

## Completely

## Surrounded



Japanese big name brands have driven multichannel almost single-handedly, but there's on affordable audiophile alternative to the orthodoxy of Denon, Marantz, Pioneer, et al. David Allcock enjoys the Cambridge Audio Azur 540R v2.0 experience...

When Cambridge Audio, a company with such legendary designs as the CDI behind them, arrived in the AV world, the competition knew they had trouble. Their first foray into multichannel, the 540R, was very well received - if a little basic by modern standards - and the subject of this review is its replacement, appropriately called the 540R v2.

The specification is extraordinary for the price point - along with six 80W amplifiers, there are four stereo inputs, a full tape loop, RDS FM tuner, a front panel stereo input with composite video input, three electrical and three optical digital inputs, a pair of HDTV ready component video inputs, three S-video and three composite inputs, and unusually at this price point both a 6.1 analogue input and 6.1 analogue preamp outputs.

These last two features show great forward thinking on the part of the designers. The 6.1 input is

not only required for DVD-Audio and SACD multichannel, but more importantly to hear the new Dolby TrueHD soundtracks on HD-DVD and Blu Ray discs. The 6.1 preamp output is also a welcome addition - in a low cost AV receiver the biggest compromises are invariably in the power supplies and power amplification stages, so these outputs give the owner the option of using better quality, external power amps to replace the internal amplifiers.

Opening the box brings you face to face to a solidly built, surprisingly heavy receiver, a dauntingly thick user manual (of which only 32 pages are English), a small ring antenna and a remote control unit. The main receiver is 430x150x350mm (WHD) and weighs 15.8kg. I was pleasantly surprised by the build quality on offer here - surprisingly solid with just a hint of ringing when tapped with a fingernail. Likewise, the controls on the front panel are good, if not luxurious, with the plastic buttons having just a little unwanted lateral travel and the main volume control

proving nicely weighted.

On the front panel are from left to right, an on-off switch, 6.3mm RS-232 connector and control bus for custom installation. Phew! The mains cable is a permanently fixed type giving no option for installing an aftermarket higher quality item. Connecting this unit held few surprises, though there were a few small shortcomings. Starting with the binding posts, these can accept either 4mm banana plugs or bare wire, but not spades, as the shroud around the binding posts preclude their usage. There is no video conversion inside this unit, so if you have a combination of S-Video, composite and component video devices, you'll need to run all three video connections to your TV or projector. Whilst six digital inputs are present, these cannot be reassigned to any input, instead you're restricted to CD, DVD and Video 1 or 2, the three S/PDIF electrical digital inputs, a TosLink and S/PDIF digital output, two component video inputs and a component video output, all on RCA phono connectors, four analogue stereo inputs, a full tape loop, 6.1

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#### SOUND QUALITY

I elected to use Onyx Rocket speakers with this receiver, a pair of RS 550 MKII front left and right, RSC200 centre, RSS 300 dipole surrounds with a pair of UFW-10 active subwoofers. Whilst this entire speaker system is still expensive in comparison with this receiver

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The only other small disappointment is the preamp out facility, which has to be activated through the firmware and is an all-or-nothing switch, you either have all the preamp outs activated or you have the internal amplifiers activated, you cannot elect to use certain channels on preamp out. The subwoofer implementation is highly versatile, giving 10Hz crossover steps between 40 and 150Hz with a final step to 200Hz.

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the Rocket speaker system with my reference processor/ amplifier combination, so knew what it could do, but the performance with the 540R v2 was still surprising. On 'Aero' there was a little extra warmth in the lower midrange, giving a touch more richness and body and causing a slight congestion - but still nothing seriously objectionable. Bass was a little slower than my reference system, the UFW-10's felt as though they could go faster than the 540R V2 could, and likewise the high frequencies were slightly more closed in than my reference.

