



Olive 4HD Hi-Fi Music Server

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Revolution Calling

We are smack dab in the middle of a revolution. It may not always be apparent to some of us music-lovers, but this decade will witness the transition away from disc-based digital music players to a domination of hard drive devices. As of 2010, it's not even debatable any longer, it's just a matter of "when" the major audio companies will drop their standard CD/DVD players and move completely to hard disc, networked based "connected" devices. The champions of hi-end, like Meridian, McIntosh and Linn have already invested heavily into this trend. Any company that waits much longer is in danger of being left behind the digital storage train. But *wait* Sam, you tell me. I *like* my CDs, my CD player, and there's no way I'm going to trust my music to something as flaky as a computer hard drive. I hear you loud and clear. And if stubbornness simply precludes you from recognizing the potential of this new movement to access your music collection with extraordinary ease, that is fine too. Check back with me in 10 years, OK? But, if you love your music, and not simply the 5" polycarbonate discs onto which it is stored, then you owe it to yourself to look at something like the **Olive 4HD**.



The Olive 4HD Hi-Fi Music Server

Olive was founded in 2005 by Dr. Oliver Bergmann and Robert Altmann, two gentlemen whose passion for music is equalled by their enthusiasm for technology. Their latest creation is the Olive 4HD Hi-Fi Music Server. Although they have developed and sold similar products in the past, this is my first experience with their equipment. The main goals of the 4HD are to store and playback your CD data from its internal 2TB hard drive, stream internet radio, as well as distribute your music to other "slave" players within your home. It can also access music via DLNA/UPnP server, PC, or Network Attached Storage device within your home.



The Olive 4HD has a unique and attractive design

The Looks

The 4HD is a standard sized component with a sloping face that has a 4.3" wide screen display, navigation buttons, slot-loaded CD opening, and transport controls. Immediately upon unpacking the 4HD, I was impressed with its heft and solid feel. The top is constructed out of a solid piece of aluminium that slopes downward to become the front panel/face. This leads to a striking design, in either silver or black, that looks very modern, yet is traditional enough not to be distracting next to your other components. The top has attractive etching that subtly reveals the printed words Rock, Reggae, Classical, Jazz, etc. The construction quality is excellent, with that milled-out-of-one-piece feel.



Rear panel connections on the Olive 4HD

Hook Me Up, Man

Hooking up the 4HD is a simple affair, although it is not short of connections. On the rear, you'll find standard stereo L/R analogue outputs, optical and coaxial digital outputs and HDMI output for audio and video. You also get a coax input to use the 4HD as an internal DAC, USB port (can be used for backing up all of the 4HD's content to an external device), a wired Gigabit Ethernet connection, as well as connections for dual WiFi 802.11b/n antennas. I found absolutely nothing lacking connection-wise for this type of device. Before you get too scared reading about all the good connection bits thinking that this could get complicated, fear not. You don't even need a computer to use the Olive 4HD. A wired or wireless internet connection is pretty essential, but otherwise it is as easy and simple as hooking up your standard CD player. The 4HD does come with a rather chunky, metal remote with a couple dozen "olive" green buttons.

I glanced only casually at the included manual and quick-start-guide before I decided to jump right in by hooking up a wired Ethernet connection, power cord (detachable) and analogue L/R cables to my Denon AVP-A1HDCI pre-amp/processor. I was greeted with a simple, easy to read menu screen on the front LCD display. Although standard navigation controls are located on the front panel, you can also touch the screen to navigate and make your selections. The four main selections are Music Library, Music Sources, Internet Radio, and Settings. Settings provides the expected choices including General Settings for setting date/time/language, etc. There are also menus for CD import settings (more on this below), Network

settings, System settings (for software updates, CD database updates, etc.). Information about your specific unit, including capacity and library information is found here as well.

The 4HD immediately connected to my home network, so I selected Music Library and found several tracks already loaded into my review sample. I could select music by artist, album, genre or track and had music coming out of my speakers instantaneously. After casually listening to a few selections, I was eager to try out the unit's real purpose: importing and playing back standard CDs. The options for CD import are lossless WAV, lossless but compressed FLAC, and 128kbps AAC or MP3. I stuck with the default setting of FLAC, as I have had success storing my music in this format over the past few years. You get all of the original sound, in about half the space that the WAV format takes up. Upon inserting a CD to the slot-drive mechanism, you are presented with the Artist/Title information and options to play, or import the entire album or just select tracks. The artist and track information is pulled from a database within the unit (can be updated via the web), album art comes from the internet. I had the 4HD import the CD, which normally takes about 5-6 minutes depending on the length. After it is done, it does eject the CD, and notify you that it got xx number of 'good tracks'. The encoding takes another 5-6 minutes, and afterward your CD is now part of the internal library.

