

ELECTRONICALLY REPRINTED FROM JULY 2008

Playback

music & movies that matters

equipment

sound-in-the-round

BUYER'S GUIDE: AFFORDABLE UNIVERSAL PLAYERS

PLAYBACK SAMPLES 5 DO-ALL DISC PLAYERS

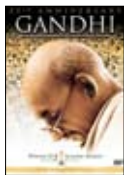
CHRIS MARTENS

WHAT IS A "UNIVERSAL PLAYER" ANYWAY?

In simple terms, a universal player is a versatile digital disc player that can handle almost all popular forms of music and video discs—not including Blu-ray discs. To qualify as a "universal player," a machine must be able to handle the four following types of discs:

In addition to these four disc types, many universal players go even further to support still other types of music, video, or picture discs:

- Other music disc types: HDCD (a variation on the traditional CD format, but that offers higher resolution), WMA, and MP3 discs.
- Other video/picture disc types: DivX, JPEG, MPEG4, and Kodak Picture Discs



The familiar DVDs that most of us are used to watching.



SACD or "Super Audio CD," a somewhat better known high-performance music disc format that supports multichannel (that is, surround sound) music mixes while providing dramatically better-than-CD-quality sound.



A not terribly well known high-performance music disc format that supports multichannel (that is, surround sound) music mixes while providing dramatically better-than-CD-quality sound.



The familiar music CDs (sometimes called "Redbook CDs") most of us know and love.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

Picture Quality with Standard DVDs: With the advent of Blu-ray, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that most of us own large collections of DVDs we love to watch, and that—by any analysis—DVDs are much cheaper to buy than Blu-ray discs. In short, DVDs still have much to offer—especially when viewed through good universal players. Here's why. Most good universal players feature built-in video processing/upscaling features specifically geared to make DVDs look their best when seen on HD screens. Although some Blu-ray players also work very well with DVDs, the fact is that others do not.

Sound Quality: When it comes to playing music, digital players are not created equal, and some sound much better than others. One reason to choose a good universal player is that its audio circuits will be optimized not only for playing traditional CDs, but also for “high res” disk formats that sound even better than CDs.

While it is true that neither the DVD-Audio nor SACD formats ever gained the market acceptance many hoped they would, the SACD format has, at this point, been widely embraced by audiophiles. This means that quality-minded listeners can tap into a stream of great-sounding new SACD releases, many of which can be found at musicdirect.com, acousticsounds.com, and other good music-buying sites.

By contrast, only one of the current generation Blu-

ray players (namely the Playstation 3) on the market can even handle SACD discs, and none of the Blu-ray players we have heard is optimized for sound quality in the way that good universal players often are.

As we see things, then, you could build a strong case for owning both a Blu-ray player (for moments when you want to watch movies in HD) and a good universal player (for watching conventional DVDs and listening to music).

ABOUT THIS BUYER'S GUIDE

We've gathered a collection of five of the best affordable (sub-\$500) universal players we know of, each from reputable manufacturers. The point of this survey is to evaluate each player's strengths as both a video and music player.

This is not a “shootout”; each of the players reviewed can and does stand on its own merits. If/when we find models that offer particularly good performance/dollar, we will denote this fact with one of our “Playback Recommended” logos.

WHAT WE LOOK FOR

Video Performance: We are looking for clean, effective upscaling, and video processing that helps minimize unwanted artifacts such as jaggies (stairstep-like edges sometime seen on diagonal edges in motion),

moiré patterns, noise, and herky-jerk cinema-video cadence conversions.

Music Performance: We look for players that sound good on all types of music discs, and that offer a smooth, well-balanced, natural-sounding presentation that is rich in vibrant tonal colors, yet never exaggerated.

Ease of Use: Because universal players are inherently complex, we seek out models whose user interfaces and remote controls are easy to learn and intuitive to use.

KEY FEATURES

- HDMI upscaling options: 480p/576p, 720p, 1080i and 1080p.
- Video Processing: Faroudja DCDi.
- DACs: 192kHz/24-bit Burr Brown audio DACs, separate video DACs for interlace and progressive playback modes.
- DVD Formats: Can play both PAL (European format) and NTSC-format DVDs.

