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Theta Compli

Are the days of the high-end CD player numbered? Meet Theta's audiophile-grade 'universal' solution

PRICE: £4,482 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds Ltd, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.thetadigital.com

There are those who think CD should stay with CD players and that the DVD-Audio, DVD-Video or SACD player has no place in high-end – especially two-channel high-end – audio systems. The Theta folk aren't among them. The Theta Compli is a do-it-all disc spinner that favours everything equally.

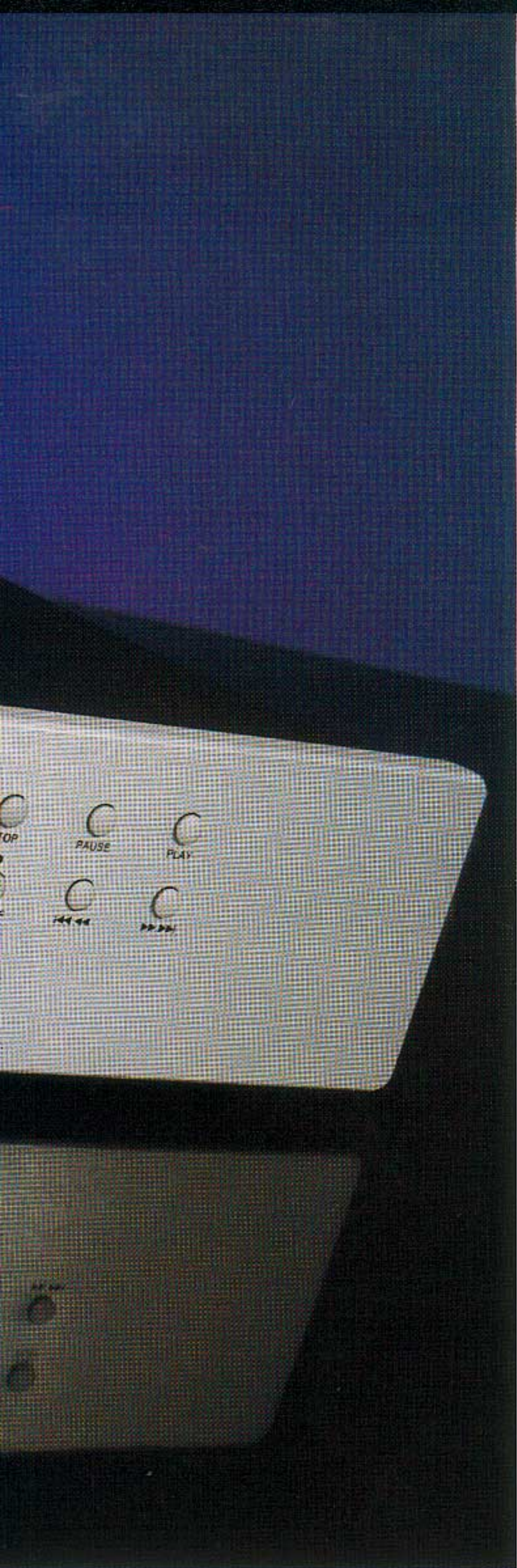
It's a surprisingly svelte for a player at this lofty level – normally when spending £4,500 on a player, companies feel disposed to

package them in cases twice the size of the Compli. That said, it's built like a tank, with a thick front panel and neatly rounded casework.

It is based on a top-end Pioneer universal DVD player, although you need to be seriously eagle-eyed to spot the similarities. The remote handset is a Pioneer with a Theta badge, the display is Pioneer and übergeeks may spot the same transport mechanism. But that is about as near as Theta comes to badge engineering.

To dismiss this player as a well-dressed Pioneer is as daft as claiming that a Jaguar is merely a Mondeo in drag. Every aspect of the player has been addressed to engineer the best possible performance across all formats, whether CD, SACD, DVD-A or DVD-V.

The back panel gives some idea of just how radical the upgrades inside are. There's BNC and AES/EBU digital connectors alongside the normal Toslink and coaxial. There is also



the Theta Digital Interface connector and an RS232 connection for AMX or Crestron remote hook-ups. The TDI link is a proprietary high-speed digital interface (in the manner of i.Link, Denon Link or Meridian's Smart Link) that allows digital transfer of all digital audio data, SACD and DVD-Audio included, to other suitably equipped Theta products – outboard DACs, processors and so on. Naturally, all the usual stereo and multichannel analogue connectors are also included, as are composite, S-Video and component/progressive scan video outputs. Optional extras include SDI and 480-pixel digital video connections (for those with the latest plasma screens or projectors).

