

Giant killer
Oppo DV-981HD



PEAKS

VITAL STATS

Digital conversion	192 kHz/24-bit
Video formats	PAL, NTSC, DivX
Audio formats	Dolby Digital, DTS, DVD-A, SACD, WMA, MP3
Frequency response	20 Hz to 20 kHz
Signal-to-noise ratio	100 dB
Outputs	HDMI 1.1, S-Video, composite video, SPDIF coaxial digital, Toslink optical digital, stereo RCA analogue, 5.1 RCA analogue
Dimensions	419 x 269 x 41 mm (WxDxH)
Weight	2,4 kg

VERDICT

Bright, well resolved and smoothly rendered video with useful upscaling joins excellent audio performance and great versatility -- all at a value-added price.

PRICE R4 400 (after discount)

SUPPLIED BY Audio Tweak 021-797-7907/083-676-1250 – www.audiotweak.co.za

The uncertainty around high-resolution audio and video formats is making it difficult for would-be buyers to commit their hard-earned cash. After all, nobody wants to pay big bucks for something that's going to be obsolete soon.

Oppo's do-it-all universal player is tangible proof that you don't have to spend a king's ransom to get compelling audio and video performance. For under R5K, you get a slimline machine with all the right goodies under the hood, most of the facilities you need, and above-average picture and sound quality.

At face value, the Oppo looks understated. Its slimline fascia doesn't leave real estate for switches and buttons, leaving only the most basic switchgear to keep the centrally mounted transport tray and the fluorescent display company.

In fact, the majority of the controls and buttons are to be found on the accompanying, full-featured remote control handset. The buttons are not backlit, but are phosphorescent, allowing them to glow in the dark. Even so, the handset's ergonomics could be better: the buttons are fiddly, and the ID tags too small.

The rear panel is pretty straightforward, with support for HDMI the major drawcard. Additional connectivity options span most requirements, with the only glaring omission being a component video output set.

The HDMI output is only HDMI 1.1 compliant, but that does allow both high-definition video (up to 1080p) and 5.1 surround sound audio to be digitally transmitted to an accompanying component such as an AV receiver or processor.

In addition, the Oppo will digitally deliver both DVD-Audio and SACD content via HDMI, although the latter is converted from native DSD to PCM first. On the other hand, it allows virtually all modern AV receivers to receive and play back the digital data retrieved off SACD by the Oppo.

Of course, the DV-981HD also has its own digital-to-analogue audio converters, which will cope with both Dolby Digital and DTS signals, and output them via the player's 5.1 analogue output set. It also has built-in DSP effects, an integrated equaliser, and channel trim and delay functions.

On the video front, the Oppo offers full upscaling to 1080p from DVD's native 480i resolution, and also offers intermediate 576p, 720p and 1080i steps. Together with the **highly regarded Faroudja DCDi video processing chip**, the resulting video output is impressive, to say the least.

A comprehensive array of video adjustments allow further tweaking to best suit a particular screen or projector, courtesy of the Faroudja's presence, thereby allowing users to make the most of the player's considerable potential.

Several sources on the Internet refer to macroblocking as a legacy of the Genesis FLI-2310 processing chip employed by the player, but it certainly didn't display that tendency in conjunction with my Hitachi Plantara plasma screen running in 1080i mode.

In fact, the DV-981HD didn't show up any major flaws in video performance terms. It rendered even difficult material with confident ease, and delivered a smooth, clear and nicely detailed image. Blacks were dark and solid, allowing bright, amply saturated colours. Fine detail resolution was excellent.

Sonically, the Oppo does an equally good job. Treated purely as a digital transport, it reliably fed the PCM digital signal to my Yamaha RV-2700 receiver, which is no slouch when it comes to processing multi-channel digital signals.

It took DVDs, SACDs and DVD-As in its stride without complaint, accepting every disc and accessing tracks and layers with impressive rapidity.

Using the 5.1 analogue output provided results that were more than satisfying: deep and authoritative bass notes, a nicely rounded midrange, and treble that was bright and open, but not too forward or attacking.

I also ran the Oppo in my stereo system, using the two-channel stereo outputs, and playing back two-channel CDs and SACDs.

The essential sonic characteristics were similar: a broad tonal range with good attention to detail, ample dynamics, and a well-integrated soundstage with lots of width and depth. It certainly had the ability to make the most of SACD's added sonic virtues and extended frequency range.

Perhaps most impressive of all, however, is just how affordable the Oppo is, especially when considering its asking price. For under R5 000, not too many players offer the same, comprehensive palette of features and performance.

Yes, the transport tray is a bit too flimsy for my liking (although it never missed a beat). And I'd have liked the option of a component video output set, given the sometimes unpredictable nature of HDMI's inter-component communications.

But these are small qualms, and shouldn't deter would-be buyers from **one of the AV world's best bargains**.

Deon Schoeman