USER INTERFACE

The DVD-SD1800 has a fairly straightforward user interface and remote control, and is for the most part easy to set up. Some elements we particularly liked included the following:

- A PURE DIRECT button that turns off video processing functions and the front panel display for superior sound quality during music

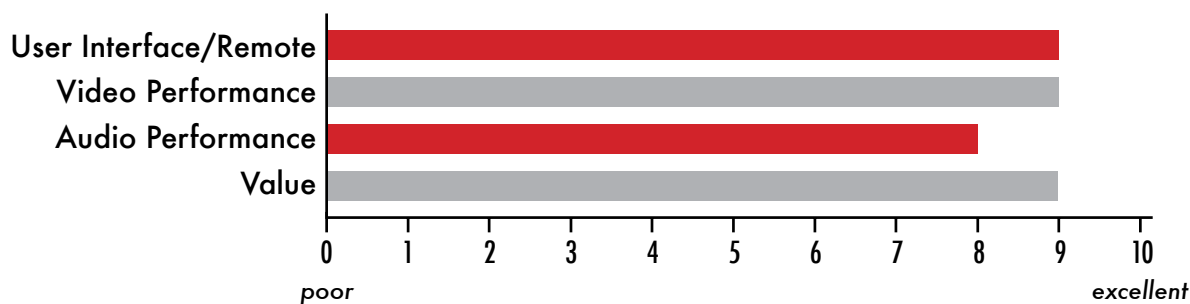
playback. One quirk, however, is that the Pure Direct button is found on the faceplate of the player—not on the remote control, as you would expect.

- A SUPER AUDIO CD SET UP button on the remote lets you choose which “area” of SACD discs (CD, SACD stereo, or SACD multichannel) will be played

We did identify several user interface shortcomings, as noted below:

- Channel level trim controls provide only a +/- 12dB range of adjustment (+/- 10dB would be preferable).
- User interface does not allow on-the-fly adjustment of audio or video settings (a feature we wish all universal players provided).
- The onscreen display for this player presents significantly less disc/track information than is typical for players in this class.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DVD99 UNIVERSAL PLAYER
(compared to sub-\$500 universal players)



VIDEO PERFORMANCE

Playback uses the Silicon Optix HQV Benchmark DVD Ver. 4 to conduct benchmark tests, and over time we've found that certain video processors tend to yield consistent, "signature" results on our tests. It came as no surprise, then, that the DVD-1940CI performed much like the other Faroudja DCDi processor-equipped players we tested, which is a good thing (remember, the DVD-1940CI is the least expensive of the DCDi-equipped players in our survey). The Denon showed solid performance on most tests, but exhibited minor shortcomings in the following areas:

- Color Bar (resolution) Tests: Minor "blurred" bands visible on the finest resolution test lines.
- Jaggies Tests: Minor "ripple" visible on worst-case tests.
- Film Detail Tests (scene of a racecar passing in front of empty grandstands): Momentary moiré pattern is visible in the grandstands before the processor intervenes and the image locks in.
- Cadence Tests: Performance is fine on the "big two" formats; namely 2-2 30fps Video and 3-2 24fps Film. However, some image "twitch" was observed on less commonly encountered DVCAM, Vari-Speed, and Animation cadences.

For purposes of watching DVDs under real-world conditions, the Denon produced smooth and generally glitch-free images that upscaled cleanly when the player was set for 1080i output (the setting that works best with our lab's reference HDTV). I found it revealing to watch the opening scenes of *Open Range*, where Mose (Abraham Benrubi) labors in the late afternoon sun to erect a canvas shelter before a storm ar-

& Pricing

Specs

Cambridge Audio DVD99 universal player

Formats: DVD-Audio/Video, DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW, SACD multichannel/stereo, CD, MP4, and DivX

Audio outputs: (1) 5.1/7.1-channel analog audio, (2) digital audio (one optical, one coaxial), (1) SCART, (1) HDMI

Video outputs: (1) composite video, (1) S-video, (1) component video, (1) RGB/SCART, (1) HDMI

Other input/outputs: (1) USB 2.0

Dimensions (HxWxD): 2.17" x 16.93" x 10.35"

Weight: 5.7 lb.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO
cambridge-audio.com

Distributor Information
 Audio Plus Services
 (800) 863-9352
audioplusservices.com

rives. As the wind kicks up around Mose, you can actually see fine bits of dust and plant debris swirl up into the air as Mose hammers tent stakes into the ground. It's small visual details such as these that make this player so rewarding.

That said, however, I should point out that when upscaling images the Denon captures just slightly less image detail and sharpness than the best players we've seen in this class. In the same scene from *Open Range*, Charley Waite (Kevin Costner) looks at the sky to check on storm clouds, but then quickly steps back under the shelter as raindrops begin to fall. When he does so we get an up close view of the surface textures of the canvas roof from the inside—textures that some players resolve so well you'd swear you could reach out and *feel* the warp

and woof of the fabric, but that the Denon softens just a bit. It's a case where the Denon does well (very well, actually), but where a few other affordable players can do even better.

