

★ AMPLIFIERS

Cambridge Audio Azur 540A ★★★★★

FOR

Well-equipped; solidly built; highly involving sound

AGAINST

Phono stage is a £20 option

VERDICT

The Azur 540A has power and control in equal measure

THE CAMBRIDGE AZUR 640A was a bit of a star in last month's First Tests, praised for its convenience, performance and value for money. The 540A is the junior of that amp, with a slightly reduced output of 50w per channel against the 640A's 65w, and a useful £50 off the price. Otherwise, the two are very similar, and the 540A looks as good as the more expensive version and is just as well built, with quality to its aluminium fascia and casework.

The 540A is built on a substantial vibration-absorbing chassis, and uses a large toroidal transformer for hefty power delivery, short signal paths for optimal resolution, and a

buffered output stage to avoid distortion. Six line inputs with two tape loops are provided, and one of these inputs can be converted into a turntable connection with the addition of a £20 moving magnet phono board. The amp also has two sets of speaker outputs and a headphone socket. A remote control comes as standard, and the handset can also drive the Azur CD players and tuner.

The 540A benefits from a run-in, and after a few days becomes capable of a big, powerful, hard-charging sound when the music demands, having plenty of headroom for dynamic slams even when running at high

levels. At the same time, it has excellent refinement and control, handling the subtle nuances of jazz or chamber music with great aplomb, and retaining those levels of detail even with full-orchestra or big-band discs.

Using the 540A with decent CD and speakers, you'll soon be revelling in big, deep soundstages, and marvelling at the precision with which performers are placed in these sonic pictures. From complex recordings to jazz vocals with trio backing, the 540A delivers excellent presence and ambience. This is an ideal building-block on which to build a fantastic budget system.

