



AZUR LIKE IT

The 640A is the big guy in Cambridge Audio's new brace of mini muscle amps

PRODUCT Cambridge Audio Azur 640A

TYPE Stereo integrated amplifier

PRICE £250

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Cambridge is a brand with form. In the seventies it created some great amps and tuners and went on to produce some of the most ambitious (if not the most reliable) CD players of the eighties, including one of the very first two-box designs.

Its latest creation, the Azur 640A is the larger by 15 watts of two physically identical amps, the other being the 540A at £200. The 640A is specified at 65 watts into eight ohms with a wide 5Hz-50kHz bandwidth.

The amp is feature rich because extra knobs clearly sell at this end of the market, though fortunately the extraneous bass and treble controls can be bypassed courtesy of a direct button. It even offers the option of an MM phono stage for those with a taste for vinyl.

Under the bonnet there are a wealth of protection systems both for the amp itself and the speakers attached to it. These include a clipping sensor, temperature sensor and something called CAPS, which is a means of monitoring the amp's behaviour to make sure that nothing untoward happens in the event of a problem with amp or speakers. It measures the distortion in the output signal relative to that at the input, which means that it's able to tell when the unit is being clipped or overdriven and apply protection if necessary. It even checks for short circuits and faults every time you switch on. It might make

Cambridge seem unduly nervous but there's a lot to be said for a failsafe product, especially if, as claimed, it has no effect on the sound.

SOUND QUALITY

Driving the fairly average load presented by a pair of Cyrus CL550s, the Cambridge delivers a three-dimensional soundstage that's detailed without being 'in your face' – in fact by the standards of its class it's very relaxed. It digs out subtle details, bringing colour to the bells on Shostakovich's *Jazz Suite No.1* while keeping up the perky sense of time that's the key to this unusual polka.

With Nils Petter Molvaer's heavy jazz renderings it delivers instrumental energy in a steady and engaging fashion – only over an extended period does this dense music begin to challenge the Azur's sense of equilibrium. Ali Farka Touré's vibrant *Niafunké* is a more comfortable disc which revels in the level of transparency and dynamic enthusiasm on offer. The Cambridge has a more weighty sound than much of the similarly-priced competition from brands like NAD and Rotel, which don't have quite the same finesse in terms of building tension. Džian and Kamien's Viennese grooves reveal the amp's impressive bass kick and ability to track energy build upwards.

We tried the Clearaudio Emotion turntable (reviewed next month) and Trichord Dino-phono stage through the Azur and were pleased to hear the classic vinyl virtues shine

through, Santana sounding as energetic as ever thanks in part to his enthusiastic percussion section. We also gave the amp a spin on the ATC SCM35 speakers reviewed this month (p42) to see just how far its 65 watts could go, but while the result was open and engaging it didn't warrant high-level or extended listening and it's wise to stick to speakers offering average to 'A+' loads (see our *Buyer's Bible* for 'ease of drive' ratings).

The Azur 640A is a welcome addition to the none-too-crowded ranks of high-quality, low-cost amps. It's not quite as much of a budget star as the matching Azur 640C CD player (reviewed last month), but at £250 it's more than capable of showing its rivals a thing or two about musical refinement. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT

SOUND >> 81%

FEATURES >> 85%

BUILD >> 82%

VALUE >> 89%



PRO
Well resolved and dynamic sound with a good sense of timing to boot.

CON
The speaker terminals could be chunkier and the control legends more legible.

CONCLUSION

With the Azur 640A, Cambridge has launched a powerful weapon in the battle for budget amp supremacy. The sound is particularly well resolved and it offers a lot of musical entertainment for the money.

HI-FI CHOICE >> **84%**
OVERALL SCORE

