



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Gryphon Mikado Signature

by Alvin Gold

One school of thought is that hi-fi components are strictly functional devices, there to do a job, and that what they look like really has no bearing in the grander scheme of things. What they sound like is what really counts, and of course this an undeniable truth – as self-evidently so as the non-existence of a deity for example. But I wouldn't buy if I was spending my own money, or at least I would do my best to avoid buying if my purchase was going to end up an aesthetic liability, and upset either myself or (if I had one) my better half. So here is the first thing I'd like to tell you about the Mikado. It is absolutely gorgeous. I would go so far as to suggest that it has that rarest of all qualities in high fidelity of inhabiting that no man's land between being strikingly good looking and unequivocally beautiful. It's also extremely expensive for what after all is essentially a simple disc spinner, but the way it is turned out is so gorgeous that it will continue to impress long after the financial pain has been forgotten. It is hard to think of many players that are as well turned out, but one example that was even more impressive and as painstaking in every minute detail was the Classé Omega, an SACD player, now defunct, that dates back to before the takeover by B&W.

But it is just a simple disc spinner. It plays CDs, and near relatives like CD-R or CD-RWs. But unlike many other ambitious CD players, especially at this price level, it won't play SACDs, for which there is a market if you happen to like acoustic music or classical, and given that the market for such discs is quite buoyant, this is a cause of real regret. Of course the overwhelming majority who don't listen to this kind of music and may not notice the omission, or realise its significance, but I do, and my experience is that the proportion of discs that pass through my hands that

are not hybrid SACDs is surprisingly small. In Gryphon's own words, the Mikado Signature focuses exclusively on CD playback with 'no compromise and no concessions. When you choose the Mikado Signature, you know that its CD performance is not a mere afterthought. It is the player's very reason for existing'. Although they don't spell it out explicitly, the clear implication is that including SACD would have compromised Red Book CD performance, but while this is a point of view, it is not one that would be subscribed to by Marantz, EMM Labs, Accuphase, Krell, Class (the aforementioned Omega), dCS, Esoteric and others.....

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▶ From the beginning of Gryphon's involvement with compact disc, the company has pioneered and promoted the idea of upsampling, in the first instance to 16 bit/88.2kHz with the CDP1, which dates from the late '90s, which was said to be the first single box player to feature this technology. Shifting aliasing noise up the frequency band this way allows more gentle acting anti-aliasing filters to be constructed, which have less effect on the audio frequency band. The predecessor to the Signature, the Mikado, introduced 24 bit 96kHz sample rate conversion, and now with the Signature, the arithmetic is performed at 24 bit/192kHz. A key benefit is the relaxation of the potentially tricky brick wall filter requirements, which in this case is replaced by a single, high quality silvered ceramic capacitor providing a gentle first order (6dB/octave) slope, which means the usual sharp knee in the response curve is almost flattened out. As a result it has very little influence on in-band phase or amplitude response. As Gryphon points out in its rather extravagantly flowery prose-cum-propaganda, in comparison with conventional 44.1 kHz digital-to-analogue conversion and lesser implementations of upsampling, asynchronous sample rate conversion in the Gryphon Mikado Signature offers 'enhanced impulse response, greater resolution of fine detail, sharper image focus and extended high-frequency response'.

Other technical highlights of this player include full balanced as well as single ended operation, and a digital conversion stage that uses four (two per channel) dual differential AKM Delta Sigma DACs from which a balanced signal is derived. The signal path downstream of the DACs is fully discrete Class A arranged mirror image fashion with zero negative feedback, with particular attention paid to minimising signal path lengths, reducing structural resonances, and banishing as much ferrous (ie magnetisable) material from the player as possible. The player mechanism is Philips a heavily modified version of the top loading Pro mechanism. And proving motive power for the player

is a complex power section that uses four custom designed toroidal transformers and multiple regulated supplies.

One intriguing feature of the Signature is a superb and unusually ergonomic diecast remote which has a form factor similar to a clenched fist, but this turns out to be an OEM design, rather than being made by Gryphon themselves. But the real head turner with the Signature is the loader for the transport, with has a motorised hinged cover that opens to accept the disc and an impressively engineered magnetic puck that clamps the disc. A ring of LEDs illuminates the disc area like runway landing lights, and the touch activated control panel that adorns the front of the player can be angled to optimise visibility. Impressive. But then just about everything related to this player is impressive.

The Signature was used in various system combinations (which for a while included the matching Atilla integrated amplifier), using both single ended and balanced interconnects, in both cases Nordost Valhalla, chosen in an attempt to reduce the number of variables as much as ▶





▶ for any other reason. It quickly became apparent that the balanced options gave a better result, with a more solidly defined and tuneful low frequency performance, and at least similar levels of dynamics and imagery. The difference wasn't big, though clearly worth having, but experience shows that balanced operation using well designed electronics and cables usually ends up delivering the goods.

Leaving cabling to one side, the Mikado Signature is an impressive player in various ways. It is fast, sure footed and assured. It has real authority, and superb levels of resolution. Overall there are few players that outperform it, though there are one or two that do things that are beyond the capabilities of the Gryphon. One is a long discontinued model which long ago earned its status as an authentic classic, namely the Krell KPS25. This was a player that had devastating weight and authority in its presentation, and a level of dynamic ability that leaves most others, probably including the Gryphon, gasping for air. Another more relevant alternative, is the remarkable Kalista Reference from Metronome Technologie, which from an all too brief audition with and without its internal upsampling (which cannot be turned off in the case of the Gryphon), gave some intriguing results though I did not form a clear preference between the two operating modes in the limited time available.

Leaving this issue to one side, the Gryphon delivered some remarkable results with discs that benefit from high standards of resolving ability. It was able to reproduce, apparently intact, the distinctive warmth and the round, even voicing that distinguishes the Fabbrini version of the Steinway Model D used the beautiful recording on ECM of Beethoven's Appassionata by Andras Schiff. The difference between this and a 'standard' Steinway are fairly subtle, and it takes a special kind of resolving ability in a disc player to reliably distinguish the two. I was equally impressed however by a recording of Bartok String Quartets (specifically the opening Lento from No 1) by the Alban Berg Quartett on EMI, which dates from a time when EMI was a real record label. In more general terms, with a wide range of recordings, the Gryphon has a slightly lighter balance than I sometimes expected. But it is finely detailed and extremely expressive – full of personality if you like - and stereo imagery is broad and explicit. Instruments and voices are firmly located in space and remain stable as musical dynamics and pitch change.

The bottom line is that the Mikado Signature is a superb player. Yes, it cannot be denied that the pricing is not unrelated to its elaborate physical construction, but good players are invariably well built. The other obvious criticism is that it is limited to Red Book CD and variants (CD-R., CD-RW etc) but it is hardly alone in that, and this is a player that clearly sets standards. Very impressive. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Connections:

Analogue out: Single ended (phono).
Balanced (XLR)

Digital out 75 Ohms S/PDIF (BNC), AES/
EBU balanced output (XLR)

Compatibility:

CD-DA, CD-R, CD-RW
Mains detachable IEC lead, Front
panel standby switching, main power
switch under front panel

Dimensions: 481 (W) x 100 (H) x 374 (D)
mm

Weight: 10kg

Price: £11,995

Manufactured by: Gryphon Audio

URL: www.gryphon-audio.dk

Distributor: The Music Room

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