This is one of the first truly platform-agnostic players around and it's equally happy with any disc you care to spin – CD, SACD or DVD-A/V.

Well, almost. SACD playback has a definite forward quality with a touch of sibilance that is never quite smoothed over (this is one of the few places where the player shows its Pioneer colours). In fairness, this is pretty subtle – it's less obvious than with many machines and only really noticeable when switching between disc types. Elsewhere the player is deftly balanced, making a sound that is as effortlessly smooth as it is keenly dynamic. It is also one of the most neutrally enjoyable players around.

SOUND QUALITY

Whatever form of disc is used, there is a sense of consummate detail and a coherence that is rare in universal, do-it-all players. Many such players have decent levels of information retrieval – it's a strong suit of the breed. Unfortunately, they often turn that information into a post mortem of music, eviscerating the recording and leaving it flat, cold and on the slab. The Theta is one of the few exceptions. It manages to keep the music alive, bouncy and focused, while retaining the informative nature of the universal disc.

Soundstaging is excellent, with a sense of layering within a tight-knit image that forms between, behind and in front of the speakers. It doesn't run particularly wide of the speakers, but within the confines of that space, it is truly holographic. Damien Rice's well-recorded 'O' CD sounded magical here – the disc's sense of occasion was highlighted by a soundstage so natural, so vivid and so

these can be over or understated; smoothed off in an attempt to rid the player of brightness, or brought so far forward that the music sounds like an all-girl chorus. Here, the player has exactly the right balance, and enables the listener to define the drive of Mozart's masterwork, to such an extent that if I were to be buried tomorrow (in fact I plan on being trebuchet'd and flung against a wall of lightly oiled supermodels, but that's an entirely different tale) I would want to be dropped off with this recording being played through this player. No, I wouldn't die for the Theta Compli, but I'd happily be buried to its accompaniment.

One of the biggest compliments in high-end seems like the biggest insult. This player sounds like it isn't there. It seems to add or subtract practically nothing to the disc and has no real influence over the sound of the electronics and speakers in tow. The palpable sense of correctness this bestows on all tracks played through it merely shows it to be the benign partner in all systems. This is not damning the Compli with faint praise, it is rare – read that as almost impossible – to find a disc spinner with almost no sonic signature, and when it comes to the still relatively new universal breed the numbers (so far) drop to the amount you can count on the fingers of one hand. And a hand that has spent some quality time with a threshing machine at that. Basically, the Compli is in the company of Linn's Unidisk, Bel Canto's Player and perhaps one or two other machines in the universal stakes. That's heady company indeed.

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solidly bolted down, it seemed as if the musicians had joined us in the room.

Many universal players suffer from bass lightness – it's most noticeable in the SACD replay, but extends to all formats. Bass is controlled and ordered, but gently rolls off and lacks the sort of deep-seated sense of rhythm found in good-order dedicated CD replay. This problem is not endemic though – the Theta proves that. This player has depth and clarity in the bass. From the organic bass of early 1960s jazz from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington to the deep and nasty artificial dub reggae sounds of Burning Spear, bass is presented without boom or overhang, but in a deep and lucid manner.

One of the acid tests of any player is Mozart's *Requiem* (the Decca – Solti version) on CD. Played at a decent lick, this should have plenty of space around the instruments, with soaring, articulate vocals (especially female vocals), which jump out at the listener, but never overawe the rest of the recording. Too often,

Okay, let's put this into some kind of perspective. The Theta Compli will not outplay an Audio Research, a Naim, a Wadia or any of the rarefied CD-only players around the same price. There is a touch of the universal player flatness that is freed up by using a dedicated CD player. But only a touch – you'd almost have to compare the players side by side to hear the difference. Essentially, if CD playback is your only priority, a dedicated high-end CD player will give you that extra 10 per cent. But if you plan on exploiting the flexibility of next-generation music discs plus films on DVD, all from a single player, the Theta is king.

It's that flexibility – coupled with excellent sound quality on all formats – that makes the this player such a valid option for today's audio enthusiast. Its video performance is as strong as its sound, and if the call of multichannel music and home cinema is becoming hard to resist, the Compli is one player that won't sacrifice your CD collection in the process. **HFC**

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