

the absolute sound

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• BUDGET COMPONENT OF THE YEAR

Oppo BDP-95 Blu-ray Disc Player

\$995

Oppo's universal players have earned a reputation for versatility and value, with each new model offering better features and sound quality than the last. Even so, we see Oppo's \$999 BDP-95 as a watershed product that, through sheer sonic excellence, establishes a new performance benchmark for sub-\$1000 digital players. The BDP-95 is defined by its distinctive audio section based on dual 8-channel, 32-bit ESS Sabre32 ES9018 Reference Audio DACs. One DAC drives the player's multichannel analog outputs, while the other drives two sets of stereo outputs (one set single-ended, the other balanced). Oppo says the balanced outs provide "a true differential signal path all the way from the DAC to the 3-pin XLR connectors"—a circuit topology rarely seen in players this price. The upshot is that the BDP-95 sounds stunning for the money and in an absolute sense, making it our Budget Component of the Year. *Chris Martens (219)*



Oppo BDP-95 Blu-ray/Universal Player

A High-End Icon(oclast)

Chris Martens

Over the past several years, Oppo has steadily been carving out a healthy chunk of the disc-player market and for all the right reasons. From day one, the firm has followed a singular vision that involves building versatile players that combine often shockingly high levels of performance and value in equal measure. As a result, Oppo's disc players have been winning friends, influencing people, and merrily re-writing the rulebooks that define exactly how much sound (and picture) quality one can reasonably expect from universal-disc player for a given sum of money.

But one other aspect of Oppo that's also deeply admirable is its dedication to continuous product improvements. Let's call this the "never-miss-an-opportunity-to-make-a-good-thing-better" impulse that, in my view, defines Oppo as a true high-end manufacturer (albeit one whose products are, by design, affordable). From year to year, the Oppo folks just keep on pressing forward in genuinely meaningful ways.

Those of you who have followed Oppo since its inception

know that the firm's practice has been to produce really good, full-featured standard models, but then to offer somewhat more costly "hot-rod" models targeted specifically toward sound-quality-conscious music lovers. This basic practice continues with the firm's new second-generation Blu-ray/universal players. Where Oppo's BDP-93 (\$499) serves as the standard model, the just-released BDP-95 (\$999) stands as the flagship, audiophile-grade model.

In the past, Oppo's flagship players were often "tuned to the nines" versions of its standard models, but that's no longer the case. While the BDP-95 shares some features with the BDP-93, it is in fact an entirely different player in ways that run more than "skin deep."

Audiophile Highlights

Apart from externally obvious differences, the BDP-95 differs from the BDP-93 (and from most other competing Blu-ray/universal players), by providing a distinctive array

NEXT-GEN DIGITAL - Oppo BDP-95 Blu-ray/Universal Player

of audio features:

- Very high quality 32-bit DACs similar to those some high-end manufacturers use in multi-thousand-dollar, two-channel CD/SACD players.
- Dedicated stereo analog output where “each output is driven by four DAC channels stacked together to achieve even higher performance.” (The stereo output offers two sets of output connectors: one set with RCA single-ended connectors and the other with XLR balanced connectors.)
- Multichannel analog outputs driven by a second set of the player’s two ES9018 DACs.
- Substantial low-noise power supplies incorporating a toroidal power transformer “custom designed and built by Rotel.”
- Coaxial and optical digital outputs that allow the BDP-95 to be used as a digital transport to feed outboard DACs.
- Expanded bass-management options with subwoofer crossover settings for 40Hz, 60Hz, 80Hz, 90Hz, 100Hz, 110Hz, 120Hz, 150Hz, 200Hz, and 250Hz.
- Powerful connectivity options, including a hard-wired RJ45-type Ethernet port, a wireless WiFi adapter, an eSATA port, and two USB 2.0 ports.
- Rich disc-and-media format support for Blu-ray Disc, Blu-ray 3D, DVD-Audio/Video, SACD, HDCD, CD, Kodak Picture CD, AVCHD, MP4, DivX, MKV, FLAC and WAV from recorded discs or, where feasible, from USB or eSATA drives.

As you look back over this list of highlights, ask yourself this: Have you ever seen a \$999 universal player that offered an audiophile-oriented feature set like this? I certainly have not, which further underscores the value on offer here.

