

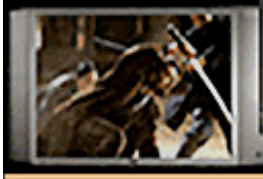
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February 1, 2005

Ayre Acoustics DX-7 DVD Transport



I recently received a letter from a chagrined [Home Theater & Sound](#) reader who had paid a lot for a DVD player and was going through a period of self-doubt. While questioning whether he had made the right choice, his buyer's remorse had led him to nitpick every unappealing aspect of the player, from its looks to the competence of the manual's writer to

the substandard remote control. Then, adding insult to injury, he was upset about the new high-definition DVD formats, which he thought would make his very expensive DVD player worthless in about ten months.



I was especially interested in his dilemma because I had favorably reviewed one of the most expensive DVD players made, the [Ayre Acoustics D-1x DVD player](#), a work of industrial art and the winner of the 2003 *Home Theater & Sound* Product of the Year award. The D-1x set the standard for producing a grain-free, film-like picture while offering exceptionally gorgeous sound through its analog audio outputs. It also cost \$11,500.

The reader's letter also got my attention because I was right in the middle of evaluating Ayre's latest assault on the state of the art, their DX-7 DVD transport. The DX-7 is aimed at one specific target audience, a group of which I am a member: those who use projectors with DVI inputs. Because there are some pretty darn good DVD players with DVI outputs for less than \$500, and because we are mere months away from the unleashing of the new high-definition DVD discs, it made me do a little soul-searching about where a player like the DX-7 fits in a world of constantly dropping prices for ever-improving technology. I came up with an answer.

Proudly *not* all things, and not for all people

Ayre has taken a rather bold move, at least from a marketing standpoint, in releasing a \$5950 device that does *not* play SACD, DVD-Audio, DVD-RAM, MP3, or most any other format people ask for these days. There are no 5.1- or 7.1-channel analog outputs -- there are no analog audio outputs at all. Nor are there any TosLink or RCA digital outputs. In fact, the only outputs on the back of the DX-7 that will be recognizable to the average denizen of Best Buy are the composite and S-video outputs. This ain't your granny's DVD player.

Remember the days when high-end hi-fi designers decided it was time to strip the digital decoding from the CD player and put it in a separate box, leaving only a disc transport? Well, the first thing I found intriguing, even before I unwrapped the DX-7, was noting the manual's carefully worded title: "DX-7 Owner's Manual -- DVD Transport with Progressive Video." Now, Ayre Acoustics doesn't do anything as an afterthought, so I didn't assume the placement of "Progressive Video" meant it was receiving less consideration -- but that "DVD Transport" designation got my attention. Once I'd pulled the unit from the box, I

had a better idea of what they meant.

An armored Hummer H2 is light compared to an M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tank, but both are pretty big vehicles. The Ayre DX-7, while a good deal smaller and lighter than its brother, the D-1x, is still pretty formidable at 15 pounds of sharply cut aluminum and steel. On the back you'll find a DVI out; five BNC outputs (why doesn't everyone use these superior connectors?) configurable for interlaced or progressive, Y-Pb-Pr, or RGB with embedded or external sync; two balanced digital audio outputs, one of which passes Dolby Digital, DTS, and PCM (that's what's on your CDs), the other only PCM; a digital audio link called SyncroLink, included to accommodate a future product, perhaps a digital decoder or a processor; the aforementioned composite and S-video outputs; and a control port for Crestron remotes that blocks some of the noise that RS-232 ports allow to cycle back into a device.

Add it all up and it's pretty clear who the DX-7's intended audience is: the consumer with a digital television, whether DLP, D-ILA, or LCD. I think it's a pretty good guess that folks buying \$60,000 CRT projectors will still want to go with the D-1x. I've been enjoying the InFocus 7205 DLP projector, so the opportunity to get rid of a D/A-A/D stage by running a direct digital signal straight from the DVD transport to the projector was very appealing. Finally, I use other devices to play SACDs, DVD-As, and MP3s. See what I mean? I am the DX-7's target audience.

Setup for smart people

Ayre provides an unusual amount of setup flexibility with the DX-7, which means you should probably let whomever you buy it from do the initial installation. Despite having one of the best, most clearly written manuals I've seen, the DX-7 has a couple of potential problem points with DIP-switch choices before you ever power the unit up. First, if you use the DVI output, which I hope you do, you must choose between whether it's an RGB or Y-Cb-Cr format. That's simple enough -- 99.9% of the time, DVI is RGB. Then you must select whether yours uses a 0-255 or 16-235 black-to-white level. Quick -- which is yours? I didn't know, and I couldn't find the answer anywhere in the InFocus User's Guide. Because presentation projectors usually use 0-255 and InFocus began as a maker of presentation projectors, I assumed . . . incorrectly.

Here's the easiest test. Set the black-to-white switch to 0-255 and your Brightness control at about half. Get a DVD with the THX test, such as [Finding Nemo](#), and go to the second test, with the THX logo and its darker shadow. If you can see the shadow, then you probably have the black-to-white level switch set correctly. In my case, no matter how far up I moved the brightness, that shadow wouldn't clearly materialize. Moving the switch to 16-235 tidied everything up and made the rest of the adjustments easy. You'll also have a few DIP-switch choices if you use the DX-7 in component-video mode. Do you want to send out a progressive or interlaced signal? RGB or Y-Cb-Cr?

