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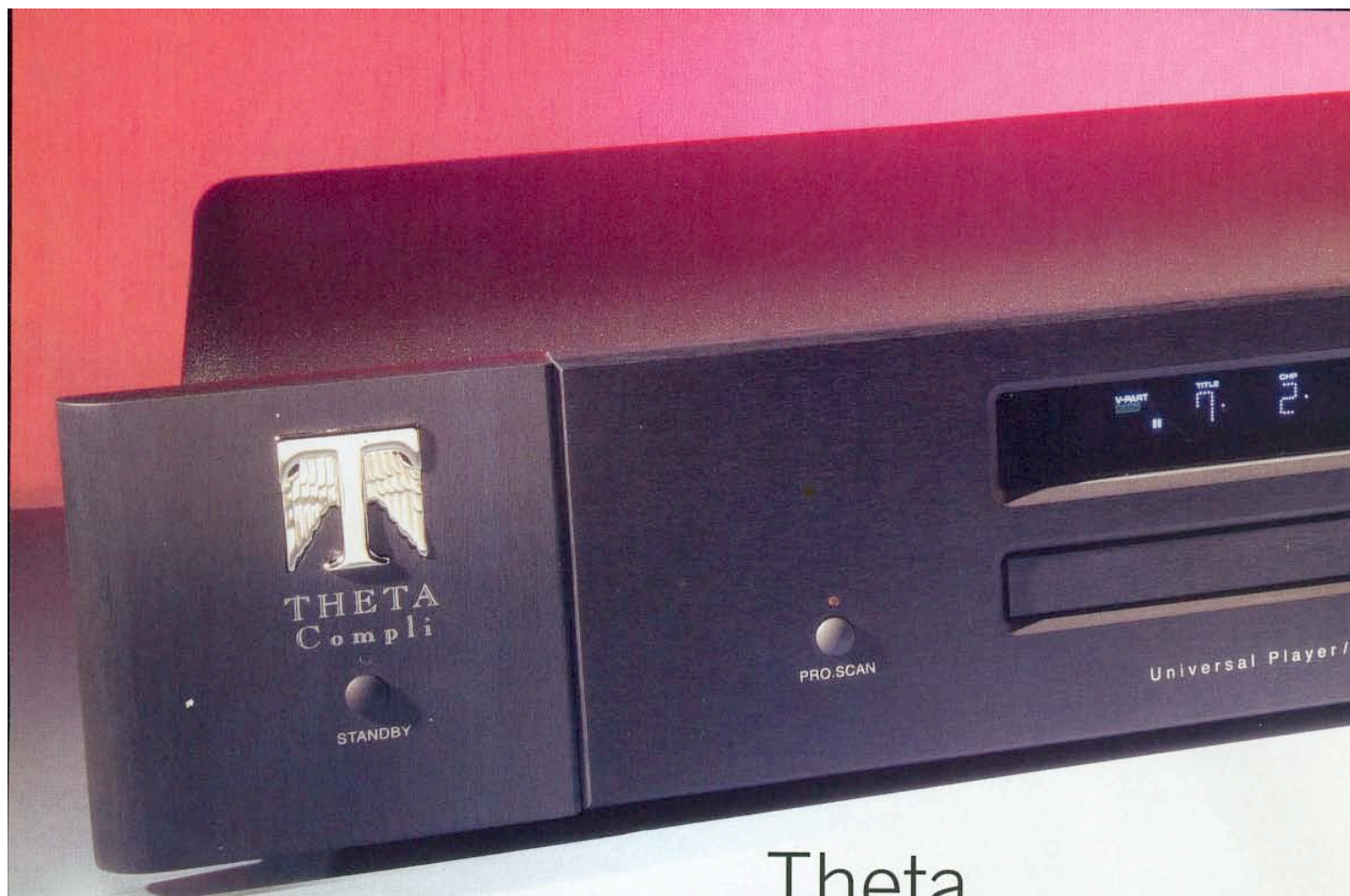
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# Theta Compli

Can Theta really give us the best of all worlds? Here's how the Compli universal player justifies its £4k-plus price tag

## Theta Compli

PRICE £4482

**A**s recently as 12 months ago, any sane observer would have argued that the best thing that could happen to the home entertainment business would be an end to the format nonsense. The means of achieving this? The ready availability of 'universal disc players' at all price points. Successful UDPs would, without exception, play any 5in silver disc, including all manner of written-to and re-writeable types, with the exception of data rather than audio/video discs, such as CD-ROMs and DVD-ROMs, which need computers to work.

Now it's gotten to the point where *decent* universal players can be had for under £300. Anyway, so far, so good for the revolution. But a lot of other stuff has also happened alongside the arrival of this expeller of consumer confusion.

In no particular order: OEM suppliers have decided to stop, or are about to stop producing CD-only transports for smaller independents to buy, so nobbled universal drives will probably end

up in so-called 'CD-only' machines for purists. SACD and DVD-A have proven to be complete and utter fiascos, beyond salvation, whatever anyone tells you. (One wag told me that their combined global sales in 2003-4 were less than the sales of LPs.) So Universal Disc Players no longer seem so appealing. Or necessary.

