

Stereo

UNIVERSAL PLAYERS

Halcro EC800

Class that lasts

Ozzie brand Halcro is one of those unashamedly high-end outfits producing the kind of gear that lesser mortals (like me) simply can't afford. And the EC800 is no different.

Halcro's first universal player is clearly positioned as part of its home theatre product family, rather than the stereo reference series it also produces. But that doesn't make it in any way inferior to the stereo line-up: the build quality is as robustly impressive, the attention to detail as painstaking.

However, the pace of technology has caught up and overtaken the EC800 as far as some of its video and AV-specific capabilities are concerned.

Its HDMI module does not conform to the latest 1.4 standard. And its multichannel decoding is restricted to 5.1, rather than today's ubiquitous 7.1 capability. Perhaps most serious of all, its maximum video resolution output is 1080i/720p, rather than today's 1080p. And it is not compatible with the Blu-ray format.

Right, now that we've got all the bad news out of the way, let's look at the upside. And there's a lot to be positive about. I've already mentioned the exacting build quality of the EC800, expressed by the thick alloy faceplate, the all-metal enclosure, and the ergonomically arranged controls.

There's also a transport tray that operates with slick precision, and a solid-feeling remote control handset, although the home theatre

user will not be impressed by the small buttons and the lack of backlighting, both of which make operation less than intuitive in an AV environment.

While not a true universal player (it also doesn't play back DVD-Audio discs), the Halcro will cope with most other discs and formats, including CD and SACD, as well as CD-R/W, DVD-R/W, MP3 and WMA compressed music files, and JPEG still images. As indicated, its surround sound talents only extend to 5.1 DTS and Dolby Digital.

The limitations in AV terms led me to believe that the EC800 is perhaps more suited as a high-end audio player, but I nonetheless started off linking it to my AV system, where it rubbed shoulders with a Marantz SR-6003 AV receiver and KEF KHT-3005 sub/sat



loudspeakers, with Hitachi's 50XR01E plasma as the display unit.

I ran the Halcro directly into the Hitachi via both its HDMI and component video interfaces, while employing its 5.1 analogue output set for the audio feed to the Marantz. Later, I also linked up the player directly to the Marantz using the HDMI module.

I won't spend too much time about the set-up procedures, except to say that the user interface is simple and intuitive enough, so that getting the EC800 up and running didn't take very long at all.

Reference discs included the moody war thriller, 'Das Boot', as well as the 'Lord of the Rings' trilogy, the original 'The Matrix' and 'Star Wars: Attack of the Clones'. I also evaluated some live music performances on DVD, notably Diana Krall's 'Live In Paris', and the 'Live at Knebworth' performance by Robbie Williams.

Video quality was excellent from DVD discs: the colours were rich and vibrant, but without artifice, motion rendering was smooth and cohesive, and the contrast levels superb. Blacks were inky, and there was palpability to the images that made for immersive viewing.

But it was the sound that really impressed me. The Halcro delivered its sonic wares with authority and composure, providing a finely focussed, cohesive and immersive soundstage that made the most of the multichannel material.

The sound had substance and texture, adding to the realism of the listening experience, while there was an elegance and ease to the delivery that made the overall performance accessible and engaging.

On movie soundtracks, dialogue was clearly defined, and special effects translated with verve and gusto. But I especially liked the way the Halcro treated musical material. It seemed to get the flow and pace of performances just

Vital Stats

Digital conversion..... 192 kHz/24-bit (audio); 1108 MHz/12-bit (video)

Frequency response

..... 20 Hz – 22 kHz (DVD)

20 Hz – 100 kHz (SACD)

20 Hz – 20 kHz (CD)

Signal-to-noise ratio <110 dB

Audio outputs..... 5.1 single-ended RCA; stereo single-ended RCA

Video outputs Composite, S-Video, component

Digital outputs..... HDMI I.1, coaxial RCA, Toslink optical

Dimensions (WxHxD)

.....434x102x600 mm

Weight 16 kg

PRICE.....R53 000

VERDICT

Still a hugely competent deck in both movie and music terms. Makes the most of the DVD format, but doesn't support Blu-ray, and not fully HD compliant. Particularly believable with stereo CDs.

SUPPLIED BY Vivid Audio
086 148-4843

WEBSITE www.vividaudio.com

right, while approaching the music with a sense of purpose and a clarity that opened up the sound, and provided new insights.

Attention to detail was admirable, but never too analytical, allowing the cohesion and purpose of the music to be retained, while there was an effortlessness and an ease to the performances that afforded long, unflagging listening sessions.

These trends were further emphasised when listening to SACD discs in multichannel mode – as much as I generally prefer the two-channel options. Diana Krall's 'The Girl In The Other Room', Sara K's 'Water Falls', and rock heroes Toto's 'Toto IV' all sounded great in 5.1, with the medium's benefits in terms of clarity, headroom and dynamics all exploited by the deck.

However, it was when I moved the Halcro to my stereo system that I realised just how good the EC800 is in two-channel applications – probably good enough to warrant its asking price despite the shortcomings on the AV front.

Discs for the two-channel appraisal included the same SACDs mentioned earlier (and yes, I still preferred the stereo layer), as well as Eric Clapton's classic '461 Ocean Boulevard', 'Homage To Duke' by Dave Grusin, the mesmerising guitar of local blues ace Dan Patlansky on 'Move My Soul', and the atmospheric 'As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls' by Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays.

Partnered by an Electrocompaniet 4.7/AW120 duo, Vivid Audio VI.5 speakers, Nordost Tyr interconnects and Anti-Cable speaker cable, the EC800 sounded smooth and even understated at first.

But extended listening revealed a player able to extract fine subtleties and nuances, and to present these with painstaking precision to create a carefully constructed, thoroughly believable sonic picture. It's the kind of delivery that entices and surprises with its ability to present well-known recordings in a new light, while always retaining an overall sense of musical integrity.

The EC800 could be accused of lacking outright impact, but that would be doing this deck an injustice. In sheer musical terms, it sounds about as real as I've heard, with a distinct lack of any electronic flavour, and composed neutrality that always allows the on-disc performance to take centre stage.

In that sense, it also does the fullest justice to decent discs and recordings, and accurately (some would say ruthlessly) exposes flaws.

The Halcro EC800 is a reference-standard, semi-universal disc player. Its appeal in AV terms is limited because it lags behind current technology and it's simply too expensive to keep merely for DVD playback. But as a classy CD/SACD player, it can hold its own against the best.

Deon Schoeman