

Arcam's flagship sets new standards

On the cusp of a hi-def era, why would anyone want to shell out nearly two grand for a DVD player? Martin Pipe might just have the answer...



DVD is now indisputably a commodity product, with players available for the cost of the newly-released movie that you might play on them. The format has been one of the major consumer-electronics success stories of the past decade, and those massive volumes of production (plus the seemingly-unstoppable Chinese manufacturing economy) have decimated pricing.

It will take some years before the variety of content available in the new HD formats begins to approach what's available on DVD – if, of course, it ever does. And that's something that was realised by John Dawson, president of high-end British AV manufacturer Arcam. HD might well have its place, but wouldn't it be better – at least for now – to maximise the potential of your DVD collection?

Hence the FMJ-DV139, a cost-no-object player with 'universal' appeal (i.e. it also plays DVD-Audios and Super Audio CD high-res audio titles), MP3/DivX support, HDMI connectivity, upscaling all the way to 1080p, in-built test pattern generator and high-end analogue circuitry for top-notch audio (and video) playback. If you watch a lot of DVDs and have a decent display and audio gear, then the DV139 should help you to derive greater levels of satisfaction from the content you already own.

Design and features

The DV139 shares Arcam's rather understated FMJ ('full metal jacket') house-style. The neat (and unmistakably-

British) silver frontage features a large, green fluorescent display, plus the bare minimum of recessed circular buttons needed to operate the player without recourse to the sleek, backlit remote.

Build quality – which is reflected in the DV139's 5.1kg weight – is superb, and well up to Arcam's usual high standard. Round the back you'll find analogue 5.1 and stereo audio outputs, plus optical and coaxial digital outputs. Video, meanwhile, escapes via RGB Scart, component, composite, S-video or HDMI. There's also a RS232 port for remote system control.

The good news continues inside the player. Arcam employ two power supplies – a linear type based around a toroidal transformer for the audio stages, and

a low-noise switch-mode type for everything else.

The main chip is a Zoran Vaddis 888-5 – similar to what you'll find in some lower-end players, but that's where all other similarities end. The DV139's audiophile audio circuitry makes use of Wolfson WM8740 24bit/192kHz DACs and professional-grade op-amps, while the video is converted to analogue by a high-end Analog Devices video encoder – which features noise-shaped video (NSV) 11bit DACs and 1080i support. Scaling and deinterlacing are the responsibilities of chippery from Anchor Bay Technologies, who make the DVDO processors.

All awesome stuff, but it's easy to drive with well thought-out setup menus. The

COMPATIBILITY

DVD-V	○	SVCD	○
DVD-A	○	DualDisc (CD)	○
SACD	○	DualDisc (DVD)	○
CD	○	DivX	○
MP3	○	DVD+R	○
WMA	○	DVD-R	○
JPEG	○	DVD+RW	○
MPEG4	○	DVD-RW (Video)	○
CD-R	○	DVD-RW (VR)	x
CD-RW	○	DVD-RAM	x
Video CD	○		

LAB REPORT

PLAYBACK

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Video jitter (4ns)		✓		
Signal-to-noise ratio:				
Composite (-67.3dB)			✓	
S-video (-79.1dB)	✓			
Component (-79.1dB)	✓			
Chroma AM/PM				
AM (-72.3dB)	✓			
PM (-68.0dB)	✓			
Chroma crosstalk (-51.6dB)	✓			
Freq response @5.8 MHz				
Composite (-0.5dB)	✓			
S-video (-0.4dB)	✓			
Component Y (-0.2dB)	✓			
Audio jitter (261.3ps)		✓		

SPECIFICATIONS

ITEM	SUPPORT	DETAILS
Video upscaling	○	To 720p/768p/1080i/1080p
Progressive scan	○	480p/576p/768p/720p/1080p
Multiregion	x	Region 2 out of the box
Composite video	○	1 output
Phono stereo audio	○	Plus 5.1 output
S-video	○	1 output
HDMI/DVI	○	1 HDMI output
Scart	○	1 output, RGB capable
Component	○	1 output, progressive/interlaced/hi-def/upscaled
DV (i.Link) input	○	Use optical digital or HDMI instead
Digital Audio	○	Coaxial and optical

Dimensions: 435(w) x 87(h) x 355(d)mm; Weight: 5.1kg

Also featuring

DVD upscaling; audio over HDMI; Pro-Logic II decoder; lip-sync delay (up to 150ms); ultra-low jitter audio clock; in-built pattern generator for basic display calibration; RS232 control

