

#### FACT FILE

- DVD-Audio playback
- PAL and NTSC progressive scan
- Dolby Digital and DTS decoders
- MP3 and JPEG playback
- Multiregional from the box
- High calibre AV DACs

“It makes your discs look and sound brilliant.”

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# Cambridge Audio 540D

DVD-Audio player  
\$379 US

The 540D is Cambridge Audio's second-generation DVD-Audio model. It comes with PAL progressive scan and high-calibre digital-to-analogue converters (DACs) for an impressive AV performance from a variety of disc formats.

Part of Cambridge's flagship Azur range, the 540D doesn't look or feel cheap. It has a slim but chunky metal casing and attractive minimalist design that apes high-end British brands like Arcam and Rotel.

Likewise the remote, which is slender but solid. If there's one downside it's that it stresses fancy-pants style over function because every button is the same shape, relying on tiny text to differentiate them.

Rear socketry is typical for a contemporary mid-range player. Scart and S-video outputs are flanked by optical and coaxial digital audio ports (for DTS and Dolby Digital), six phonos for its built-in Dolby 5.1/DVD-A decoder and component video jacks for progressive scan.

The onscreen menu is the only thing that lets it down compared to true luxury machines. It's clear and functional but is the same kind of operating system that adorns cheaper efforts.

The acoustically dampened disc transport system takes good care of your discs – the tray glides with ease and the machine is fast, efficient and whisper-quiet in action. Main features include the high-resolution audio-video DACs to deliver progressive scan video and multichannel DVD-A with 24-bit/96kHz sampling (or stereo at 24/192).

There are various playback tricks too, such as five-speed search, multilevel zoom

and tweaks for sound and image levels. It's also multiregional out of the box and can skip those tiresome FBI/copyright screens at the start of discs!

#### PERFORMANCE

This kind of player could boost the minuscule DVD-Audio market. Several affordable machines include DVD-Audio but few make the most of it. Given the 540D's price, its open soundstage and dynamic performance are genuinely refreshing. Whether your taste encompasses Philip Glass, Missy Elliott or anything in between, the tone is majestic. Even standard CDs have a substance and delicacy that's often missing when DVD players double as music decks.

DVD-Video playback is provided in either pin-sharp RGB or smooth progressive scan. There's no next-generation digital video interface (maybe next time) but that's the only letdown, for this is a mighty proposition. Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* has all its dust and cowboy stubble intact, while *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Finding Nemo* look so rich, colourful and three dimensional, you can almost taste the salt water. From S-video to RGB Scart and beyond, there's an effortlessly natural quality in the picture that is usually scarce at this price.

The Azur 540D's claim of cutting-edge performance at a low price rings true. While it's no serious threat to old-school premium goods, you could add it to a £400 AV amp and mid-range speakers to create a great system for less than £1,000.

How has Cambridge been able to produce such a classy model rivalling products costing two or three times as much? Although the packaging boasts that Azurs are 'designed and engineered' in the UK, we wouldn't be surprised if the bulk of production was done in cost-effective plants in the East but given the right factory conditions and quality control, these sites can work wonders, as the 540D shows.

It makes your discs look and sound brilliant, and for a pittance in the broad scheme of things. If you're a devout audiophile on a tight budget, this is the answer to your prayers ■ Ian Calcutt

#### WHAT'S GOOD

Picture; sound; price; multiregional by default

#### WHAT'S BAD

No SACD; built-in decoder doesn't do DTS; handset too stylish for its own good

PICTURE	★★★★★
SOUND	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
EASE OF USE	★★★★★
VALUE	★★★★★

#### ALSO CONSIDER...

**JVC XV-NA77SL**  
PAL progressive scan and DVD-Audio support all wrapped up in a top quality bundle from JVC. Best of all is the price – a bargain at £200  
Reviewed: March '04

**PIONEER DV-565A**  
At £250 this is a great beginner's option for DVD-Audio and SACD. Component video improves its picture but sadly there's no PAL progressive scan  
Reviewed: March '04

#### OVERALL VERDICT

The 540D does a magnificent job in adding audiophile qualities to a low-priced player. Astonishing value

