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Hi-fi's own HD box

Theta's Compli Blu is a state-of-the-art universal (Blu-ray) disc player that, says **Alvin Gold**, brings HDMI into an audiophile context

What is your view of the ideal disc player? There are a number of possible answers to this, but definitely high on the list would be those models that bridge the apparently irreconcilable gap that distinguishes the various flavours of both the audio and video disc with the minimum loss of fidelity.

Using versatility and performance as yardsticks, this new model from Theta potentially, at least,

comes near the top of the list and, perhaps, at the absolute pinnacle. How so? Well this is a high-end transport which can be used as a full standalone player. It's happy dealing with almost any 12cm disc that is round and silver, be it audio or video.

Versatile performer

First and foremost, the Compli Blu is a universal audio transport, that can recognise and play CDs, DVD-Audio and SACD

DETAILS

PRODUCT:

Digital Compli Blu

ORIGIN:

USA

TYPE:

Universal disc player

WEIGHT:

5.1kg

DIMENSIONS:

(WxHxD)

430x77x336mm

FEATURES:

- Compatible BD-Video, DVD-Video, DVD-Audio, AVCHD, SACD, CD, HDCD, Kodak Picture CD, CD-R/RW, DVD±R/RW, DVD±R DL, BD-R/RE
- HDMI v1.3 with HDCP output up to 7.1 channel high-resolution PCM, 5.1 channel DSD
- 1GB internal storage for Blu-ray
- System control over HDMI via remote

DISTRIBUTOR:

Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE:

020 8971 3909

WEBSITE:

thetadigital.com

discs, be they stereo or multichannel. The Theta is also HDCD compatible. This means that it will also play DVD (and AVCHD) video discs and, unlike almost all so-called 'universal players', Blu-ray discs.

Because the Theta has an HDCP-protected HDMI output, it brings a whole new level of capabilities to the party, by being able to stream music from SACD in digital form – Bitstream or native DSD, depending on menu set-up. Of course, being a transport, this is dependent on your amplifier having an HDMI input, which current AV amps do have, but audiophile amplifiers do not.

In addition, the Compli Blu supports the main variations on the Blu-ray theme, including BD Live (interactive BD-ROM profile 2) and Bonus View, which adds PIP (picture-in-picture). The Compli Blu also has a USB card reader as a media reader and rear panel socketry includes RS232 for



system control and to flash the internal firmware.

Like an increasing number of well-connected components, there is also a LAN connector, which can be used to download additional BD-Live content from the internet – previews, trailers, special features and more besides.

No specialist producer can design its own Blu-ray player from scratch and the Compli Blu is no exception, being based on an Oppo BD83 platform. But although functionally similar, the two players are not the same, as noted on the Theta website entry for the this model which states: 'The Compli Blu is based on a manufacturing kit obtained from a third party then optimised by Theta Digital. In the past, we've partnered with Sony, Phillips and Pioneer. This time, we're pleased to partner with Oppo and establish yet another benchmark of performance by Theta Digital in the transport product category'. So say what you like, but there is no attempt here by Theta to pull the wool over anyone's eyes as to the origins.

“The Compli Blu is a knockout piece of equipment that helps highlight the true potential for HD audio.”

Changes that Theta has made to the basic Oppo player are as follows: the mechanism is now damped rather than sprung and has been moved to a lower position in the transport for stability; while the chassis has been built from thicker-gauge steel and the PCB tracks doubled in thickness. The internal firmware has also been customised for the Theta and is regularly updated.

The high-capacity (seven-amp) power section has been completely respecified. It is now a linear design based on four independently rectified and regulated supplies and multiple transformers, headlined by an 80-watt torroid.

Finally, the player has been built into a case that mirrors the presentation of other Theta

products, with obvious physical and visual benefits. What effects these various changes make to sound (and picture) quality is unknown, given that no Oppo model was available for comparison.

Our only criticism is that it's a pity (although in some ways understandable) that Theta feels it has to support the scourge of regional coding. Interestingly, the Oppo opposite number is available in an all-region version, though whether the hack involved can be applied to the Theta is not known. In accordance with licensing requirements, the player can only be specified for a single region, though a patch is available to change which region is supported.