The BDP-95, like many high-quality players, benefits from a generous amount of run-in time and needs plenty of warm-up before giving its best. It also tends, as do many other high-end players, to benefit from extra care taken in selecting associated power cords and signal cables, so that some experimentation is the order of the day. Odd though this may sound, the BDP-95 deserves—and in a sense almost demands—to be used with very-high-quality cables that could potentially cost as much (or more) than the player does. Once these preliminary issues are resolved, however, the sound of the BDP-95 becomes very special indeed—especially if you choose to listen through its balanced XLR outputs.

As I perceive things, the BDP-95 has three signature qualities that set it apart from the competition. First, the player has a highly detailed sound, yet a sound where the different aspects of “detail” are so thoroughly and beautifully integrated that you tend not, at first blush, to notice just how much sonic information the player is able to retrieve. When I use the term “detailed” to describe the BDP-95, I am thinking of a complete package that includes subtle timbres, textures, transient sounds, reverberations and echoes, and especially spatial cues. Put all of these elements together and there’s suddenly more “there” there.

Second, the BDP-95 is remarkably smooth sounding, which is all the more impressive when you consider that it is also highly detailed. In my experience, detail and smoothness don’t necessarily travel together, so it’s a rarity to find them working as synergistically as they do in the Oppo. There’s real sonic “magic” to this combination of virtues—sort of the audiophile equivalent

of gain without pain.

Finally, the BDP-95 is capable of exceptionally three-dimensional presentations, assuming your chosen recordings are up to the task. Three-dimensionality, more than any other quality, gives the Oppo an overarching and holistic quality of sophisticated musicality, making it sound like a higher-priced component than it actually is. During my listening tests, for example, I compared the sound of a series of discs being decoded by the digital front end of the excellent Anthem Statement D2v A/V controller (\$8499) to the sound of the same discs played through the BDP-95. I also did similar comparisons between the BDP-95 and two comparatively expensive reference players I had on hand: a Musical Fidelity kW SACD player and a Rega Isis CD player. The results were eye-opening.

First, I found the BDP-95 consistently outperformed the Anthem controller’s digital front end—sounding smoother, more detailed, and *considerably* more three-dimensional. I also found the Oppo was thoroughly competitive with (though perhaps not fully the equal of) my two high-end reference players. While I ultimately preferred my reference players to the Oppo, the Oppo sounded, in a qualitative sense, much more *like* the premium-priced reference players than unlike them. In short, the Oppo proved to my satisfaction that it could “play with the big boys.”

Let me provide a handful of illustrations to show how these qualities play out with real-world recordings. As a starting point, listen to Musica Nuda’s cover of the classic Beatle’s tune “Come Together” from *Live à Fip* [Bonsai Music]. Musica Nuda represents a category-defying collaboration between vocalist Petra Magoni and acoustic bassist Ferruccio Spinetti. The track opens with Spinetti vigorously playing the familiar opening theme of “Come Together” on his acoustic bass while what turns out to be a processed form of Magoni’s voice supplies what would normally be percussion and other instrumental accents. As the song evolves, it becomes clear that Spinetti’s bass will not only supply the traditional “bass part” of the tune, but

SPECS & PRICING

Disc/file formats supported: Blu-ray Disc, Blu-ray 3D, DVD-Audio/Video, SACD, HDCD, CD, Kodak Picture CD, AVCHD, MP4, DivX, MKV, FLAC and WAV from recorded discs or, where feasible, from USB or eSATA drives	Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz (-0.3dB), 20Hz-96kHz (-2.5dB)
Digital audio outputs: Two HDMI, two digital (one coaxial, one optical).	Signal-to-noise ratio: >130 dB (A-weighted, mute)
Analog audio outputs: one 7.1-channel output, two stereo outputs (on single-ended via RCA jacks, one balanced via XLR connectors).	Dimensions: 4" x 16.875" x 12.25" Weight: 15.4 lbs.
	Warranty: One year, parts and labor Price: \$999
	OPPO DIGITAL, INC. (650) 961-1118 oppodigital.com



will also—through Spinetti’s sheer dexterity and inventiveness—provide other instrumental parts, as well (so that, in essence, one hears acoustic bass playing the role of an ensemble). The BDP-95 makes it easy to hear Spinetti apply various playing techniques as he draws multiple distinct voices from his instrument.