Playback Time

I was eager to hear the Olive's analogue performance on some known material via the analogue outputs. I started with Mark Knopfler's "Get Lucky" album from 2009. The 4HD presented the delicate guitar and piano work of tracks like "Hard Shoulder" in a wonderful, balanced sound that was neither hard, nor congested. The tonal balance was very neutral, with neither a tipped up treble, nor tubby or anemic bass. According to Olive, the 4HD uses Texas Instruments' 192khz/24-bit Burr-Brown PCM1792A. This chipset is widely known as one of the finest DACs on the market, and is Burr-Brown's premium offering. No skimping here! Of course, a premium DAC is only part of the equation, and must be complimented with a quality analogue output stage. Whatever analogue design Olive used after the DAC was well-thought out indeed. Hi-Fi sound, for certain.

Radio via the Web

I've been enjoying internet radio for a few years. So much so that terrestrial radio does not get listened to in my home, or very often even in the car. The 4HD includes playback of internet radio accessed via genre, or directly via station search. The sound quality of course varies by encoding rate, but I found the internet radio to operate as expected with no fuss. Regardless of the encoding level, all internet radio streams are output digitally as 16bit/44.1kHz. You can even save your favourites as presets. If you haven't tried internet radio yet, do yourself a favour and look into it for an outstanding variety for all types of music genres.

Olive has certainly spent a great deal of attention to the unit's design and need to house a potentially noisy source such as the internal hard drive(s) and CD transport mechanism. The 4HD does not use a fan, only passive cooling. I never found it to get warm during normal operation. If I didn't know any better, I would say there was no spinning hard drive inside. The hard drives are encased in 8 layers of noise cancelling padding. Even with careful listening positioning my ear less than one foot away, I could not tell there were hard disc platters spinning happily inside. The CD drive is a slot load, like you'd find in your car or PS3. It had the occasional laser assembly searching noise while loading discs, but certainly no more mechanical sound than a normal CD/DVD player makes.

Olive 4HD In Use

While playing CDs, the front LCD panel of the Olive displays a small image of the album art, artist name and album title. The current song scrolls across in large letters, easy to read from my listening position. I did not come across any manner to reconfigure the display, or to display track time progress, although time remaining does show even though it is small and only visible if you are close to the display. I spent quite a bit of time using the touch panel display to navigate among artist, tracks, genre and even album cover art. The touch screen was calibrated well, and the navigation controls were responsive. Those used to an Apple iPhone or iTouch could be underwhelmed. The snappy response and simple iTunes interface unfortunately makes most competitive controls seem a bit clumsy. However, Olive has developed a good solution in the form of a free app called Maestro from the iTunes store for download to your iPhone/iTouch. I downloaded this to my iPhone and found it to be an improved experience over the internal LCD and navigation controls. Selections via the app were quick and easy to use. Searching was simplified by the use of the iPhone's

virtual keyboard. While using the Maestro app, the front panel controls are disabled. You can resume control from the unit by tapping the LCD screen.



The 4HD's Full colour touch-screen LCD display

Another manner to control and configure the Olive is via their Maestro web browser software. This software lives inside of the unit, you point a browser on your home's internal network to a variation of the unit's IP address. The Maestro web interface is simple, but elegant in design. It looks similar enough to iTunes that you'll be navigating and controlling without any difficulties. Using the Maestro software is not required, but it is a much simpler than the front panel to create playlists, as well as navigate through several thousand songs. Within the software, you also have total control to edit disc/artist/title/etc. information for everything in your library. Music lovers like myself will appreciate the ability to add notes, performer details, lyrics and much more to every album in your library. These types of features are what really spotlight the improvements of a device such as the Olive 4HD vs. standard CD players. A rather unique feature of the 4HD is the ability to burn playlists onto a CD-R via the internal drive. Simply select your playlist (which of course must fit within the data limitations of a CD-R) and you can selection the option to burn to disc. I tried this and was pleased to find it works as advertised. The Olive also has an HDMI port on the back. I connected this to my Denon processor and fed the output to my plasma TV. The HDMI video output displays similar contents as the LCD front panel. I didn't find the video output to be as useful as the Maestro iTunes app or web-based Maestro control. The HDMI connection also carries the audio sound, so that could simplify connection in some applications.

