

## Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD Blu-ray Universal Player Reviewed

Once upon a time, there was a universal player, [the Lexicon BD-30](#) that aspired to be the high-end alternative to the growing number of affordable universal players entering the marketplace. At \$3,500 retail, the BD-30 was expensive in comparison to other universal players, but not so outlandishly priced as to warrant discarding it right away. However, trouble was afoot and it didn't take long for enthusiasts to discover that the BD-30 was the emperor's new clothes, in that it wasn't much of a high-end solution at all, but merely a dressed-up impostor. Shamed, Lexicon reeled back their excitement for the BD-30, practically killing it in the process. Many enthusiasts and journalists alike rejoiced at their victory and [the great Oppo BDP-93](#) became the undisputed king (at the time) among universal players. The end.



The problem I have with the above story isn't that it's not true - well, not all of it; Lexicon did do a piss-poor job of educating consumers about what they actually did to improve upon Oppo's design, but that's not my issue. The issue I have is that Oppo came away from the fight a champion, when one could easily make the argument that even the Oppo wasn't an Oppo. You see, Oppo doesn't make the platform from which their universal players are based; they get it from Mediatek, an OEM company that also happens to supply Cambridge Audio. So while the Lexicon may have been an adaptation of the Oppo BDP-93, the Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD (751BD) reviewed here is not.

At its core, [Oppo's newer, higher-end BDP-95](#) has more than a few similarities to the 751BD, in that they both use the Mediatek chipset, which grants them the ability to be compatible with all audio/video formats. This in turn means that some of the menus, connection options and controls are going to be similar between the two brands - though it does not mean they're the same or that one is merely a re-badge of the other.

Turning my attention solely to the 751BD reveals a fine-looking player, one that has virtually no visual similarities to the Oppo in any way, at least from its front panel. The 751BD has a deep, almost black brushed aluminum finish that looks more high-end and feels more substantial than the competition. The 751BD itself measures a little over three inches tall by nearly 17 inches wide and 12 inches deep. The 751BD tips the scales at 11 pounds, which is heavy for a Blu-ray player, though not quite as heavy as Oppo's BDP-

95, which bottoms out at 16 pounds. There are manual controls across the front of the 751BD that control play/pause, stop, chapter skip and eject, as well as a single control marked "filter," which allows the user to set the curve, if you will, of the 751BD's internal DAC - more on this in a moment. There is also a front-mounted USB input that can access compatible music and movie files for playback through the 751BD. The 751BD's disc tray is located in the center, just above its narrow display window, which is clear as day and able to be read from distances in excess of ten feet.

Around back, you'll find a myriad of connection options. Going left to right, these include its Ethernet port, second HDMI output, component and composite video outputs, IR Emitter, second USB input, e-Sata input, first HDMI output, dual digital output (optical and coaxial) and RS-232C port. A quick word on the 751BD's dual HDMI



outputs: they're both HDMI 1.4-compliant, meaning they support 3D and can power multiple displays, which I'll get to in a moment. It also means that you can send 3D video to your [3D-capable HDTV](#) while sending the audio to your non-3D capable AV preamp or receiver, thus extending the life of some of your components if they're not 100 percent up on the times. Above and to the right of the RS-232C port rests the 751BD's 7.1 channel analog audio outs. To the right of them are the analog stereo outputs, all of which are unbalanced. The Oppo BDP-95 offers balanced stereo outputs, as well as unbalanced ones, and also showcases its use of a fan when comparing the two universal players' back panels. To the far right of the 751BD's analog audio options is its detachable AC power cord. The 751BD's back panel is clearly and intelligently laid out and allows for easy cable management should you connect it via a single HDMI cable or in multiple different ways as I did, which I'll get to later in the review.

