



# ROKSAN ROLLOVER

Smart updates of Roksan's Caspian CD player and amp build on the strengths of the originals

**PRODUCT** Roksan Caspian M Series

**TYPE** CD player and integrated stereo amplifier

**PRICE** £1,100 (CD) and £1,000 (amp)

**KEY FEATURES** Size (WxHxD): 43x8x33cm • CD player: CD-R compatible (not CD-RW), Philips TD1305T DAC • Amp: 85W/ch (8 ohms), 120W/ch (4 ohms)

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Roksan's extensive range of Caspian hi-fi and home cinema components seems to have been around forever, but was actually introduced in 1998, with occasional improvements and only one previous major revision under the original model designations. In fact, the Caspian series has now remained practically unchanged since the dawn of the millennium, and the opportunity was clearly ripe for an update. The design aims for the new 'M' designated CD player and integrated amp reviewed here were partly to improve reliability, and partly to enhance the aesthetics which were beginning to look a little dated. The principal intention, however, was to improve sound quality based on experience gained from the originals.

The visual changes are limited but they make a useful difference by adding an extra degree of sophistication and class to the designs, though the changes are small enough to allow stacking with older components without looking out of place. The black button tops on the front panel have been swapped for silver-finished equivalents and there are changes to the lighting of the display, which have little visual impact but are designed to make the indications more legible from a little distance.

The amp's ALPs motorised volume control

knob, with its distinctive cut-out and illuminated position indicator, is new. Both units in this test are stand-alone components, and both are supplied with identical silver-coloured system remote controls, replacing the translucent blue iMac-inspired handsets that we considered out of place at the time. And that's about it aesthetically, give or take. But limited as they are, these changes have had the desired effect, lifting and improving the visuals.

The basic specifications of the CD player (£1,100) are as before. A single-play model, it's based on a Philips TD1305T continuous calibration (hybrid) DAC, but with a number of significant refinements to the supporting circuits, including (but not limited to) the power supply and servo sections. The output

identical play buttons, one each side of the loading drawer for symmetry. Standard play, programme and repeat options are available from the handset. Double play buttons aside, there's nothing in the least remarkable about the fixtures and fittings, but then the Caspian CD was always intended to be functional first and foremost. The player feels very well put together, the controls are responsive and the mechanism and hinged cover are quick-acting by CD player standards.

Much the same applies to the microprocessor-controlled amplifier (£1,000), which also boasts a simple, straightforward and functional user interface. The main operational controls are the two large rotaries at each end of the fascia, which have a firm

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op-amp has also been upgraded, to the Burr-Brown 2604. The player copes happily with recordable discs, and is equipped with a single pair of analogue outputs and an electrical digital output on a BNC connector. There is no optical digital output.

The centrally mounted mechanism is equipped with a hinged door which includes a simple green fluorescent display built into its front surface, which shows track numbers, timings and operational status. Front panel controls are limited to track number select, play, pause and stop, and two (count 'em!)

and positive action. Minor controls take care of mode switching and tape monitoring – the mode switch is a multi-function control which switches the amplifier between standby and operating mode, and which when the amplifier is activated invokes a 20dB mute circuit. Power, input and tape monitor status are signalled by the central display. Around the back are a single set of 4mm binding posts, five line inputs, a tape loop and two sets of preamp outputs, which could be used for driving external power amps in a bi-amp configuration (or even a tri-amp system) ▶

# Q & A

Touraj Moghaddam, joint founder and chief engineer of Roksan, discusses the changes built into the M Series Caspian CD player and amplifier.



**HFC:** Was there a trigger for the development of the new M Series Caspians?

**TM:** They're based on original circuits which were developed for the Roksan Caspian M Series monoblock and preamp.

**What are the major changes in integrated amp compared to the previous Caspian generation?**

The integrated amplifier is based on the circuit design of our component monoblock power amplifier and preamp. Over the years, the Caspian integrated amplifier has effectively been compromised only by the quality of the components used and the power supply. So we kept the circuit more or less the same and improved the components. What we have also done is to redo the software for the speaker switching and protection with a new circuit board where the loudspeakers connect. We use new high-quality relays, which has meant a new protection circuit. Back at the mains input, we now fit a high-quality mains input filter.

**Is this in response to the tightening of legislation concerning electrical interference?**

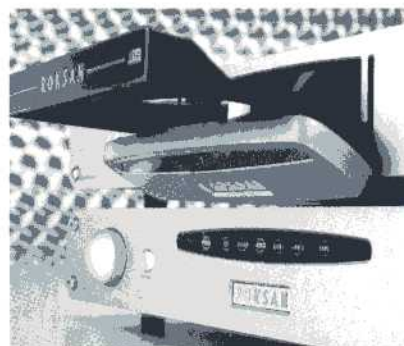
Not really. The basic idea was to stop interference from other equipment. It has more to do with audio quality. Many products, especially CD players, processors and D/A converters, feed a lot of digital noise into the mains, which can make its way into the amplifier, and influence sound quality. We have always included mains filtering on our CD players, but many products are not well filtered, despite existing legislation.

