

Review of Monrio Top Loader 2 by Jason Kennedy & Ed Selley, 02/03 2011, on :

Hi-FiChoice

Monrio Top Loader 2 CD Player



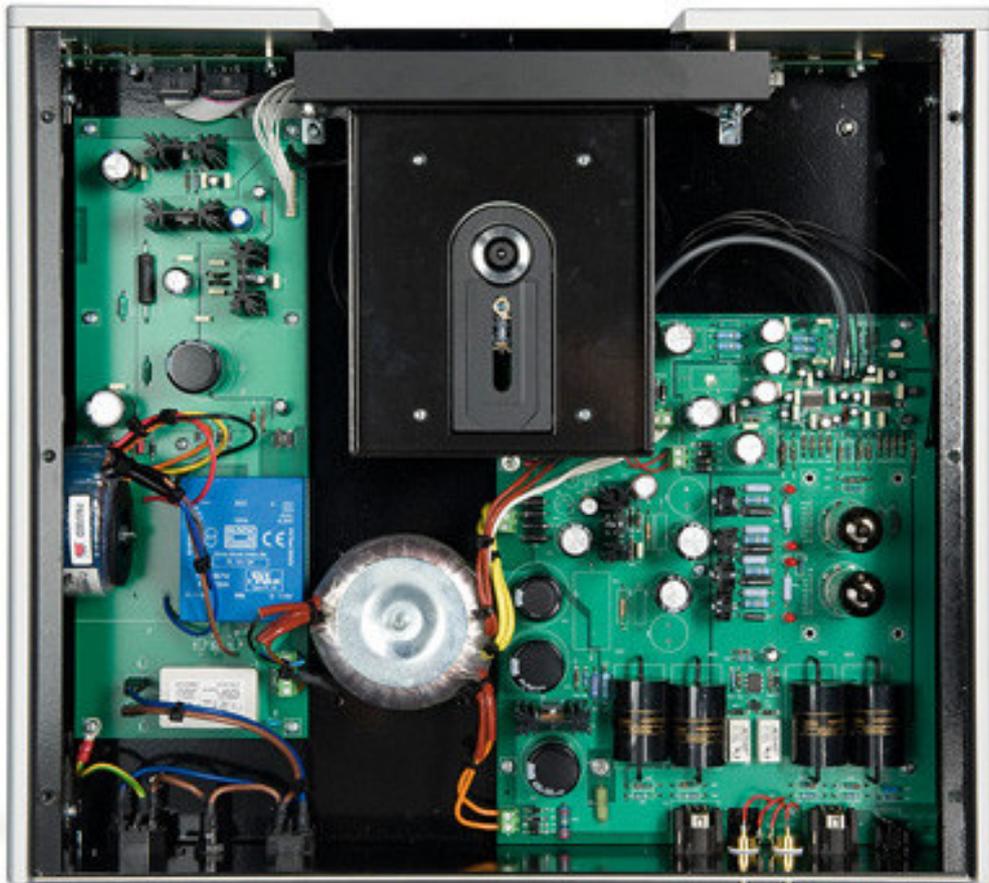
Emotional rescue Italian stalwart Monrio has a refreshingly honest design philosophy when it comes to hi-fi. Jason Kennedy gets passionate about the stylish TL 2

Monrio is an Italian company with a refreshingly honest aim, “Our pretension is neither to bring a real listening experience to your house – it is not possible to do it – nor to imitate the reality but to represent it in the best possible way.” Few companies have the strength of character to be this open about their approach. It does, of course, grant Monrio founder Giovanni Gadzola licence to make highly personal products, but the fact that he has been selling them for over three decades suggests that his tastes are not unique.

The Top Loader 2 is Monrio’s penultimate CD player and quite a stylish conglomeration of aluminium and acrylic it is too, the question is does it sound as good as it looks?

More substance

Gadzola started out in the seventies making amplifiers and has subsequently grown the range to include phono stages, DACs, pre and power amplifiers and four CD players. Most of the low-power circuits that Monrio builds incorporate valves and this is true of the penultimate disc player that we have here. And as is the Italian way, the styling is very strong on this machine. But this does not always tally with great ergonomics, a situation that was slightly exacerbated by the non-arrival of the remote handset.