Under the hood, things get really interesting. The 751BD is compatible with and can play back 3D Blu-ray, DVD, CD, HDCD, DVD-Video, DVD-Audio and SACD discs. Its primary HDMI output features the Marvell QDEO video processor, which provides it with motion-adaptive noise reduction, as well as up-scaling to 1080p for legacy source material. The 751BD can decode all of the latest surround sound formats, including [Dolby TrueHD](#) and DTS-HD Master Audio. These codecs can also be sent via bitstream over HDMI to your AV receiver to decode if you prefer, or if you have an older AV receiver that cannot accept decoded Dolby TrueHD or [DTS-HD Master Audio](#) signals. In the audio realm, the 751BD employs five (one per channel) Wolfson WM8740 24/192kHz digital to analog converters or DACs, as well as Anagram Technologies' Q5 192kHz upsampling technology and a choice of digital filters that help tailor the DAC's overall sound. The filter can be set to linear phase, minimum phase or steep. Fans of Cambridge Audio may be thinking to themselves that much of the 751BD's analog and/or DAC capabilities seem similar to what can be found in their [DacMagic DACs](#), and they wouldn't be wrong, for the 751BD employs a lot of the same circuitry. The 751BD also has a Pure Audio mode, which shuts down all video processing to ensure the purest audio signal. In comparison, the Oppo uses a SABRE32 Audio DAC from ESS Technology, though it only uses two, one for its multi-channel outputs and the other for its two-

channel output. Lastly, the 751BD uses a switch mode power supply, as opposed to a standard toroidal transformer (like the Rotel sourced power supply in the Oppo), giving it better efficiency and a standby draw of less than a single watt.

The 751BD ships with a wireless dongle that connects to the back of the player and provides it with the ability to connect to the Internet, thus taking advantage of BD Profile 2.0 material and other features that now come standard with many Blu-ray discs. Of course, you can also access the same material via a hardwired Ethernet connection, but it's nice to see Cambridge giving you a wi-fi option, albeit with a dongle. I should also point out that the 751BD does have some internal storage in the form of 1GB of memory.

But what about price? It's true we've become more consumed with price than ever before and are willing to often get less if it means saving a buck or two. On the flip side, we're more prone to judge a product as better because of its price, which can get confusing. Thankfully, the Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD player doesn't cost an arm and a leg. Better still, it isn't that much more expensive than the Oppo BDP-95, to which it has been compared. The 751BD retails for \$1,249, though I've seen it for less through legitimate dealers. At \$1,249, the 751BD is only marginally more expensive than the Oppo at \$999, though if you go over the feature set again, the slight up-tick in price appears justified.

### **The Hookup**

Installing the 751BD into one's system is pretty straightforward if you plan on using a single HDMI connection into either [your AV preamp](#)/receiver or HDTV. However, for the purposes of this review, I connected the 751BD to my reference system in a variety of ways, beginning with its HDMI outputs. I ran one to [my Integra DHC-80.2](#) and another to my [Anthem LTX-500 D-ILA front projector](#). The bulk of my review period with the 751BD was spent evaluating it via an HDMI connection to my Integra AV preamp. I should also point out that I disabled my Integra's internal video processing so as not to infringe upon the 751BD's video performance.



Next, I connected the 751BD to my Integra's CD inputs via a pair of unbalanced analog interconnects, courtesy of Crystal Cable. In order to make a true reference comparison, I used my trusty Mapleshade Clearview interconnects as well.

I also connected the 751BD to my reference DAC, the Wyred 4 Sound DAC-2, and to my affordable reference DAC, [Cambridge's own DacMagic](#). It should be noted that the DAC-2 uses the same DAC chipset as the one found in the Oppo BDP-95. I connected the 751BD to my DacMagic in order to test the similarities and differences between the 751BD's internal DACs and the DacMagic. All digital connections were made via generic coaxial and optical digital cables.