To make matters even screwier, the iPod has inflicted so much damage on the entire notion of

cannot simply be waved away with a Gallic shrug and a whiff of Gauloise: who the hell needs a universal player costing £4482?

In my multi-channel system of Lexicon MC1 A/V processor, Sony TA-P9000ES line-level multi-channel pre-amp, Theta Intrepid 5-channel amplifier, Marantz plasma screen and five MartinLogan speakers, I have a much cherished Denon DVD-2900 universal player. It has never

**"It begs a question that cannot be waved away with a Gallic shrug: who needs a universal player costing £4482?"**

discs as music carriers that the market for disc players of any sort is disappearing.

Then what happens? Along comes Theta's Compli, which seems like the answer to a raft of problems. And it has the sonic power to disarm even those who refuse to admit that, their commercial failure aside, SACD and DVD-A did have so much to offer. But it begs a question that

disappointed me, though its design brief is that of an affordable machine. I have used it without complaint. But I am not so easily pleased that I fail to realise it can be bettered in part by a standalone SACD player dedicated to the task, a CD-audio-only player dedicated to its task, a DVD video player dedicated to *its* task, and so on. But, hey, for £800 or whatever its retail was, the

## Auditions

universal player



**The Compli will play nearly any audio, visual and image format you care to choose, including MP3**

machine is a delight – surely to be regarded as a future classic, if the DVD era is to produce any.

So what does Theta's Compli bring to the table for five times the outlay?

Let's not even question the video side, because more and more we're learning that most brand-name DVD video players from £200 up deliver acceptable images, provided that you have a projector, screen or other display device able to resolve the images. I've even seen some superb results from the sort of unlicensed shite sold in some supermarkets and newsagents. (How do I know those other players are unlicensed? Easy: first, certain format owners are winning lawsuits hither and yon, and secondly, any legitimate, law-abiding manufacturer can tell you that if you pay for the rights to Dolby, DTS, SACD, MLP, MPEG, THX and all of the other alphabet soup ingredients, you're looking at fees that simply do not allow for the retail sale of a player at £49. At

least, not with the maths used in this dimension!) I'm not trying to diminish the importance of video circuitry, when plenty of engineers will tell you that a video signal is far more complex to resolve than audio, but so much of a player – DVD or universal – is a kit of parts made to an astonishingly high standard by the OEM supplier. I can't recall the last time I saw an unwatchable DVD player, yet plenty are unlistenable.

Please: I'm not trying to challenge the notion of garbage-in-garbage-out. But I have a sneaking suspicion that, for visual playback and with any given budget, the user is better off allocating greater expenditure on screen/projector than on the DVD player. But to guarantee that this isn't even an issue, the Compli provides sublime output from its S-video, component and composite outputs, while – in typical Theta fashion – making available options for a Serial Digital Interface (SDI) and the company's

own Ultra Sync II 480p output board using Faroudja Labs' DCDi (Directional Correlational Deinterlacing) technology. By the way, the review model was option-free.

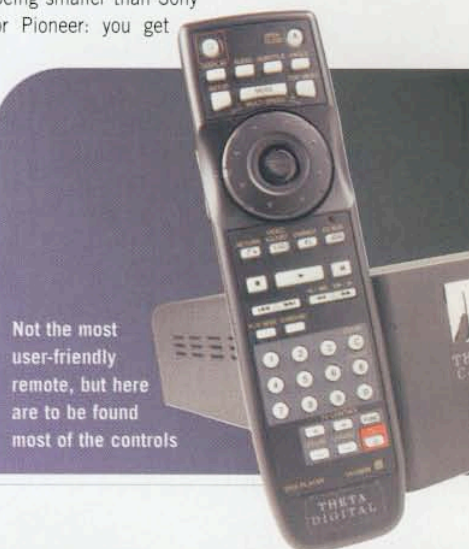
Even so, it was immediately noticeable that the Theta showed obvious visual gains over the Denon. Which it should, of course, given the difference in price. In particular, there was a reduction in the staircase effect on diagonals, primary colours were brighter, and there seemed to me a clear improvement in colour gradations, especially on sunsets, flames and others with high red/yellow or orange content.

While some might find this ludicrous, the Theta was positively magical when it came to resolving grey scales, a boon for those of us who cherish old monochrome movies be they *film noir*, silent-era or early Kurosawa. Grab the BFI's DVD of *Seven Samurai* and check out the rainiest, muddiest scenes. View Criterion's *The Third Man*, especially the shadows in the Vienna street scenes. Details come through that just vanish with lesser players. But not £3600's worth over, say, the Denon – unless you're either extremely critical, or have a superior display device.

You can take it as a given that the Compli is using a top-end transport section adapted to Theta's needs, probably a Pioneer. To this, Theta adds its own video and audio stages, audiophile output stages, a super power supply and the usual raft of high-quality designer components shunned by mass market makers. It's certainly a chunky, well-made machine, its 445 x 133 x 381mm (whd) belying a weight of 10.4kg (23lb).

