

OPPO DV-980H Universal Player

by Tom Lyle



OPPO Digital Inc.
2629B Terminal Blvd.
Mountain View, CA 94043
650-961-1118
www.oppodigital.com
Price: \$169

I offer these brief, mostly subjective comments regarding the sound of this player as a supplement to the commentary by David Rich in *Sensible Sound* (Nov./Dec. '07, p. 10). I am speaking here only of the unit's audio performance playing CDs, SACDs, and DVD-A's through a two-channel system.

FORM AND FUNCTION

On the CD-Check disc (Digital Recordings) it read levels 4 out of 5 of the red book tracks without error, which is outstanding. My "reference" Arcam DIVA CD 192 (\$1499) could not read past track 2. The OPPO did not reject any disc fed it.

This player has a very slim (in height) design. The front panel is pretty bare, with almost all its functions controlled by the remote whose layout is just okay. There are a lot of buttons for a lot of functions. The disc play, stop, and pause buttons are larger than most of the others, so you can quickly learn basic operation. A pleasant surprise was a volume control, which is a nice feature.

During my rather long audition period, I found that its red book CD sound was more than acceptable. If you believe that there is little difference in CD players regardless of price, then this player should suit you just fine. For the rest of us, its treble sounded a little tipped up when directly compared to the Arcam. Its bass did not go as deep, nor was it as authoritative. When performing A/B and informal A/B/X tests versus the Arcam, I found the bass a tad deficient, and the upper-bass, too, was lacking a bit.

The last Nick Cave CD I bought (not including his *Grinderman* project), 2004's *Abattoir*

Blues, is not the best recording in the world. Nor is it the last word in low-end power. It needs all the help it can get.

But otherwise, especially in the all-important midrange, the disc sounded very good. The instrumentation becomes pretty dense at times—there are all sorts of acoustic instruments mixed with the standard rock band of guitar, bass, organ, and drums. But the vocals are front and center, and are reproduced very realistically. The OPPO sounded very close to the Arcam in the midrange, and if judged solely on its midrange performance, I think there is very little doubt that you could not tell one player from the other.

Some might say that the transients of the OPPO's treble were sharply drawn, which might lead you to think that the high frequencies were being spotlighted unnaturally. But after living with the player for a while and frequent comparisons to the very neutral-sounding Arcam, I determined that it just ended up sounding a bit brighter. As usual, I'm exaggerating to make a point—the Oppo wasn't wimpy sounding or anything, and judged on its own it sounded perfectly fine. When all is said and done, the differences between the players were small, but I definitely could hear those differences.

STELLAR PLAYER

The OPPO's reproduction of SACD and DVD-A discs was a completely different story. I now need to take back *everything* I said about its sound in the previous paragraphs. An SACD or DVD-A in the OPPO blew away the performance of the Arcam in red book mode on every disc I played. On the SACD of the 1970's beloved *Future Days* by the German band Can, Holger Czuyak's bass and Jaki Liebszeit's drums shook the room with extremely well-balanced bass. The soundstage was also impressive, and the separation of each instrument in space was extraordinary. I could "see" into the recording session, at the same time separating the live to

two-track performance from overdubs.

One thing I love about SACD versus regular CD is its seemingly limitless treble extension. The OPPO flaunted this quality. The treble on everything from Damo Suzuki's natural vocal sibilants to Jaki's cymbals (along with a good measure of tape hiss) sounded as though I was listening to the analog master tape.

The Beatles' *Love* is one of my favorite CDs at the time of this writing. The plain vanilla CD is impressive enough. George and Miles Martin's re-mix of songs I've heard ten thousand times before brings these Beatles recordings into the 21st century; I get shivers (in a good way) every time I listen to it. The stereo tracks of the DVD-A bring it quite a few notches above this—the OPPO elevates this disc to new heights. If only the original albums from the Beatles catalog were remastered in a hi-res format! (But I digress.)

At this price, and considering its compact size, you can justify the purchase of this player solely for use as an SACD and DVD-A player. It's that good.

Manufacturer's Comment:

On behalf of all staff at OPPO Digital, we thank Mr. Lyle for this comprehensive and insightful review. Mr. Lyle apparently spent a lot of time and effort with a lengthy audition period using the DV-980H Universal Player in a two-channel system. Although the DV-980H is primarily designed to be an affordable up-converting DVD player, we put a significant amount of effort into optimizing the audio performance.

With the ability to play DVD-Audio, SACD, Red-book CD and its affordable cost, we hope to introduce more users into the wonderful world of high fidelity audio and high-resolution audio formats. This review is an indication that we have achieved this goal. The experience and know-how from the DV-980H have been migrated into our new BDP-83 Blu-ray Disc player, which also supports CD, DVD-Audio, and SACD with audio performance as one of the design goals. Thanks again for the great review, and enjoy the music!

Jason Liao
VP Product Development
OPPO Digital, Inc.

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