



BLU-RAY PLAYERS
Yamaha BD-S1900

Welcome to a new generation

Yamaha was a fairly early adopter of the Blu-ray format. But up to now, its sole entrant in that sector has been the BD-S2900, a first-generation BD deck that offered robust build quality and solid performance standards.

However, the BD-S2900 also suffered the vagaries of early Blu-ray players, including slow disc loading times, and no support for Internet connectivity, with associated BD Live functionality.

Enter the BD-S1900, a new-generation Blu-ray player that addresses most of its predecessor's shortcomings, while also upping performance standards, and placing a particular emphasis on on-board decoding and high-quality analogue audio.

Visually, the Yamaha doesn't break any new ground, but it does look smart and purposeful. A profiled, anodised aluminium faceplate is home to a centrally located transport tray accompanied by an amber-illuminated display directly below it, and a short row of essential switchgear.

A fairly crowded rear panel offers stereo and 7.1 analogue audio outputs, as well as HDMI, coaxial and Toslink optical digital outputs. Analogue video is provided via component, S-Video and composite jacks.

Confirming the Yamaha's BD Live capability is the presence of an Ethernet port, while installers will welcome the RS232 port, and

the IR remote repeater jacks. The rear USB jack allows a user-supplied memory stick to be connected for data storage from on-line sources.

The latter is a little disappointing, since several of the Yamaha's rivals at this price point provide around 1 GB of internal storage, with no need for user-supplied USB memory. Yamaha recommends a 2 GB minimum for use with the BD-S1900, though.

And while we're on the subject of negatives: the BD-S1900's predecessor, the BD-S2900, made provision for a front-panel SD/MMC slot, which was handy for viewing images. Unfortunately, that feature has not been carried over to this latest model.

That aside, the Yamaha's arsenal of features is pretty impressive. As a BD Profile 2.0-compliant player, it not only offers BonusView and BD-Live compatibility, but also includes secondary audio and video encoding with picture-in-picture capability, together with virtual packaging to combine disc and USB-based content.

As one would expect, the BD-S1900 copes with all the current high-definition surround sound formats, including Dolby TrueHD and DTS-Master, and will also decode these on-board if required, before outputting the analogue surround sound signal via its 7.1 output set.

Of course, it can also provide the part-

nering processor or receiver with a digital Bitstream signal via HDMI, or 5.1 linear PCM signal when using the coaxial or optical digital outputs. The Yamaha employs four pairs of 192 kHz/24-bit DACs to decode the digital signal into 7.1 surround sound.

In video terms, the Yamaha provides a full spectrum of options, including composite video and S-Video. But those intent on optimum video performance, especially in the full HD context, will want to stick to HDMI as their chosen interface, with component video as the second option.

With HDMI, full-HD 1080p video at 24 Hz can be delivered to the receiver (or direct to the display, if required). The Yamaha is x.v.Colour and Deep Colour compatible, and will also upscale DVDs and other visual material, including JPEG images, to 1080p.

Setting up the BD-S1900 entailed little more than plugging in the various connections, powering up the deck, and making the necessary adjustments via the highly intuitive on-screen set-up menu. The deck was afforded some time to settle in, but did not appear to need much burning in time, and performed well out of the box.

I ran the Yamaha using primarily HDMI for audio and video, but also tried the 7.1 analogue audio output set, and the separate, stereo analogue outputs for two-channel material. I also tested the component video output set, but didn't bother with composite or S-Video, as neither belong in an HD environment.

For the record, this deck can read CD-R/W discs, but doesn't recognise any compressed music formats such as MP3 or WMA files. And it won't read SACD or DVD-A discs, either.

Source material spanned both Blu-ray and DVD material. On Blu-ray, discs chosen included Ramsay Lewis' 'Legends of Jazz Showcase', the Aix Records HD music



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sampler, and 'Chris Botti Live', as well as Blu-ray editions of 'Die Hard 4.0' and 'Gangs Of New York'.

Of the DVD discs tried during the review, Diana Krall's 'Live in Paris', and Eric Clapton's 'Crossroads Guitar Festival' are the ones that stood out.

