



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cambridge Audio Azur 650 series

By Alan Sircom

Sometimes I worry about stuff. Stuff like ‘is the audio industry recession proof?’ It’s all well and good recommending fantastic audio works of art that cost as much as a small village in Wales, but in a time when our economy is so broken that you could buy half of Canary Wharf for a packet of Wine Gums, we have to plant our feet back on the ground. Not everyone can afford to spend tens of thousands on audio equipment and even some of those who can right now, may have to make some serious downshifting decisions in the near future. But, can you make high-end sounds without the high-end price tags?

The good – make that great – news is that it’s perfectly possible. Cambridge Audio’s Azur 650 series is leading the charge in producing economical components that look and sound like they are more expensive than they really are.

The Azur 650C CD player is a perfect case in point. Its spec sheet could comfortably be applied to products costing considerably more than £350. It’s EnergyStar efficient, consuming less than 25W at play, less than a watt at rest. It sports a pair of 24-bit, 192kHz capable Wolfson WM8740 converter chips, arranged in a double differential, four-pole balanced topology, a very high precision clock with impedance matched clock buffering, the company’s latest servo mechanism (which makes the transport open in geological time, it must be said) and a choice of sharp or slow roll-off filters. That would read impressive for a £2,000 player; at £350, it’s almost insane.

The back panel of the CD player is sparsely populated by high-end standards. Just a pair of phonos, another set (with a minijack) for multiroom connection, a toslink and a coax digital

output. Where are the balanced outputs, the RS232 port, the AES/EBU connector? Interestingly, it’s not that they are missing that’s the kicker, it’s that you are surprised to find them missing. In looking over the product, you automatically expect it to be a middleweight and the few parts that show up its bantamweight nature almost catch you out.

The Azur 650A amplifier is not quite as much of a surprise, but only because you are used to seeing its spread of controls on amplifiers at the price. There’s only so much you can do with a set of tone controls, source selection and a volume knob. Nevertheless, the product is built far better than you expect and the odd touch of class (like the start-up diagnostic that runs up and down the blue LEDs for each source, the inset logo on the top plate, the little trim ring around the volume, balance and defeatable tone controls and the red protection LED to show when it’s time to play nice) really counts. And then there’s the thick front panels and the rolled edges of the black or silver cases. It’s all very, very professional and can put many a more expensive product to shame.

Under the hood, the same impressive price-busting spec dominates. It’s essentially ▶

“No ‘the wolves of the sea have many beards... fear them’ here, just good sensible advice about the products and their use.”

- ▶ a stereo line preamp with a pair of 75 watt monoblocks in the same chassis. Once again EnergyStar certified (less than a watt in standby), the design sports an oversized transformer, a motorised ALPS pot and Sanken transistors and polypropylene signal caps. Like its predecessor, it features the company’s own non-invasive CAP5 protection circuit, retuned and updated prevent the amp from clipping, overheating or going short circuit. Although the 650A does not feature the company’s clever class XD output system, this is still an exotic spec for an amp that costs this little.

The manuals for these products are so well written and comprehensive, I almost hanker after Japlish translations or florid, Cantona-esque descriptions of performance. No “fulsomely insert cable-centre leftwards toward” or “the wolves of the sea have many beards... fear them” here, just good sensible instructions about the products and their use. Cambridge Audio does not supply cables in the boxes and the amplifier is without phono stage. Cambridge Audio also supplies aftermarket interconnect cables and a phono stage. These last two sentences may be connected. Fortunately the phono stage is a bit of a honey in its own right and those who’ve tried the cables report positively about their build and sound quality.

What’s surprising on first opening the boxes is just how professional the whole caboodle is. The packaging is slick, the product is encased in its own blue cover, the remote handset is custom-designed for the Azur product line, the front panel is deceptively thick and the casework remarkably flex-free. Aside from a low whirring as the volume pot moves under its own steam, both products are remarkably free from niggles and noises (that near silent transport mechanism is especially impressive). In other words, all the things you should expect of a product costing five times as much (but are often disappointed to see are MIA).

It’s the sound though that really shocks, in a good way. It’s an incredibly exciting performance, packed with energy and drama and a great deal of grip. Faced with a world of hundreds and hundreds of watts, you might think a 75 watter will run out of steam, but partnered appropriately (or at least, partnered with a moderate amount of sanity) it works with a bags of energy on tap. Surprisingly dynamic, surprisingly bubbly and surprisingly musical sounding, were the tasting notes. Ending in “well, I’m surprised!” of course.