Technical Bits

Although the 4HD is positioned as a product that excels at "ease of use," I do want to cover some technical bits, for those so inclined. All 4HD devices come preloaded with a selection of tracks with native 24bit/88.2kHz or 24bit/176.4kHz data rates. I did sample several of these tracks, and found them quite enjoyable in content and fidelity. However, I ran into roadblocks when trying to output these HD tracks over optical, coax or HDMI digital outputs. I tried two different digital pre-amps, and one former flagship receiver in my home, but none could lock-on or output sound from the HD quality track. I contacted Olive, and they were very attentive to my concerns. After a fair amount of trouble-shooting, I was unable to pass these resolutions over any digital connection, and I am led to believe they are likely incompatibilities with my equipment as opposed to restrictions of the Olive 4HD. Lest you find this too concerning, it is important to note that the internal digital to analogue conversion within the 4HD is of such a high level, the analogue outputs are guaranteed to be satisfying should you be unable to listen to HD files over a digital connection. A possibly overlooked feature of the 4HD is the ability to import WAV/FLAC/MP3 via a networked PC/Mac directly to the unit. This was straightforward enough, and I even had success importing 24bit/96kHz content into the 4HD. Curiously, this 24/96 content was able to pass over the optical/coax outputs (unlike 24/88.2 and 24/176.4) to my processor.

Showdown With A Transporter

As impressive as the Olive 4HD is, it is important to compare it with other devices in its price range. I have owned and used Logitech Squeezebox products for 3 years, including the Squeezebox Classic and US\$1999 audiophile-gearred Transporter. The Olive looks almost futuristic compared to the Transporter. The Transporter is a component that interfaces with your music server/hard drives located elsewhere within your home. Although flexible, it does take a bit of time setting up to interface with your music stored on another device. Since the Olive 4HD uses an internal hard drive, slot loading CD player and LCD display, one may not ever need to worry about the configuration challenges that often arise using a separate music

software and standalone CD ripping program such as EAC. As much as I have enjoyed the Transporter, I will readily admit that managing the database and Squeeze Server software can be frustrating at times. The Olive interface appears robust and hassle-free. I imagine that 2TB would hold all but the most massive CD collections when store via FLAC. Olive claims a capacity of almost 6000 CDs for this model. With the 4HD, you're getting an "all in one" device that you can enjoy and use immediately vs. the fairly regular interfacing you'll have to do with the Logitech software. You do get more flexibility in configuration with the Logitech products, but that tweakability does fight against the drive for simplicity.

In a head to head listening comparison between the 4HD and Logitech Transporter I found the analogue performance to be very similar in overall presentation. That is a big compliment to the Olive, as I find the Transporter to provide reference sound vs. a wide variety of redbook and DVD/Blu-ray players that I have tried in my system. Sonically, the Olive 4HD was a bit more laid back, with the soundstage just a bit deeper behind the speakers than the Transporter. It did not lose any detail, or sound distant, just slightly different. I think the preference between the two would boil down to synergy with existing equipment. I certainly found myself enjoying the sound of them both, with preference dependent on source material.

Sound Bliss

The Olive 4HD provided an unexpected surprise with its positively high fidelity sound. Music was presented with such smoothness as well as detail that the 4HD will go head to head with most any dedicated CD player. I was also unprepared for just how quiet it was in operation. There is no need to fear its internal components audibly intruding into even the most quiet of listening rooms. That last point is crucial to winning the interest of those stepping into a digital music server for the first time. If you haven't yet started digitizing your music for a home-brewed or similar device, you owe it to yourself to explore the Olive 4HD. It is painless enough to load each of your CDs into the unit, but Olive does offer a service to load all of your discs onto your unit before they ship it out to you.

Final Thoughts

The Olive 4HD is the perfect jumping-in point for those who have not joined the revolution (ahem, journey) to a music-server type platform. It is simple enough to use without a computer, and has attractive styling with a quality build. Only when comparing the user interface to Apple's iTunes does the front panel LCD interaction seem a bit crude. Controlling the unit via the free iPhone app or web-based Maestro interface will have you zipping through your entire music collection with ease. The sound from standard CDs alone is practically enough to justify its price, adding in the streaming and storage functionality you have a genuine Hi-Fi bargain. Highly recommended.

The Good:

- Superb sound from analogue outputs
- Simple to set up and use
- Quality construction and design
- Great web interface and iPhone app
- Plenty of connection options
- Ultra quiet operation

The Bad:

- Touchscreen LCD display only average
- Front panel display information not customizable
- Clunky playlist interface via front panel/Maestro software

The Scorecard:

Design:



Performance:



Value:



Overall:



Specifications:

- Width 17.13"
- Height 3.35"
- Depth 11.42"
- Weight 13.2 lb

More Information:

Olive 4HD Hi-Fi Music Server

- <http://www.olive.us/>