



Cambridge ups the CD ante

Cambridge Audio Azur 640C

CD player
£250

★★★★★

FOR

Simplicity of styling and operation; quality build and a sound to match

AGAINST

At the price, nothing of any significance

VERDICT

Storming – if we didn't know the price we'd have guessed this was £400-500, or maybe even more

THE NEW AZUR range finally puts to rest that old Cambridge Audio problem of sounding good, but being a bit rough around the edges: the silver finish, thick aluminium front panels and quality case-work put the new products in a league above their forbears. And CD playback still features strongly in the new range, along with two amps, a DAB/FM tuner and a DVD-V/DVD-A player. Two CD machines complete the launch line-up.

The £250 player we have here differs from the £200 540C in the use of superior 192kHz/24bit conversion sourced from Wolfson Microelectronics, along with enhanced power supply provision to give much lower distortion, higher signal to noise ratio and better channel separation. Both players use Sony optics in a custom-designed transport, proprietary data relocking to reduce distortion-inducing jitter, and separate power supplies for the

transport, digital-to-analogue and audio sections. It also has optical and electrical digital outputs, and a slick system remote.

The 640C goes way beyond what we'd expect of a player at this price. Straight from the box it sounded a bit cold and uninviting, but after plenty of use the sound filled out and became sweet, tight and utterly involving, suggesting it's worth keeping the player powered up.

Once in its stride there's not much to touch the 640C this side of £500: it has a

rich intimacy with vocals that's never at the expense of bass definition or treble sparkle, ensuring music is full-scale and highly atmospheric. Ask it to rock and it does so convincingly, whether with Radiohead or some old-school thunder courtesy of live Who tracks. It'll make any well-sorted system fast, tight and powerful when required, and lush and luscious with smaller-scale, closely recorded music.

With discs such as the fine *LSO Live!* catalogue the Cambridge delivers excellent orchestral scale and definition, creating a broad, deep soundstage picture of excellent focus, while with Holly Cole's *Shade* set the character of David Pilch's bass and Aaron Davis's piano are as spine-tingling as the singer's voice on *Lazy Afternoon*.

In other words, this is a fine all-round performer, capable of scaring a few pricier machines – let's just hope the rest of the Azur range is up to the same standard.

LEADING RIVALS

NAD C521BEE

£200 ★★★★★ October 2003

A Best Buy in the 2003 Awards, the NAD has great sound and solid build

Arcam DIVA CD73T

£400 ★★★★★ October 2003

Product of the Year in the 2003 Awards: refined and involving