The rest of my reference system played out as follows. I have Panasonic's TC-P50GT30 50-inch HDTV plasma, which I've had professionally calibrated to THX standards,

courtesy of Ray Coronado of SoCalHT. It should be noted that Ray did a calibration to the 751BD itself for, out of the box, the image was a touch bright and the contrast too high. Calibration of the 751BD can be tackled via a disc such as Digital Video Essentials. I also used my reference Anthem LTX-500 D-ILA projector, though it was not calibrated to the same THX standard as my Panasonic plasma. My two screen choices included [a Dragonfly high-contrast screen](#) from SnapAV, as well as a Vutec Letric III with Vutec's BriteWhite (1.3 gain) material.

For two-channel listening I used Pass Lab's X250.5 two-channel amp to drive my reference [Bowers & Wilkins 800 Series Diamonds](#), both of which were connected either to my Integra AV preamp or to the speakers themselves using Crystal Cable. For multi-channel listening, I used my [Parasound 5250 v2 five-channel amplifier](#), which powered three Episode 900 LCRs across the front, and my two [Noble Fidelity L-85 LCRS in-ceiling speakers](#) for the rear channels. I used generic speaker cables and interconnects for the multi-channel setup.

### Performance

I began my evaluation of the 751BD with two-channel music, courtesy of Amos Lee's self-titled debut and the track "Keep It Loose, Keep It Tight" (EMI). Using the 751BD's internal DACs, Lee's vocals had a natural and organic presence to them with an immediacy that felt live. The entire midrange had a sort of sultry, sweet quality to it that was seductive without sounding recessed or veiled. The delicate piano notes hung effortlessly in space and possessed a natural sense of air and decay throughout. The subtle double bass had nice definition and texture and plumbed deep enough to ground the performance and give it a palpable edge.

In terms of soundstage, the 751BD truly did the recording proud, in that it was able to extract every last ounce of detail and inject it into the performance, giving me a truer sense of the recording space and of the musicians within it. Speaking of detail, there just seemed to be more of it via the 751BD, in that subtle nuances, such as the irregular quiver of a guitar's string or the reverberation of sound within a double bass'



hollowed body, were presented with far more authority and focus than what I've experienced in players of this type or price in the past. Truthfully, as a two-channel source, relying solely on its internal DACs, I view the 751BD's performance as nothing short of reference quality at its price point and even a few ticks above.

Speaking of the 751BD's internal DACs, I found them to be superior to what is offered in the Integra DHC-80.2, for when feeding a digital signal to the Integra for it to decode, the sound became vague, recessed and cloudy in comparison. On the flip side, sending a two-channel digital signal to my reference DAC-2 provided subtle (emphasis on subtle) improvements, but the 751BD's sound did lose a bit of its body and midrange warmth. What it did gain was a bit of low-end focus and top-end shimmer but again, the

differences were mild at best. In terms of soundstage and dynamic performance, the DAC-2 imparted a bit more space between the performers and seemed to yield a touch more energy to the beginning of certain notes and vocals, but the differences are difficult to quantify beyond that. I will say this: I didn't view the addition of the DAC-2 as so much an upgrade as it was just a change. If I didn't already have the DAC-2, I could just as easily live with the 751BD on its own, for its two-channel performance is exemplary.

Moving on to SACDs, I cued up an oldie but a goodie in Miles Davis' Kind of Blue (Columbia) and the track "So What." The double bass was oh so subtle, but still clearly present. It sort of snuck up on you, giving it an almost playfully haunting vibe that gradually grows louder and closer, which the 751BD captured brilliantly. Still, the texture contained within each subdued pluck of the strings was captivating. The cymbals were equally impressive, possessing the same nuance as the low bass notes, but adding sweetness up top that was rife with natural air and decay. Miles' trumpet sprang to life and was placed firmly in the center of the soundstage, with clear space between him and the other musicians, horizontally as well as vertically. Miles' trumpet was brassy without being "shouty" or aggressive. The entire presentation, despite the clarity of SACD, still had a sort of period swagger to it that felt true to life, as if to suggest the sound was playing amidst the clouds of cigarette smoke that must have been swirling about the recording space.

