

GET YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

IN LESS THAN five years, DVD players have gone from being playthings of affluent early adopters to something you can pick up with your spuds at Tesco's. However, there's still a wide disparity in prices and abilities of players, so what are you getting for the cash?

UNDER £100

DVD technology is pretty stringent, so even the cheapest players will at least spin CDs and DVD-Videos and still look better than VHS. The cheapest players tend to come from China and often boast a surprisingly wide range of features such as SVCD (Super Video CD) playback, MP3 and JPEG handling from CD-R and they are usually made multi-region with ease. Audio-visual quality may suffer on bigger screens, though, and you can't always be sure about build quality or longevity, but at this price, what's there to complain about?

CHOICE BUYS:

CyberHome CH-DVD 400 £50
Mustek DVD-V56L £80
Wharfedale M3 £95

£100 – £300

Pay a little more and you'll have access to the bigger brand names as well as possible extras such as built-in surround sound decoders and progressive scan (which is becoming more commonplace and is ideal if you have a plasma or projector). Decoders are often not necessary for Dolby Digital and DTS, however, as most AV receivers and amps have integrated decoding; all you need is a good digital audio connection.

CHOICE BUYS:

Toshiba SD-330E £140,
Panasonic DVD-S75 £180,
Harman Kardon DVD 21 £250

£300 – £500

Most players at this price point will handle one or both of the high-res music formats, Super Audio CD or DVD-Audio, along with DVD-Video. Surround decoders will often be built into these as standard, too, as they need a variety of decoders to play the new music formats via a suitably decent amp and speaker system. Also, the more you pay, the better the internal components.

CHOICE BUYS:

Toshiba SD-520E £300
Philips DVD963SA £400
Pioneer DV-656A £400

MORE THAN £500

For the serious user, spending upwards of £500 will give you access to the flagships from the leading consumer brands, plus high end specialists around the £1,000 mark. You'll be able to fine-tune video quality to suit your display and probably isolate the audio circuitry for top-notch music-only playback. Build quality will of course be extremely high: these babies are built like battleships!

CHOICE BUYS:

Denon DVD-2800 MkII £750
Pioneer DV-757AI £800
Arcam DiVa DV88Plus £1,000



CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DVD55 £150

A super-league player at a bargain basement price

VERDICT



FEATURES	★★★★★
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
PICTURE	★★★★★
SOUND	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHETHER

Cambridge Audio's success is due to cutting out the middle man (the company is part of the Richer Sounds empire), the fact is, the brand produces caviar products at fish finger prices. The DVD55 is a prime example.

This £150 player has an insanely high specification list that would not look out of place on a player costing five times as much. Naturally, it supports DVD-Video, Video CD, and all the CD formats. It also has MP3 support. And a Dolby/DTS decoder. And it's resolutely Region Free (thanks to Richer Sounds of course, not Cambridge Audio). And it has RGB and component video outputs on Scart and phono respectively.

But there's one more extra that puts it into the super-league of DVD replay, and far beyond the ken of the others in this group. It can play movies in PAL progressive scan, for those people with a plasma screen TV or projector capable of coping with a progressive scan input. This system was only ratified earlier this year, and this is the cheapest player to be able to do so, by some considerable margin. Practically speaking, progressive scan cuts little ice at the budget end, simply because few people in the market for a budget DVD deck will partner it with a high-end screen. But, given that Richer Sounds cuts some of the best plasma screen deals around, this seems sensible and a logical addition for the future.

And it has the performance to match the specification. In picture quality terms, it lags only slightly behind the TEAC, Toshiba and Panasonic, each of which have the ability to make the picture wonderfully three-dimensional like the layering of film on screen. The Cambridge gets very close, but doesn't have that film-

like depth in standard mode.

Regardless, it makes a very natural, attractive picture, with crisp and vibrant colours and plenty of detail without overstatement, blocking or moiré effects that often beset cheaper players with pretensions of grandeur.

This means instead of watching snippets of the films used for testing the whole film gets watched. And then the next... I gave up after sitting through the *Godfather* trilogy, *Gone With the Wind*, *Gettysburg* and *Das Boot* – but not through fatigue, just the couch potato's version of bed sores. Only this and the Panasonic had this ability to extend the viewing session.

The sound is excellent, combining being nimble with sounding richer (no pun intended) than most, without being too dry or closed in. It was also the best in test for playing CDs – sounding as good as a DVD player can (unless it costs as much as a Flat).

In fact, the only annoyance with the DVD55 player is the bright blue LED panel which has a habit of flashing incessantly when a disc is loaded but not playing. Otherwise, buy one now!

CONTACT (Richer Sounds): 09069 188881

WEBSITE www.richersounds.com

KEY FEATURES

- DVD-Video, DVD-R, CD, VCD, CD-R/RW, MP3 replay
- Multi-regional
- Dolby Digital and DTS decoder & output
- S-Video (mini-DIN only)
- RGB video output (Scart)
- Component video (phono)
- PAL progressive scan
- Stereo phono, coaxial/optical digital audio

