

"The unit, as it comes, is a set-top box, capable of receiving digital TV, but not recording. But if you just plug in a simple USB hard drive, it becomes a PVR..."

Although not labelled as Freeview-certified, the SRT 5425 has a number of the virtues required by that standard. For one thing it switched stations with remarkably speed, typically taking less than two seconds to get the new station's picture up on the screen. For another, the unit supports MPEG4. A couple of years ago I was pretty dismissive of MPEG4 capability in a previous Strong unit. At the time it seemed to me TV stations would have to be insane to introduce new digital TV stations not supported by the then (and probably, still) majority of digital TV receivers. But since then Freeview has launched, with an announcement of future MPEG4 transmissions; this would still cause an immense problem in making much existing digital TV equipment redundant, but it certainly seems that Strong was right and I was wrong. Past experience suggests that I would be wise to give up trying to predict the future! In any case, this unit ought to be reasonably future-proof when it comes to TV reception.

As is quite common with HD digital TV receivers, the digital audio output setting in the menus is labelled as being for the S/PDIF output. So initially I thought that this unit may have been hobbled by an inability to output Dolby Digital over HDMI, like some others. But that wasn't the case at all. If you set the unit to PCM, the internal decoder converts both MPEG and Dolby Digital to PCM. If you set it to RAW or AC3, then Dolby Digital is output in its original format, while MPEG is still converted to PCM. This applies to both the HDMI and coaxial digital audio outputs.

If you're using an AV receiver, go for RAW or AC3. Then if Dolby Digital 5.1 audio is used in a program, you can take full advantage of it. What you lose is the use of the unit's own volume control for any of the Dolby Digital stations (this only works on output PCM signals), but the mute control still works.

The picture quality from HDMI was very good, including with SDTV stations. There was no 'native' output format, which would permit the unit to automatically follow the station video format. But a 'Format' key on the remote cycled the HDMI output through 576i, 576p, 720p and 1080i output.

The HDTV performance with 1080i stations was excellent. With SDTV 576i stations, the deinterlacing was competently performed, so whether delivered at 576p or 1080i it looked good. But you have the choice to use 576i, so that if your display has particularly good video processing, you have the option to use it.

And, of course, you get that PVR functionality with the addition of a USB hard drive. I had a 320GB unit to hand, set to FAT32 format. No preparation was required: I simply plugged it in and after a few seconds I had the ability to record programs. You can set these up through manually applying timers, or via the EPG. If you do it the latter way, selecting a program to record just throws you immediately into the screen to set up a timer recording, but most of the boxes are automatically filled in. You can choose a repeat mode of Once (the default), Daily or Weekly. You must also go to the final entry on this screen (arrow up from the starting point to jump to the bottom) to change the Mode from 'View' to 'Record'.

Recording and timers worked reliably. Playback is pretty basic, but you get fast forwards and rewind speeds up to 32x. The recording worked both to a hard drive and also a large-capacity USB memory stick. Those who edit and archive might like to know that I could not get the recordings to play back in the VideoReDo editing program on my computer, even though they were in *.ts (MPEG2 transport stream) format.

You can watch other stations on the same broadcast band while recording — for example, you can record ABC2 and watch ABC1 at the same time. You can't play back a previous recording while you're recording something new.

You can choose from different partitions for recording on a connected USB hard drive, so newer high-capacity hard drives shouldn't be a problem.

As delivered, the firmware version installed on the unit was numbered 1.0.1, and dated late 2009. Around the time of official launch, a new firmware, also numbered 1.0.1, but dated April 2010, was released. This added a time-shift feature. Time shift is, of course, just a FIFO (first in, first out) buffer. To start it up you

press the 'Play' key on the remote and after a few seconds, with an on-screen notice, it starts up. You can then pause, rewind or fast forward through the buffer. Once again this worked well. (I'm not sure what its ultimate capacity is. The time shift just kept on chugging on. After three hours or so I gave up trying to wait it out.)

As a USB multimedia player, it worked OK. I was a little frustrated since it didn't seem to support any of the lossless audio formats I had on my USB media — WAV, WMA lossless or FLAC. But regular lossy WMA and MP3 were supported, along, Strong says, with AAC. It also supports photo display (including JPEG, BMP and PNG), but for some reason the photos displayed letterboxed, rather than at the maximum resolution the unit was capable of producing.

For video, it worked fine with my MPEG2, DivX and AVI files, and would even allow their display aspect ratio to be changed.

CONCLUSION

If you need an inexpensive way into HDTV, and want to have the option of adding a big recorder as well, the Strong SRT 5425 could well meet your needs; it's certainly impressively priced. *Stephen Dawson* +

VERDICT

Strong SRT 5425 HDTV set-top box

Price: \$129



- Good quality HDTV picture
- Low cost
- Inexpensively upgradable to basic PVR functionality



- Sometimes very slow to respond to remote control
- USB cable on front during PVR use unsightly

TESTED WITH: Firmware version: 1.0.1, 19 April 2010

INPUTS: 1 x aerial, USB

OUTPUTS: 1 x component video, 1 x composite video, 1 x HDMI, 2 x stereo audio, 1 x coaxial digital audio, 1 x aerial out

FEATURES: Record to external USB hard drive; supports MPEG4

POWER USAGE: 20W maximum

DIMENSIONS (whd): 250 x 42 x 178mm

WEIGHT: 0.87kg

WARRANTY: 12 months

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