At the same time, Magoni applies her expressive and malleable voice in a highly creative way, sometimes supplying traditional vocals, but at other moments shifting radically in pitch and texture to produce what almost seem like sounds produced by otherworldly instruments or even a synthesizer (an illusion reinforced by selective use of presumably soundboard-controlled reverb and echo effects). Again, the Oppo is so detailed that it invites you to explore and savor not only the core sound of Magoni’s voice, but also the many unexpected twists and turns it takes along the way. Though there are basically just two people performing, the illusion is that of hearing a large and eclectic ensemble at play.

One subtle yet very important aspect of the Oppo’s rendering of the song is the deft manner in which it provides low-level sonic cues that let you know the song is not—despite its occasional use of electronic effects—a traditional studio recording, but rather a live performance. In an almost subliminal way, you become aware that—behind the occasional technical pyrotechnics—the performance is being captured in a real recording venue before a live audience. A delicious three-dimensional moment occurs about a minute into the song as Magoni belts out the song’s signature chorus line “Come together...” from center stage, only to have a voice positioned at the far right rear corner of the soundstage complete the line “...over me.” As the song powers to an abrupt close, the pent-up energy of the crowd erupts into enthusiastic applause that, through the Oppo, sound remarkably believable and realistic—not like “canned” white noise.

For another fine example of many of the Oppo’s musical strengths at play, try listening to the third (“The Alcotts”) movement of Charles Ives’ *A Concord Symphony* [SFS Media, Multichannel SACD). Though only a bit more than six minutes long, this movement spans quite a range of orchestral moods, introducing everything from gentle, contemplative woodwind themes through powerful and sometimes deliberately dissonant brass and percussion outbursts.

Throughout the movement, the BDP-95 impressed me favorably in several ways. First, it caught the distinctive timbres of each orchestral section in a rich and vibrant way. You hear what Brant once described as the “athletic surefootedness” of the orchestration conveying Ives’ musical ideas in “clear, vivid, and intense sonorities.” This player is all about getting the tonal

colors and textures of instruments right.

Next, the sheer smoothness of the BDP-95 allowed it to navigate the more angular and dissonant aspects of Ives’ themes in a way that revealed their intentional (and sometimes startling) idiosyncrasies, while at the same time allowing their richness and underlying beauty to shine through. If you know Ives’ music, then you may have found, as I have, that some disc players tend to turn it into a strident, jagged-sounded mess, but not so the Oppo. String tones, for example, sounded rich and buttery smooth, while brass section sounds had appropriate energy and bite, burnished with golden overtones. While the Oppo never hid or glossed over the at times quirky aspects of Ives’ themes, its inherent smoothness and tonal richness invited listeners to embrace the broader sweep and flow of the composition.

Finally, the BDP-95’s three-dimensionality let me hear that this was a live recording (captured in Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco), so that through myriad small sonic cues I got a sense of the orchestra as a living, breathing entity interacting with hall and audience.

It is important to bear in mind, though, that the Oppo isn’t one of those players that pursues detail for detail’s sake; instead, the player’s many small sonic details coalesce to form an integral, organic whole that simply “sounds right.” If you stop to think about it, that’s one of the highest compliments any disc player could earn.

Are there caveats, here? There are a few, though it seems almost churlish to mention them given the many things the BDP-95 does well, and for so little money. From an operational standpoint, I would love to see Oppo configure this player so that it can serve as a USB DAC. Sonically, the Oppo already delivers very good-to-excellent performance in most areas, so that the player could perhaps best be improved by simply expanding upon its current core strengths: detail, smoothness, and three-dimensionality. About the only area where the BDP-95 might immediately benefit from a bit of extra work would be in the area of low-bass performance, where some competing players do offer a somewhat deeper and more powerful presentation with a bit better pitch definition in an absolute sense. But that said, let me also be clear on one fundamental point: Absolutely nothing I’ve heard at or even vaguely close to the BDP-95’s price can compete with its sound quality.

The bottom line is this: The BDP-95 is by far the finest Blu-ray/universal disc player Oppo has yet produced. If you can afford one, then put the Oppo right at the top of your short list. If you can afford something more expensive, strongly consider buying the Oppo anyway. It’s that good. **tas**