

MEDIA PLAYERS

Best of the rest up to £800

HD Digitech HDX-1000 1TB



£330

AS WITH THE A-110 (left), you can play files from a PC or NAS, or transfer them on to the 1TB hard disk via USB or Ethernet.

But little niggles do pop up, such as having to switch the menus from Japanese to English and manually setting up the NAS device. It's not a major issue, but such things leave this unit short of the idiot-proof simplicity of an Apple TV.

Where the HDX leaves the Apple device eating digital dust is in format support. Everything we threw at it was handled without fuss: it'll even play ripped DVDs and Blu-ray discs. The only files it won't play are DRM-protected ones.

Overall video quality is excellent: standard-def material is close to the original and, apart from a touch of motion smear, so is HD.

Only the sonic performance is a bit of a letdown. Although there's much detail to surround soundtracks, we found music playback to be rather lacklustre. The other niggle is operability: to access files you have to trawl through your lists of folders, which can be arduous.

But if you can live with this and the lack of musicality, and you know a bit about computers, only this and the Popcorn Hour offer true format flexibility.

VERDICT

For downloaders and rippers out there – this is the player you've been waiting for



Popcorn Hour C-200 500GB/Blu-ray



£485

THE POPCORN HOUR C-200 builds on the capability and flexibility of its smaller, cheaper A-110 sibling (left). As in that player, the C-200 is available in various forms, with this iteration offering the delights of substantial built-in hard-disk space (500GB) and its own, internal Blu-ray player.

Now, don't get over-excited. You can't go ripping films from one drive to the other: copyright protection simply won't allow that to happen.

What the new capability does mean, however, is that you could, if you want, own just one box – this one – to stream all your music and movies, listen to internet radio, display your photos and play your Blu-rays.

Set up is a little more complex than with rival players such as AppleTV (p74). That's partially because the C-200

is more of a specialist product than its Apple rival – but it's also because it's far more flexible. It'll support a huge range of file types, and the design's new screen makes operation easier than with some players of this type, including the A-110.

And in action? The C-200's picture quality is fine: yes, you'll notice some subtle judder with Blu-rays, but otherwise HD quality from the built-in player is solid enough. Images from the hard disk are similarly capable, and if sound is a little soft, in context we'll consider that fair enough. This is great-value kit.

VERDICT

A little specialist, but stunning value for rip and download enthusiasts



Vivadi MM200



£780

VIVADI REALLY KNOWS what a home cinema consumer wants from a media-centre PC. And in that tough market, the MM200 delivers in almost every way.

For a start, when you pop a disc in, the Vivadi's My Movies application automatically prompts you to rip your film to the unit's capacious 1TB hard drive. My Movies is also nice enough to add artwork, synopsis and cast and crew details, so your burgeoning virtual DVD library is extremely well-organised.

Of course, we've seen ripping software before, but rarely so well-integrated. In fact, you never need leave Media Center at all, but if you do want to do some web browsing, you can close the Center, grab the

bundled wireless keyboard, and you've got a Windows Vista PC.

But what about the video and sound? Playing a DVD rip of Ricky Gervais' *Ghost Town*, the Vivadi proves a capable player: natural, balanced and detailed. But it's fair to say that a standalone DVD does offer a crisper performance.

Of course, if you're looking at media-centre PCs, it's because you want more than just a DVD player, and when you add twin-recording Freeview tuners to the huge HDD, integrated ripping and superb styling, you can see what's so appealing about the Vivadi MM200.

VERDICT

If usability issues have put you off PCs in the past, this might be the one for you



XiVa musicm8



£800

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED in using a music server or streaming device, Imerge's new XiVa musicm8 could well be just what you're looking for.

Essentially it's a sophisticated NAS box with built-in disc-ripping courtesy of a fascia-mounted CD drive. It's small, comparatively quiet (but not silent) and, with 1TB of storage, there's plenty of hard-disk space to store your choice of music, photos and video files.

That said, you can easily find a media-centre PC for about the same money (see the Vivadi, left), while simpler NAS drives without disc-ripping support start at £400. So why does the musicm8 cost £800?

Simple: because it's incredibly easy to use. The XiVa just does

everything it ought to do, straight out of the box with no fuss, no additional configuration, nothing. It has full iTunes support, grabs its own album art and comes configured to support many popular devices, such as Squeezebox, Sonos, Linn, Nintendo DS and Wii, PS3 and Xbox. It's Mac, Windows and Linux-compatible, and rips music in either WAV, FLAC or MP3.

Throw in remote online access, so you can get to all your content from anywhere in the world, USB-based provision for hard-disk back-up, plus the option to position the device upright or flat, and you've a proper product. Yes, it's a little dear, but it's also well worth it.

VERDICT

A premium NAS, but easy to use and live with, and appealingly flexible