AUDIO PERFORMANCE/SONIC CHARACTER

The DVD-1940CI's three greatest sonic strengths are smoothness, neutral tonal balance, and a good measure of natural clarity. While some players offer greater levels of detail, slightly more vibrant tonal colors, and can create more "holographic" soundstages, the little Denon holds its own, and does so at a very reasonable price. One appealing aspect of the player is that it seems to perform equally well when playing CD, SACD, and DVD-Audio material, whereas some competing players tend to favor one format or another at the expense of the others.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

While conducting listening tests with the Denon,

I took an opportunity to play the track "Country Roads" from Gary Burton's *Like Minds* [Concord, multichannel SACD] for a colleague in the office. What's special about the record is not only that it captures a stellar jazz ensemble (Gary Burton on vibes, Chick Corea on piano, Pat Metheny on guitar, Dave Holland on acoustic bass, and Roy Haynes on drums) playing great music, but also the fact that it captures an eerily realistic "stage mix." As I played the track, the Denon did a beautiful job of reproducing the distinctive timbres of the individual instruments, and a quite respectable job of placing the musicians in front of, behind, and to the left and right sides of the listening area. As the track ended, my colleague looked up with a touch of wonder in his eyes and said, "I've rarely heard the *Playback* Audio Lab system sound this good," and he was right. While you can find players that sound better than the Denon, at least in some respects, those that do tend to cost more—sometimes quite a *lot* more.


LAST WORD



- On music, smooth textures and wonderfully neutral tonal balance.
- Solid video performance thanks to built-in Faroudja processor.



- Video benchmark tests revealed some minor weaknesses.
- User interface has some quirks and does not allow on-the-fly audio adjustments.

BOTTOM LINE: *Denon's DVD-1940CI is good video performer and a player that delivers smooth, evenly balanced sound on all audio material of all formats. Best of all, the Denon has a satisfyingly even-handed way of dealing with music, tending to draw out the strengths of recordings without belaboring their weaknesses. PB* 

Balance Is Its Own Reward

Marantz DV6100

The \$500 DV6001 is the least expensive of three universal players offered by Marantz, yet nothing about its extensive features set or performance would lead you to think of it as an “entry-level” model. On the contrary, for value-minded music and movie lovers the DV6001 may be one of the most well balanced options on today’s market—a player that, while perhaps not the top performer in any one category, nevertheless manages to do all things well. In particular, we think the DV6001 would be ideal



for those seeking a player that combines solid video performance with a sound that is unfailingly smooth, highly three-dimensional, and that provides a comforting touch of natural warmth.

KEY FEATURES

- HDMI upscaling options: 480p, 720p, 1080i and 1080p.
- Video Processing: Faroudja DCDi and NSV (“Noise Shaped Video”)
- DACs: 192kHz/24-bit audio DAC, 216MHz/12-bit video DAC
- PAL (European format) < - to- > NTSC conversion

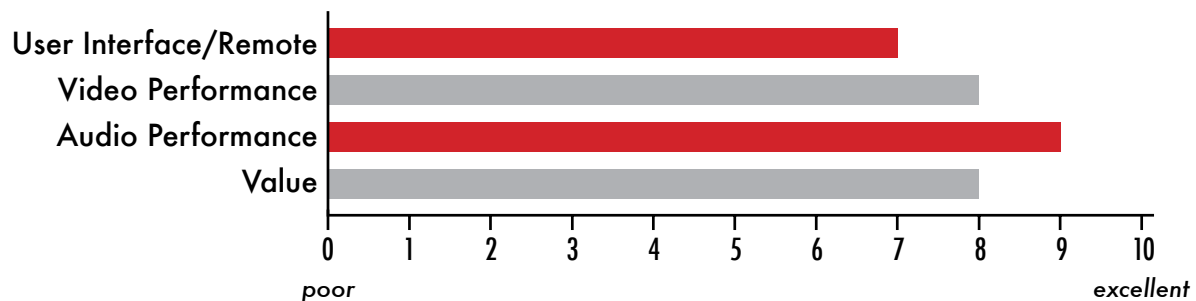
USER INTERFACE

The DV6001 has a reasonably straightforward user interface and remote control and is easy to set up. We liked the fact that the remote offered an AUDIO EX button (which turns off most video

processing functions and the front panel display for superior sound quality during music playback), and a SOUND MODE button (which allows users to toggle between multichannel and stereo mixes when listening to SACDs). However, we did have several “nits” to pick, as noted below:

- Dual-function SKIP AHEAD/FAST FORWARD and SKIP BACK/FAST REVERSE buttons on the remote control are confusing and tricky to use.
- Channel level trim controls provide only +/- 6dB range of adjustment (+/- 10dB would be preferable).
- No trim or distance controls for the sub-woofer (a potentially serious omission in our view).
- User interface does not allow on-the-fly adjustment of audio or video settings (a feature we wish all universal players provided).