**Are there other changes to the amplifier?**

There are a number of detail changes, mainly improved quality components. The transformer for example has the same rating but is mechanically quieter, and the diode rectifier bridge uses new high-speed devices, with new high-frequency, low-impedance reservoir caps. Coupling caps are higher value Elna Filmics, which give a more extended LF response and a better sound, and the main PC board has been respecified with thicker copper plating.

**What changes have been made to the player?**

It's a similar story, which involves a large number of detail changes to the motherboard, which is now a double-sided, plated-through component. Chassis ventilation has been improved, and the main D/A board has been equipped with a high tolerance crystal oscillator. Tighter tolerance components are used in the servo so that focusing and tracking have improved.



**“This is an excellent player which is always enjoyable and unfailingly musical.”**

if the internal power amps are used as well). Finally, an input is available to bypass the preamp and drive the power amp direct, but this facility must be activated internally, so it's not quite plug-and-play. Like the CD player, the M Series integrated amp feels as solid as a rock, and is clearly built to last. Both components tested feature 1.6mm steel wraps and 6mm thick aluminium front panels. The amp is fully short-circuit protected and includes power supply failure detection, along with a dedicated output protection board with high current speaker relays. A diagnostic check is performed at power-up before the speakers are connected to the load.

Most of this is much as it was on previous versions of the Caspian amp, though the protection and relays have been improved. But there are some important differences too. Power output is up by around 20 per cent from 70 to 85 watts per channel into four ohms from a 350VA toroidal transformer, rising significantly in output into a four-ohm load. Peak current drive is said to be substantial, and the Roksan will drive a variety of mid to lowish sensitivity speakers hard enough for most practical purposes, even in large rooms. It wasn't quite equal to the task of driving B&W's Nautilus 800 comfortably however, but this is a punishing speaker that defeats most integrated amps short of Krell standards.

## SOUND QUALITY

The two products were assessed in a system whose common factors were speakers and cabling. The main test speaker was the

Focal-JMLab Alto, a wide bandwidth, high-resolution model with a refined and broadly neutral tonality. Interconnects and speaker cables were Nordost Valkyrja. Part of the listening involved direct comparison with products that were as close to the Roksan in price and general aims as possible – an Arcam FMJ A32 amp (HFC 228) and another Arcam product, the Diva CD93 CD player (HFC 247).

From the outset, it was apparent that the two Roksan components have quite similar voicing, or more correctly that they share a significant amount in common within the limits set by the fact that they do very different jobs. Without in any way meaning to suggest that they had a noticeably tailored sound, still less that they were coloured, there was something about their voicing that suggested openness, warmth and grace.

Looking closer, differences between the Roksan CD player and its opposite number from Arcam turned out to be more subtle than the corresponding differences between the two amps. The Arcam was the player with the greater resolving power, and in a recording of the elegiac *Adagio* from the Emerson set of Shostakovich string quartets, the Arcam CD93 sounded leaner and drier tonally, and more alive to the detail in the upper strings. The rumbustious *Allegretto*, a highly energetic joke polka which follows the *Adagio* on the same disc, sounded more vital and alive through the Arcam.

But the Roksan brought some additional qualities to the party – a more distinctive sound, a great sense of grip in the midband, and a more 'rosiny' quality to the strings. In a



recording of *The Queen's Monastery* from Janacek's *Sinfonietta* (on Reference Recordings), it was again the Arcam that gave the more sharply etched sound, while the Roksan seemed somehow more distinctive, colourful and alive to the musical intent of the piece. But the loss of detail and articulation, which was noticeable across a wide range of discs, is a factor that weighs significantly with the Focal-JMLab Alto, which shows this kind of limitation very clearly.

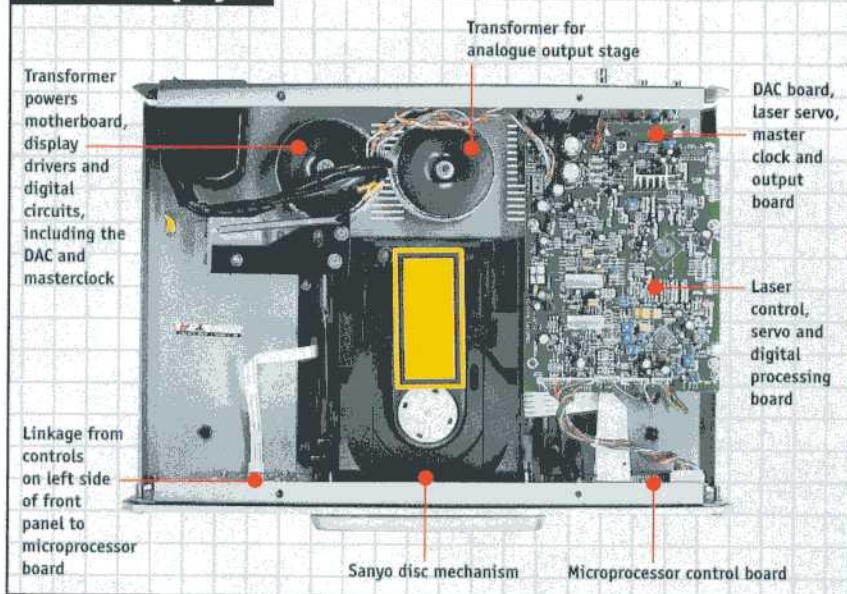
In the end, although the two players sound distinctively different, it is hard to put a value judgement on this. Whether one is a better player than the other probably depends more on the system context, and also perhaps on the kind of music that will be used, than any other factors. Used with the kind of speakers that are more likely to be employed with CD players and amps in this price category, the Roksan may end up giving more 'shape' and a more sonorous and varied feel to the music. This is an excellent player, always extremely enjoyable and unfailingly musical.