It’s clear a lot of time and energy went into making both these products work beautifully. And that time and energy paid off. There were a lot of discs thrown at this combo, to see just what the upper limit was. And it was hard to find. Playing a very dynamic piece of music (Mahler’s Eighth for example) at a fair volume – but not enough to trip the protection circuit – began to push the amplifier into sounding a touch hard and topky. And, compared to more upmarket products there was a sense of richness and openness to the soundstage, and a sense of control at high volumes that this amp could not replicate with the same authority. But we’re not talking huge differences here and given that the cost of this system was almost one-third of the cost of the interconnect cable of the other, you can see why this is extraordinary stuff.

The CD player is the perfect partner for that amplifier. It’s accurate and dynamic, but where the amplifier can be ‘zingy’ in the ▶





▶ treble, the CD player is softer and more rounded sounding. These are not bold departures from accuracy even when taken separately, but in combination the two make for a remarkably natural performance. This highlights the biggest regret surrounding the 650 series; and it's got nothing to do with the 650 series! The prices of these two products will naturally end up with most of them being used with loudspeakers costing around £200 or so. While it will do a great job here, to really hear what it can do, try it with a pair costing five times that figure, ideally one with a soft dome tweeter too. Suddenly, what most people consider as good mid-price electronics becomes a neutral platform to play music with a great deal of integrity.

More than anything though, the Cambridge Audio combo makes inherently 'likeable' sounds. That doesn't mean it makes everything sound nice; stick on Pantera and you are in for an aggressive angry rant; exactly what you expect from Pantera, in fact. No, instead it makes a sound that makes you want to play music through, whatever your taste in music. It is perhaps this, admittedly somewhat nebulous concept that lofts the Cambridge Audio Azur 650C and 650A above the mainstream. There's none of that sense of great music, not so great sound here.

There's a small, but growing movement, that suggests the electronics are relatively unimportant in the creation of good sound. The loudspeaker and the room acoustic treatment take centre stage in this audio ethos. This could be the CD and amplifier that proves them right (of course, we'd say it's because these are the *right* CD and amp for the job). OK, some perspective is in order; anyone matching £700 worth of electronics with £7,000 worth of speaker is setting themselves up for major disappointment, but realistically the Cambridge Audio duo are capable of driving far better loudspeakers than they should be capable of.

In the insane world of high-end audio, this is the sanest choice you could make. +

“More than anything though, the Cambridge Audio combo makes inherently ‘likeable’ sounds.”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Cambridge Audio Azur 650C CD player

D/A converter: Dual Wolfson WM8740

24-Bit/192kHz capable

Filter: 2-Pole Dual Differential Bessel

Double Virtual Earth Balanced

Frequency response: 20Hz – 20kHz

(+/-0.1dB)

THD @ 1kHz 0dBFs: <0.001%

THD @ 20kHz 0dBFs: <0.002%

IMD (19/20kHz) 0dBFs: <0.0005%

Linearity @ -90dBFs: +/-0.5dB

Clock deviation: +/-20ppm

Stopband rejection (>24kHz): >90dB

S/N ratio, A weighted: >104dB

Total correlated jitter: <140ps

Max. power consumption: 25W

Standby power consumption: <1W

Dimensions (HxWxD): 85 x 430 x 305mm

Weight: 4.8kg

Cambridge Audio Azur 650A integrated amplifier

Inputs: 6x phono inputs (including tape monitor in), iPod minijack

Outputs: 2x phono outputs

Power Output: 75 watts (into 8 ohms)

THD (unweighted) <0.002% @ 1kHz, 80% of rated power

<0.03% 20Hz-20kHz, 80% of rated power

<0.02% 20Hz-20kHz @ 10W

Frequency Response: 5Hz-50kHz (-1dB)

S/N Ratio: (ref 1w) >92dB (unweighted)

Input Impedance: 47kohms

Damping Factor: >100

Max. power consumption: 600W

Standby power consumption: <1W @ rated mains

Bass/Treble controls: Shelving, ultimate boost/cut +/-7.5dB @ 20Hz – 20kHz

Dimensions (HxWxD): 120x430x350mm

Weight: 8.4kg

Price: £350 per unit

Manufactured by Cambridge Audio

URL: www.cambridgeaudio.com

Distributed in the UK by Richer Sounds

URL: www.richersounds.com

Tel: 0845 900 1230 (UK only)