

A TRUEBORN NORWEGIAN VIKING

Hegel Mohikan was supposed to be the last CD player released by the company but, luckily, they did not keep that promise.

Text: [Håvard Holmedal](#)

Hegel celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2022 and that means that designer and owner Bent Holter has been hunched over screwing, soldering and probably also cursing since he launched Hegel 25 years ago, after completing his studies at NTNU and writing his master's thesis on the design of transistors for use in amplifiers. Holter rejected all established circuit solutions and threw himself into a project that resulted in what we today refer to as SoundEngine Technology. But where did the name Hegel come from? Bent is also an accomplished guitarist and played (and still does play) in a rock band called The Hegel Band. Perhaps the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel originally also had something to do with it. Who knows?

A changing world

The world has undergone significant change since Mohikan was created. We have lived through a pandemic, a transport crisis and the subsequent shortage of components and, of course, there's also the matter of the inherent curiosity and ability to think outside the box that comes into play for all designers. We thought that Hegel had enough to do with the launch of the P30A and H30A amplifier sets, but it seems that there's more going on in the storeroom at Hegel than what we might imagine. So there will

be a new CD player and they are unlikely to stop there. Of course, we could speculate wildly, but our lips are sealed. We always have access to a lot of news, but if you have promised to keep quiet then that is exactly what you need to do. However, there is every reason to get excited.

CDs still sound great

In a world dominated by streaming and music that can be purchased and stored on a hard drive, the CD, as a format, has faded into the background. Some blame this on the resurrection of vinyl and turntables, but that's only part of the real reason.

I'm one of those people who have put most of my CD collection into cardboard boxes that are stored in the basement. It's nice to have a powerful stereo set in your living room, but it can be hard to also justify making room for several shelf metres of CDs, and I must admit that the majority of the music I have on CD was purchased because I am interested in the music rather than for audiophile enjoyment. In this case you might as well use Tidal or Qobuz, or as is the case at Stereo+, both.

Because I'm quick to forget, every new listening session with CDs played using my CD transport and DAC system becomes a wake-up call and reminder that the CD still has qualities that offer a





very strong listening experience. However, the kit and associated connection of Hegel Viking leads to a listening experience that shakes things up. We have a relatively good overview of what we can get from the individual storage formats and streaming services, but we enjoy real surprises and new perspectives and that is exactly what we get.

But why the name Viking? We will let Hegel answer that question.

- We decided to call our CD player Viking because, just like our Norse ancestors, we improve existing technology. When the Viking Age began, boats had already been around for thousands of years. But the Vikings perfected the design. Their longboats couldn't only sail along the coast, they could cross the open seas. The improvements they made allowed them to travel to new coasts and even to new continents. The CD technology might be old, but we believe that when it has been perfected, it will still be the best digital medium available.

Dedicated player

You are faced with several choices if you are launching a new CD player. One is how much to add in terms of the equipment that is currently in demand. I imagine it could be tempting to fit it with digital inputs so that Viking can be used as a digital converter/DAC and maybe someone would like to use it as a high-quality streamer.

That said, Hegel Viking has been designed to play Red Book CDs only. That means that the drive unit, electronics, the implementation of and the digital converter itself have been fine-tuned for one thing

only and that is to play CDs with a 16 bit/44.1kHz resolution.

Simple and straightforward

Hegel Viking is simple and straightforward but robustly built. Like several other new models, the cabinet has the small recess at the top of the faceplate, a couple of control buttons to turn it on/off, track selection, play and stop. The centre display is clear and has been chosen because it is very modest.

The player is available without a CD tray. Some might be sceptical of such a solution, but there is no need to be. The internal drive unit is of high quality and has been designed to play CDs only. Most people will probably choose to use drive units intended for video and audio formats, such as DVD-audio and SACD, but Viking is dedicated to CD playback.

The back may be even more sparse than the front. You will find a single BNC digital output and a couple of phono/RCA analogue outputs, as well as, of course, a balanced XLR.

The inside is equipped with a bit-perfect digital converter and Hegel's SoundEngine.

Tested using multiple systems

The player has primarily been run on my own set. That is with a Hegel H590 and a couple of Kerr Acoustics H320. Not because the set is in the top high-end class but because I know it inside out. The player has also been tested in combination with Hegel P30A/H30A and a couple of Focal Kanta 3. The experiences were different to say the least, with H320 providing typical monitor



precision, while Kanta 3 pulls much more on the bass and provides more energy in midrange and treble, but thankfully without being sharp.

However, this doesn't mean that the Hegel Viking's qualities struggle to break through, in fact they shine as clear as the sun when it breaks through the clouds after a day of rain. At the same time, I find it almost hard to believe how everyone who creates hi-fi systems ends up with such widely differing results when the goal is exactly the same.

