

The Audio Beat

Lindemann • 825 CD Player

"...the most affordable (and versatile) digital front-end that I could happily live with.

by [Roy Gregory](#) | July 20, 2012

If you took a quick scan across *The Audio Beat's* recent show reports and Chris Thomas's review of the BL-10 loudspeakers, you could easily conclude that we at *TAB* have been bowled over by our recent experiences with the Lindemann products from Germany. Of course, that conclusion would be reinforced by the collapsed time scale which puts pages reporting on this year's Munich and Newport shows and the product of a lengthy review process slap bang next to each other, but it would certainly be fair to say that a journey that actually started last year has only served to reinforce those positive impressions. So far, we've heard a range of systems at shows and a couple of products in our own setups, and each time we've been mightily impressed. This review covers the 825 CD player, the company's sole source component, and I've been just as impressed by it as Chris was by the BL-10. But before I get into that, it's high time for a little history, and the 825 is just the place to start.



Price: \$12,500.
Warranty: 3 years parts and labor.

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I first came across Lindemann in the shape of their 820 SACD player, a machine that set seriously high standards at a surprisingly approachable price point. That was back in 2004, but the company's history actually stretches back another decade, to the AMP1 integrated amplifier and BOX1 loudspeakers, launched in 1993. The simultaneous appearance of both products is significant. Lindemann has always been a "system solution" company, rather than an electronics manufacturer that has turned its hand to speakers (or vice versa). It's a philosophy that has extended forward into digital front-ends and broadened to include a complete family of power and signal cables as well as component supports. Yet, unlike many other companies that go this way, whilst Lindemann's complete systems are spectacularly successful, they never lose sight of the fact that their products also need to stand alone, in isolation. It's a comprehensive design policy that stresses completeness, coherence and conceptual simplicity.

The company quotes Einstein's maxim -- "Everything should be as simple as possible, but no simpler" -- and for once it's not hubris. There is an unmistakable elegance to Lindemann products, the finely honed simplicity that bespeaks the incessant return to first principles and a confidence in the conclusions reached.

The current 825 bears an uncanny resemblance to the older 820 -- but a price tag of around half the weight. The feet are different, with a new felt-disc interface in place of the previous domed aluminum, and the drawer front is now narrower and finished in a contrasting silver, reflecting the change in transport mechanism, but otherwise, the solidly constructed aluminum chassis, with its multi-part, dispersive structure, simple button layout and external analog power supply, is virtually identical. If it ain't broke. . . . The result is that the 825 is a machine with an elegance, style and quality of finish that make it look like it is a far more expensive product -- which of course the 820 was. Many a company has traveled the well-trodden path of contrasting black and silver chassis elements, not least Mark Levinson, but few have done it as beautifully as Lindemann, which have brought a timelessness and graceful balance to both the 825 and their other products.

Unfortunately -- at least as far as I'm concerned -- it is also a machine that has been divested of SACD replay, although that won't worry many potential purchasers, who will be far more interested in the array of socketry decorating the rear panel. Like any sensible CD player, the Lindemann could be more properly described as a DAC with a disc transport attached. As a result, as well as the option of CD replay, you get two RCA S/PDIF inputs, a TosLink optical input, RCA and TosLink digital outputs and the essential (in this day and age) asynchronous USB input -- along with switching between them. You also get a choice of balanced or single-ended outputs.

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But even here there's more to the Lindemann than meets the eye. Given that the "High Definition" in the player's name doesn't refer to disc replay, it shouldn't be too much of a stretch to guess that the DAC on board the 825 runs at 24 bits and 192kHz, while the USB input accepts data rates up to that level too, making high-rez file replay a potential reality rather than just the all-too-frequent pipedream. In this as in so many other ways, the 825 seems to tick all the right boxes -- and we haven't even gotten to its musical attributes yet!

Chris Thomas noted an immediate sense of rightness to the sound of the BL-10 loudspeaker, a quality that means that you simply relax and accept what's offered, rather than continually peer round the sonic edges of its musical performance. It's a quality shared by the 825. There is definitely an immediately inviting and engaging character to the Lindemann's musical presentation, an appeal that seems to hold true regardless of situation or system. Having heard the player in a number of different rooms and completely different systems, I can say that the sense of musical enthusiasm and honesty shine through as a constant; and that includes show systems, where, generally speaking, sonic conclusions are so variable and unreliable as to be utterly useless. Of course, being a source component gives the 825 an edge in this regard, as it gets to set the musical agenda for the rest of the system, but the consistency of the Lindemann "thumbprint" is remarkable by any standards and speaks volumes about what this player does and how it does it.

