

Sony VW12HT

Can Sony breathe new life into LCD projection? By Max Christoffersen

Sony VW12HT LCD video projectors. \$13,999.

"Ahhhhhhhhh... now that's more like it!!" That was my first unedited response to the Sony image on viewing the new Sony VW12HT LCD projector.

What was getting my attention was the immediate sense of 'rightness' about the black level (and contrast ratio) this new Sony projector was producing.

I felt a wry smile cross my face as the obvious dawned: LCD still has something to offer the home theatre enthusiast and the rumours of its demise to the claimed superiority of DLP projection has been greatly overstated.

"Well I'll be... it can still do it after all." The bottom line here is that having seen the earlier Sony 10HT and 11HT - there are really only two major questions to ask: how deep is the 12HT's black level and how visible is the screen door pixel array?

On the former - the simple answer is very good indeed. Damn exciting in fact. The reputed higher contrast level of Sony's newly designed wide XGA LCD (HDTV capable) panel with their new "Micro Lens Array" was immediately on show - the VW12HT displays deeper black level and greater contrast ratio than previous LCD models.

Exciting with a capitol X

Did I mention this was damn exciting? This was an LCD image of genuine colour depth and contrast ratio that I hadn't seen before. The colour body,

general black level and sense of liveness about the image is very satisfying.

The second answer is less emphatic: the

pixel screen door is still there and is particularly noticeable on white fields or colour burst (explosion or fade out to a single colour). Minimising screendoor may require moving your viewing position back a few inches or feet to ameliorate its impact even further.

For my viewing, the pixel array still provides a sense of barrier between me



and the real 3D depth that good DVD transfers are capable of producing.

But in many ways, such a trade-off is a small price to pay for the clear edge definition, tight focus and relative ease-of-use the Sony 12HT offers. (I would like to see however an aspect ratio control on the remote rather than colour balance memories).

Fan noise (rated at 30 dB) is higher than I find comfortable, but less so for most home theatre enthusiasts used to digital fan noise.

A word about this 'black thing'

Many see a projected image of a black cat or a black car or black clothing and wonder what this 'lack of black' is all about - "it sure looks black to me!" - and to be fair it does. But LCD still can't achieve full projection 'black out' (total absence of light in a dark room).

But here's where the 12HT got it right with the black level it does produce. The image and contrast ratio (1000:1) have a bold sense of full body and contrast. Black is assisting not just in shadow detail but the fullness and richness of the rendering of all colours.

And its this colour depth and contrast that makes this an exciting projector. Add in the ability to customise Gamma settings via a supplied CD-ROM and you have a genuine personalised image designed to look good for your eyes only.

Once again the usual caveats of digital projection apply: Ensure you choose

a quality screen (personally I don't prefer grey screens) and factor in the replacement lamp cost @ \$1,380 (incl GST) every 2000 hours (or less).

Okay, so what's the bad news

You knew this couldn't last right? First, there is a lack of colour uniformity. The image has a red balance on the left side of the image moving through white to green on the right hand edge. It's clearly visible on a white field or facial skin tones.

Second was a colour dust-blob of blue at about 3 o'clock (noticeable only on a black field) and most visible of all, was vertical banding which shows up as a kind of rain drop water trail across the entire screen. The colour balance remains skewed towards digital fluorescent (yellows looked like traffic officer weather jackets) no matter how much I decreased the colour level.

Overall, the winner is...

Given its overall image quality, customised settings and controls, simple connectivity and vastly improved black level, the Sony VW12HT is a hit. The pluses far outweighed the minuses and the image was enjoyable with no sense of eye strain or fatigue. See it before you buy it but be prepared for a new level in LCD projection performance.

This was an LCD image of genuine colour depth and contrast ratio

