



The VW80's centralised lens can deliver 300in widescreen images

# SXRD pounces on the higher-end

Sony's latest high-spec SXRD projector is easy on the eye, but, wonders **John Archer**, can it fight off the cutthroat competition?



The next few months could be quite critical for Sony's SXRD projection technology. Since making a spectacular debut on the 'mainstream' scene back in January 2006 with the VPL-VW100, SXRD has found itself chased down by sudden surges in quality and cuts in price from its technological rivals – especially JVC's D-ILA system. To maintain its claim to the PJ high ground it had to be have a big statement up its sleeve, a projector that at least tackled one of these two potential problems! And no, with a price of £5,000, I'm not talking about the affordability one...

## Midnight cowboy

In keeping with all the SXRD projectors we've seen to date, the VPL-VW80 is quite a looker. Its beautifully black – sorry, Midnight Sky – finish and distinctive lozenge shape combine with an outstanding build quality to imperious effect.

Tucked under a ledge down one side is a variety of inputs, including two v1.3 HDMI sockets, two 12V trigger outputs (one for firing up an electric screen, one for anamorphic zoom mode), a PC port, and an RS232 jack so the projector can be integrated into a full home cinema system.

**A third HDMI would have been appreciated on such a costly projector**; after all, Panasonic's incoming PT-AE3000 projector will have three HDMI's, and that's only costing around £2,200. Still, I guess if you can

afford a VW80 you can also afford an HDMI switching box!

The VW80 has an immense feature list, but one aspect in particular stands out: MotionFlow processing. This actually comprises two individually controllable elements, Motion Enhancement and Film Projection.

The first of these calculates and then adds extra frames of data between the real image frames of a source, to reduce judder as objects cross the screen, and help motion look crisper.

The Film Projection system is similar, in that while it, too, adds extra frames of image data, these are darkened to give pictures a vaguely flickery look reminiscent of the 24-frames-a-second celluloid experience. This effect should also again reduce motion blur, since it stops our eyes from trying to 'fill in the blanks' between frames.

In practice, I actually found the Film Projection methodology more effective than Motion Enhancement. For while Motion Enhancement does indeed make for smoother viewing, it also generates unwanted side effects including shimmering noise around fast-moving objects, and occasional glitching during camera pans.

The Film Projection options aren't perfect, but despite initially making me feel like I'd gone back to watching an old 50Hz TV, over time I kind of grew to like the gentle flickering effect – especially for the way it genuinely seemed to make movie motion look more natural.

## AV/CV

**Product:**  
A Full HD SXRD projector with some of Sony's most sophisticated image processing yet

**Position:**  
Second-placed in the Bravia projector range behind Sony's VW200 flagship model

**Peers:**  
JVC HD100;  
Marantz VP-15S1

Oddly, I never grew to like the comparable processing employed on Sony's current SXRD flagship, the VW200. But I believe there's a reason for this, namely the way the VW200's brighter, more dynamic pictures exaggerate the flickering effect just a little too much.

Another water-cooler-worthy addition to the VW80's specification sheet is its Bravia Engine 2 processing tech. Honed like Excalibur, this silicon helps the VW80 produce HD pictures of outrageous sharpness. Indeed, I don't think I've seen any other projector costing below five figures able to do better justice to the detailed freeway fracas sequence on the *Transformers* Blu-ray.

## Back in black

Another eye-catcher is the VW80's claimed contrast ratio of 60,000:1. Even using a dynamic iris fudge, 60,000:1 is a remarkably high contrast ratio figure for a home cinema PJ, yet our Tech Labs measured a post-calibration rating of nearly 43,000:1, so it seems the Sony marketing department isn't that far off.

This contrast helps deliver some excellent black levels. During the nearly eternally dark scenes of Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd*, for instance, the frequently pitch black London backdrops are portrayed with hardly any grey cloudiness. Also, enough subtle shadow details are retained to give the city three-dimensional life.

I'd argue that dark scenes on the VW80 look more stable than >

**Firing it up:**

The twin 12V triggers can be used to activate a projection screen and anamorphic lens sled

they do on the more expensive Sony VW200, thanks presumably to the dynamic iris adapting more quickly to changes in an image's brightness content.