MARANTZ DV6001 UNIVERSAL PLAYER
(compared to sub-\$500 universal players)



VIDEO PERFORMANCE

The DV6001, like several other players in this class, provides Faroudja DCDi video processing, which ensures good—though not necessarily best-in-class—image quality.

On benchmark tests, conducted using the Silicon Optix HQV Benchmark DVD Ver. 4, the DV6001 turned in solid performance on most tests, though with minor shortcomings in the following areas:

- Color Bar (resolution) Tests: Minor “blurred” bands visible on the finest resolution test lines.
- Jaggies Tests: Minor “ripple” visible on worst-case tests.
- Film Detail Tests (scene of a racecar passing in front of empty grandstands): Momentary moiré pattern is visible in the grandstands before the processor intervenes and the image lock in.
- Cadence Tests: Performance is fine on the “big two” formats; namely 2-2 30fps Video and 3-2 24fps Film. However, some image “twitch” was observed on less commonly encountered DVCAM, Vari-Speed, and Animation cadences.

In real world tests, during which the player was set for 1080i upscaling, the DV6001 offered a smooth, slightly soft-looking, but generally film-like presentation with better than average resolution. Facial closeups in films such as *Gandhi* offered smoothly rendered shadow details and gorgeous textures. Only on real torture tests, such the scene from *Seabiscuit* where the camera pans over a black & white still photo of a gentleman wearing a finely patterned hound’s-tooth jacket (whose surface textures are notoriously hard to reproduce), were any moiré problems evident.

AUDIO PERFORMANCE/ SONIC CHARACTER

Sound quality is a major part of the DV6001’s appeal, and one of the things we appreciated most is that the player sounded equally good on CDs, SACDs, and DVD-Audio discs (not all universal players do). This player’s general sonic character is shaded slightly to the warm side of neutral, with refreshing freedom from treble edginess and glare—problems that often crop up with other affordable players. The Marantz is particularly good at reproducing spatial

Specs & Pricing

Specs

Marantz DV6001 universal player

Formats: DVD-Audio/Video, DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW, SACD multichannel/stereo, SVCD, VCD, CD, CD-R/RW, MP3, WMA, JPEG HD, and DivX

Audio outputs: (1) 5.1-channel analog audio, (1) 2-channel analog audio, (2) digital audio (one optical, one coaxial), (1) HDMI

Video outputs: (1) composite video, (1) S-video, (1) component video, (1) HDMI

Other input/outputs: (1) RS-232, (1 each) IR In/Out, (1) Flasher input

Dimensions (HxWxD): 2.3" x 17.3" x 12.6"

Weight: 8.3 lbs.

MARANTZ AMERICA, INC.

(201) 762-6500

marantz.com

cues in music, so that it offers a strikingly spacious, three-dimensional sound. Though not the last word in detail or resolution, the DV6001 sounds unfailingly engaging and is easy to listen to for hours on end.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Violins are difficult for any digital player to reproduce, because in real life they tend to offer the not necessarily compatible qualities of incisiveness and sweetness. Frankly, many players tend to capture one quality at the expense of the other, but not the Marantz. On virtuoso violinist Hilary Hahn's performance of Vaughan-Williams' *The Lark Ascending* [Deutsche Grammophon] the Marantz deftly negotiated the fast-rising edges of Hahn's bowing changes, yet without ever losing a grip on the inherent sweet-

ness of her tone. Bravo, Marantz.

When properly reproduced, well-recorded SACDs offer compelling sonic benefits relative to conventional CDs, but the fact is that some players impart a hard, steely quality to SACDs that spoils the whole effect. But happily, the Marantz does no such thing. Instead, it draws out the lushness and rich inner vocal and instrument details found in, say, the track "Speak" from Nickelcreek's eponymous album [Sugar Hill, SACD]. The DV6001 invites you to drink in the timbres of Chris Thile's mandolin or Sara Watkins' voice on that track, and it will flat blow your mind as it reproduces the 3D swirl of whispering voices heard toward the end of the track. The heightened sense of being transported to an entirely different acoustic space is part of what makes listening to this Marantz so worthwhile.

LAST WORD



- Sonic smoothness, warmth and richness on all major music disc formats.
- Always engaging, easy to listen to.
- Solid video performance creates smooth, film-like images
- Heavier construction than most



- Some user interface quirks.
- Video benchmark tests revealed some minor weaknesses
- Not the last word in sonic detail and resolution, but highly three-dimensional.

BOTTOM LINE: *A good all-rounder and solid video performer, the Marantz DV6001 trades off the nth degree of sonic resolution and detail to achieve a warm, smooth, 3D sound. To its credit, this little Marantz always sounds rich and tuneful—never overly bright, edgy, or harsh. PB*

An Overachiever Among Overachievers

Oppo Digital DV-983H

*P*layback and its sister magazine *The Absolute Sound* have reviewed a number of Oppo universal players over the years, all of them offering great performance per dollar, some of them winning awards, and most priced at or below the low \$200 range. But now, we come to the \$395 DV-983H, which is Oppo's flagship model. Is it something special? You'd better believe it is, both in terms of excellent video and audio performance, as well as overall versatility. As you'll discover in a moment, this industrial



strength Oppo is a killer video player, one of the best music-oriented players in its class, and one heckuva good deal.