Given a high quality DTS signal, this system could generate a stunning sense of space, simply destroying the walls of the room and placing sound right around the listener. This was not splashy, diffuse surround sound, but highly directional and carefully controlled images, precisely located on the soundstage. Even with the formidable 'Zoolookologie' (a surround sound maelstrom), the 540R v2 proved more than up to the job in hand, keeping instruments in their appropriate speakers whilst steering the voices quickly and cleanly around the room. Dolby

was still an excellent performance. On more subtle material, chapter 20 'The First Date' from 'The Thomas Crown Affair', whilst there was an echo around the museum as Rene Russo and Pierce Brosnan discussed the artwork, this was not as clear or as convincing as I usually hear, likewise the conversations of the other diners in the restaurant later in this sequence were indistinct, but the ambience generated around the room was widely enveloping of the viewer and succeeded in giving the viewer the feeling of listening into a conversation in a crowded restaurant.

Dolby Pro Logic performance was assessed using 'Heat' on LaserDisc. The soundtrack on this is particularly dynamic, the final heist sequence is chaotic and requires sounds to be accurately placed in all speakers. Again the 540R v2 gave away some imaging precision and speed to the Denon 3805, but overall the steering was very quick, well focused, although the bass frequencies were a little

Still, I have to say, for £250 the stereo performance is peerless - I wouldn't so much as contemplate the idea of listening to music on any of the 540R's price rivals, as you'd never get out alive! At this price, the Japanese branded receivers sound just plain nasty on music, and the Cambridge Audio does not - therein lies the difference.

Finally we come to the radio, and I was pleasantly surprised by the sensitivity and separation available on the FM tuner. It pulled in The Bay from about 40 miles North of my home, cleanly with good separation, whilst BBC Radio Three and Four

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were both very quiet, offering a very listenable sound, whilst the RDS functionality of this receiver worked well. I would, however, recommend a good external, roof-mounted antenna if you intend to seriously use FM, as a small internal FM aerial gave very poor performance.



Digital is equally well served musically with the same signature speed and transparency, only with a little harshness in the high frequencies, typical of the Dolby Digital encoding process.

I selected two movies which each present their own challenges for an AV receiver. Starting with 'Swordfish' (Warner Bros. 85392 13222 Region 1), I went immediately to Chapter 18, 'Hitting the Hit Squad', which involves a high speed chase through a city centre with machine gun fire and soundtrack punctuating the sequence. The 540R V2 did an excellent job of allowing each strand of the soundtrack to be heard, but lacked the ultimate low frequency impact of my reference system, with the individual impact of each bullet being discharged from the chain gun sounding less dynamic than through the Denon 3805. Likewise, the dialogue channel had a little less clarity than my reference, but this

softer and lacked the absolute impact which I can achieve with higher end units, this is still an excellent result.

A blinding multichannel performance at the price then, but on two channel, this receiver's lower cost roots are more obvious. When used to decode CD the sound is over dependent on the low frequencies, and this means some midband attack, texture and clarity is lost. Likewise, the upper midrange and high frequencies are somewhat harder and a little more forward than in real life. The midband is quite reticent and veiled, giving a slightly murky quality to the sound. However, all the blame cannot be aimed at the DAC stage as the analogue side of things exhibits a lack of midrange transparency together with a slight exaggeration of lower registers. I also noticed that everything went through the processor, even straight stereo, meaning there was no true pass through available for analogue signals.

#### CONCLUSION

Here is a comprehensively equipped, multichannel AV receiver for only £250 - I have interconnects that cost more than that! Performance is superb on surround sound material, its tuner is very usable and the internal amplifiers are powerful beyond what their specification would suggest. If you are looking for a solid six channel AV receiver which can handle all the current surround sound formats found on satellite and DVD, I would give this an unequivocal recommendation, the value for money is astonishing.

Put simply, it's the only AV receiver at or anywhere near the price that plays music in a listenable way, as well as offering a welter of surround sound facilities. Other Japanese branded designs may have far more gloss and glitz to their finish and feature count, but this one punches way beyond its price point on sonics.

#### VERDICT

Incredibly versatile, sonically excellent AV receiver at a bargain price.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO  
540R V2.0 £250  
Cambridge Audio  
☎+44 0845 900 1230  
www.cambridgeaudio.com

#### FOR

- excellent feature set
- high quality amplification
- Component video sockets

#### AGAINST

- no onboard video conversion
- no true stereo pass through
- slight opaqueness on stereo