

Does the baby deserve its bathwater? Mercedes-Benz C180

by Christian Wimmer, European Photography Editor



It was the summer of 2003, and I had just returned from London to Mühlendorf. I was eager to visit the local Mercedes-Benz dealership in the hopes of spotting and being able to test-drive some new Mercedes cars.

The next day, my father and I drove up to the dealership in our 2002 Mercedes E320 *Avantgarde* for a scheduled repair; a stone had chipped the front windshield a few weeks ago. As the service would take some time (probably a day or two), we needed a family car to return home with.

The Mercedes-Benz dealership was always very kind to us, and not only complied, but did so with a 2002 C180 Kompressor (as opposed to, say, a Smart). We picked up the base-model gasoline C-Class in front of the dealership entrance door with the engine running and sounding encouragingly smooth (although one could still tell it was a four-cylinder). The rims were not as bad as one might have expected, and there seemed to be a surprising amount of interior space.



I also noticed that this car had the six-speed manual transmission. Now, I was excited – I wanted to find out if Mercedes' manuals had improved over time. Mercedes manual transmissions do not enjoy a good reputation; they have been constantly criticized by the German automotive press for lacking in precision and smoothness. Every German and British car magazine I've read recommends the Mercedes automatic over the manual, claiming it is more refined and smooth - and that it fits the car much better.



Frankly, I think *Volkswagen* makes better manual transmissions than Mercedes! But, then again, Mercedes expects to sell most of their cars with automatic transmissions, so there is little incentive to perfect their 'stick-shifts.'

Knowing my enthusiasm for trying new things (especially cars), my father let me drive.

On the move, the 1796cc engine confirmed what I had heard while the car was idling. Its smoothness can probably be attributed to Mercedes' recent adaptation of counter-rotating-balance-shafts. My ex-1992 Mitsubishi Galant GTI (of the 1987-1992 generation) had featured these all the way back in 1989! The *Kompressor* (supercharger) could neither be heard nor felt, which I found quite interesting since some reviews had said that the SL55

AMG's supercharger was loud. Wind noise was also kept to a minimum and the engine, even at high speeds and high rpm's, was quiet and well-behaved.

Once I got on the *Landstrasse*, things really grew interesting. I floored the car in second gear and, to my surprise, the one hundred and forty-three horsepower C180 Kompressor felt spry and agile. While not mind-blowing, it clearly was not slow, either.



At any rate, 0-62 mph according to Mercedes could be attained in 9.7 seconds with the manual transmission. While I did not have the opportunity to confirm this numerically, it certainly felt that way. The C180 Kompressor's spirited behavior was also probably due to the two hundred and twenty Nm of torque the engine developed (162 lb/ft) - quite respectable for a 1.8-liter engine, but clearly also helped by the supercharger.

Only that six-speed manual transmission took some of the fun away. True to form, it was not very precise and lacked the smoothness so associated with BMW manuals. Even my ex-1992 Mitsubishi Galant GTI had a better manual. Worse, our ex-1996 Mitsubishi Pajero with a 5-speed "truck-like" manual made this Mercedes manual appear completely obsolete! Clearly, this is not

good for a company like Mercedes that prides itself on technology and engineering.

At any rate, overtaking was not a problem, as the C180 had the necessary power reserves. In sixth gear, the engine rpm's were quite low for the benefit of fuel economy. Indeed, the C180 Kompressor's top speed of two hundred and twenty-two km/h (139 mph) is quite respectable, if not too much for a car of its class!

In terms of comfort and space, the C-Class offered surprisingly huge amounts of legroom and side space for me and my father (6'4" and 6'2" respectively in height). This was probably one of the biggest surprises of the car. I had always thought the C-Class to be small and cramped, but I could not have been more wrong.

On the negative side of things, the interior looked very cheap - despite this C180 Kompressor being an *Elegance* model (one notch above the base, *Classic* trim level). The wood looked fake, and the plastic was nothing to write home about. Interiors tend to be very important to me; I like to feel good in a car that I am driving. This was clearly not the Mercedes level I was used to.



Knowing my car enthusiast father, he also wanted to see what this car felt like, so we took some winding country roads back home. Here, the C180 Kompressor was quite at home and it took the curves with ease. The agility of the car surprised both me and my father.

The engine was always in a sporty mood, never felt underpowered, and it loved to be revved! On these roads, the manual transmission actually added a little fun - but, in a Mercedes, I enjoy the automatic transmissions equally.

The suspension was not up to par with our E320, or even my 300SE, but it did quite well at absorbing rough roads (of which there are admittedly not many around Mühlendorf).

Once at home, I dropped off my father and drove to our garage, which is about a 5 minute walk from our home. I parked the car next to the 500SL, in the space where our E320 usually sits.

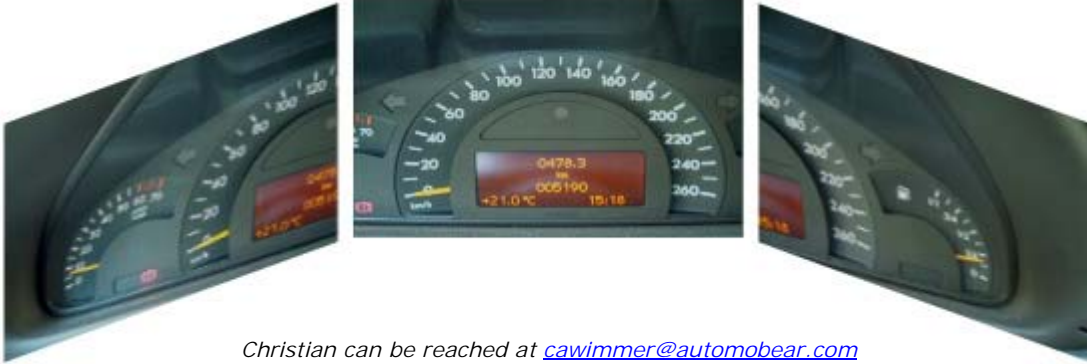
As I turned off the engine, closed the door, and locked-up the car. I took one last look at it. I really thought that it was a decent piece of machinery. It performed the basic functions required of it in the real world well enough.

There were a few things that were annoying, or that did not do the Mercedes' name justice. Even so, my dad had suggested that it would be quite nice as a family car, and this test-drive had changed my views on the newest C-Class.

The next day, we received a call that the E320's front windshield had been successfully replaced, and that the car was ready to be picked up. The task was given to me to take the C180 Kompressor back, make the payments for the E320's new front windshield, and bring the E320 home.

I quite enjoyed the ride up to the dealership in the C180. Certainly, it was fun to drive despite the Mercedes manual transmission and the little 1.8-liter powerplant.

However, after I brought the C180 back and got back into our E320, I did feel much better to be back in a 'real' car that did everything better than the C180.



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