



Listening Review: NAD L53 Receiver

By Gary Galo, Regular Contributor

NAD L53 DVD Receiver. NAD Electronics International, a division of Lenbrook Industries, Ltd., 6 Merchant St., Sharon, MA 02067, 781-784-8586. www.nadelectronics.com. List Price: \$599. Source for review sample: Factory-refurbished unit purchased by *audioXpress*.

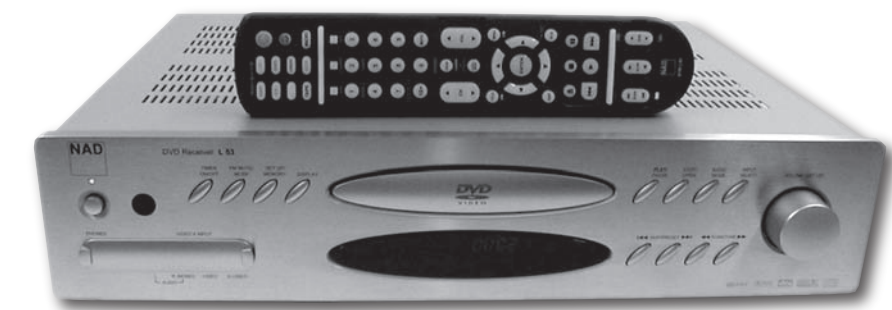
This review was originally intended as a companion to Charles Hansen's extremely thorough test and measurement report on the NAD L53 DVD Receiver published in the Dec. 2005 issue of *aX*. My portion of the review was interrupted by our move to a bigger house just as the fall 2005 semester at SUNY Potsdam got under way. Between moving some 12,000 recordings (78s, LPs, and CDs), taking care of the many things a new house entails including setting up a new listening room, and keeping up with my day job, many projects fell behind.

OPERATION

The NAD L53 comes with a remote control that I had to learn, in part, by trial and error. The manual has six pages of instructions on operating the remote, but many things could use more detailed explanation. There is a hierarchy to the remote's logic that is not at all intuitive.

You first select a device via the Device Selector keypad, and then use the various other buttons associated with that device. Some buttons have multiple functions, depending on which device (AMP, DVD, TUNER, and so on) you selected. These functions are confusing at first, and should have been better explained in the manual.

The L53 uses a Vacuum Fluorescent (VFL) Display as its main display. Unfortunately, the manual does not reproduce the display or explain the various indications. There are three indicators



that are illuminated all the time: "L," "R," and "LFE." "L" and "R" are self-explanatory, and "LFE," which stands for "Low-Frequency Effects," refers to the L53's summed, mono subwoofer output, a line output intended to feed a powered subwoofer ("LFE" is standard Dolby terminology for the "point one" subwoofer output on 5.1 surround systems).

Because the left, right, and LFE outputs are always active, and can't be changed by the user, it may seem strange that the display illuminates these indications. The left and right main outputs always operate full-range. The manual should at least mention all of this, letting you know that you haven't missed something in the setup (I was left wondering whether the "LFE" somehow needed to be turned off in my installation, but NAD makes no mention of "LFE" in the manual). NAD uses the same VFL Display in several other products, including some with surround capabilities. In these cases, there are additional indicators that display which outputs are operational.

The L53 manual contains one misleading error. On page 6, the manual states: "High-performance components used throughout the receiver's analog audio circuits maximize quality from all sources, including multichannel analog sources such as DVD-Audio and SACD." The problem here is that the

L53 does not play DVD-Audio discs or SACDs.

If you put a DVD-Audio disc in the player, after attempting to load the disc the L53 will display a message on your TV screen that says "DVD Audio Disc," and will then eject the disc (there are some DVD-Audio discs that are DVD-Video compatible, which will play on the L53). If you try to load a single-layer SACD, the player displays a "No Disc" message (the L53 will play the CD layers of dual-layer discs).

NAD's product literature does not make any claims for DVD-Audio or SACD compatibility, but the manual is available online, so potential purchasers may be misled into believing that the L53 is compatible with these formats. Also, the NAD L53 is not a multi-channel device—it is a two-channel stereo receiver. NAD should correct the online and printed manuals ASAP.

THE SOUND

The L53 receiver is likely to be used with fairly modest loudspeakers, but I decided to evaluate the unit with my main loudspeaker system, a pair of ACI (Audio Concepts, Inc.) Sapphire III satellites along with their Sub-1 subwoofers. Each Sapphire III was bi-wired using a pair of D.H. Labs Q10 loudspeaker cables, and the Sub-1s were connected with double runs of D.H. Labs T14. The Sapphire

III/Sub-1 combination is nominally a 4Ω system, but it is a fairly easy load to drive, and the L53 had no difficulties with it. Because my Sub-1s are passive, and I have one for each channel, I did not use the subwoofer output.

