only in the recording itself—the recording engineer used a custom-built tube mixer and a Telefunken analog tape recorder.)

On large-scale music, I also thought I was listening to a much more powerful amplifier, as the Creeks took the Quads to their dynamic limits. They also gave the ESL-2805 some welcome additional bass weight, but did nothing to blunt the speaker's lightning transient speed or spoil its remarkable coherence. Still, I preferred the Creeks mated to the Hyperion HPS-938—a speaker with low-distortion dynamic drivers. The combination was particularly thrilling and would fool many into thinking that they were listening to a mega-buck system. It was able to take all the power classical music, big band jazz, and hard rock I could throw at it. As soon as I started cranking *The Ultimate Collection* from The Who [MCA], my teen-aged daughters came running into the listening room and started dancing around. Keith Moon's drumming propelled the

music forward without a hint of tube sluggishness; his cymbal crashes were extended and decayed naturally; and John Entwistle's bass was deep, articulate, and powerful.

Not only are the Destinies more musical than previous Creek units—and that's saying something—but they also have more clarity, bass power, and immediacy. Unlike some "musical" MOSFET designs from other manufacturers, the Destinies do not veil the sound or defocus the image. They convey the timbre of instruments and voices well. Peggy Lee's riveting performance of her signature song "Fever," from *The Best of Miss Peggy Lee* [Capitol], sounded appropriately seductive and natural, and her finger snaps sounded like the real things. On guitar tracks from Nils Lofgren, Martin Sexton, and Xue Fei Yang, the tuneful resonance of the guitars came through with lots of natural detail and transient speed. I could hear the wood in the clarinet, oboe, and flutes at the beginning of Enescu's *Romanian Rhapsody No. 1* on the Reference Recordings *30th Anniversary Sampler*, and the triple-tonguing of the trumpets had very good "ping." Although I'd still give the nod on massed strings to my analog and tube-based references for their bloom and lushness, the Destinies conveyed the delicacy and air of massed strings better than nearly any digital/solid-state combo I've heard, the exceptions being a handful of far more expensive units.

The performance of the Creeks is unique

Given their pedigree, I expected the Creeks to be musical, but I was unprepared for their ground-breaking soundstaging performance at this price. I have been critical of all but a few costly digital players in this area, because they typically only provide good lateral imaging but not much soundstage depth. Well, the Destiny combo adds that third dimension to the soundstage and actually

Design Elements

Several design innovations are at play in the Destiny CD player and integrated amplifier. High-quality parts and connectors are used throughout. The units themselves are larger and more substantial than their less-costly Creek brethren, with custom extruded aluminum sections to give them an attractive high-end look as well as better rigidity. The heftier casework and Sorbothane feet combine to limit resonances, and the solid metal function buttons also provide very good tactile feedback. Yet, the cosmetic changes, while perhaps welcomed, are not the real story here.

Image focus and soundstage depth seem to be enhanced by isolating and buffering the signal paths for each channel in both units. The power-supply and voltage-regulation circuitry are kept separate in the integrated amplifier, and the CD player uses a total of 16 low-noise power supplies, as well as separate fully-encapsulated toroidal transformers, to drive the transport, logic, and analog sections. To help give it a more natural, realistic character, the CD player employs re-clocking circuitry to eliminate timing errors (that dreaded "jitter"), as well as a 24-bit DAC controlled by custom Creek software.

The preamplifier section of the integrated, which can be electronically separated from the power amplifier via a recessed switch, may be run in either passive or active modes, with the latter providing three increments of additional gain by means of a slider switch on the bottom of the unit. It's easy to change from passive to active mode via the highly functional and intuitive remote or the front-panel switches. I found the passive mode worked very well in combination with the Destiny CD player, adding a tad more immediacy, but the active mode provided a lot of flexibility without a very noticeable sonic penalty.

