

## Denon DCD-1500/PMA-1500

**Denon DCD-1500AE CD/SACD player (\$1799) and PMA-1500 amplifier (\$2299)**

April 2006

You have to hand it to Denon of Japan for continuing to expend effort on two-channel audio when so many manufacturers have been distracted by multichannel applications. Denon have always been a name to respect in the stereo game, though in my experience value for money in Denon gear is at the expensive end in their digital sources and the cheap end for their amplifiers. In order to foil me, I've been commissioned to review two solid middle rankers in Denon's current two-channel line up.

### The performers

I'll start by telling you this pair consists of the strictly stereo DCD-1500AE CD/SACD player, a couple of steps down from the range-topping DCD-SA1, and the 70-watt per channel PMA-1500AE. They

look like they play for the same team, finished in brushed silver and similarly dimensioned from the front. Their faceplates feature a horizontal swell that is certainly

distinctive, although it gives the units a strangely old-fashioned look.

I wasn't too excited about the rotary input selector switch on the PMA-1500AE: it indicates position with a rotating light that only makes sense if you're looking squarely at the knob.

Other than that it's nicely put together and well equipped. It is amply provisioned for inputs, including two tape loops and a decent phono-stage. There are tone controls, but unless your system is somehow amiss, bypass these with the 'source direct' switch for a purer sound.

### The performance

Source and amp don't just look good together. They are impressive in terms of timing and drive, and detail levels are also noteworthy. In terms of revelation,



I didn't find new instrumental lines rising from the mix, but the spatial placement of instruments and voices stood out as well above average.

This was true not only in the case of SACD playback, where a more palpable sense of air around performers is to be expected, but even in CD playback. This suggests the latest incarnation of Denon's proprietary 'Alpha' signal processing is still up to snuff.

My only concern is that I couldn't shake the slight tilt toward the upper frequencies. It's not that the system won't do bass, indeed all the thumping and throbbing seems present and accounted for. Rather it's as though the bass is set to 100 and the treble to 101.

I lay this quirk at the doorstep of the CD player, which is extremely competent, but invests just a smidgeon too much energy to high frequencies. This might be a Japanese thing, as there seems to be a cultural preference for zing over there. I recall the European designed Denon stuff of a decade ago had a more neutral balance, and that is retained in the amp.

For its part, the PMA-1500AE plays not only with neutrality, but goes nice and loud – unfazed by the multi-tracked madness of the big finale on Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells 3* with the volume knob set at 12 o'clock. It's a very competent machine, devoid of serious foibles.

### Reformatted

If pushed, I'd maintain the DCD-1500AE is a better CD player than it is an SACD player. I say this on the assumption that the SACD format offers improvements across the board (well, it should), although I confess I've yet to be sold on the format. When played on the 1500AE spinner, the improvements are only partial: things may sound different, but not necessarily better. However, this player won't be bought on the strength of its CD playback skills, good though they are, rather it's potential to play the higher spec'd format that will draw credit cards from their leathery dens.

The 1500AE pairing perfectly demonstrate Denon's long experience in the hi-fi stereo game. These products are entirely worth their asking prices, without giving away the farm. If carefully partnered with speakers and cables, the source will prove a fine CD player and a more than adequate SACD spinner. The amplifier is a subtle charmer, but it faces strong competition, and some have more obvious virtues, such as power output, or upgradability. I'd go for this duo if equipment-rack presence ran a close second to sound-quality on my shopping list, and I didn't want to be left high and dry if the world suddenly decides the future is SACD.—*Brent Burmester*

---

*Source and amp don't just look good together. They are impressive in terms of timing and drive, and detail levels are also noteworthy*

---