I normally shy away from "all-in-one" pieces of equipment, because there are invariably performance trade-offs that must be made when several devices must be incorporated into a single chassis. Adding a DVD player to the three components already found in a receiver (pre-amp, power amp, and tuner) can only complicate matters further. But, there are plenty of instances where integration is desirable, for reasons of space and/or budget. As Chuck Hansen noted in his review, NAD seems to have made the right compromises in the L53, rejecting cheap, switching power supplies in favor of conventional transformers and regulation, and using high-performance Burr-Brown/TI OPA2134 op amps in the main signal path.

NAD's design choices have paid off in the sonic performance. The L53 is sonically much better than I would have

expected, with at least one foot solidly in the entry-level, high-end camp. The L53 provides musically satisfying, non-fatiguing listening over the long haul. It produces a credible stereo image from left to right, and gives at least a hint of depth perspective.

Bass performance is surprisingly good for so modest a product. Bass drums and low strings have decent weight and impact. In the *Rachmaninoff Symphonic Dances* DVD and *Respighi's The Birds* (Mercury CD), the low strings were warm and rich, and even the high strings have a pleasingly musical sound. The L53 offered quite smooth reproduction of choral music when played at reasonable levels, particularly on the 96kHz/24-bit DVD transfer of *Abravanel's Berlioz Requiem*.

Any product in this price range must have weaknesses, but it is almost unfair to compare a product as affordable as the L53 against my reference system. Nonetheless, readers are entitled to know where it falls short. The midrange has a rather dry quality; instrumental timbres are tonally quite accurate, but there's not

much liquidity in the sonic presentation. The soundstage is somewhat narrow from left to right, and depth perspective is rather shallow and not particularly precise.

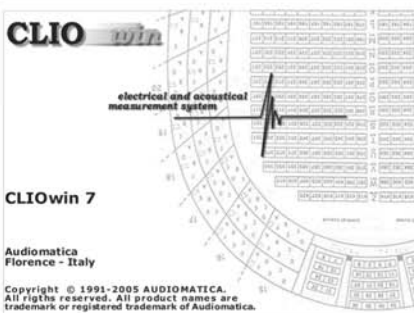
Though the bass weight is pretty impressive, definition is somewhat lacking. Low string articulation can be a bit mushy. At large orchestral climaxes, the L53 will become a bit congested, and high string tone can become a bit coarse or wiry. If really pushed, the treble can become a bit sizzly (this is, after all, a modestly-powered device). The L53 does not resolve every last ounce of inner detail, but at reasonable levels its errors are mostly things left out, rather than the addition of unmusical things. Bear in mind that I have evaluated the L53 on an extremely revealing, high-end loudspeaker system.

I also found that the L53 is good enough sonically to make differences between inexpensive and high-end loudspeakers readily apparent. I found that the Madisound *Sledgling* (more on this system follows) performed very well with the L53, but the small loud-

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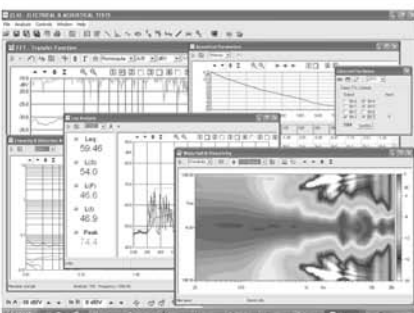


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speaker's weaknesses were also obvious, compared to my reference ACI system. These weaknesses include a tendency toward brightness in the treble, a less precise stereo image, and a loss of inner detail. Of course, it goes without saying that such a small loudspeaker system will lack the bass of my Sub-1s. If space, rather than cost, is the main consideration, the L53 becomes better with more refined speakers.

Video performance of the L53 leaves nothing to be desired, and delivers the superb picture quality I have come to expect from DVDs with current-generation video circuitry. The FM tuner did a fine job on our local public radio station, and offered slightly lower stereo noise than my reference tuner (an Adcom GTP-400) on the CBC station from Ottawa, some 85 miles away. The L53 does not have an FM signal strength indicator, but NAD clearly could not offer every desirable feature at this price. The FM tuner display supports the Radio Data System (RDS), which allows the L53 to display the station name (PS mode) and radio text (RT mode), if the stations encode that information in their carrier (our local public radio station does).

SRS TECHNOLOGY

The L53 is basically a two-channel device, but it incorporates the Sound Retrieval System developed by SRS Labs which simulates surround sound from

two-channel sources. The L53 manual notes that "SRS, the leading 3D Sound technology in the world, is the result of many years of research based on the psychoacoustics of sound and the dynamics of the human hearing system. SRS retrieves the spatial information that is lost during the recording and playback process and restores the original three-dimensional sound-field. As a result, the reproduced sound is much closer to what the artist originally intended and to that of a live performance."

On classical music recordings, I found the SRS system to be very unnatural. Orchestral recordings are reproduced with a strangely hollow quality. SRS destroys the original two-channel image, making it impossible to localize instruments within the original soundstage. The orchestra seems awash in a sea of confusion.