Switching gears to movies, I went with James Cameron's Titanic on DVD (Paramount). I'm normally not a fan of upscaling. I find it is often akin to putting lipstick on a pig; you're not changing the fact that it's still a pig. DVD will never be HD. Period. The end. This being said, with the 751BD's 1080p upscaling in full effect, it appears you can get close -real close. Truthfully, minus some minor noise in low light and dark regions of the screen, such as the hull of the ship itself or the boiler room, the brighter scenes possessed HD-like clarity. Turning the upscaling off (which can be done on the fly) revealed just how good the 751BD's video processing was. For the un-scaled image appeared soft and somewhat muddy in comparison. Colors were vivid but natural, retaining the film's romance and sheen up until it was time for the boat to sink, when the cool, steely blue hues stood out in stark contrast to the film's otherwise warm palette. Motion was smooth throughout, with only minor judders visible on some of the film's more complex and longer-lasting tracking shots. Edge fidelity was also excellent, possessing near-HD levels of sharpness, especially in the film's many close-up shots. I've demoed and spent time with a number of video processors, and I have to say that the Marvell Qdeo processor is among the best I've seen in bridging the gap between SD and HD -those of you with rather large DVD libraries should take special note.

In terms of its sound quality, the 751BD proved to as adept at multi-channel surround sound formats as it was with two-channel and SACD. Dialogue, like the vocal tracks before, was clear as day, with a sure-footedness that placed the actors firmly in space, not only on screen but in the room. **The 751BD's surround sound performance was terrific, as was its ability to extract every last ounce of detail from the mix, bringing with it a greater**



sense of ambience. Truthfully, it was like being given secondary colors with which to paint; the aural tapestry was just that much richer.

I ended my evaluation of the 751BD with the Robert Redford-directed film *The Conspirator* (Lionsgate) on Blu-ray. This period-accurate drama about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln may not have set box office records, but it's a hell of a home theater demo, especially if you're looking to test low-light and black-level detail, as the film looks as though it is lit almost entirely by natural light and/or candlelight. On my calibrated Panasonic plasma, the 751BD's low-light detail rendering was spot on and its black levels superb. The constant shadow play caused by the ever-present candlelight in many of the film's interior scenes showcased the 751BD's contrast and ability to resolve subtle detail. Even in the darkest regions of any given frame, noise levels were kept to a minimum, minus of course the natural grain structure of the film itself, which was not robbed by the 751BD. Colors were again natural, even more so than in my demo of *Titanic*, for very little stylization was brought to bear on the film, aside from the period-accurate methods used to light each scene. Skin tones were beautifully rendered, as was the detail found in many of the older actors' eyes, mouths and facial hair. While the film as a whole is softer in tone than many of today's super-slick summer blockbusters, there was still a sharpness to the image via the 751BD that lent a truer sense of dimension than what I've experienced through other players.

In terms of its surround sound performance, once again the 751BD was exemplary in recreating the aural landscape necessary to accompany the image and transport the viewer to the film's particular time and place. The tonal quality was always inviting, with just the slightest hint of warmth throughout, which brought a welcome sense of weight and, more importantly, humanity to dialogue tracks. I sometimes turn my HDTV off when evaluating a player's Blu-ray performance, for it's easy to get so wrapped up in the visuals that it's possible to overlook certain aspects of the sound and vice-versa. It's true that sound is half of the picture, but one doesn't want to be thrown off if only given the sound to digest. Sure, the overall experience was better when sound and image were working together, but the 751BD is so good at recreating the essence behind every emotion that the action on screen could still be followed even when the screen itself was off.

From CDs to Blu-rays and literally everything in between, there was little if anything that I found fault with in regard to the 751BD's audio/video performance. It is without a doubt one of the finest Blu-ray players I've ever encountered.

### **The Downside**

From a performance standpoint, there was little I found to object to with the 751BD. This being said, there were a few items that I thought could be improved upon in future iterations, starting with the 751BD's lack of internal wi-fi. I appreciate Cambridge supplying a wi-fi dongle rather than forcing consumers to buy one



separately, but with so many players (even cheaper ones) including built-in wi-fi as standard, I feel the 751BD should have it, too.

