

NOVEMBER 2005



CEC OF JAPAN

TLO-X BELT-DRIVE TRANSPORT

Reviewer: Linnman

Source: CEC-TLO-X, Zanden Audio Model 2000P/5000S

Preamp: Wavac PR-T1

Amp: Goldmund Telos 600 monoblocks

Speakers: Kharma Midi Exquisite, Kharma Ceramique Subwoofer

Cables: Argento Serenity Master Reference Extreme Edition digital XLR, Acrolink DA6100 digital RCA, Argento Serenity Master Reference (SMR) Special Edition between DAC and the Pre, Argento, Serenity Master Reference Extreme edition between Pre and the Amp, SMR Extreme Edition speaker cable and Serenity SE between the output of the Wavac PR-T1 and the subwoofer; SMR-H power cord x 2 on the amps and all other power cords by ORB of Japan (model HC-150ACW)

Stand: Finite Elemente Master Reference Rack (stock platforms upgraded to custom-made wooden platforms from Acoustics International)

Power line conditioning: HT-4G AC passive strip for the source components via SMR power cord as the AC wall connection; power cords on preamp and amp connect directly to wall

Sundry accessories: 2 x super-cyro technology wall sockets from Japan

Room size: 11' w x 15' d x 10' h

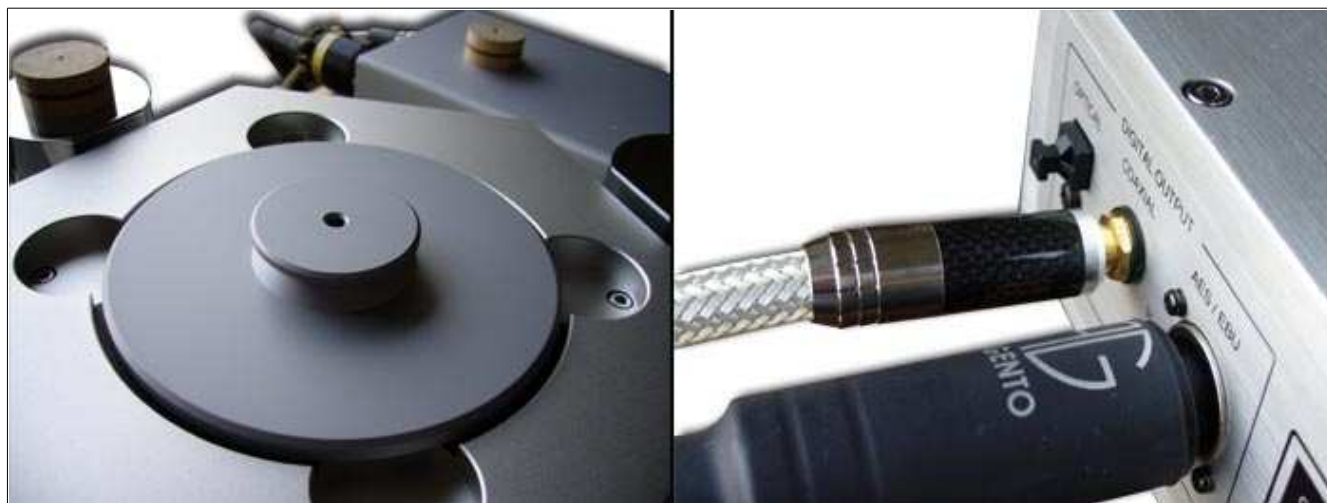
Review Component Retail: ¥1,890,000



Silence between the notes

This is by no means an in-depth review. The CEC TLO-X transport has only seen electricity for 150 hours thus far. My musical mind has yet to fully adjust to the new sonic landscape offered by this meticulously crafted CD transport, which in my opinion is quite a feat of mechanical engineering.

During this initial time, the physical placement of the TLOX transport and its outboard power supply were located separately to achieve optimal physical isolation. Grouping both together on the same shelf was done merely for the sake of photography [above]. The same rationale of photographic convenience was applied to two digital cables, the Acrolink/Esoteric DA6100 RCA digital and Argento SMR Extreme Edition Digital XLR [below right]. The actual listening tests always only had one digital cable hooked up between the transport and Zanden's 5000S tubed converter. Using two different digital cables during alternate listening sessions on the same group of CDs made it easier and quicker for me to identify the sonic characteristics of the transport, which is the purpose of this first impression report. A change in components as substantial as this transport requires numerous fine-tuning adjustments, ranging from the support platform to cables, accessories and even the room. I have not gone through these procedures yet to get the very best from the CEC, hence readers are reminded to not take these initial impressions as definitive statements.



The mechanical engineering of this belt-driven beast with "double viscous and triple spring suspension" and 10-20mm aluminum panels is definitely top notch and thus, the transport is very heavy, 16kg according to the specifications excluding the separate power supply. When I lifted this behemoth out from the original packing, I could feel its mass highly concentrated in the center. The CD stabilizer puck and the three supporting spike plates exude the same weighty feel. Each highly polished spike plate has a little hole in the center with some soft material underneath, presumably the exit point for final evacuation of mechanical resonances while the soft material absorbs and dissipates them.