While listening to SRS, I can feel the pressure differences on my eardrums produced by the extreme phase changes rendered by the system, similar to listening to opposite polarity (incorrectly, "out-of-phase") loudspeakers. I found this an annoying effect, one that did not make me wish to continue listening. For classical music collectors who hear live music on a regular basis, SRS is a gimmick. I hear live classical music every day, and SRS doesn't sound like any live performance I have ever heard. Collectors of more popular fare may find the effect more pleasing.

I did try SRS on a couple of DVD movies with stereo soundtracks, and found the effect a bit more satisfying. My reaction to the SRS feature has nothing to do with the rest of the L53's performance. If you don't like SRS, you don't have to use it.

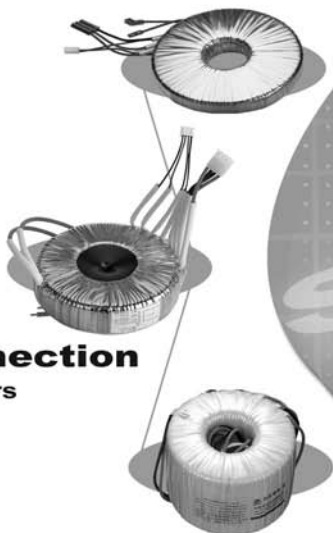
A CUT ABOVE THE ALTERNATIVES

The L53 is likely to be used in situations where space is at a premium and/or cost is a deciding factor, including a college dormitory, office, apartment, or as a second home system. For many applications, the NAD L53 provides an attractive alternative to products like the Bose Wave Music System with integrated CD player, which is currently selling for \$499. This one-piece unit incorporates a pair of less-than-overwhelming 3" speakers and does not play DVDs.

There are a number of loudspeakers priced around \$200/pair or less that would make fine companions to the NAD L53. Audio Advisor (www.audioadvisor.com) often has incredible sales on high-quality, small loudspeaker systems. Currently, they are selling the Athena Audition AS-B1 for \$99/pair (list is \$180), and last spring they offered the Wharfedale Diamond 8.1 with maple finish for the same price (half of list). Check their website for current specials like these. The PSB Alpha B loudspeakers are also getting favorable press these days, and normally sell for less than their list price of \$249/pair (www.audioadvisor.com).



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psbspeakers.com). PSB is a division of Lenbrook, NAD's parent company.

DIY audiophiles should consider the Dayton BR-1 kit from Parts Express (www.partsexpress.com) at \$140/pair, or Madisound Speaker Components' fine *Sledgling* kit priced at \$216/pair (www.madisound.com). Both come with assembled enclosures, with the *Sledgling* featuring particularly robust construction. The point here is that for \$200 to \$300 more than the cost of a Bose Wave Music System, you can get performance several orders of magnitude better by mating an L53 with any of these loudspeakers, and you get a DVD player to boot.

In short, the L53 is a very good performer at a very fair price, continuing the NAD tradition of real value for the money. Anyone in need of a cost-effective, space-efficient audio system should consider this fine product.

RECORDINGS USED FOR EVALUATION

Rachmaninoff: Symphonic Dances, Op. 45. Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Donald Jo-

hanos, conductor. Classic Records DAD 1004. (96kHz/24-bit PCM transfer of 30-ips analog tape engineered by David Hancock).

Berlioz: Grande Messe des Morts (Requiem), Op. 5. Charles Bressler, tenor; Utah Symphony Orchestra, University of Utah Civic Chorale and University of Utah A Capella Choir conducted by Maurice Abravanel. Classic Records DVD HDAD 2012. (This set contains two double-sided DVDs, one with 96kHz/24-bit DVD-Audio Surround and Dolby Surround programs, and another with 192kHz/24-bit stereo DVD-Audio and 96kHz/24-bit stereo PCM programs; the 96kHz/24-bit stereo PCM program was used for this evaluation).

Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade, Op. 35. Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Fritz Reiner. RCA Victor Living Stereo "Gold" CD 68568-2.

Mussorgsky, arr. Ravel: Pictures at an Exhibition. Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Fritz Reiner. RCA Victor Living Stereo "Gold" CD 68571-2.

Dukas: The Sorcerer's Apprentice. Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch. RCA Victor Living Stereo CD 68978-2.

Respighi: The Birds. London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antal Dorati. Mercury Living Presence CD 432 007-2.

Schoenberg: Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16 (1949 Revision). London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antal Dorati. Mercury Living Presence CD 432 006-2.

Stravinsky: The Firebird (Suite, 1919 Version). Atlanta Symphony Orchestra conducted by Robert Shaw. Telarc SACD-60039. (Direct Stream Digital transfer of the original Soundstream digital recording; the CD layer was used for this evaluation). **ax**

MANUFACTURER'S RESPONSE:

Gary points out that the manual contains an error on page 6. This will be reworded in future issues of the manual and on the website.

—Mark Stone

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