



ARCAM DV27A £1,900

Arcam's DV27A DVD player boasts the company's traditional styling, but is its performance more cutting-edge than its predecessor's?

Arcam is one of those companies that makes major developments to products on the inside while keeping the external appearance virtually unchanged. Take the DV27A player from the brand's FMJ range. Aside from the 'A' suffix and the odd extra logo, it looks exactly the same as the original 1991 DV27.

However, the DV27A is much changed inside. It now supports DVD-Audio (hence the 'A') and includes progressive scan technology for both PAL and NTSC discs (which means UK DVDs as well as US imports). In fact, the DV27A was the first player to legally include PAL progressive scan when it was launched last year.

This fact highlights Arcam's secret weapon in the high-end stakes. While most small and mid-sized manufacturers draw heavily on the inner workings of players built by bigger companies (for example, the original Theta DaViD player was a heavily modified Pioneer design), Arcam

takes the more development-intensive route and builds each player from first principles. This means that the company can introduce features such as Silicon Image's PAL Progressive Scan circuitry before the rest of the pack, and can use seriously potent components – such as the Wolfson 24bit, 192kHz digital-to-analogue converters (DACs) in every channel. Of course, this entails massive 'R&D' costs, compared to a product that is basically a badged version of an existing player. It also makes the player extremely easy to upgrade, as the Arcam's processing can be upgraded using a CD-ROM.

Traditional tricks

Even the unchanged FMJ casing is important. From the outset this has been produced by Sontech, a laminated anti-vibration material most commonly used to keep top-class cars smooth and quiet. The downside of the unchanged exterior is an equally unchanged remote control. Arcam sticks doggedly to the same slim and



elegant grey remote, despite near universal dislike of it outside the Arcam factory. It's not wholly counter-intuitive but, even after considerable familiarity, the user will often hit the wrong button or spend time peering helplessly at small grey-on-grey writing in an attempt to decipher what the more obscure buttons do.

The DV27A is an extremely competent player, and standard DVD-Video discs provide truly stunning pictures that are bright, colourful and detailed. In fact, the images are so good that they cry out for a big projection screen to highlight their strengths. While the player is wonderful through a CRT or plasma, it isn't markedly better than an £800 player. Run it through a good projector, however, and the Arcam takes on film-like layering and shadow detail that puts it at the very top of its league. And it also deals well with bright-on-bright or dark-on-dark scenes.

For example, *Saving Private Ryan* has shots of silhouetted soldiers against a dark background (with occasional bright explosions). This is a nightmare for most DVD players, but the DV27A copes wonderfully. As the picture moves, there is no too-fast detail refreshment and, best of all, the progressive scan system

works perfectly, with no jaggedness or any of those stepping effects.

Living room war

DVD-Video sound is superb – rich and dynamic from the built-in decoder and not too sharp or thin through the digital links. The Wolfson DACs used in every channel (designed for DVD-Audio) really make 5.1 sound come alive. *Saving Private Ryan's* DTS track highlights this, and the film sounds bigger and even more like D-Day than usual. Machine gun bullets don't just whip around your head but around the whole living room, let alone Omaha Beach.

DVD-Audio playback is also exemplary, with crisp and detailed sound in every channel. The Arcam shows just how artificial most cheaper players sound. You'll have to consider spending big on a Meridian player (even more expensive) to better this...

Arcam was one of the first companies to make a CD player that was acceptable to the vinyl-buying die-hards in the 1990s. Since then, the company has retained an excellent reputation for making wonderful-sounding CD players. And that reputation extends to the DV27A. It's a supremely musical player, even capable of keeping up with the

funk and deceptively fresh Latino poly-rhythms of Ray Barretto's 'A Deeper Shade of Soul' from his classic 1968 recording, *Acid*. It also creates a big musical soundstage with the right amplifier and stereo front speakers, making the DV27A almost as good as a £750-£1,000 dedicated CD player.

Next-gen no go

There's no SACD facility, and other omissions include next-generation digital audio and video connections like IEEE1394 (Firewire) and DVI or HDMI. Digital links like HDMI are becoming more important for tomorrow's home cinema systems, especially those used with new plasma screens or DLP projectors, while IEEE1394 is fast becoming the replacement to the coaxial digital link, as it can securely pass the digital output of a DVD-Audio or SACD disc to the amplifier. Given Arcam's open-ended view on upgrading, though, it's likely that such links will become available in time.

In summary, Arcam's DV27A is currently one of the most important DVD players available in the UK. It's perfect for high-end home cinema users who want to get the best out of their projector – but it doesn't need the very latest digital link to hook the two of them together.

And it looks and sounds wonderful, especially playing CDs. If you can live with the remote control, this is simply one of the best DVD players that money can buy. It's just a shame that you need so much of the stuff to get it – even with all that pedigree and performance. **WHC**

TEST SCENES

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN



KILLER PERFORMANCE

The Omaha beach sequence is a textbook DTS demonstration, and takes on an unprecedented size, scale and weight on the Arcam. It's so real, you'll think you're going to get shot at any moment



WATERTIGHT PICTURES

The Arcam's pictures are ideal for a projector, and the player even deals well with scenes of adverse weather and fast movement

GOOD POINTS

Truly wonderful picture and sound, and especially good CD playback. A sophisticated picture that is good enough to keep digital nasties at bay

BAD POINTS

Next-generation digital picture and sound formats are not supported (as yet)

OVERALL

If you want the best in DVD performance – and CD performance – from the same player, the Arcam is the one to go for. On paper it may lack digital pictures and the latest sound connections, but in practice it's good enough on analogue for that not to matter

RATINGS

Style	★★★★★★★☆☆
Ease of use	★★★★★★★☆☆
Features	★★★★★★★☆☆
Picture	★★★★★★★☆☆
Sound	★★★★★★★☆☆
Value	★★★★★★★☆☆
Overall	★★★★★★★☆☆

83%