The moment I placed a CD on the platter through the 4mm solidly milled spindle, I already felt in the presence of mechanical silence. Even though the CD just sat quietly on the platter and the sensation placing it there is hard to describe in words, this feeling of mechanical stillness was real and present. After I affixed the CD stabilizer atop, the entire hexagonal section lowered into position until a 'ting' sound and the spinning CD stabilizer announced action status.





Mechanical silence

The musical background on the TLO-X is *very* quiet but not of the dead silence type. Rather, its silence evokes a sense of serenity and calmness that is hard to describe save for comparisons to three high-end power strips I've reviewed at the beginning of the year: the silence exerted on the musical background by the TLOX is *much* stronger than what the conditioners accomplished. This quietude between notes in the bass was especially apparent in Scarlatti's *Sonata in E major K.380* performed by Chinese pianist Li Yundi [Track 1, Li Yundi's *Vienna Recital* on DGG, Japanese version]. Imaging was ultra stable, making the physical presence of the piano very strong. The enhanced woodsy tone of bass piano keys was rich without compromised image outline. My rusty ears did not perceive any significant slowdown of tempi. Honestly, I was initially quite fearful of overdamping as the sheer weight of everything made me predict that this beast could sound slow and unduly damp the music. To confirm, I played Paganini's "La Campanella" performed by Chinese violinist Mengla Huang, a protégé of Professor Lina Yu of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music [Track 1, Mengla Huang, *Violin Showpieces*, DGG.] The rondo of this piece requires lightning speed and Huang presents it flawlessly and with intensity and tenacity. Transients were quick and full-bodied. The broad contours of the accompanying piano remained untroubled even during peaks of tensile violin sounds.



On vocal recording, the TLOX rewards the listener with all the delicate textures of the midrange alongside the subtleties of inflective variations of the performing vocalist. It seemed as though *iota levels* of musical information were discovered anew. On jazz recording such as Diana Krall's *Christmas Songs*, the whole energy spectrum of the big band jazz behind Diana exploded vehemently, albeit without sacrificing rhythmic bass lines. Those are always delivered with taut energy recoil. The elasticity of double bass string sounds sensational. Low frequency energy is bouncing in and out of the musical fabric in a rhythmic manner.

At this point in time, the TLOX already has done a very good job on most of the recordings I tried. The only small remaining reservation I have is the reproduction of live recordings. Recording engineer Wolf-Dieter Karwatky recorded Li Yundi's *Vienna Recital* in the Wiener Musikverein Großer Saal. That recording venue is widely heralded as the golden hall. There is a picture of it with Li Yundi playing the piano in the CD booklet. While the TLO-X's delivery of tone, texture, dynamics and energy is excellent in every sense, the integration of the piano with the hall ambience cannot be felt as easily. If one did not read the CD booklet, one wouldn't know that this performance took place in such a famous concert hall. To put it simply, the hall ambience does not seem to be adequately reproduced when compared to my clock-linked Zanden combo.



I tried this again with other live recordings and the results were similar. For example, Teresa Tang's *Last Concert in 1984* was recorded live in Japan's NHK hall. The perceived distance between Teresa Tang singing on stage and the audience now was shorter. The interactions between the audience and the vocalist remain, of course, but the essence of the live feel is somewhat diminished. The next live recording was Keith Jarrett's famous *Köln Concert*. Again, the portrait of the physical presence of the piano was second to none and Keith's spontaneous virtuosity on the keyboard was vividly revealed. Alas the presence of the performing hall was downsized again. The final live recording put to the test was Beyond's *1991 Live Recording* [Japanese version]. The abundance of musical energy conveyed to me by my favorite band not only excited me but brought back memories from almost 15 years ago. My heart was touched. On this recording, the abundance of musical energy (which is also an essential factor in live performances) overrode the importance of hall ambience. Yet, it was also true that the presence of the hall was somehow lessened again. I listened to the aforementioned records a few more times alternating between the Argento SMR EE XLR and the Acrolink/Esoteric DA6100 RCA. The former rewarded with more ambience retrieval and a more dimensional reconstruction of the soundstage while the latter had a seemingly mellower midrange. That said and for the time being, the very live feeling via the clock-linked Zanden system is still absent.

For context, my experience with high-end transports ranges from the Mark Levinson 37, Burmester 979, Goldmund Eidos 38 and Kalista by Metronome Technology to a short stay with the PiTracer from 47Labs and the CDS by EMM Labs alongside my beloved Zanden combo. Each of these possesses sonic virtues that would easily find admirers, such as the lucid midrange and speed of the Goldmund, the grandiose soundstaging of the Kalista, the quick transient snap and ultra transparency of the PiTracer and the correctness of the CDS when partnered with the DCC2 or DAC 6. Despite their respective strengths however, the stubbornness of my subjective musical mind always had me return to the Zanden combo during the course of 2005. I am in the process of building a 2nd system and it has not been easy to identify an alternative CD transport that satisfies my subjective criteria until the arrival of the TLO-X.



Indeed, the CEC lives up to expectations and my initial impressions are excellent in almost every regard. The use of another power cable, digital cable and/or perhaps a different supporting platform might subsequently change my only reservation of this mechanical beauty. The TLO-X is an excellent and rare example of advanced mechanical engineering. It has become an integral member of my soon to be built 2nd system. Yes, I have already purchased it. This transport is worthy of a more in-depth review once further understanding has been gathered. I will submit a more comprehensive follow-up in another month.



Linnman

Manufacturer's
[website](#)

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