

# Cambridge beats the blues



Another member of the Azur clan gets five stars – and a fine product it is, too

## Cambridge Audio

### Azur 540C

CD player

★★★★★

#### FOR

Looks; build; sound; and the remote is worth a mention

#### AGAINST

The superlative 640C is only another £50

#### VERDICT

Another stonking Cambridge model; a nailed-on item for your shortlist

IN WHAT IS an unprecedented flurry of activity from Cambridge Audio, the Azur range is expanded to include this new, entry-level CD player. Regular readers will know we're great fans of the pricier 640C, while we also found the 540A and 640A amplifiers to be fearsomely competitive. So can this new machine continue Cambridge's startling run of form?

Head on, it looks identical to its bigger brother, except for a smart black-on-white display that, if anything, looks classier than the 640C's black-on-blue affair. There are optical and coaxial digital outputs accompanying the analogue RCAs and the aluminium Azur remote control is carried over – this last item adds pounds to the perceived value of the machine. Under the hood, the 540C makes do with a simpler

(but still more than adequate) Wolfson DAC than the 640C uses. And that's the difference – that, and a saving of £50.

Like the 640C, the 540C is well capable of scaring machines that cost plenty more. A listen to *The Dark of the Matinée* by precocious Glasgow four-piece Franz Ferdinand reveals a generous, well-defined soundstage with decent insight into what's a fairly dense mix. The vocal retains every arch intonation; the choppy white-boy funk rhythms are precise, crisp and full-figured. There's the sense of urgency the song demands and a three-dimensionality few machines at the price can muster.

Switch to Norah Jones' cover of Tom Waits' *Take the Long Way Home* and the Cambridge generates a spacious, natural-sounding bed for La Jones's intimate,

conspiratorial vocal. Each bass note begins with the pluck of a string, while each guitar strum includes scratchy spectrum noises to accompany the sound of the instrument itself. The 540C is talented beyond its price.

This 540C CD player neither looks nor sounds like a £200 CD player: build is great, facilities are fine, and the sound is the equal of machines that cost a whole lot more.

#### LEADING RIVALS

##### NADC521BEE

£200 ★★★★★ October 2003

2003 Awards Best Buy offers you a solid build and a cohesive sound

##### Marantz CD5400

£150 ★★★★★ August 2003

Tremendous dynamics and timing for this bargain-basement price tag