The integrated amplifier accepts Destiny plug-in moving-coil and moving-magnet phonostage boards, as well as a planned D-to-A converter board. Unfortunately, I did not have them for audition. The integrated also employs a sophisticated protection system, with microprocessor-controlled sensing. This not only protects the amplifier but also your speakers.

On the Liszt *Prelude on B-A-C-H* track from the Reference Recordings' sampler, the organ's deep tones caused the Quad's panels to audibly distort. Its protection circuit attempted to send a knock-out blow to the Destiny, but all the Creek did was mute its output for a few seconds and flash some red warning lights, giving me the necessary time to lower the volume. The sound returned and neither the Creek nor the Quad was the worse for wear. A lesser amp would have at least blown a fuse or required a trip to the repair shop.

Creek has used MOSFETs in its power amplifier sections since 1993, and the Destiny is a further evolution of this technology. I believe it is largely responsible for the unit's realistic timbre and musicality. On the convenience front, Creek has added a low-power standby mode to the Destiny products, so they can be ready to sound their best without a lot of warm-up time. JH

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Specs & Pricing

MUSIC HALL

108 Station Road
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(516) 487-3663
musicchallaudio.com
creekaudio.com

DESTINY CD PLAYER

D-to-A type: 24-bit/192kHz
Dimensions: 17" x 2.8" x 12.3"
Weight: 13.2 lbs.
Price: \$2395

DESTINY INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Power output: 100Wpc into 8 ohms
Inputs: Five line-level, plus one tape loop (optional internal phono boards available for moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges)
Features: Preamplifier section with passive or active modes (+3dB, +6dB, +9dB gain)
Dimensions: 17" x 2.8" x 12.3"
Weight: 22 lbs.
Price: \$2395 (without optional phono board)

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

SME 20-12 turntable and Sumiko Celebration cartridge; VPI Aries turntable (TNT V platter & bearing), Graham 1.5 arm (w/2.2 bearing), Koetsu Black cartridge; Art Audio Vinyl Reference phono stage; Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 21 DAC; MFA Venusian preamp (Frankland modified); PrimaLuna Prologue 6 amplifiers; Quad ESL 2805 and Hyperion HPS-938 loudspeakers; Chang Lightspeed CLS-6400 ISO MKII; Virtual Dynamics "David" cables



captures most of the rear of the stage. The string sections on the Enescu were not compressed horizontal masses; instead, the players were spread out from the front towards the back of the stage. *The Pines of Rome* selection from the same Reference Recordings disc also seemed to cover the entire stage, with the percussion instruments solidly positioned at the rear. Imaging was not only precise and stable; it was almost holographic on this CD—and on many other discs, too. Those who like listening to Hans Zimmer film scores, like *Blackhawk Down* [Decca], will be in for an exciting spatial treat from the Destinies.

The performance of the Creeks is so exemplary that they merit comparisons with good analog front ends and tube separates rather than with other units in their class. However, they do have some minor limitations. Those who want the ultimate in liquidity, body, air, and “continuousness” will have to look elsewhere—but be prepared to spend a lot more. Occasionally, the Destinies reveal their digital

and solid-state roots in some thinness in the highs, but this is more often a result of mediocre digital recordings or power-line problems. Adding a Chang Lightspeed and better cables helps smooth and flesh out the treble, and, of course, with better discs this is typically not a problem. While the Destiny amplifier did not put a vice-like grip on the bass or have quite the dynamic explosiveness of a large Krell or Musical Fidelity, it drew more bass out of the Hyperion speakers than other similarly-rated power amplifiers I’ve tried. The Destiny integrated sounds a lot more powerful than its 100Wpc channel rating.

In sum, I think the Destiny combo strikes a very nice “sonic middle ground” between tubes and solid-state, as well as analog and digital. If you like the sonic virtues of analog and tubes, but don’t like the associated set-up and maintenance hassles, or if your current digital and solid-state electronics leave you a little cold, check these babies out. They may be just your ticket. **TAS**