**The DV139 should help you to derive
greater levels of satisfaction from
the content you already own'**

Loading disc

STOP

PAUSE

STOP

PAUSE

NAV

▲

▼

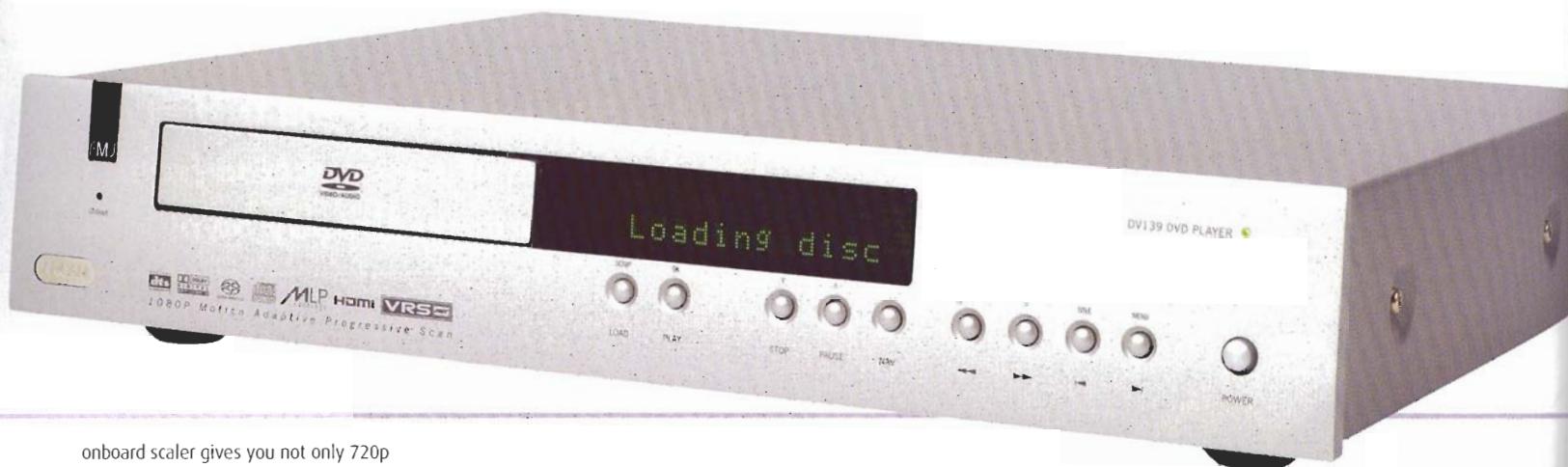
TITLE

MENU

DV139 DVD PLAYER



Tried & Tested... DVD Player



onboard scaler gives you not only 720p and 1080i options (plus 1080p, if you're using HDMI) but also 480p/576p and a 1366 x 768 resolution optimised for many flatpanel TVs. Other video adjustments look after black level, HDMI colour space and DivX registration amongst other things. There's also a unique test pattern 'wizard' for basic calibration of your display's contrast, colour and sharpness controls.

end audio gear that predates the introduction of the Dolby standard. I would have welcomed the ability to change aspect ratio with similar ease – some self-made discs (e.g., those made with Panasonic recorders) don't flag widescreen material, and some displays won't let you change aspect ratio when fed via HDMI/DVI.

Artefacting is also held at bay; even home-brew DVDs being given a new lease of life – as opposed to their flaws being exacerbated, as is so often the case with high-end hardware. The HDMI output managed to fare even better in terms of definition – furthermore, the progressive and upscaling modes reveal smooth movement allied to a lack of 'stepping' and no drops in horizontal definition with NTSC film-derived material.

Those strong visuals are reinforced by an analogue audio delivery that can only be described as breathtaking. Simply put, this player will sing with soundtracks, whether DVD, DVD-A, CD or SACD. Even with CDs, you'll have to spend a lot of money on a dedicated audiophile player to equal it – and the DV139 of course does so much more. The 5.1 Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks of DVDs are impeccably delivered, combining a neutral character with dynamism when it's called for. Channel separation and steering are also of a top-flight standard. The analogue output will do a better job than the decoders of many AV amps and receivers, but that's perhaps just as well; the optical digital audio output would 'drop out' on

occasions - substitution for other DVD players revealed that our Yamaha AV receiver and cabling were not to blame. Arcam – which has been in the audio business for three decades – admitted surprise, and so I'm prepared to overlook this as a sample fault.

'The 5.1 Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks of DVDs are impeccably delivered'

Conclusion

The DV139 is the best DVD player yet from the Arcam stable, and in my opinion one of the best DVD players you'll find anywhere on the planet. It does indeed make the most of your existing software – and that's surely the most important thing, even with all of that hi-def demanding your attention... ■

If you're using external processing, you'll appreciate the 480i/576i mode – which is available via HDMI and component – and an adjustable audio delay. The 5.1 output benefits from full bass-management facilities, as well as the usual channel-level and delay adjustments. A noise sequencer is also handy.

If you're using the 5.1 outputs, you can engage a built-in Pro-Logic II decoder for two-channel mixes simply by pressing a button on the remote. A neat idea, and one that will appeal to those with high-

Performance

Quite simply this is a superb performer. On the test bench, the DV139's key analogue outputs were found to have an extended frequency response that's a mere 0.5dB down (or better!) at 5.8MHz – in the subjective world, this manifests itself as crystal-clarity and superb reproduction of fine details like facial character, tree branches and stonework textures.

Colours are vivid and true to life, and the DV139 is capable of conveying real depth to the image.

RATINGS

Highs: Peerless picture and sound; build quality, flexible format support
Lows: Photos shown in (upscaled) standard-def only; no HD support

Picture	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Features	★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★



The build quality is first-rate – but can you stomach the green LED?



Back-panel connections include an RS232 port for system integration plus 5.1 phonos for multichannel audio support



Arcam's trademark remote matches the DV139's styling