Tracking down

The fact that, as we mentioned earlier, the Compli Blu is not entirely Theta's own work has become a matter of some controversy. The Oppo, for example, is much cheaper than the Theta and some frenzied (and in some cases spectacularly



THE COMPLI BLU is based on HDMI version 1.3, but Theta is currently working on Version 1.4. This will involve a major upgrade to the unit, including a new power supply and audio boards, and the interface which has major licensing implications, too. The new version should be available by September.

Whether existing players will be upgradable is not certain yet, as the player design has still to be finalised. Upgrades, however expensive, could also support 3D which, for better or worse, is one of the main drivers for HDMI 1.4.

Q&A...

HI-FI CHOICE SPOKE WITH DAVE REICH, PROJECT MANAGER AT THETA DIGITAL



We discussed the Compli Blu with Dave Reich (ex-founder of Classe Digital), in particular the analogue design which, in combination with the underpinning capabilities of the Oppo, helped shape what the Compli Blu has become.

HFC: What role did Theta play in the evolution of the Compli Blu?

DR: I am fundamentally an analogue designer and what Theta wanted to do was to improve the parts of the unit that were under our control, in particular the power supply and the physical elements of the design. These areas are where our strengths lie. We wanted to produce a player that was visually part of the Theta family and that had the kind of performance-led qualities that we have built into our existing range of products.

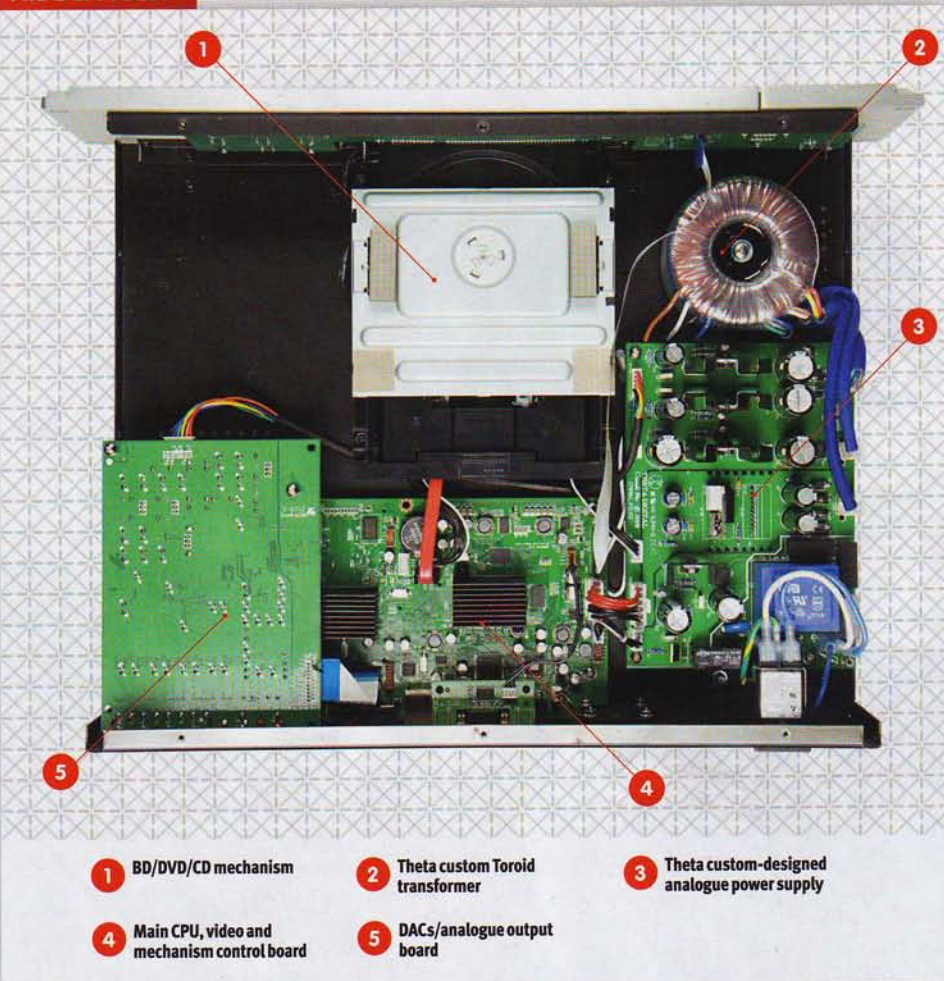
Did you work directly with Oppo on the design?

