



# Old-school comeback

Narrowly missing our recent *Group Test*, **David Price** looks at this flagship silver-disc spinner to see how it compares

Life comes at you fast. A decade ago, as the UK was cowering under the weight of the biggest financial crisis we've had in our lifetimes, British music fans were escaping the doom and gloom by playing their favourite music on compact disc. It was by far the most popular way of buying and listening to music, with the internet only influencing our buying habits insofar as we were beginning to buy CDs online.

How times change... It's been a while since I got to review a silver disc spinner without so much as a digital input, but here it is in all its minimalist glory. There's no need to connect Mitchell & Johnson's new

S800 CD Player up to your home network, and/or download an app to my already RAM-challenged iPhone, to get it going. No need to network it to your NAS, or go through an arcane start-up protocol that only the engineer who dreamt it up thinks makes sense. Instead, you pull it out of the box, plug it in, hit the eject button, put a disc in and press play – and suddenly music starts coming out of your hi-fi system. It's so easy that you wonder why so many people have left the format behind.

The machine's connectivity extends only to a choice of optical or coaxial digital outputs and balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA phono line-level outs. There's also a fascia-mounted

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Mitchell & Johnson S800 CD Player

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
CD player

**WEIGHT**  
5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
440 x 110 x 310mm

**FEATURES**

- Digital outputs: 1x coaxial; 1x optical
- Analogue outputs: 1x RCA; 1x XLRs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
MIAN Distribution

**TELEPHONE**  
01223 782474

**WEBSITE**  
mitchellandjohnson.com

headphone socket with its own stage and volume control. The power switch is a largish toggle that's different to the other switchgear, so you instinctively know how to switch it on and off. Disc loading is decently swift and the tray itself is par for the course in terms of smoothness of operation at this price.

It's not all good news, however, because the pressed steel box of this £1,299 product resonates when you knock it with your knuckle; more internal damping would help here. It's not the prettiest box either, and like the matching S800 and S815 pre/power amplifier combo reviewed in *HFC* 443, it has exposed Allen bolts which you would never see on a Japanese machine at this price. The chunky aluminium fascia looks decent enough, but the twin dual-function rotary controls – giving eject and headphone volume and play/pause and track selection – don't have as positive an action as you might wish for and the backlit dot-matrix liquid crystal display is blocky and lo-res, yet this designed and built in the United Kingdom model still has its own quirky charm, even if the execution isn't quite perfect.

Inside, there's a European-sourced CD drive that marries up with an ESS Sabre DAC chip. Mitchell & Johnson says that an 'audiophile grade' linear

power supply is fitted, with a Noratel Xtraquiet transformer delivering the juice. At the back, there's also the company's own 12V Power Link, so it will power on and off when connected to its stablemates. There's a choice of either silver or black fascia finishes.

## Sound quality

The S800 CD player auditions more impressively than it looks, having a confident and musically satisfying nature that makes you want to keep on listening all day. In addition to this, it sports a taut, propulsive bass, highly detailed midband and a



Musical Fidelity's M3scd was our recent affordable CD player *Group Test* winner (*HFC* 450). At £1,150, it has a warmer presentation than the S800, with a stronger bass and slightly less dry midband. It's also very musically engaging, never making a meal of what it's asked to play. The downside is that it's fractionally less dynamic sounding, so music isn't quite as stark and bracing. Choosing between the two is most likely to be a case of system synergy; go compare the two together with your own amplifier and speaker pairing if at all possible.

decently smooth and subtle treble. It's so pleasant that it reminds me just how bland many equivalently priced network audio streamers can sound.

Music sounds expressive and articulate through this player; there's little sense of things being boxed in, compressed or contained. *Watcher Of The Skies* by Genesis pushes along with a sense of purpose and flow; I find myself sensing the song's dramatic impact, which often gets buried with affordable digital front ends. Paul Hardcastle's *Rain Forest* also proves a joy, this player hooking the listener right up to the music, reminding me what a great era the early eighties were for British funk music. It has a wonderful rhythmic gait and a real sense of propulsive

## It boasts a propulsive bass, highly detailed midband and smooth and subtle treble

drive, which set my feet tapping. I revel in the complex interplay between the drum machine and lead synthesiser, reminding me that this song's real appeal is in its complex, multi-layered rhythm track that subtly evolves as the song moves on.

Tonally, it isn't one of the sweetest and warmest around; it has a crisp, clean character that doesn't try to add warmth to make a recording sound more sumptuous. Don't confuse this with brightness, however; it proves smooth enough to take a little bit of the edge off Peter Gabriel's opening vocal line on the Genesis track. This can sound a little sandpapery on some budget players, but the S800 delivers it with real finesse. It doesn't warm the sound up, though; you are still well aware that you are listening to a quintessentially dry early seventies progressive rock

recording without much in the way of deep bass on show to speak of.

The Mitchell & Johnson also exhibits fine soundstaging and spatiality, even if it isn't outstanding in this respect. It delivers a nicely expansive feel to Herbie Hancock's *I Have A Dream*, which is a lovely (albeit dated) sounding recording and the machine focuses on conveying the former aspect, not the latter. It isn't overly deconstructive of what it's asked to play, but is grippy enough to place all the various instrumentalists in the recorded acoustic, just where they should be. Instruments hang in the air with confidence and solidity, allowing one to follow each player individually from the collective mass of sound. Depth perspective is decent too; so many inexpensive digital front ends struggle to go any further than two dimensions, but there is a good sense of dimensionality here.

## Conclusion

Overall, the Mitchell & Johnson S800 CD Player proves a most likeable listen, with an impressive sonic delivery. It's a bit quirky to use, but this is actually quite endearing, and ultimately the player gets out of the way and lets you continue to enjoy your CD music collection •

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★  
**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★  
**FEATURES** ★★★★★

**LIKE:** Propulsive drive and musical sound  
**DISLIKE:** Middling finish; blocky display, quirky controls  
**WE SAY:** Fun-sounding, old-school CD spinner, but price is a bit high

### OVERALL



## CONNECTIONS