For the review, I used the player on both the Stillpoints ESS rack and the finite-elemente Master Reference HD-04, and in both cases it produced that characteristically inviting sound. Each rack had its own impact on the presentation, differing in terms of definition, resolution, spatial presentation and tonality, but the essential nature of the musical performance remained constant, further underlining the core integrity of the 825. A far bigger difference (and benefit) was delivered by lifting the player on Stillpoints Ultra SS couplers, a move that brought added space, separation, clarity, weight and stability to the music, without in any way impeding its sense of pace and flow. The musical and sonic impact was so great that I'd consider the use of the Ultras (or something similar) as an essential step in actually achieving the performance this machine is capable of. It's interesting to note that in all the show systems that I've seen (and heard), Lindemann have employed a finite-elemente rack and the small wooden-disc/ceramic-ball couplers they supply with the BL-10 speaker. They've obviously reached similar conclusions -- and they should know.

Initially at least I'm considering this as a CD player. Running it via the USB input simply introduces so many hard- and software variables that at this point in time it's too much of a moving target for conclusions to be meaningful. But running either the Wadia or dCS transports into the S/PDIF inputs confirmed the DAC's stellar qualities, while replay from its onboard transport was sufficiently good to render external disc spinners an unnecessary luxury. Comparisons with CD also suggest that in the case of high-res file replay, the USB input won't be the limiting factor. Just how much you can wring out of it will be defined by the care and attention you put into the storage/retrieval chain as much as the quality of the files themselves.

So what is it that makes the Lindemann 825 so musically appealing? It's what I'd term its sense of musical progression, its ability to move through a performance or recording without tripping or being slowed by the musical demands. Perhaps the classic example of this is the difficult transition that occurs in Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, as the music transits from the almost climax of *Nimrod* to the jaunty *allegretto* of *Dorabella*. As the intensity of the burgeoning crescendo suddenly dissipates it is remarkable how many conductors, orchestras and/or recordings fail to apply the brakes, stumbling over themselves in a tumbling surfeit of low-frequency energy as they try to readjust in scale and pace from the stately, almost portentous yet deeply emotional *Nimrod* to the nimble fragility of the intermezzo. All too often it's like watching a cavalry charge try to turn itself into *apas de deux* -- yet it's rarely a problem in live performance. Once we enter the world of recordings, then generally if the conductor gets it right the system lets him down.

Not so with the Lindemann playing the Andrew Davis/Philharmonia reading -- [Signum Classics SIGCD16], a live-performance recording that is musically complete -- which treats the work as a whole rather than a series of disjointed episodes. It's highly recommended. Here, both recording and player perfectly map the graceful poise with which Davis and the Philharmonia traverse the potential musical chasm awaiting the unsure or unwary in this most English of works. The sense of deep personal warmth is retained in *Nimrod*, only heightened by the contrast with the lightly brushed portrait of Dora Penny. It's a perfect example of what makes this music so powerful when it's performed live -- and what so many systems diminish or miss altogether. But its significance in this instance lies in the fact that it's just one familiar example of a surprisingly common musical failing when it comes to reproducing recorded music.

Keeping it in the family (in name at least), take a listen to Carl Davis's concert version of his "The World at War" theme for the ITV documentary series of the same name. For those unfamiliar with this project, it was TV history on an epic scale long before the genre was fashionable. First shown in 1973 and at that point in time the most expensive TV series ever made, its 26 episodes were produced by Jeremy Isaacs and narrated by Laurence Olivier. The monumental task of producing theme music to represent this global cataclysm fell to Carl Davis, and his response was masterful.

Subsequently expanded into a short concert piece, the truncated musical development demanded by TV was expanded but still presents a conductor with formidable changes of density and textural challenges. On the disc *Carl's War* [Carl Davis Collection CDC009], Davis conducts his own music, not surprisingly managing the dark-to-light transition from the somber, Smetana-esque main theme to the martial beat of the central march with a deft and unerring baton. Sadly, it's a confident tread that most players can't follow, only the best of them making the juxtaposition sound anything other than forced and awkward. Not the 825, which renders this transition not just without reproductive drama but revealing the musical development as utterly natural and fluid. In this regard it shows a surer footing than the resident Wadia S7i, no slouch itself when it comes to the challenges of musical progression.