KEY FEATURES

- HDMI upscaling options: 480p, 720p, 1080i and 1080p.
- Component video upscaling options: 480i, 480p, 720p, 1080i and 1080p
- 7.1-channel analog audio outputs
- HDCD disc decoding: HDCD is a better-than-CD-quality disc format that can play on normal CD players, but that requires a dedicated HDCD decoder for optimal performance. The Oppo DV-983H is the only player in our survey to provide an HDCD decoder. Note: A surprising number of “conventional” CDs in fact use HDCD encoding, even though they do not carry HDCD markings, and the Oppo, of course, makes them sound better, too.
- Variable analog audio outputs with volume control

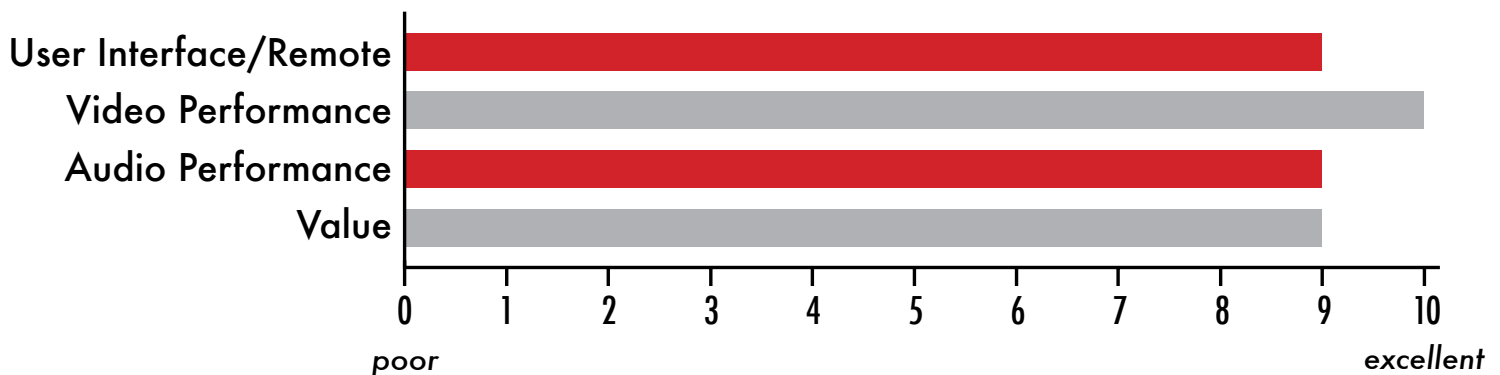
- USB 2.0 connection: Allows player to access and play material stored on USB flash/memory cards or other “mass storage devices”
- Video Processing: VRS (Video Reference Series) processor from Anchor Bay Technologies.
- PAL (European format) < - to- > NTSC conversion

USER INTERFACE

The DV-983H provides one of the best user interfaces we’ve ever seen on any universal player, and the remote is quite cleverly designed, as well. Highlights include:

- Analog audio setup support for both 5.1 and 7.1-channel systems.
- Analog audio channel trimmers that provide a full +/- 10dB range of adjustment.
- Audio as well as (some) video settings that can be adjusted “on-the-fly;” that is, while disc are playing—a feature few players at any price provide.

OPPO DV-983H UNIVERSAL PLAYER (compared to sub-\$500 universal players)



- An OSD (onscreen display) button on the remote allows users to access a wide range of information on discs being played, including the album and track titles for SACD discs.
- An AUDIO ONLY button turns off video circuitry to minimize noise.
- A P/N button allows PAL/NTSC switching from the remote control.
- Direct DVD/USB input switching from the remote control.
- A volume control on the remote regulates levels from the DV-983H's analog audio outputs, meaning the player can be connected directly to self-powered speakers to create cost-effective, minimalist systems.

Although the DV-983H remote control is not illuminated, it does provide luminous, glow-in-the-dark control buttons, which is the next best thing. About the only thing things the user interface lacks are channel-level test tones, and variable crossover frequencies for subwoofers (both are features some of the best players in this class provide).

VIDEO PERFORMANCE

Let me cut straight to the chase. On our benchmark tests, conducted using the Silicon Optix HQV Benchmark DVD Ver. 4, Oppo's DV-983H passed *every single test* on the disc with essentially letter perfect results. You read that right; there are no video performance quibbles or caveats to discuss here, because the Oppo "aced" every test we threw at it. The Oppo's performance would do credit to a player several times its price, and it's a stunning achievement for one selling for under \$400.

