



Olive 4HD Review



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Highs: Killer sound, Absolutely quiet, Brilliant software for editing metadata, Can be expanded to a multi-room system,

Lows: Expensive, Limited placement options, Can't edit metadata on tracks stored on other networked storage, Funky remote,

We review the Olive 4HD Hi-Fi Music Server and we think it may be the ultimate audiophile device.



Introduction

We can describe the Olive 4HD Hi-Fi Music Server in one word: Exquisite. If you love music—collecting it, archiving it, and above all, *listening* to it—this is the digital audio player you should own.

If you're not an audiophile, on the other hand, you might dismiss this device with a few other "ex" words: Excessive, extravagant, or extreme, perhaps. Indeed, there's almost no task the Olive 4HD can do that can't be duplicated on just about any properly equipped PC (we're talking a machine equipped with the US\$180 Asus Xonar Essence STX sound card). But good luck finding a PC that's entirely passively cooled in order to operate in perfect silence, as the Olive 4HD does — you can't even hear this machine's internal CD-burner spin. You might find a passively cooled home theater PC, but it won't have a 4.3-inch touch screen or the capability to stream audio to an equally exquisite client, and it certainly wouldn't be this easy to use.

Features and Designs

The Olive 4HD looks a little like standalone CD player, but it features a slot-feed optical drive so you never hear the whir of gears as a tray slides out to accept your disc. Olive went so far as to put a lip on the slot to prevent mechanical noises from leaking out (the internal hard drive is wrapped in eight layers of sound-deadening padding). The front panel is slanted, which makes using the touchscreen and the buttons easy when the device is placed on a surface between your waist and your chin, but you won't want to place it any higher or lower. That presented a problem in our entertainment center, which is designed to house our A/V components above one of our tower speakers. The most frequently used device, the A/V receiver, is on the bottom shelf and our Blu-ray player is above that. We had to put the 4HD above that, which meant we needed a ladder to operate it. Olive maintains that the player can be stacked on top of a receiver, but we'd be concerned about the receiver's ventilation and the player's heat dissipation.



The entire chassis is fabricated from thick brushed aluminum (in your choice of black or silver), but the 4HD's otherwise elegant appearance is marred, in our opinion, by Olive's decision to cover the entire top with the names of musical genres (Opera, Rock, Disco, Reggae, Rap, etc.). You use the touchscreen to browse your music collection (by artist or album name, album cover art, or genre), configure network connections (wired or wireless), tune in Internet radio stations, and so on. Music can be stored on the 4HD's internal 2TB drive or on any other device on your network (another DLNA/UPnP server, PC, or NAS box, for instance). You can also plug in an HDMI cable and switch the display to a television (which is great for viewing album art while you're listening to music). Olive provides hardwired buttons for navigating the menus without the touchscreen and for pausing and skipping tracks.

Using the HD4's HDMI output doesn't prevent you from using the onboard DAC if you decide it delivers better sound than the decoder in your receiver, but your receiver must be capable of pairing its analog audio inputs with its HDMI input (a feature that seems to be increasingly uncommon in new A/V receivers). Alternatively, you could connect the HD4's analog-audio outputs to your receiver and plug its HDMI output directly into your TV. Just mute the TV's volume and use the receiver solely as an amplifier.



The 4HD's back panel has stereo analog outputs (RCA), optical and coaxial digital outputs, HDMI out (for audio and video), and a gigabit Ethernet port. Showing great forethought on the part of Olive's engineers, you'll find *two* Wi-Fi antenna mounts (Olive provides only one antenna, but you can add a second one if you're having problems establishing a wireless connection and wired networking isn't an option); a USB port (for backing up the hard drive); and a digital audio input (so you can use the 4HD as an outboard digital-to-analog converter). And if you want to stash the player in a closet with a solid door, you can plug in an infrared receiver.

Why would you want to use the 4HD as an outboard converter? Because Olive chose Texas Instruments' top-of-the-line Burr-Brown PCM1792A DAC for the task. This chip, which is also found in the aforementioned Xonar Essence STX sound card, boasts 24-bit resolution, sampling rates up to 192kHz, and 129dB of dynamic range.

**Editors Note 1/22/10: We called Olive tech support and verified that the 4HD does not play or burn SACD or DVD-Audio discs.*

Performance

The Olive 4HD sounds positively sublime. We auditioned it with a diverse collection of tunes, ranging from Joe Strummer and the Mescaleros' "Johnny Appleseed," to John Coltrane's "Blue Train," to Gustav Holst's "Mars," and the music player never failed to please our ears.

You can use the Olive 4HD as a standalone CD player, but Olive knows that most people don't want to deal with CDs. When you do slip a disc into its slot, it will ask if you'd like to rip the CD. Tracks can be ripped as uncompressed WAV files, encoded as FLAC files (a lossless codec), or encoded as AAC or MP3 files (both of which are lossy codecs, but require less storage capacity). It will automatically reach access the Internet and grab the appropriate album art and metadata, too. Insert a *blank* CD, select a playlist, and the 4HD will automatically transcode those tracks and burn them to the disc. Unfortunately, burned discs don't contain any metadata and tracks are labeled simply as Track One, Track Two, and so on.



Olive has also developed an awesome software tool for creating playlists and managing your music library. Maestro, written in the PHP scripting language, runs in the Firefox web browser and enables you to use your PC to create playlists and edit album art and other metadata attached to the tracks stored on the 4HD's hard drive. Olive enables you to tag tracks with absolutely fanatical attention to detail: The ripper will automatically tag tracks with the typical metadata (artist and album name, genre, track number and title, file type, codec, bit depth, and bit rate).

Maestro goes far, far beyond that. The software has fields for featured instruments and voices, arranger, producer, lyricist, orchestra, choir, conductor, recording method, and much more. And if you can think of anything Olive didn't, there's a field for personal comments. These tags can be applied to individual tracks or to an entire album. Unfortunately, Maestro can't access tracks that are stored on a different server or on a NAS box—they must reside on the 4HD itself. Then again, a 2TB hard drive provides enough capacity to store nearly 6,000 CDs, so you might never need any other storage.



The 4HD works great in standalone mode, but you can also build a multi-room system by deploying up to 15 Olive 2 clients throughout your home using wired or wireless connections. The Olive 2 (\$599) has similar specs, inputs and outputs, and other features but no optical drive or onboard storage. The server and each client have their own remote control and touchscreen, and Olive provides a free iPhone app that enables you to control the system using your phone.

Conclusion

The Olive 4HD is a brilliant self-contained music ecosystem, but Maestro lets you use a PC's large screen, mouse, and keyboard to create playlists and to perform detailed editing. The setup is expensive, there's no getting around that, and we do have a few gripes as well. (We've already mentioned a couple, but we're perplexed as to why you can't back up its storage to another drive on your network, we also found the touchscreen to be a trifle temperamental, and the brick-like remote control isn't very comfortable to hold and operate). But the bottom line is that we haven't encountered a digital music system that's elegant, well thought out, and better-sounding than this. Bravo!

Highs:

- Killer sound
- Absolutely quiet
- Brilliant software for editing metadata
- Can be expanded to a multi-room system

Lows:

- Expensive
- Limited placement options
- Can't edit metadata on tracks stored on other networked storage
- Funky remote