Once I'd made these choices and connected the DX-7, everything else was easy. Well, almost. Read the manual -- the DX-7 has some quirks. For instance, the universal remote control (which is a little cheesy for a \$5950 DVD player) doesn't have any apparent chapter button. After shining a bright light on the subject and getting out a magnifying glass, I still couldn't find one. Stop, Pause, Play, Forward and Backward Scan were all grouped together. As a last resort, I pulled out the manual and found that the two big buttons marked "CH," opposite the volume controls, were for CHapter, not CHannel. The fact that they were placed in a different area of the control is counterintuitive; I wouldn't have figured it out without reading the manual.

The other minor epiphany I had after reading the manual was that if I owned the DX-7, I could start buying all the DVDs I wanted from Hong Kong *and* Hollywood -- the DX-7 automatically switches regions to match the disc. That means that, given a digital projector or TV, almost all of which will allow both PAL and NTSC, you should be able to use the DX-7 to watch movies from nearly any country in the world! I can feel edaymovie.com tugging at my AmEx.

At last, movies

Through the Ayre's DVI output and the InFocus 7205, the DX-7 created the most strikingly real picture I've ever seen chez Marshall. I was reminded of years ago, when I got my first Linn Sondek turntable and Jeff Rowland preamp and cruised through my record collection listening to everything anew. The draw then was liquidity and truthfulness against a clean background with minimal distortion. Ditto for the DX-7.

I began, as always, with chapter 10 of *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* to make sure the DX-7 was dealing with the nightmare of panning across verticals with moving horizontals behind (stair rails and Heather Graham, respectively), which it handled with aplomb. Next, I tried comparing the DX-7 through both its DVI and component progressive outputs. What a difference an output stage can make. There is a scene 5:16 into *Finding Nemo* in which the blue sea is framed by floating brown flora. With the progressive out, the flora had a lush, gleaming look that was very pleasing. Switching to the DVI

completely changed the flora -- now it had minute detail. This was like washing the windows. I did the rest of my testing through the DVI output.

Robert Rodriguez's film [Once Upon a Time in Mexico](#) was shot entirely with digital cameras, so it at least had a chance of looking great. Did it ever! Rich, burnished brown hillsides and desert backgrounds just popped with detail yet always looked film-like, never false. Rodriguez's good friend Quentin Tarantino provided both [Kill Bill: Volume 1](#) and 2 with dazzling camera work. Both were perfectly translated to DVD and done justice by the DX-7, especially the scene in *Volume 1* where The Bride, after decimating the army of attackers, opens the doors of the restaurant onto a gentle, snowy garden. It took my breath away.

So did another Rodriguez project. Developed after the director provided the music for *Kill Bill: Volume 2*, [Del Castillo Live](#) is reminiscent of the days in the 1960s when Wally Heider would roll up in a panel truck and throw together a recording that captured the sweat and grit and inspiration of a live show. Neither the picture nor the sound is perfect in a conventional sense, but the DX-7 let me get at the director's intent. How can you ask more than that?

Well, maybe I could ask for one more thing. At least half of my favorite films are in black and white. Anyone who has seen a large-format print by a master photographer such as Ansel Adams or Herman Leonard knows the detail and sheer depth that a well-composed B&W photo can provide. The films of John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and dozens of others have just as much visual power, and that requires a combo of DVD player and projector with abilities that are hard to find outside of using a CRT projector. This is where I had the greatest hope for the DVI connection.

I wasn't disappointed. The best-recorded B&W DVDs -- films such as [Citizen Kane](#), [Casablanca](#), [Notorious](#), and, especially, Ford's [The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance](#) and *My Darling Clementine* -- all were reproduced with superb resolution of shadow detail and deep, rich blacks. This was partly due to the InFocus's good design and high-quality Texas Instruments HD2+ chipset, but I've had a number of other DVD players hooked up to that projector, and none has matched the DX-7's performance with black-and-white films. That is reason enough for me to lust after a DX-7.

Which takes me back to our reader and the dilemma over price. A decision to buy boils down to three questions: Do I have the money? Does it do what I want? Am I willing to spend the money I have to buy a piece of gear that will do what I want? If I want a nice bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon tonight, I can get a perfectly delicious Columbia Crest Grand Estates for \$8.99, or I can get a bottle of Casanova di Neri 2001 Pietradonice for \$150. Determining which wine to buy will be different for, say, a frat boy trying to get his date drunk and a young attorney trying to impress her managing partner. Or, perhaps more germane, my wife would be a lot more impressed with me finding a bottle of delicious \$9 wine than a yummy \$150 wine. But it's all personal.

The bottom line for me is that I can't afford the DX-7. If I could, I assure you I would write the check tonight. If you can afford it, you owe it to yourself to find a dealer and give it a try. Who knows? You might decide that \$5950 is a small price to pay for the joy you get in return.

...Wes Marshall
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Ayre Acoustics DX-7 DVD Transport
Price: \$5950 USD.
Warranty: Two years parts and labor.

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