

FIRST TESTS

Cambridge Azur? You'll like it!

Cambridge Audio
Azur640A
Integrated amplifier
★★★★★

FOR

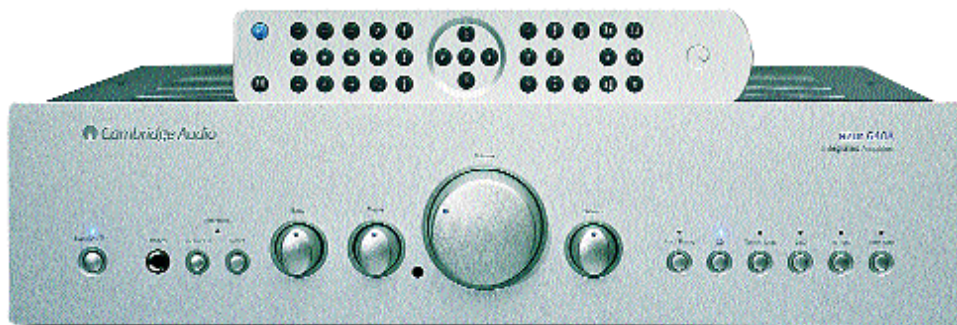
Clean, powerful sound;
sensible
roster of facilities;
well-built, too

AGAINST

No phono input as
standard, but that's all

VERDICT

A fine budget amplifier
from Cambridge
Audio, with just
the right mix of
performance and
user-convenience



AS WE COMMENTED last month when testing the 640C CD player, the new Cambridge Azur range is solidly built, looks good and sounds very fine indeed. And the 640A amplifier is even better than the player it's designed to partner.

Cambridge has been in this sector of the market for years, with varying success. For every superb bargain amp we've tested from the range, there's been one that's left us a little cold, and recent years have seen rapid reactions in the form of hasty MkII versions to address criticisms of ho-hum originals. No such problems with the Azur range, however: the designers have gone back to the drawing-board, and have come up with an excellent line-up.

The 640A is the more expensive of two Azur amps, sold through Richer Sounds: it's just under £250 – £50 off a typical selling price of £299.95, although where it's typically sold at that price we're not sure –

“This amp is just plain exciting, whether with crunching rap tracks or the slam and wail of Led Zeppelin”

while the less powerful 540A is £200, again '£50 off'. The power difference isn't huge – 65W against 50W – but the more expensive amp has been tuned for better performance.

Like the CD player, the 640A looks good in its silver finish – black's available as an option – and is solidly put together with good-quality metal fascia and casework. It's line-only, with five line-ins, a tape loop and additional tape out and preout sockets, but a phono board is available as an optional extra: the PM-01 is £19.99 which – you've guessed it – is £20 off a 'typical price'.

Outputs are provided for two pairs of speakers, while the tone controls can be bypassed for the most direct sound. Finally, there's a sleek remote handset with a metal finish to complement the fascia of the amp, completing the quality feel.

Just as the 640C CD player has the wherewithal to put the frighteners on more expensive hardware, not to mention being a leading contender in its price-class, so the 640A is a pretty serious bit of kit for not much money. It's powerful, making good use of that 65W output and what is hefty current-swinging ability to play demanding rock and dance tracks at substantial levels with no loss of composure. Actually, 'loss of composure' rather understates things: this amp is just plain 'crash-it-out' exciting, whether with crunching rap tracks or the slam and wail of some vintage Led Zeppelin. Whether your idea of fun is getting down with your homies or wielding the Air Strat, you'll find a lot to enjoy in the sound of the 640A.

But there's more to this amp than just clout and volume: it has finesse and control, making it as adept with classical music as it is with jazz or other acoustic recordings. There's a fine sense of the timbre and character of instruments and vocals, the amp bringing out plenty of atmosphere and drawing you into the music. We'd expect this kind of involvement from much more expensive amps, but few at this kind of level are quite so enticing. Listen to it sweeping through the drama of Beethoven's 7th, or allowing tight trio jazz to flow from the speakers, and it's unlikely you'll be unmoved.

This is a special amplifier, of that there's no doubt: and given the quality here and in the matching CD player, it seems Cambridge Audio is back, and almost unstoppable right now.

Azur: the blueprint for a bargain amplifier

THE 640A, LIKE other Azur products, is built on a low-resonance, acoustically damped chassis, fronted with a thick aluminium fascia. Inside, an oversized toroidal transformer and generous power supply provision give dynamic headroom, while short, clean signal paths minimise losses and distortions. The amp uses proprietary CAP5 protection to monitor its operation and provide protection while

adding no active electronics in the signal path. A clipping sensor reduces the volume before damage occurs to amp or – more likely – speakers, there's short circuit detection (should you cross speaker wires, for example), a temperature sensor that will cut the amp out if it gets too hot, and DC protection. This is an amp designed to take a lot of abuse, which should bode well for its longevity.



TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Power output

65W per channel into 8ohms; 100W per channel into 4ohms

Inputs 5 line (phono £20 option), tape

Outputs 2 tape, preouts, two pairs of speakers, headphones

Tone controls Yes, with bypass

Remote control Yes, both NTSC and PAL

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43x10x31cm