For my money, one or two of the best DLP units, and JVC's D-ILA models, can do deeper black levels still. But this Sony certainly ensures its images look punchy and rich in black level. Viewers won't feel shortchanged.

**Choose your weapon**

The VW80's Real Colour Processing system lets you adjust the image with startlingly flexibility; the red, green, blue, magenta, cyan and yellow components of the image can be manipulated via a clever pie chart-style interface. Even more appealing is the way the Sony drops out of the picture every colour other than the one you're trying to adjust, enabling you to see precisely the impact of your fiddles.

Even without tinkering in the RCP menus, though, the VW80 produces very good colours. Returning to my reference *Transformers* Blu-ray, the VW80 has the subtlety, for instance, to do total justice to the CG rendering of the robots, making them look three-dimensional and, dare I say it, astonishingly real.

I've criticised previous SXR D projectors (except for the Xenon lamp-bearing VW200 model) for their rather pallid colours, but the VW80 breaks away from that

trend and produces rich hues with genuine vibrancy. Sure, some DLP machines are better, but they come with the onerous caveat of a rainbow-inducing colour wheel.

**The VW80's colours mark such a significant step in the right direction for SXR D**, that I've now convinced myself that SXR D is capable of creating potent colours without the aid of a Xenon lamp.

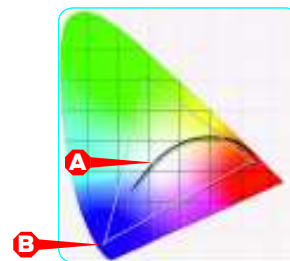
The VW80 is a seriously refined and talented projector – it's deliciously quiet in operation, too, which is another feather in its cap. There's nothing more annoying than being distracted from the emotional impact of a movie by the whirl of fans.

So a thumbs up then. However, it's worth noting that the projector market is becoming ferociously competitive, and there's no shortage of high-calibre models around which undercut this Sony. JVC's remarkable HD1 projector is now available for less than £3K, and even Sony's cracking entry-level SXR D charmer, the HW10 (reviewed *HCC* #163), retails for around £1,700.

Of course, none of this detracts from the VW80 being an excellent projector, that would enhance any high-end theatre. My advice would be to keep a close eye on this model at retail and as soon as you smell a bargain, pounce like the proverbial pussy. After all, you know you want one...●

**→ Specifications**

**HD Ready:** YES with 1080p24 support  
**Progressive scan:** YES NTSC and PAL  
**Component video:** YES one input  
**HDMI:** YES two HDMI v1.3  
**PC input:** YES D-Sub PC  
**Resolution:** 1920 x 1080  
**Brightness (claimed):** 800 ANSI Lumens max  
**Contrast ratio (claimed):** 60,000:1 (with help of manual iris)  
**Dimensions:** 407.4(w) x 179.2(h) x 482.4(d)mm  
**Weight:** 12kg  
**Features:** MotionFlow picture enhancements; Real Colour Processing; MPEG block and mosquito noise reduction; dynamic iris; anamorphic zoom mode; 24fps True Cinema system; Bravia Engine 2 processing; 3,000 hours lamp life; 20dB fan noise; 2 x 12V triggers; RS232 port

**→ Tech Labs**

Our tests of the VW80 indicate superb performance; pre-calibration colour temperature in Standard mode is a little high at 7,952K (**Point A**), due to a high Blue of 115% (**Point B**), but manual adjustment easily delivers a near-perfect 6,504K. Contrast and brightness ratings are excellent

**Before calibration**

**Colour temperature:** 7,952K  
**RGB:** 83/103/115 **Luminance:** 29,134fL  
**Contrast ratio:** 48,883:1

**After calibration**

**Colour temperature:** 6,504K (user)  
**RGB:** 100/100/100 **Luminance:** 23,928fL  
**Contrast ratio:** 42,987:1

**HCC VERDICT**

Sony VPL-VW80  
 £5,000 Approx

**Price check:** [www.techradar.com/487460](http://www.techradar.com/487460)

**Highs:** Excellent overall picture quality; great design; features galore; runs quietly

**Lows:** Motion Enhancement system needs work; a third HDMI would have been nice

**Performance:** 1 2 3 4 5

**Design:** 1 2 3 4 5

**Features:** 1 2 3 4 5

**Overall:** 1 2 3 4 5