Real world DVD tests further confirmed that the DV-983H is one *outstanding* DVD player—hands down the top video performer in our survey. With the player's upscaling controls set

for 1080i output, I watched movie after movie, mesmerized by the DV-983H's smooth, film-like presentation and exceptionally good resolution and detail.

Specs & Pricing

Specs

Oppo DV-983H universal player

Formats: DVD-Audio/Video, DVD±R/RW, DVD±R DL, SACD multichannel/stereo, HDCD, CD, CD-R/RW, Kodak Picture CD

Audio outputs: (1) 5.1/7.1-channel analog audio, (2) digital audio (one optical, one coaxial), (1) HDMI

Video outputs: (1) composite video, (1) S-video, (1)

component video, (1) HDMI

Other input/outputs: (1) USB 2.0,

Dimensions (HxWxD): 2.12" x 16.87" x 10.5"

Weight: 6.1 lb.

OPPO DIGITAL
(650) 961-1118
oppodigital.com

In the “Cool As Water” scene from *House of Flying Daggers*, the protagonists Jin (Take-shi Kaneshiro) and Xiao Mei (Ziyi Zhang) don garments whose surfaces reveal rich colors and intricate, brocade-like textures—colors and textures that most players tend to soften to some degree. But not so, the Oppo; it captured the fine, inner details in the surfaces of those fabrics and presented them with the sort of precision and clarity you’d expect from a topographic relief map. Everywhere I looked the player seemed to find new details or shades of coloring to reveal, consistently making images look richer, more three-dimensional and more finely detailed.

It is no exaggeration to say that the DV-983H will tempt you to fall in love with well filmed tight close ups, because it makes facial details and expressions fairly jump off the screen. A particular scene in *Gandhi* floored me with images of an emaciated and fasting Gandhi (Ben Kingsley) explaining to his follower Meerabahen (Geraldine James) why he believes good will always triumph over evil in the end. The Oppo caught the gritty textures of the stubble in Gandhi’s beard, and the combination of determination and profound sorrow in his eyes. At the same time, the player also caught the softer textures of Meerabahen’s face and the fine wisps of her hair protruding from beneath her shawl as she leaned forward to listen to Gandhi’s words. The point, I think, is that when onscreen image details get this good, films can move us in deeper and more intimate ways.

More so than most players, the DV-983H shows how a good upscaling player can give DVDs a new lease on life—not quite elevating them to the level of Blu-ray discs, of course, but making them look better than we might ever have thought possible.

AUDIO PERFORMANCE/ SONIC CHARACTER

The Oppo is also one of the two or three best sounding players in our survey thanks to its uncanny combination of resolution, rich tonal colors, and overarching three-dimensionality. While some might find the player’s tonal balance exhibits faint traces of brightness (at least for CD playback), the richness of the player’s tonal colors tends to offset any tendency toward an edgy or “cold” sound. And, as you shift toward higher resolution DVD-Audio and SACD material, the player sounds even better—most notably by producing huge, wide-open, holographic soundstages.

Finally, the Oppo stands as a sonic “gift that keeps on giving,” because it can decode HDCD discs. You may be surprised to discover that certain ostensibly “standard” CDs have, in fact, been HDCD encoded, and once you hear the heightened resolution that HDCD encoding offers, you’ll appreciate the Oppo’s decoding capabilities even more.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

As I played the track “Timeless” from Larry Coryell, Badi Assad, and John Abercrombie’s *Three Guitars* [Telarc, multichannel SACD], I sat back and marveled at the huge sound the Oppo produced. On the track I’ve referenced, Coryell is seated at the left, Abercrombie on the right, and Assad in the center of a wide stage. As the song unfolds, the instrumentalists take turns soloing while their compatriots contribute atmospheric textures and phrases. The effect is not unlike finding yourself seated front row, center seat, at a magical concert performed just for you. While all of the players in this survey sounded good on this track, the Oppo helped it expand to fill a huge, yet quite believable, 3D space that I personally found enchanting.

Similarly, the Oppo sounded remarkably detailed and spacious on the Goodwin/Minnesota performance of Tavener's *Icons of Eros* from the Reference Recordings *30th Anniversary Sampler* disc—an HDCD-encoded recording. The piece is an unusual one, juxtaposing angular string passages with a rhythmic percussion motif that builds in intensity until it climaxes with a choral shout that seems to reverberate forever in the cathedral-like recording space. The DV-983H

did an unexpectedly fine job of conveying the sense of “air” in the recording, letting you *feel* as much as hear the acoustics of the space.

