

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Oppo DV-981HD DVD Player

HIGH DEF-LIKE DVD



If you just bought a new high definition TV with the latest HDMI connections you probably want to make sure everything you plug into it looks its best. If you're ready to place your bet on the new high definition disc war (HD DVD or Blu-ray) then stop reading here. A high def player will ensure your TV is getting the best signal it can take. However, if you're still undecided and want to play it safe with standard DVDs, you can still give your system a boost with an upconverting DVD player. This Oppo DV-981HD is among the best of those I've used.

An upconverting DVD player takes the signal of a standard DVD (480 lines) and processes it in several ways to convert it to a semblance of a high definition signal. Most upconverting DVD players will output their enhanced signal only through a digital connection, either DVI or HDMI, not component. This Oppo is one of those, and in fact doesn't even have a set of component connections (it does for some reason include s-video and composite). It can convert a 480i signal into 480p, 720p, 1080i or even the latest 1080p via an HDMI cable.

The Oppo is interesting in other ways as well. There are lots of upconverting players on the market, though only a few will process all the way up to 1080p. Even Sony's PlayStation 3 does it, but only via a firmware upgrade, and not all that well anyway. Oppo uses the latest DCDi video processor from Faroudja to perform deinterlacing and noise reduction.

Though rival video processor Silicon Optix has taken a lot of thunder from Faroudja recently, you won't find an SI chip on a product at this price. In addition to the video performance features, the Oppo DV-981HD is also compatible with DVD-Audio and SACD discs and includes a set of 5.1 analog connections to channel those signals—the multi-channel audio can also be sent to a receiver via HDMI. It also is compatible with all DivX formats including XviD. Kodak picture CDs and WMA files also work—in fact it also plays MP3s but doesn't list that in its specs.

The DV-981HD is surprisingly sleek for all it does. It's only a little more than an inch thick, glossy black and lit by blue LEDs. The absence of the component connections probably contributes to the player's trim beach body. The remote is decent, with plenty of room and easy to read buttons, but they only glow in the dark for a short time—they're not backlit.

During set up, the Oppo menu offers a bit more control than a lot of other DVD player. Picture controls like contrast and sharpness are available in the player as are audio controls like time delays and equalizer functions. The HDMI button on the remote controls the resolution output. Each press bumps it up to the next level (480i-480p-720p-1080i-1080p). You can even try out different setting while you're watching a movie by pressing the stop button and then selecting a new resolution. Pressing play will restart the movie where you left off.

I started off using the player by testing it with Silicon Optix's HQV test pattern DVD. It sailed through the jaggies test and other image tests with no problem on my Optoma HD73 projector. To be fair, the projector also does very well on its own when connected to my Harman DVD player, because both the Oppo and Optoma use the same processing chip.

When I hooked the Oppo up to an LG plasma the differences were much clearer. The upscaled picture looked sharper and punchier when scaled to the plasma's native 720p resolution. Edges looked smoother and details more realistic. The Oppo also did a better job of upconverting than Sony's PlayStation 3 (after its latest firmware update). I then hooked it up to a different Optoma 1080p projector and ran the Oppo output to 1080p. Here again the improvement was more pronounced particularly because that projector didn't include as good a processing engine as the other Optoma.

The Oppo 981HD is no high definition player, but it does make your standard DVDs look much better on high resolution displays. If you want the best out of your disc collection but don't want to try HD DVD or Blu-ray yet, this is definitely worth trying. If you have an HDTV, particularly a new 1080p and you don't think your DVDs look as good as you expected them to, then this will probably work out well for you. The inclusion of SACD and DVD-A is a big plus if you've already got a collection in either or both formats, but think you can go out and easily build up that collection now since both are essentially dead. ■

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Oppo DV-981 DVD
\$229
HDMI output
1080p upconverting
No component output
SACD and DVD-A
JPEG image viewing
Faroudja DCDi processing
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