Which raises the real question: what is it about the Lindemann player that gives it this special quality? The short answer is "timing," but rather like "neutrality", that's a term that in the hi-fi lexicon has become both multi-faceted and value-laden, so conflicted it's almost devoid of meaning. So let's be a little more precise. The capability that really marks the 825 apart is the way it presents both the placement and duration of notes. That might sound simple, but it is also the most basic challenge confronting any CD player -- and one that way too many fail. Everybody is familiar with the notion of jitter and its undesirable impact on player performance, but few extend that realization to the understanding that this is exactly the crucial information base that jitter undermines.

One of the principle differences between listening to live music and listening to recordings is the absolute clarity with which you can hear individual instruments and exactly what they're playing. Hi-fi systems, even the very best ones of whatever type, collapse and blur these distinctions. Yet, along with pitch, the position and length of each individual note, how it relates to all the other notes, is exactly what distinguishes music from noise. The Lindemann 825 does as good a job of preserving these qualities, this pattern and structure, as many of the very best CD players out there. But it does so at a fraction of their price. Here in the UK, the Lindemann 825 weighs in at a not insubstantial €6500, not exactly bargain basement, but a pittance compared to the heavyweight competition. It might be David Haye rather than Wladimir Klitschko, but that hardly makes it a pushover.

Compared to the S7i, the 825 certainly lacks the absolute low-frequency weight and authority of the Wadia, as well as the air and space that go with it, both in terms of overall acoustic and the sense of air around individual instruments. Likewise, it lacks the tonal range and shading of the bigger player, but it's not disgraced in any of these respects. Instead it offers its own lively, energetic and musically bright (that's *musically* bright, *not* tonally bright) presentation, built on the absolute clarity of its temporal and microdynamic structures. The sound of the Lindemann is impressively transparent, focused and immediate, and while close comparison to a player like the S7i playing the Carl Davis disc reveals that it doesn't quite match the textural definition on timpani rolls or the full tonal twang of bass bows being bounced on strings, short of such direct comparisons, you are really not going to know. And that's precisely the magic of the 825: structurally it gets everything so obviously and apparently in the right place that what's where makes perfect sense -- which is why you can so easily accept what it's telling you. What's more, if system building is all about allowing electronics to deliver the performance they're actually capable of, the 825 contributes mightily in this regard too, simply by providing such a clean and unconfused feed to amp and speakers, meaning they don't face the impossible task of sorting out a temporal tangle perpetrated upstream.

So, it's not just the 825 that's musically organized and lucid; by dint of its position at the head of the chain, it delivers those qualities to the rest of the system, making every component's job significantly easier. Which helps explain both what I've heard in all the 825-fed systems that I've heard, as well as what CT described in his BL-10 review, once he plumbed the 825 into the system.

The other key aspect of the 825's musical delivery could be described as honesty -- or perhaps integrity might be even better. This is no rose-tinted view of the musical event, and its musicality isn't achieved by papering over the cracks. There's no tube output stage adding a rosy glow or "careful voicing" of the tonal balance -- a sort of audio equivalent of paint by numbers, but

generally using caps instead of pigments. The Lindemann succeeds by being honest to the input and impacting on it as little as possible. The album *Red Horse* [Red House Records RHR CD 233] features three of America's best folk singer-songwriters working in collaboration. Eliza Gilkyson, John Gorka and Lucy Kaplansky are all great solo performers in their own right, but here their collaboration allows, even encourages, each to tread new ground. Twelve tracks allow each a lead vocal on four songs, and each lead vocalist gets to use his or her own preferred studio and producer. It makes for a fascinating musical collage, one that the Lindemann lays bare, but without picking apart. So the clarity and immediacy of Cisco Ryder's work with Gilkyson is instantly recognizable, the work of Ben Wittman with Lucy Kaplansky and Scott Jarrett with John Gorka each equally distinctive. By cutting to the very foundation of the music and building up from there, the Lindemann manages to make these difference part of the musical fabric, part of the listening experience rather than its *raison d'être*.

