

Flying the flag for high-end AV



The Vantage HD is a scaler that hails from – yes – Britain! Martin Pipe thinks it might even hold its own against the foreign competition



To date, all of the scalers we've tested have been made in countries as far-flung as the US, Germany, and Hong Kong. And so when we came across UK company Calibre at last year's CEDIA Expo, we were thrilled to see a home-grown high-definition scaler that was flying the flag.

Calibre's background is in professional video and this bodes well for the company's first foray into home cinema. A good start is that the Vantage HD is built around Silicon Optix' Realta HQV (Hollywood Quality Video) chipset. This video processor can be found in a variety of advanced home cinema products including top-end Denon DVD players. To look at it, you'd never guess at the power within. The nondescript black box sports the bare minimum of controls (labelled in

black for some reason) and has no front-panel display. There are menu controls, but these are an alternative to the handset for onscreen configuration. However, a nice touch is the cyclical input selector – useful if the remote isn't to hand.

The rear-panel is more comprehensive – certainly in terms of connectivity. There are two component inputs (which will also accept RGB Scart sources if the right adaptor cable is used), two composite video inputs, two for S-video and a VGA-type (RGBHV, analogue) input for your PC.

You also get a pair of HDMI 1.1 inputs though I would have preferred more, given the explosion in digital sources. Thankfully, two more (and HDMI 1.3 to boot!) will shortly be added at extra cost courtesy of an 'expansion slot'. An HD-SDI board or alternative can already be plugged in here.

The Vantage HD has an in-built audio delay to compensate for the video processing, thereby ensuring correct lip-sync. To facilitate this, there are two sets of coaxial and optical digital audio inputs – the audio from HDMI sources can also be delayed (provided it is Dolby Digital, DTS or 2-channel PCM). Analogue sources (eg S-video and component) haven't been forgotten – there's a bank of four assignable analogue stereo inputs, to ensure you'll get correctly synchronised sound and video from your VCR or Sky+.

Synchronised digital audio is available on several outputs – HDMI, coaxial, optical and analogue stereo. In addition to the HDMI 1.1 output which goes all the way to

RATINGS

Highs: Clear performance benefits; future-proofing
Lows: Some cooling fan noise; lack of output refresh rates

Picture	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★½
Features	★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½

1080p – there's an analogue output for driving, say, CRT projectors. This takes the form of a VGA-type socket though I would have preferred a set of five BNCs for the various signals. Still, an adaptor cable can always be employed here.

Interestingly, both analogue and HDMI options are simultaneously active (unless the source is HDCP-protected, in which case the analogue output is disabled). Ideal for those running two displays? Unfortunately, both outputs share the same configuration. Note that in some cases as when your display is finicky about what's fed into it via HDMI – the analogue output may be a better option.

Setup and use

The processor is fairly simple to set up with onscreen menus. The deck defaults to a 480p output mode, which can be handled by the majority of displays. The first step is to configure the output to your display's native resolution (there's a bunch of presets, along with a custom mode).

You can also choose the output refresh rate – an alternative is to use the 'auto' option ensuring the output matches the input thus avoiding conversion, which can yield motion judder. There are only two

FEATURES

Inputs: 2 x composite, 2 x S-video, 2 x component/RGB, 2 x HDMI (plus Scart RGB support); VGA (analogue RGB/HV); 4 x analogue audio; 2 x optical digital; 2 x coaxial digital; optional HD/SD-SDI (1 or 2 ports) and 2 x HDMI (1.3) expansion boards

Outputs: HDMI, RGBHV (VGA); 1 x coaxial digital; 1 x optical digital; 1 x analogue audio

Also features: Output resolution 480-1080p; input resolution (HDMI/component) 480i-1080p (max 30Hz component); 2048 x 1080p mode, vertical refresh 50/60Hz; per-pixel motion adaptive HD and SD deinterlacing; fully-programmable scaling and aspect ratio (4:3 to 2.35:1); RS232 control port; USB port for firmware upgrades; onscreen setup and control with remote; HDCP support; video processor with black/white level, cropping, saturation, sharpness/detail, deinterlacing mode, overscan, colour temperature, noise reduction, aspect ratio (preset and custom), chroma-crawl reduction and gamma adjustment; PAL/SECAM/NTSC SD video support; audio delay

Tried&Tested... Scaler



'And it even has Realta HQV's unique 'warp' function to compensate for awkward projector placement'

frequencies – 60Hz (59.94Hz in reality) for US and Japanese source material, and 50Hz for Europe. I would have liked a 48Hz (or 72Hz) mode for film-derived material – which is supported by some projectors such as high-end SIM2 models.

Hopefully, a firmware update will add this. Out of interest, you can carry out such updates yourself. Just download the firmware and updater from the Calibre website, connect your PC to the Vantage HD's USB port, and run it!

Other output options include audio delay, output gamma correction, and projection mode (ceiling/table, front/rear). And it even has Realta HQV's unique 'warp' function to compensate for awkward projector placement.

Then it's a case of configuring the inputs.

Each needs to be 'turned on' first to specify an input number so it can be selected from the remote or front panel. Note that the scaler's component and HDMI inputs support all standards up to 1080p. Inputs can be named and treated to a host of processing parameters. The regulars (brightness, contrast and saturation) are joined by picture format, aspect ratio, sharpness/detail adjustment and video filters.

Standard-definition sources benefit from separate MPEG and Motion-Adaptive Temporal Noise Reduction (M-ATNR) controls, whilst HD sources are improved by selectable M-ATNR. But there's more. A further menu gives you colour temp, black level (the default here is 7.5IRE – presumably to appease the big US target market – so switch to 0IRE when watching

European sources), gamma correction and overscanning. And you can assign a specific audio input. And each input has its own series of settings memories. Whew!

Other features include HDMI input configuration (there's a 'repeater' mode that relays your displays capabilities to the selected source – try this if you're having HDMI difficulties), onscreen menu customisation, a 'picture-in-picture' mode (note that processing limitations mean two full-HD sources can't be displayed together with optimal picture quality), a split-screen 'demo' mode that lets you compare unprocessed with processed video and a pop-up display that shows source and output resolutions and refresh rates.

Performance

I tried the Vantage HD with a number of sources (including Sky HD, DVD and Blu-ray) and several different displays (Sony Pearl VPL-VW50 and Hitachi 720p PJ-TX100 projectors, plus a Sony 32in Bravia WXGA-resolution LCD TV). I was impressed with the picture quality the Vantage HD can muster.

It lends more visual 'snap', better portrayal of tricky detail, less banding and a wider dynamic range to all my sources. Deinterlacing is also improved relative to integrated scalers, with fewer 'jaggies' from interlaced sources ranging from 576i to 1080i. Something that's also noticeable, courtesy of scrolling captions, is smoother movement. Noise reduction performed pretty well – it even made an old VHS tape look close to watchable! The analogue-to-digital conversion is high quality – an A/B comparison between the converted digital feed and a direct analogue connection to our amp revealed that there was no tangible difference. The only performance criticism I have of this deck is minor. On occasions, it can take a few seconds for the audio and video to 'lock', especially with HDMI sources.

Conclusion

Overall, the Vantage HD is a flexible and highly-performing scaler that demonstrates that British design and engineering is worthy of a place in high-end home cinema. Well worth auditioning ■



Although there's only two HDMI inputs an expansion slot can be added if that's not enough to keep you happy



Even the few front panel controls it has are cunningly camouflaged...



... and the handset isn't much more complicated