

Cambridge Azur 540r

Cambridge Audio's debut receiver goes for a stripped down approach but has it got what it takes under the bonnet to impress?

AV receiver

\$699.00 US



It might be hard to believe, given Cambridge Audio's reputation in the home cinema industry, but the Azur 540r is the company's first integrated home cinema receiver.

DESCRIPTION

The Azur 540r is an 80W per channel design, although that boosts up to 100W when used in 5.1 mode. It has a rather curtailed spec sheet, with only Dolby Digital/EX, DTS/ES and Dolby Pro-Logic II in the line-up, leaving the likes of DTS Neo:6, DTS 96/24 and Pro-Logic IIx way outside its purview. Also, the set-up is severely curtailed, with only a simple two-line front panel display used in the set-up process. There is no onscreen set-up or menu system.

The remote is also a little disappointing, as it has no learning or programmable function. Which is why it looks more elegant than all of its peers – it has less to do.

The amplifier itself looks a bit basic, as if designed by an engineer primarily and then tweaked by the product designers later on. It's not ugly per se but there are some distinctly odd touches. For example, the light grey on silver writing on the rear panel. It may be subtle and not break up the elegant rear panel layout but it also means people have to either use the manual or some kind of intuition to determine which wire goes where.

Strangely, though, after all these downsides, the amplifier gets the thumbs up because the Azur 540r has got what it takes where it counts. Yes, the rudimentary speaker set-up might be more indicative of a budget receiver of a decade ago, lacking as it does, any form of speaker distance setting and

relying on delay time experimental settings. And yes, the lack of a digital optical cable and S-video on the front camcorder input is a bit of a crying shame.

But under the surface, the Azur 540r features a Crystal Semiconductors' CS493263 digital signal processor, allied to a CS4251 24bit/192kHz digital to analogue converter. That last bit of jargon should give the game away – 192kHz is never featured at this price normally. £1,000 receivers feature 192kHz DACs; at this price we are usually stuck with 96kHz.

The rest of the amplifier is similarly well specified on the inside, with things like a big toroidal power transformer instead of the more commonplace R-core style used at this price point. This helps keep those power amplifier circuits delivering top-class juice.

OPERATION

With little set-up and no onscreen menus to get in the way, the Azur 540r is very easy to use. The remote has fewer buttons than the other models in the test and everything falls to hand readily. You don't have dramatic DSP options to play with, so these don't get in the way either. In other words, it's not much less basic than a stereo amplifier in use. Set-up is also reasonably straightforward, although setting speakers by delay times is more luck than judgement. Still, it gives the listener the chance to experiment.

PERFORMANCE

This is a product that stands or falls on its sonic performance, given the limitations of its specification sheet. Fortunately, it stands and stands tall. The sound is just more sophisticated than the rest of

the receivers in the group, producing articulate and transparent sounds that only serve to make this seem like a really expensive product.

The other models in the line-up seem a bit splashy and inconsistent by comparison to the Azur 540r. This becomes extremely apparent on vocals, with a graceful articulation and forthright intelligibility that even makes Russell Crowe's rough, deep and gargling tones come alive.

There's no sense of artificiality, here. Sounds aren't bright or dull, they are just right and fill the room with ease. You become less aware of the speakers with the Azur 540r, thanks to the power delivered from that big toroidal transformer. It seems more powerful than the 80/100W figure would imply and it drives all the speakers in the room so well, it seems like they've

FEATURES

6 x 80W/5 x 100W (RMS) amplifier power; 192kHz/24bit D/A converter; Dolby Digital/EX, DTS/ES, Dolby Pro-Logic II; five proprietary DSP processing modes plus Passthrough; AM/FM tuner with RDS and 40 presets; dimensions: 430(w) x 100(h) x 310(d)mm; weight: 9.5kg

SOCKETS

Front: headphone socket; stereo phono audio; composite video phono inputs
Rear: 4 stereo audio phono inputs; 3 composite/S-video inputs; 2 component video inputs; 2 stereo audio phono tape outputs; 1 composite/S-video output; 1 component video output; 6:1-channel phono input/output; 3 optical digital inputs; 2 coaxial digital inputs; 1 optical digital output; 1 coaxial digital output; AM/FM tuner inputs; six multiway speaker terminals

CONTACT

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TEST DETAILS

Manufacturer's output: 80W (20Hz-20kHz, 8Ω)
Power output @ 1kHz: 70W (8Ω, 0.1% THD); 70W (4Ω, 0.1% THD)
Fidelity firewall: 90W @ 0.5% THD (8Ω)
Distortion @ 50W: 0.01% (8Ω, 1kHz)
Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz ± 1.0dB

For a full explanation of test data, see page 132



More elegant than the amp



Pump up the volume...



A packed rear panel but the silver writing is hard to read

UPGRADE YOUR HOME CINEMA



been on steroid treatment and have grown half an octave in the bass.

It's a highly detailed presentation, too. Sounds come off the disc strikingly well and are replayed with great precision. This means the Azur 540r isn't just good

"It's like the Caterham Seven of home cinema amplification"

for home cinema replay, it has enough information retrieval and good enough timing to keep up with CDs of more complex fare. Yet, it makes these CD sounds with a fine sense of musical



A basic design with a grown-up performance

entertainment, too. This makes the Azur 540r ideal for those who want to play CDs and home cinema at the same time. Normally, doing that properly at this price is next to impossible.

There's a phrase little used in home cinema: 'grown up'. We seem obsessed with explosions and the shiny demonstrable parts of a cinematic presentation. This receiver cuts a little deeper, investigating the more subtle parts of a DVD but not at the expense of the gunplay. This shows the Azur 540r is all grown up.

CONCLUSION

It's a personal decision, whether to trade performance for features. Most companies go the features route, on the understanding that it is easier to sell a product on its on-paper performance. Cambridge Audio takes a very different route, sacrificing features to make the best sounding product at the price.

Some may not be able to stand the stripped down approach and seek a more gadget-rich product. Let them. It's like the Caterham Seven of home cinema amplification: stripped back to the bare minimum in the luxury stakes but all performance and all fun. We love it! ■ Alan Sircom

WHAT'S GOOD

Sounds much more expensive; genuinely powerful; very elegant remote

WHAT'S BAD

Rudimentary set-up routine; remote lacks programming function;

SOUND
FEATURES
EASE OF USE
VALUE



OVERALL VERDICT

Too basic by far but the Cambridge Audio sound is beguiling and makes a strong argument



FACT FILE

- 6 x 80W all-digital amplification
- Dolby Digital/EX, DTS/ES, Dolby Pro-Logic II
- Toroidal transformer
- 24bit/192kHz DACs
- RDS-equipped AM/FM tuner with 40 presets