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The result is a machine that allows you to hear shortcomings in a recording without those shortcomings detracting from the music -- as long hours spent listening to less-than-stellar discs have amply demonstrated. No matter how compressed or murky the recording, the 825 seems able to dig out its heartbeat and inject some life and a sense of rhythm. The action might not be as dramatic as CPR, but the effect is not dissimilar, as apparently inert musical corpses rise, suddenly rejuvenated, from the listening room floor. Want an example? After hearing the brilliant *Audible Sigh* [Proper Music B00004TE20], I sought out other albums by Bill Malonee and the Vigilantes of Love. Let's face it -- any band with a name that great has got to be worth a punt. Well, sadly, as far as *To the Roof of the Sky*. . . [ASC CD001] goes, the answer always used to be a pretty emphatic "Non!" But firing up said disc in the Lindemann, duly demagged and destated courtesy of Furutech, I was finally reminded why I'd made that search in the first place. Malonee's voice and his hauntingly effective lyrics emerged from the musical morass of backing guitars, themselves shaken out into some sort of orderly progress. Okay, so it's neither an album nor a recording that will set the world alight, but it's no longer a piece of redundant polycarbonate littering up the planet either. Believe me, if the Lindemann can unlock that musical Gordian knot, most material should be a cinch.

If designing audio components is all about striking a balance between compromises, then, by extension, defining your priorities is absolutely key. The clarity of purpose and confidence in that purpose that underpins Lindemann designs is matched by the musical clarity and confidence of their delivery. The 825 disc player is possibly the purest realization of that thinking, partly because of the critical position it occupies in the musical chain of reproduction; screw it up here and you ain't ever getting it back. It isn't the best CD player I've ever used, but the ones that better it cost several times as much -- and many of those that cost considerably more deliver considerably less. Perhaps more important, it is the most affordable (and versatile) digital front-end that I could happily live with, free from performance angst on hi-fi or musical grounds. If you wanted to sum up the Lindemann philosophy you could do so in the phrase "Don't bend it out of shape; don't add anything along the way." If you are setting out on the path to musical Nirvana, that's a pretty good departure point. ☺

What makes the 825 tick?

The Lindemann 825 might be viewed as primarily a DAC, but that doesn't mean the company has neglected its transport. Based around a DVD mechanism servo optimized for CD replay, it uses a machined, metal one-piece disc tray and a fully buffered output. All input data is examined to assess its sample rate, and where necessary it is reclocked to the 24-bit/96kHz internal sample rate by an innovative receiver circuit, consisting of a combined buffer/digital PLL and an extremely accurate sample-rate converter, resulting in a standardized jitter level below 50ps. Any input data received at 24-bits/88.2kHz or above is fed directly to the DAC in its native form. This relates mainly to files fed via the high-definition asynchronous USB input, which will accept data in all common formats (44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 196kHz). Kernel drivers are included for Windows-based operating systems -- currently XP/Vista/7, while USB Audio Class 2 is natively supported by MAC OS X (10.6.4 and later).

The DAC itself is described by Lindemann as "a component within a component." The chipset is galvanically isolated and fed from its own, dedicated power supply and transformer windings. A Black Fin DSP is employed, running Lindemann's own development of the Anagram Sonic 2 code, reconfigured to accept the dual-mono DAC topology and eliminate the linear-phase filter. This has been replaced with a minimum-phase type with apodizing behavior that suppresses pre-ringing and other time-domain-related artifacts. The output stage is built using discrete components and a current-feedback topology to maintain time-domain performance.

All of this should make it apparent just how seriously Lindemann take timing errors. Generally speaking, I've been less than impressed by the majority of upsampling players that have come my way. More often than not I've preferred their musical performance with the upsampling turned off, the Esoteric X-03 being a case in point. That's not an option with the Lindemann, yet it was also never an issue. Rarely have I heard such a precise, poised and sure-footed performance from CD. This is a player that really embodies the expression "a place for everything and everything in its place." From the impressively low jitter levels of the input sample-rate converter, to the attention paid to time-domain errors in the filtering and output stage, the attention to detail has clearly delivered the temporal and, as a result, the musical goods.

-Roy Gregory

Associated Equipment

Preamplifiers: Lyra Connoisseur 4.2L SE, VTL TL-7.5 Reference Series III.

Power amplifiers: Jadis JA-30 and Jeff Rowland 625 stereo amplifiers, VTL MB-450 Signature Series III monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: KEF Blade, Marten Coltrane.

Cables and power products: Complete looms of Nordost Odin or Crystal Cable Ultra from AC socket to speaker terminals. Power distribution was via Quantum Qbase 8s or Crystal Cable Power Strip Diamonds, with a mix of Quantum QX2 and QX4 Power Purifiers and QV2 AC Harmonizers.