The answer is yes. They supplied us with the basic kit on which the player is based. Oppo then worked with us, modifying the internal firmware and the decoding software to our specific requirements.

But this was after we approached a number of suppliers in China and elsewhere and asked them if they could supply us with the basis of a player we could enhance and sell. For the most part they said 'yes', but they would only play ball on the basis of an initial order for, say, 10,000 units. They also wanted to know how many thousands (!) we would take every month. This is a bit like asking how many Bugatti Veyrons a market like the UK can absorb.

Of course it is not possible to sell this kind of quantity to the audiophile market and we were very pleased that Oppo were able to offer us an extremely competitive and well-developed platform, as well as the fact that they were willing to take a more realistic attitude towards our requirements.

HIDDEN TECH



1 BD/DVD/CD mechanism

2 Theta custom Toroid transformer

3 Theta custom-designed analogue power supply

4 Main CPU, video and mechanism control board

5 DACs/analogue output board

misinformed) comments in the blogosphere seek to claim that the difference in price is questionable.

Before we leave the question of price and the cost differences between the Oppo and the Theta, it's probably worth mentioning that the Oppo BDP-83 is listed at around £600 for the Region Two (UK) model. According to Theta, the price of its Compli Blu is consistent with other Theta models and given the quantities they reportedly produce this is certainly believable. If so, it makes any charges of profiteering seem wide of the mark.

In the end we remain agnostic about the value for money rating, but if you really want an out and out bargain, then the Oppo is possibly the player to go for. That's if you can find a Region 2 model and there's little or no reason to assume that it will outperform the Theta. What's more, Oppo product is not exactly easy to track down in the UK (as we discovered when researching this review). Also, what strikes us forcibly about the Compli

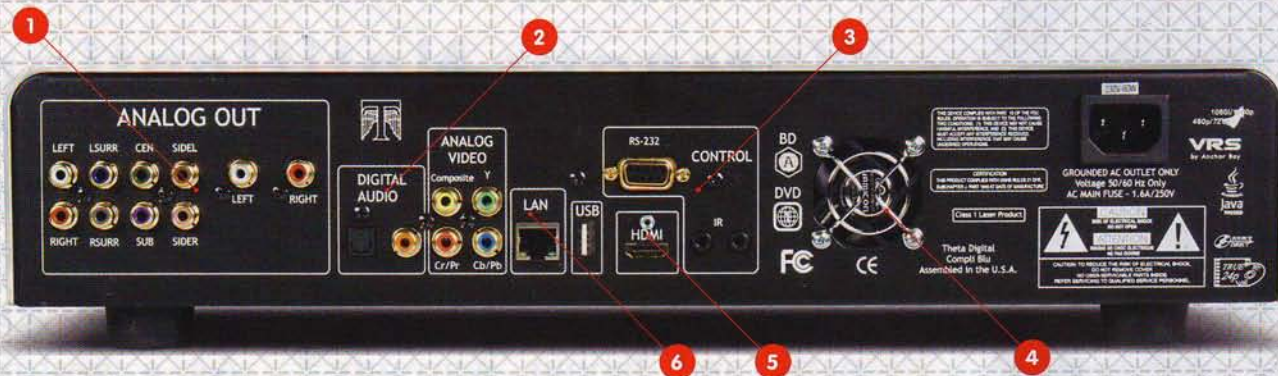
Blu is that, far from being expensive, it seems to be quite sharply priced.

True heavyweight

Any lingering thoughts that the Theta wouldn't stand up to the traditional virtues of the brand would be very wide of the mark. Although the Compli Blu is officially a transport rather than a player, the lines are blurred to say the least, because it does have analogue outputs, including two-channel and multichannel alternatives. The main limitation is that the analogue outputs will not deal with high-resolution audio, DTS Master Audio and Dolby True HD from Blu-ray discs without a processor at the far end of the HDMI link, which is also needed to extract a high-resolution DSD (or Bitstream) data from high-resolution audio discs (SACDs in particular). Note that some discs will downgrade the audio to a slightly homogenised lower level – the instructions and your ears can guide you here.