In many ways the Oppo sounds more like a pricey high-end player than it does a unit priced under \$400. True, this means the player sometimes exposes the flaws in so-so recordings, but that's a tradeoff that—in the Oppo's case—we can live with (remember, the DV-983H isn't so much “un-forgiving” as it is honest).

LAST WORD



- Killer DVD image quality that really shows what a good upscaling player can do.
- Sound quality hinges on good resolution, vibrant tonal colors, and terrific three-dimensionality—a sweet combination if ever we heard one.
- Excellent user interface



- Can sometimes sound slightly bright on CD playback.
- Makes more costly players nervous—very nervous.

BOTTOM LINE: *Oppo's flagship DV-983H is, by any standard, an outstanding DVD player, and a very fine audio player, too. If you'd like to get a good, big taste of what pricey high-end players are like, yet without breaking the bank, look no further. Oh, and did we mention that the Oppo even comes with a free HDMI cable? Cool, no? **PB***

Higher Definition Than Most

Yamaha DVD-SD1800

The \$450 DVD-S1800 is the less expensive of the two universal players currently offered by Yamaha, yet it offers features that—just a year or two ago—would only have been found in much higher priced players. Like several other universal players in this survey, the DVD-S1800 incorporates Faroudja DCDi video processing, but the Yamaha's superior real-world picture quality makes it arguably "first among equals" in comparison to the other DCDi-equipped players in this survey. Sonically, the DVD-SD1800 skews slightly toward the brighter, leaner side of strict neutrality—emphasizing definition, detail, and treble "airiness," though at the expense of a bit of overall smoothness, bass weight, and tonal richness. This player will appeal to listeners who prize definition over other sonic



qualities, and to viewers who prefer images with a bit of extra contrast for more visual punch.

KEY FEATURES

- HDMI upscaling options: 480p/576p, 720p, 1080i and 1080p.
- Video Processing: Faroudja DCDi and NSV (“Noise Shaped Video”)
- DACs: 192kHz/24-bit audio DAC
- DVD Formats: Can play both PAL (European format) and NTSC-format DVDs

USER INTERFACE

The DVD-SD1800 has a straightforward user interface and remote control, and offers a much more extensive range of set-up options than most players in this class. Some elements we particularly liked included the following:

- An **AUDIO DIRECT** button that turns off most video processing functions and the front panel display for superior sound quality during music playback.
- A **MULTI/2CH** button for toggling between multichannel and stereo mixes when listening to SACDs.
- An extensive **SA-CD CONFIG** setup menu with settings for three common surround-sound speaker system configurations, plus a **CUT-OFF FREQUENCY** control that lets users choose

the subwoofer crossover frequency to be applied.

- An excellent OSD (onscreen display) menu that allows users to access a wide range of information on discs being played, including the names of individual tracks on SACD recordings.

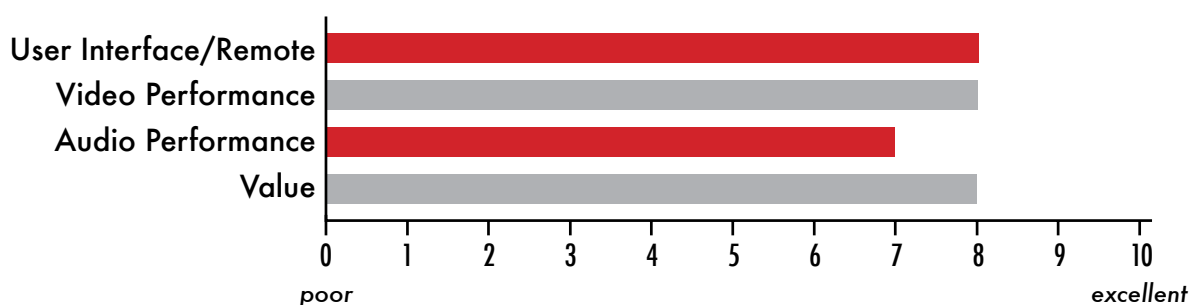
We did identify several user interface shortcomings, as noted below:

- A somewhat confusing SACD track selection control, evidently meant to use cursor UP/DOWN buttons, which appeared not to work reliably (though tracks could be accessed by pressing track number keys and then the ENTER button).
- Channel level trim controls provide only a +/- 12dB range of adjustment (+/- 10dB would be preferable).
- User interface does not allow on-the-fly adjustment of audio or video settings (a feature we wish all universal players provided).