Broadly similar points can be made of the Roksan Caspian M integrated amp, which hints at the fact that they have common design roots. But this time the differences are rather more clear-cut, and so too is the price gap. The Roksan's slight power shortfall compared to the 100-watt Arcam was audible with large-scale, extended-bandwidth works played at moderately high (but by no means excessive) volume levels, especially in handling the lowest octave or so. But the Caspian trades this for a little more warmth and enthusiasm – with one choral piece featuring an orchestral and organ accompaniment (Weinberger's *Polka And Fugue*, also on Reference Recordings) these qualities proved particularly attractive.

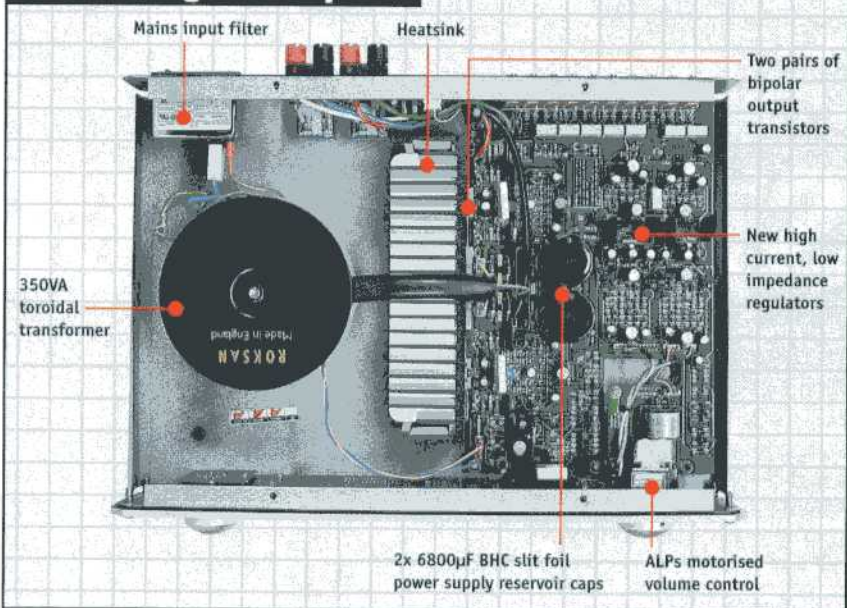
On the other hand, the Arcam offered superior articulation and a more even-handed way of handling the whole band, with a more 'alive' sounding upper midband and treble. In the end, although the Roksan often sounded 'nicer', the more expensive Arcam justified its price by telling a more detailed story. It was the more tactile too (try the opening chord from the superbly recorded title track of Mark Knopfler's *Sailing To Philadelphia*), but it was the Roksan that sounded the more propulsive and which appeared to have more on-the-ball timing. When the music called for it, the Roksan had more spirit and more responsiveness, and was more ready to (metaphorically) let its hair down. Something similar was heard in an old faithful recording, Tracy Chapman's *Mountains O' Things*, whose erratically choppy rhythms were more convincingly lop-sided and fluid sounding through the Roksan. The Caspian sounded more responsive, more elastic and in the end considerably more satisfying.

Again, which amplifier is better for you is going to depend on the rest of the system

## Detail – CD player



## Detail – Integrated amplifier



and perhaps on personal taste. It isn't so much a question of which is the better amplifier – under ideal conditions, and in the context of a suitably analytical system, the Arcam ultimately has some powerful qualities at its disposal. But in practice the qualitative differences are not major and the decision is going to end up as one of personality – the right personality to suit your system, and the right personality to suit you. If the question being asked is which is the better amplifier, for overall discipline and resolving power, and suitability for high-grade replay, it would be difficult to argue against the Arcam. But if asked which provides more musical involvement and enjoyment – two different but vital qualities – then more often than not it's the Roksan. This is an amp and CD player for music fans, pure and beautifully simple. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

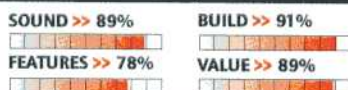
### VERDICT – CD player



**CONCLUSION**  
Good build and disc handling from a euphonic player that generally punches above its weight. Plays CD-R but not RW.

**HI-FI CHOICE**  
**OVERALL SCORE**  
**>> 85%**

### VERDICT – Integrated amplifier



**CONCLUSION**  
This is a fine, expressive and punchy integrated amplifier with a clear performance edge over the previous version.

**HI-FI CHOICE**  
**OVERALL SCORE**  
**>> 89%**