Yet while the back is filled with the socketry associated with a UDP, even with the options blanked off, the front is rather minimalist. Its controls include, along with the absolute minimum of necessary buttons (play/pause/on-off/open-close buttons), only two extras: one to choose Pro-Scan for the optional video circuitry and another to defeat the video display when listening in purist, music-only mode.

All other controls, including menu control, numeric keypad, etc, are relegated to a rather tacky remote handset, with a teensy joystick for manoeuvring the menus that will have you cursing in frustration. But such is the price of being smaller than Sony or Pioneer: you get



Not the most user-friendly remote, but here are to be found most of the controls

stuck with generic doggie-do for remotes. The odds are that the people who can afford Complis will have custom-installed home theatres, with Crestron or similar remotes instead of this plastic joke.

While the Theta certainly dazzled me sonically in the aforementioned multi-channel system, it was more than just acknowledging that here was a player that provided equal weight to the primary sources of DVD-Audio, DVD (video), SACD and vanilla CD. I suspect that the latest Linns, the new upscale Denon and a handful of others have also resolved the thorny problem of curate's egg UDPs, where one format shines, one is OK and one or two are crud, but, so far and in my experience, this is one of the best to extract superb performance from all four. And the test was not in the multi-channel system, but when using the Compli as... a two-channel CD player.

Who knows: maybe this is the litmus test for universal players? After all, most people have more CDs than DVDs – certainly than SACDs and DVD-As – and more people spend time listening to music, even if just in the background, than sitting down to watch films. So is it not logical that CD playback should be as good as if not better than the rest?

I had ascertained to my satisfaction that the Compli worked stunningly well with surround formats, be it DVD-A, SACD or Dolby and/or DTS off DVD video discs. Theta products always have a characteristic smoothness, sheen and coherence to disarm those who fail to give surround sound a chance. The Compli has this in

### Universal soldier

As is necessary with a universal player, the Compli provides six-channel analogue audio outputs, along with digital outputs for PCM, DTS and Dolby Digital. It incorporates Theta's proprietary High-Speed Digital Interface, originally designed for Theta's two-channel Generation

VIII Digital-to-Analog Converter. The Compli is also able to connect to the sister processors, the Casablanca and Casa Nova, with their high-speed input options. Theta itself describes the universality thusly: 'Compli enables you to play nearly any audio, video, and image format:

DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, DVD-R, DVD-RW, SACD, Audio CD, Video CD, CD-R, and CD-RW. The Compli is also compatible with CD-R/RW, DVD-R/RW and MP3 formatted material, with some restrictions.' I have not yet found a disc, in three months' heavy usage, that baffled it.



Video display defeat and optional video circuitry selector buttons can be found on the fascia

sweet, warm and natural-sounding, the sort of player you can alternate with turntable playback and not feel nauseous when going from black plastic to silver.

It sounds like, well, a £4k CD player, the Compli's on-board DAC not inspiring for a moment the acquisition of an outboard device. Its L-R stereo spread is as seamless as its 360° surround envelope, its resolution first-class. And it begs the following party trick: find an anti-SACD type, slip in a two-channel SACD and don't say a word. If the victim doesn't admit that it's among the best CD playback he's ever heard, then tell him you know a supermarket where he can buy a £49 UDP.

Grumbles are few, mainly minor things like three-speed rather than Ferrari-quick variable speed search on DVD, no zoom control and other non-essentials. The remote is a piece of junk. But I'll say this much: if you don't want to restrict your digital playback to CD, if a part of you wonders what you're missing, the Theta Compli is one of the best ambassadors yet for the new formats. The realisation that all flavours of 5in disc can live harmoniously in a single chassis has to be the best news an audiophile can hear. ■

**Ken Kessler**

**While the back panel is filled with socketry, even with the options blanked off, the front is rather minimalist**

spades, exorcising the hated-by-purist artefacts that suggest way too much processing, or sonic trickery. If you want to experience truly all-encompassing 360° surround without holes, or a sense of there being five mono signals, a properly set-up system with a Compli driving it could very easily convert you.

But back to the litmus test: vanilla CD. I shlepped the Compli into the two-channel room and treated it as a CD player (and as an SACD player for two-channel discs, such as those from Audio Fidelity). I was warned that it would prove to be a thoroughbred with the oldest of silver disc formats. And it did.

If musicality is the goal for audiophiles, replacing specifications, accuracy, low distortion, soundstaging or other *causes celebres* as the banner for this decade, then the Theta will rattle not a few cages. However neutral I try to remain, in my heart of hearts I *want* universal players to end the bullshit, to unite every faction; musicality is one of the missing ingredients so far. Believe me: the Theta does for the high-end what the Denon DVD-2900 did for the real world.

Its CD playback is wholly audiophilic, with sound not unsurprisingly reminiscent of golden age players such as its great-great-great granddaddy, the CAL Tempest II. The Compli is

Theta makes available options for a Serial Digital Interface and its own Ultra Sync II 480p



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### Hi-FiNews verdict

Even without the optional extras (like Theta's Ultra Sync II 480p output board with DCDi), the Compli offers a fine picture performance – and it manages to deliver smooth, audiophile sound on all formats.