VIDEO PERFORMANCE

Not surprisingly, the DVD-SD1800 performed much like the other Faroudja-equipped player on benchmark tests (conducted using the Silicon Optix HQV Benchmark DVD Ver. 4). This meant the Yamaha showed solid performance on most

YAMAHA DVD-SD1800 UNIVERSAL PLAYER
(compared to sub-\$500 universal players)



tests, but exhibited minor shortcomings in the following areas:

- Color Bar (resolution) Tests: Minor “blurred” bands visible on the finest resolution test lines.
- Jaggies Tests: Minor “ripple” visible on worst-case tests.
- Film Detail Tests (scene of a racecar passing in front of empty grandstands): Momentary moiré pattern is visible in the grandstands before the processor intervenes and the image lock in.
- Cadence Tests: Performance is fine on the “big two” formats; namely 2-2 30fps Video and 3-2 24fps Film. However, some image “twitch” was observed on less commonly encountered DVCAM, Vari-Speed, and Animation cadences.

In real world tests, however, the DVD-SD1800 enjoyed a subtle but noticeable edge in overall picture quality relative to the other Faroudja-equipped players we tested, exhibiting visibly better contrast on certain scenes and films. We suspect this performance edge might be attributable to the BLACK LEVEL control found under the Yamaha’s VIDEO menu. Yamaha specifically recommends turning the Black Level control “On” whenever the player is used with NTSC televisions, where the aim is to “improve the color contrast during playback.” That claim certainly jibes with our observations.

To appreciate the practical benefits of turning the Yamaha’s Black Level control on, try watching a scene filmed under subdued lighting conditions, such as the “A Warm Cup of Tea” scene from *Open Range*. In that scene, Charley Waite (Kevin Costner) and Boss Spearman (Robert Duvall) are served tea by Sue Barlow (Annette Bening) in a prairie kitchen illuminated only by oil lamps. The Yamaha helps give the scene added

visual punch and snap, despite the fact that it is dimly lit and that the room’s background colors are comparatively drab.

AUDIO PERFORMANCE/SONIC CHARACTER

As mentioned above, the Yamaha’s tonal balance sounds somewhat lighter and brighter than that of some of the players we surveyed, while its bass—though deep and clear—can sound a bit “lean.” Definition (that is, the ability to render transient sounds cleanly and clearly) and midrange and

& Pricing

Specs

Yamaha DVD-SD1800 universal player

Formats: DVD-Audio/Video, DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW, DVD_R DL, SACD multichannel/stereo, SVCD, VCD, CD, CD-R/RW, Picture CD

Audio outputs: (1) 5.1-channel analog audio, (1) 2-channel analog audio, (2) digital audio (one optical, one coaxial), (1) HDMI

Video outputs: (1) composite video, (1) S-video, (1) component video, (1) HDMI

Other input/outputs: (1) RS-232, (1 each) IR In/Out

Dimensions (HxWxD): 3.44" x 17.12" x 11.19"

Weight: 7.2 lbs.

Price: \$450

YAMAHA ELECTRONICS CORPORATION,
USA

(714) 522-9105

yamaha.com

treble details are this player's strong suit. Put these qualities together and you have a universal player that is extremely rewarding on truly well recorded material, but that also tends to "spotlight" the shortcomings in not-so-perfect records. At its best, the Yamaha is a formidable-sounding player, but it is not terribly forgiving of records that tend toward excess brightness, edginess, or glare.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

One of the most beautiful-sounding SACDs I own is Patricia Barber's *Nightclub* [Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab], and when I played the record through the Yamaha the results were so satisfying that the DVD-SD1800 could nearly have passed for a player twice its price. On the opening track, "Bye Bye Blackbird," the delicate shadings

of Barber's voice, the shimmering overtones of cymbals and of Barber's piano, the taut growl of the acoustic bass, and the almost "electric" sense of the air in the room were reproduced vividly and accurately. So far, so good.

But on a good though admittedly less than perfect recording, such as the Abravanel/Utah performance of Brahms's "Variations on a Theme by Haydn" [Silverline, DVD-Audio], the Yamaha stumbled somewhat, causing the Utah string section to sound harder, more "steely," and more brittle than it should have. Granted, this particular Brahms recording is not an easy one to get right, but it serves to illustrate the fact that the Yamaha's best qualities (midrange and treble detail and definition) can sometimes become sonic "double-edged" swords.

LAST WORD



- Well thought-out user interface, with especially good SACD setup options.
- Offers better contrast than many Faroudja-equipped players in this class.
- Detailed and well-defined highs and mids, with clean, taut bass.



- Sometimes errs in the direction of sounding overly bright, thin, and edgy.
- Video benchmark tests revealed some minor weaknesses.
- Interface does not allow on-the-fly audio adjustments.

BOTTOM LINE: *Yamaha's DVD-SD1800 universal player offers better picture quality than some of its most direct competitors, plus a light, lively, crisply defined sound that makes the most of really good recordings. But be aware that player's sonic virtues can cut both ways, sometimes making imperfect records sound thinner and more "raw" than they should* **PB** 🌟