Audiophiles are bound to harp on the 751BD's lack of balanced audio outs, at least for two-channel listening, which I can understand, though I didn't personally need this feature. Balanced connection options, along with built-in wi-fi, are two of the biggest reasons I could see consumers siding with the Oppo BDP-95 over the 751BD, for the BDP-95 has both.

Lastly, the drive inside the 751BD is louder than I expected, especially when playing back Blu-ray discs. It's not so loud as to draw attention to itself during quiet passages, but it is loud enough that, upon startup and during loading times (the 751BD loads quickly), you can hear its subtle low drone.

### **Competition and Comparison**

Obviously, the biggest competition the 751BD faces is from [the Oppo BDP-95](#), which I've spoken about and already compared it to at length. Sure, there are other universal players out there, [some far cheaper](#) than either the 751BD or BDP-95, but for a true apples to apples comparison, these are the only two players in the conversation. While it would be easy for one to look at the BDP-95's feature set and see the subtle differences between it and the 751BD and conclude that for \$999 it was the better player, I'd urge you not to do so. Not that I think the BDP-95 is a horrible player, hell, it was [Home Theater Review's Product of the Year](#), it's just the two are more evenly matched, at least in terms of audio and video performance, than most people realize.

It is my opinion that those who are looking for a more "analog" sound, one that has a slightly richer tonal quality throughout, will most likely side with the Cambridge, whereas those who are looking for something a bit more neutral or perhaps lively, dare I say lean, will no doubt side with the Oppo. From a video standpoint, there is little that I can see on paper or on a screen that differentiates the two players minus built-in wi-fi, some streaming capabilities and slightly more internal memory storage: 2GB as opposed to 1GB in the 751BD. So what the decision really comes down to is personal taste, for the price difference (if there is any, thanks to the Internet) are not enough to be a deciding factor, at least not for me.

While I generally love what Oppo is doing and think they've single-handedly revolutionized the concept of what makes a high-end source component, I don't personally own any Oppo products nor have I for quite some time. Why, you ask? Maybe I'm cursed, but I haven't had the best of luck regarding Oppo and their reliability, for every Oppo product I've owned has broken or had some sort of glitch that has impacted my ability to enjoy it as a whole. Having lived with the 751BD for several months now, I can say that no such issues have arisen with it, which is why, if it were my money, I'd side with Cambridge.

Again, with players this closely matched, it simply boils down to personal taste. For more on these two players, as well as other universal players like them, please visit [Home Theater Review's Blu-ray Player page](#).

### Conclusion

I'll get right to it: the Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD Blu-ray Universal Disc Player is brilliant. Even though its retail price of \$1,249 may seem a bit high, in my eyes, it is worth every penny, for I don't view the 751BD's asking price as anything short of a high-end bargain, as you're essentially getting seven unique products in one: a CD, SACD, HDCD, DVD, DVD-Audio, Blu-ray and Blu-ray 3D player. Take \$1,249, divide it by the number of formats the 751BD affords you the ability to enjoy, and it works out to be less than \$200 each. I can't think of any truly high-end-sounding CD players that cost less than \$200, let alone any that manage to play DVDs and Blu-rays as well. Factor in what the 751BD brings to the table in terms of its video processing and ... oh, you get the idea.



While the concept of having a universal player is nothing entirely new, I've yet to encounter one that performs at such a high level across the board as does the 751BD, save maybe the Oppo BDP-95. While the Oppo is clearly the reigning king of universal players, it doesn't mean there isn't room for one more. Unlike the Lexicon BD-30, the Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD is upfront about its origins and, with this honesty, manages to demystify the Oppo a bit, for both players share similar beginnings without one having to be responsible for the other.

So which to choose? Variety is the spice of life and, as with any audio/video component, it all comes down to personal taste, which for me means the Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD, for it's among the finest disc spinners I've ever heard.