Let's deal with the video side of the Yamaha's performance first. Despite very limited video set-up facilities, this deck proved to be an expressive and vibrant performer in both analogue and digital domains.

Using the component video outputs, the colours were rich and natural, with smoothly rendered sequences, good shadow detail and fine resolution of textures. The blacks weren't quite as dark and deep as I would have liked, and the tonality was on the warm side, but the overall effect was accessible, believable and enjoyable.

With HDMI, the Yamaha's light shone even brighter. Colours were more vibrant, but not unnaturally so, and the attention to detail was quite superb, extending to the pores and flaws on faces, highlights on strands of hair, and fine surface textures.

'Diehard 4.0' features many intricate action sequences in gloomy light, but the Yamaha was able to deliver a rich harvest of detail despite the marginal lighting, and really exercised the tonal range of my Hitachi plasma to the full.

Action sequences were rendered with greater assurance, and contrast levels were definitely better than with the component cables, delivering images with greater depth and punch. The colour tones were more neutral and therefore more realistic, too.

With DVD, the Yamaha will only output 480p/576i via the component outputs, but does upscale to 1080p via HDMI. That fact alone will make HDMI the output of choice in most normal installations. The two outputs can be operated simultaneously.

Besides, the switchable CEC control function of the HDMI socket will allow centralised control

Vital Stats

Audio DAC	192 kHz/24-bit
Frequency response ..	2 Hz – 44 kHz (BD/DVD 96 kHz sampling)
Signal-to-noise ratio	115 dB
Audio outputs	Stereo RCA, 7.1 multichannel RCA
Video outputs	Composite, S-Video, component
Digital outputs	HDMI, coaxial digital, optical digital
Dimensions (HxWxD)	435x96x316 mm
Weight	4,6 kg
PRICE	R8 330

VERDICT

Competent, intuitive BD player with user-friendly set-up. Supports on-board decoding of key HD audio formats. Vivid picture and clean, precise analogue delivery.

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of the display, if the Yamaha is directly connected to it.

DVD playback via HDMI was good, with the Yamaha's upscaling ensuring compelling video rendering, although obviously not in the same league as a good Blu-ray disc. Still, the BD-S1900 did the moody camerawork on the German classic, 'Das Boot', full justice, and dealt admirably with the gritty action scenes of 'Black Hawk Down'.

So, the BD-S1900 does a sterling job on the video front, and with no fiddly set-up procedures to worry about, either. But how

does it fare in audio terms?

Using the 7.1 analogue output set, and the BD-S1900's own decoding DACs, the sound was incisive and authoritative, with excellent, accessible staging and good surround sound rendition. The deck was able to paint a generously dimensioned sonic picture, allowing both bold strokes of sound, and finely nuanced details to come to the fore.

The player's set-up menu allows individual adjustment of distance, level and speaker size for each channel, together with a test tone generator to ease fine-tuning. It worked well enough, but the signal gain was quite low, so that my accompanying Marantz SR-6003 receiver had to work a little harder.

Even so, there was ample tonal depth to the Yamaha's analogue rendition, together with a palpability and texture that added credence to the listening experience. Treble was open and accessible, if a little cold, but never to the point of becoming aggressive, while surround staging was believably integrated.

With HDMI digitally delivering the audio signal to the Marantz's DACs, the latter determined much of the sound quality. I can tell you that the Marantz's penchant for rich musicality, expansive staging and focussed imaging was never in question, which at the very least indicates the BD-S1900's ability to deliver a digital sonic signal with accuracy and integrity.

The Yamaha BD-S1900 is a fine Blu-ray player, offering all the latest protocols and features, and linking them to a reassuringly robust execution. An intuitive user interface, simple but effective remote control (without backlighting, though), adds further appeal.

However, this Blu-ray player's true talents are in its audio and video performance, both of which are top-drawer. And while a new flagship is likely to join Yamaha's BD range next year, the BD-S1900 is the current senior model – and a worthy one at that.

Deon Schoeman