

PRODUCT REVIEW



Sony CD/DVD Player Model DVP-NS55P

By Jesse W. Knight

Many months ago I took a few DVDs to Radio Shack and Tweeter to test them on better equipment. My Toshiba 19" TV with built-in DVD player was giving poor performance (via the headphone jack) on discs that had received good reviews for sound quality. Many critics who review DVD are picture-oriented, and to put it mildly, are not audiophiles. I wanted to perform my own tests using studio monitor headphones. I was not surprised to find that a Cinevision 1000 player costing \$300 sounded much better than the TV. Better still was using a Rotel home theater amplifier costing \$1200 to do the sound decoding, rather than depending on the DVD player's two-channel analog output.

Needless to say, I was overjoyed to find a Sony player for only \$70 that delivers excellent sound from both Dolby 2.0 and LPCM formats with any good stereo amplifier. For DTS or Dolby 5.1 you will need a home theater amp. Better still, it performed well on every disc in my collection, including two that I thought were hopeless.

LPCM soundtracks on some discs exhibit sound breakup that sounds like gross clipping distortion. I sent one disc to a friend who has a Marantz player and he confirmed the problem and is keeping the DVD for future study. This disc was far from the worst case that I would later encounter. All my other LPCM discs that exhibit this problem have played perfectly on the Sony player. It is unlikely that this one disc, act one of a three act opera, would not play well on the Sony. Act two and act three from this set play fine on the Sony, and clip on the TV player. This is an ominous finding because it suggests that the player defect in my TV is not unique to the "low end." This is possibly a defect in the player's ability to "unpack" the Meridian Lossless Packaging that allows

more music to be placed on a DVD. Just this alone is reason enough to buy this player, but there is more good news.

Dolby Digital 2.0 soundtracks play cleanly on the TV but some discs sound very compressed, as though they were made from old TV videotapes, yet are of very recent performances. It is not a well-known fact that some Dolby Digital soundtracks contain encoding for compression so the original dynamics can be flawlessly reconstructed for playback on high-end gear without pushing low-end gear beyond its limits. My TV selects the most compressed algorithm while the Sony allows you to select two compressed modes or a "wide range mode." The difference is similar to listening to a mint condition 78-RPM shellac record and a CD in some cases. In other cases the difference is quite subtle. Put another way, depending on what your player picks as the default mode and compression algorithm on the disc, you will hear entirely different sound without knowing why. DVD is very confusing without this hidden factor. This makes the review process even more treacherous.

AS A CD PLAYER

I find differences between all but very low-end new CD players so small that I am not sure I hear any real difference at all between players. One CD from Telarc of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* however does break up sporadically. This can only be heard on studio monitor headphones, and it is not prolonged. This disc sounded cleaner on the Sony DVD player than other players. No CD I tested plays less well on the Sony.

This is the first CD player I have tested that played a Sony CD-RW (rewriteable) disc without uncorrected errors. I did not test it on other brands of CD-RW discs, however. Needless to say it has no trouble with CDR discs (write-once).

Should you want to run this player without connecting the video out to a TV, note that you will not have access to the setup menu. In the setup menu there is an option for high or low analog output audio signal levels that you can change using onscreen prompts. Navigating DVD menus without a TV would be nearly impossible. CD track listings appear on the DVD player display, just as they do on a typical CD player. Once the preferred output level is selected, the setting is stored after power is turned off. The TV does not need to be turned on each time a CD is played.

PICTURE

I do not have a large screen with which to do any meaningful analysis of the video quality. If I ever commit that kind of money to anything electronic, it will be a speaker system. What I see on a 19" screen looks fine.

CONCLUSION

Listening to this player for an extended period gives me the impression of complete transparency back to the original master videotape. Video productions are far more complex than making CDs and there is always something that sounds wrong here and there as a result. Prior to 2000, few video master tapes are completely free of compression or vocal/orchestral balance problems. I do not hear a coloration in the sound that is consistent from disc to disc, which is a very good sign, considering that I tested the player with 20 DVDs of very different opera productions, including three lip-synced ones. Is this player equal to more expensive players? Only time will tell. With an "alphabet soup" of standards, DVD is an ongoing puzzle. In 2009 HD will become the new standard. HD disc standards have yet to be finalized and HD players are expensive. In this light I consider this player a great buy in the meantime. *aX*