One thing that will cause real surprise is the speed with which the

CONNECTIONS



- 1** Discrete analogue outputs with additional left and right stereo mix-down
- 2** TOSLINK and Coaxial digital audio outputs
- 3** RS-232 (DB-9) and remote IR control
- 4** Fan and mains inlet
- 5** USB for updating and HDMI
- 6** LAN 'RJ' network connection

Theta identifies what kind of disc has been inserted and then proceeds to play. This fast-tracking discs makes a pleasant change from the general sloth-like behaviour of many other players, including non-universal Blu-ray models.

On the minus side, the loading mechanism isn't the smoothest ever and the player is mechanically rather noisy during play, though you'll be unlucky to hear it in your listening room in practice.

As a plain Red Book CD player, the Compli Blu is a true heavyweight. It is smooth and articulate, with a delicately refined sense of detail and a layered stereo image, as well as certain degree of spaciousness, which works well with some of our usual acoustic, rich-flavoured musical fare. And yet it is suitably raunchy and outgoing with more rock-flavoured material.

You can also use the display dimmer and the pure audio buttons on the remote control to improve

performance further – the pure audio circuits which kill the video circuits being by far the more useful of the two. As a CD player, this level of refinement and musical ability is just what is expected of a brand like Theta.

When used as an HDMI source, the final level of performance is partially dependent on what's available at the far end of the HDMI cable and the concept of audiophile-quality amplification which uses this interface is in its infancy (though it is only fair to say that it is on everyone's radar).

In many ways the prospect of high-resolution audio (stereo and multichannel alike) is more exciting than HD video, but for this test we were limited to the AV amplifiers we had on tap – from Sony, Onkyo and Denon, none of which are from the top level of their type. Nevertheless, they worked well.

The Theta is a refined and capable video player, with excellent screen

HOW IT COMPARES

THE CURRENT Casablanca preamp/processor is now the acknowledged obvious partner for the Compli Blu. It talks to the outside world through HDMI, and is capable of dealing with all the relevant formats, including Dolby True HD and dts Master Audio, as well as accepting uncompressed DSD data from SACD and bitstream from DVD-Audio.

Naturally the compressed (downscale) audio formats available from the Compli Blu are all compatible with the Casablanca and are handled transparently to the user, though you would not achieve the kind of performance that is available from the uncompressed HDMI interface.

Unsurprisingly, as an electronics specialist, Theta would not be drawn on the loudspeakers it thought people should use. But it did point to its existing range of amplifiers as being appropriate matches, but the same arguments would apply to any high-quality range from other sources.

contrast and good colour, making for very subtle images. The audio is handled particularly well and the Theta has enough of what counts under the bonnet to show the potential of DTS Master Audio and Dolby True HD lossless codecs, the senior citizens of the audio world which are designed to bring HD audio into the world of HD video.

Knockout

The Theta seems a little ahead of its time in some ways, as a universal player/transport (call it what you will) that anticipates changes that are already in progress in the world of audio and video. By any standards the Compli Blu is a knockout piece of equipment. It's presence helps to highlight the true potential for the new fledgling generation of HD audio codecs from Dolby and dts. And yet it supports the legacy formats, SACD, CD and even DVD-Audio, with real depth and conviction. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



OUTPUT LEVEL : 2.40Vrms for left and right. Levels of the dedicated stereo output are matched within 25 millivolts	THD+N (ODBS): 0.002% falls within expectations. We also expected better with Blu-ray (2.2%) given the format's resolution	FREQUENCY RESPONSE: +/-0.2dB is a fair result. The output actually starts to rise beyond 2kHz. With Blu-ray we measured +/-1.2dB	CROSSTALK: 10kHz (111dB), is probably the best crosstalk measurements we've come across so far	DYNAMIC RANGE: 96.0dB is very good and meets CD's theoretical limits. How can we possibly ask for more?
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Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Support for HDMI in audiophile context; rapid disc-type recognition
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: No setup status information without display and noisy mechanics
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A very accomplished transport which can be used as a capable standalone player
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

