



AUDIOMAT MAESTRO

sound brighter, not in the usual digital sense, but as though the harp were playing a quarter tone higher.

Gerard agreed, noting the great coherence of the complex passages, the ones that sound as though two musicians are at work, and he praised the overall finesse of the sound. "It's in the near silences that you can really judge this converter," he said. Albert found the result magnificent, but wasn't sure which version he preferred.

We ended with our challenging choral disc, *Now the Green Blade Riset*. Reine chose to put her pen down and listen. Was the final crescendo in the opening piece slightly harder than with our reference? Gerard thought it might be, if only a little. "It nearly always does harden up at the end," he said, "but the Récital made it sound so smooth till the end." Albert praised the tonal beauty of the rendition, and especially appreciated the clarity and transparency, which allowed glorious separation of the choral voices. He would have liked more substance to the organ in the final crescendo, though he found nothing to criticize in other aspects of the crescendo.

We did our usual readings on the test bench. The top trace shown at left is of a 100 Hz square wave. There is minor ringing that is quickly damped. On the other hand the tilted top indicates that Audiomat has not gone for maximum top end extension. The lower trace is of a 1 kHz sine wave recorded 60 decibels below full level. It is close to perfect. Jitter was low.

There is a lot to like in this admirable converter. Not many audiophiles will consider it truly affordable, but in an odd way it offers tremendous value. The recommended CEC TL51X transport is a mere C\$1590, or US\$1290, a fraction of what most upscale transports cost. Put one together with the Maestro plus a decent digital cable, and you have a player that can challenge the state of the art. Do the math.

If you want to hear everything that the wonderful Récital can do, you won't want a source less capable than this one. So can you get one for less money?

As the Magic 8-Ball used to say, "signs point to no."



LISTENING ROOM

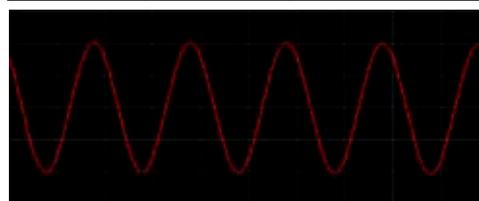
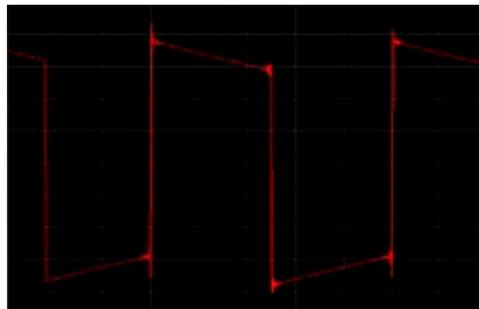
It is not precisely a surprise that the Audiomat Récital amplifier reviewed in the preceding pages would turn out to be a handful. Nor that it would push our concept of what a boxful of electronic parts can do for the musical experience. But Audiomat's distributor (and North American manufacturer), Mutine, told us that if we *really* wanted to hear everything it could do, we should listen to it with the company's best digital-to-analog converter, the Maestro. Mutine recommends using it with a CEC belt-driven transport, which we just happen to own. After the session with the Récital was over, we plugged in the CEC/Maestro combo, with an Acti-note cable linking them, and listened again to three of the test recordings that are actual Red Book CDs.

We began with the Dvorak violin piece. Once again, James Ehnes' violin sounded silky and realistic, much as it does in real life (we did in fact have a chance to hear him a few days after the listening session). The timbres of both the violin and Eduard Laurel's accompanying piano were superb, and the balance between them was excellent.

But which version was better? All three of us wrote that question in our notes. Albert was the only one to provide an answer, thinking that our reference might have the edge. The other two panelists reserved judgement. This was, nonetheless, a good beginning.

We continued with the harp recording, which really did sound different with the CEC/Audiomat combination. Was

it better? Reine thought so, giving the Maestro extra points for the subtlety of both instrumental timbre and the actual playing. "McDonald's hands seem to be playing more together," she said. She found the sound richer than with our reference player, with the powerful low notes more "woody." She also found the



SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Audiomat Maestro

Price: C\$8,590/US\$6,990

Dimensions: 44.5 x 13.5 x 35.5 cm

Most liked: Coherence, delicacy of timbres

Least liked: What...you want us to make something up? All right, the blue lights aren't the same hue as other Audiomat lights. Happy?

Verdict: Can something of this price actually be a bargain?