The Top Loader 2 was built for customers who want the qualities of the company's best player, the Top Loader 3, but without the cost, so the casework is more traditionally shaped and the electronics simplified. The case is still pretty substantial and beautifully finished – Monrio is keen to keep resonance at bay and so builds heavy and strong using aluminium extrusions for maximum rigidity. The TL 3 has two valves protruding from its flank and these same valves can be found inside the more affordable player. They are 12AU7 triodes with high-voltage transistor regulation fed by a 'generously rated' toroidal transformer with separate windings for the various sections of the player. It has twin Sigma/Delta DACs and uses an I2S bus to keep audio signal and clock data separate prior to conversion. Analogue output is via single-ended or balanced connections and a digital signal can be output from the single coaxial connection.



The unusually slim control buttons look good, but are rather short on tactile response, there is little or no give when you press them. Doing so elicits a response, however, and after a while you learn not to press too hard. The larger control on the right of the fascia looks like it might revolve to select tracks but only seems to be a standby switch.

It's a solidly built machine in all respects, except for the acrylic cover that slides over the disc bay. It looks good with its blue tint, but doesn't operate all that smoothly. Discs need to be held in place with a magnetic puck and the player spins up when you close the cover, a system that does mean you can stop playback by merely sliding the lid back, which makes for button free disc changes.

On the tin

This is a great-looking machine with strong design and a lot of flair for the money. Its appearance is slightly undermined by the ergonomics, but disc cover aside, most of these are less of an issue if you have the remote. It's not big on features, there's no digital input as is the prevailing fashion, so you can't attach a streamer or PC and there's certainly no USB input for maximum flexibility. This is a CD player pure and simple, albeit one with a pair of valves inside, not many glass-powered players are all that feature-rich. Build is generally good with decent casework alignment and an encouraging solidity. The feet look fairly mundane but are, in fact, spiked with a padded foot to avoid damage to the supporting surface.

At this price there is quite a lot of competition for Monrio. For example, we very much liked Denon's DCD-2010AE, a £1,700 machine that may not have the style on offer here, but it plays SACD and has plenty of support for your iPod. Naim's CD5 XS (£1,825) offers openness, as well as fine quality timing on top of the marque's strong reputation for musicality. The only machine we've seen in recent times that competes in terms of style is the Consonance Droplet CDP3.1 (£1,995), which is even more extravagant in appearance and also has valves under the skin.

Open and shut

In the listening room we hooked the TL2 up to Townshend's new Glastonbury Pre, a pair of Mark Levinson No.53 monoblocks and PMC's fact 8 loudspeakers. If it doesn't sound good through this lot it never will. Fortunately it does, but with a distinctly relaxed demeanour that tallies with Monrio's musical experience rather than attempted realism philosophy. It does this very well, thanks to a good sense of timing, calm presentation and high musicality – once a good track is playing there is no inclination to turn it off and move onto the next and even with high-end players this isn't always the case. While the valves make it a little too relaxed to be considered a pace, rhythm and timing style player, its strong sense of involvement puts in contention with that type of machine.

Next to a Leema Antila you can hear that it is distinctly lacking in spatial resolution; the Leema sounds extremely open, has a lot of depth and a greater sense of realism. The Antila is a more expensive machine, but there are more closely priced players that deliver a similarly open sound. Leading-edge definition can be enhanced with the right choice of interconnect – we tried some TMS Pulse B in place of the usual Townshend Isolda DCT100 and this enhanced the sense of speed, but undermined the Monrio's ease at high levels. There aren't to our knowledge, any cables that can make this player sound really open but if you can live with that this is a very engaging disc-spinner with its heart in the right place.

Centre stage

Very easy to live with from a sonic point of view, the Top Loader 2 is a good-looking player that is also very strong on charm. It doesn't have the transparency or urgency of the best at this price but it does make you want to listen to your music and that's a fundamental quality of good hi-fi. It gets very close to offsetting its limitations with its ability to focus the listener on all that's transcendent in the music, but whether you will feel it gets the balance right is a matter of taste and for that matter system-matching. But if you aren't listening enough it could well have the power to put music back in your life.

LIKE: Very engaging and musical player that goes loud with ease

DISLIKE: The sliding disc cover undermines the aesthetics

WE SAY: An engaging player with minimal features that's slightly let down by poor ergonomics