

SOURCES



STRONG SRT 5495A HD personal video recorder

The Strong SRT 5495A is the company's current premium high-definition personal video recorder, offering a number of higher-end features and a large hard-drive. Despite this, it is still remarkably affordable.

Equipment

For slightly under \$500 the Strong SRT 5495A gives two high-definition digital TV tuners and a 500GB hard-disk drive for recording. That is enough space to record over 70 hours of the most bit-hungry HD station (One HD), and 200 to 250 hours of the various SD stations.

The front panel has a fairly-detailed LED front-panel display, showing station number and name, along with various status markers.

Of course it offers the usual outputs, including HDMI and component video. There are also composite and S-Video. The aerial is fed by two inputs. Normally you'd leave the supplied jumper in place from one of the aerial outputs to the second input, but this arrangement gives enough flexibility to allow you to use two separate antennas if necessary.

It also has the excellent bonus of external inputs — component video, composite video and stereo audio — with built-in analogue-to-digital video and audio converters. This allows you to use the unit as a recorder for, say, your Foxtel box, or digitise old recordings from a VCR. You can even program timer recordings for the external inputs.

Performance

Setting up the unit was pretty straightforward using the set-up wizard. The unit's station scan was effective, getting everything in our area... and beyond.

By default the automatic time-shift facility wasn't switched on, so we'd recommend that you go back into the menu system and make sure that is on. That way the unit will buffer up to the last couple of hours of the station you are currently watching, so you can rewind if you like. If it isn't

switched on, you can invoke the timeshift by pressing the pause key on the remote.

Reception reliability was excellent, as was the reliability of the recording timers. These can be manually programmed or by selection from the

EPG. You can set record padding periods for all recordings to ensure that the unit doesn't fail to capture the end of a show. A maximum of 15 minutes of padding is provided.

One useful enhancement would be some work on the EPG, which doesn't have a display format showing programs for multiple stations, nor jump keys for advancing through the program list to several days in the future.

During playback you can fast forward or rewind at up to 32x speed. But there are also jump keys and you can bring up a progress bar and add bookmarks. These persist through turn-off/turn-on cycles, and so can be quite useful. There is also an editing facility, but this doesn't actually remove the deleted parts of the video, so it releases no space on the hard disk.

Not that we think space is a problem. If you think the 500GB might not be enough for you, well just plug a bigger USB hard drive into the unit and set it as the recording drive.

The unit also extends beyond the usual limitation of two recordings at a time. It will record three different programs at once, so long as two of them are from channels on the same station. For example, you can record something on Nine, on 2 and on 24 at the same time. And while that's happening, you can watch something else on a channel associated with Nine, such as GO! or GEM! Or you can play back a different recording.

We recorded a couple of clips directly from a DVD player using both the composite video and the component video inputs. It turned out that the latter supported only standard definition content: either 480i or 576i. The picture quality delivered via composite was mediocre, due to the limitations of that format. But our test clip with component video was rendered with very good accuracy (as MPEG2).

One killer feature of this unit is something that shouldn't be regarded as a feature at all, but we do because it is so rare: the unit offers good picture quality from standard-definition stations over its HDMI output. For progressive scan conversion,

otherwise known as deinterlacing, the unit employs a decent motion adaptive processor, with none of the horrible repeated line artefacts often delivered by HD boxes when receiving SD stations.

Indeed, we ended up setting the output to 1080p and just leaving it be. The results were pretty respectable most of the time.

This PVR can also be used to transfer content between the unit and a computer on your network. If you're brave! The process is outlined in the manual, and uses a program on your Windows computer that turns a specified folder into a network share accessible to the Strong unit. Then you need to enter the IP address of your computer to the Strong (better fix that IP address, then) to add the computer to the list of devices on the left side of the screen. Then you can copy recordings across, though they are listed here not by name but by the channel, time and date, with *.trp files inside the folder (sometimes several, since the unit uses a maximum of 2GB per file). This isn't actually more difficult than file transfer from any other device, but it just seems a little counter intuitive.

The unit also supports display of JPEG photos and playback of MP3 music from USB device or from an SD card inserted into the unit. It also plays video, showing our MPEG and AVI clip but not recognising a DivX one.

Conclusion

The Strong SRT 5495A is a solid, flexible twin-tuner HD PVR that is such excellent value for money that *Sound+Image* has made it PVR of the Year. Perhaps its menus could be prettier and some functions a little easier, but given what you get for the dollars, who can complain? ■

Strong SRT 5495A HD personal video recorder

Price: \$499
Warranty: 12 months

- Good picture quality, including with SDTV
- Very good value for money
- Network/IceTV support

- EPG a bit limited
- Using some functions a little complicated

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