We experienced an additional push and dynamics in the bass with both of the systems we used. The sound is not more bold or rich, but it has excellent depth, powerful control, solid dynamics and more nuance than we usually experience. Both pairs of the speakers we used are capable of playing bass down to a range of 20Hz, but we have rarely heard depth like this, despite many audio sources having been connected.

CD vs streaming

It's never easy to tell whether we are listening to different versions of the studio master, but, for all the tracks we played, it was close to 20-0 in favour of Hegel Viking. OK, let's say 18-2 just to be kind, but that still represents what could be described as a crushing defeat for streaming. Of course, we can speculate about the reasons, but what is certain is that the Hegel CD player plays music at a quality that definitely stands out from the two DACs (iFI Audio iDSD Pro and the

new Ferrum Wandla) and the streams we tested, which, together, add up to at least the same price as Viking. Is the challenge the quality of the signal received from the streaming servers or is it because the digital converters try to be "all things to all men"? I don't know, but high-resolution files, good digital converters and streamers did not have the same precision and openness in the midrange and treble or the incredibly beautiful holography and the same depth perception in the bass. The strange thing was that I could hear what was playing even if I walked halfway down the stairs and stood there to listen.

Music on CD

Armed with a handful of CDs and with rain drumming on the roof so that heading to the beach for a swim is not an option now that the world has finally started their summer holidays, I am ready for one of the most exciting tests of the summer.

I start with Terje Rypdal's Last Nite. It goes straight to Terje Rypdal's guitar and it's rare to hear the sound so directly while also being so floaty and airy. Ethereal guitar tones, echoes and suitably soaring synths provide a fantastic soundscape. I decide to continue with more Rypdal and As If The Ghost Was Me? Fortunately, he has kept the essentials but replaced the drum machine with a real drummer and it sounds masterful. The guitar is relentlessly focused, the zing in the projections of the ride cymbals are



magnificent and the soundscape is huge, with well-defined instrument placement.

I move onto Opeth and Hessian Peel from the album Watershed. Not because it usually sounds great but because all too often it does not. The sound tends to get a bit stuffy and woolly and the different instruments often end up getting in each other's way. However, the Hegel player does an impressive clean-up operation here and firmly nails each of the instruments against the pitch-black background, retrieving a wealth of information for the ears to feast on without doing anything overt or threatening for that matter. As the track progresses, it becomes powerful and heavy with an unusually strong bass foundation, but the soundscape still maintains the impressive size and the same clarity and openness I experienced during my initial rounds with the player.

The somewhat drowsy Over En By by Kari Bremnes is muted, but served with a wealth of nuance and incredible articulation. Even though I have almost played this record to death, it still provides an unusually fresh and almost new experience. The voice is simply beautifully rendered and feels incredibly close. The articulation, the tone and the restrained s's, other difficult consonants and phrasings are masterfully rendered and, even though there is a lot of fine-tuning of the musicians in the background, every little stroke and every touch of the brushes against the drum skins is unusually clear. At the same time, the rather dusty trumpet tone from Arve Henriksen is incredibly rich in air, resonance and timbres. All in all, the melody is much too short. When you get into it, close your eyes and make yourself comfortable, you want it to last for at least half an hour because the sound experience really is fantastic.

Conclusion

It is of course dangerous to make predictions, but it's very hard to imagine that a CD player in this price range could get much better without significant innovations. Hegel Viking processes the audio from a CD in an incredibly impressive manner, which is both surprising and gratifying. The sound is very good regardless of what you compare it to under 100K and it makes you think carefully about whether it was such a good idea to put your CDs in the basement. It may seem as though a few decades of developing CD playback devices has yet to fully unlock the potential of the once-popular silver discs. Perhaps they too will experience a renaissance?

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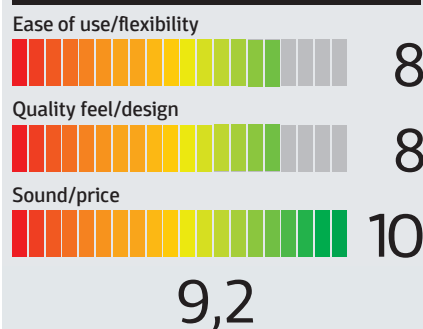
- Fantastic detail and great playing performance
- Impressive dynamics
- Incredible bass and strong foundation
- All unnecessary equipment removed

WE DON'T LIKE:

- All unnecessary equipment removed

STEREO+ SAYS: Hegel Viking has been designed to play CDs only and does so in a way that marks a provisional high point for sound rendering in this price class.

SCORE



Hegel Viking	
PRICE:	NOK 49,998
MANUFACTURER:	Hegel AS
LINK:	www.hegel.com