

# The twin towers of AV excellence

Cambridge Audio's stunning €1320 DVD and receiver package leaves Richard Stevenson relaxed and eating ice cream

If you are in the market to spend around 1300 Euro on a new DVD player and AV receiver, stop reading this review right now. Instead, put on your best brogues and Panama hat, collect your credit cards and skip gally along your nearest Cambridge Audio retailer with all due alacrity.

I have thought about it, flicked back through ten years' worth of reviewing notes and cogitated extensively on the subject - only to come to the sane conclusion every time; never has such a fine combination of products graced my home cinema room for such a humble outlay. Clearly, this is the

budget best buy partnership of the decade.

For less than the price of most manufacturers' mid-range AV receivers, Cambridge brings you two very solidly-built devices with thick aluminium fascias, gold plated socketry and luxurious metal-topped remote controls.

Available in either black or silver, the 540 combo looks like at least a grand's worth of kit, and has the tactile appeal and sheer stylish presence on the rack right up there with Arcam's AVR350 and DVD79 pairing. Of course, those two would set you back nearer E 3000.

Internally things are no less lush. While features count is not going to excite the AV technophile, both designs implement solid audiophile principles throughout; chunky transformers, good circuit design, decent output devices, high-end Crystal Semiconductor DAC's and no frills processing. On the downside the 540R receiver is only a 6.1 channel amp for a mono rear-speaker arrangement; it does not have audio set-up or Room

EQ; it cannot decode the new HD surround formats (but can accept them via 6.1 analogue input) and its HDMI sockets are only a switching implementation.

The latter isn't a major problem in use, but it does mean that you will need another video cable to use legacy sources like a non-HDMI Freeview box, or indeed access its on-screen display. That ain't worth writing home about either - although its basic block text approach is

LAB REPORT				
	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Manufacturer's Output 80W per ch into 8Ω				
Measured Power @ 1kHz				
2ch driven: 113W into 8Ω	✓			
5ch driven: 95W into 8Ω	✓			
2ch driven: 145W into 4Ω	✓			
5ch driven: 185W into 4Ω	✓			
Fidelity firewall @1kHz/2ch 106W into 8Ω (0.0079%THD)	✓			
Distortion @ 1kHz 0.0052%THD @ 50W (8Ω)		✓		
Frequency response 20Hz-20kHz +/-0.93dB			✓	

## SPECIFICATIONS

Cambridge Azur 540R		
ITEM	SUPPORT	DETAILS
Dolby Digital	○	5.1, EX(6.1) ProLogic IIx
DTS	○	5.1, 6.1ES, Neo:6
THX	×	Not here
AV Inputs	○	3 composite/S-video, audio (2 out)
Audio Inputs	○	3 inputs
Component Inputs	○	2 inputs
Tape Loop	○	1 input, 1 output
AV Monitor output	○	1 in video/S-video
Component output	○	1 outputs
Video upconversion	×	HDMI switch-through only
HDMI input/output	○	2 inputs, 1 output
DVI input/output	×	None present
Multi channel output	○	6.1 configuration
Subwoofer output	○	1 phono output
Digital Audio input	○	4 optical, 4 electrical
Digital Audio output	○	1 optical, 1 electrical
Phono input stage	×	No vinyl here
Speaker out	○	6-channel
Headphone	○	1 output, front mounted

Amplification: 7 x 80W; Tuner: AM/FM

Dimensions: 430(w) x 100(h) x 310(d)(mm); Weight: 9.5Kg

Also featuring

Acoustically damped chassis with aluminium front panel; gold plated connections; metal-topped remote control; RS232 port; IR emitter In



*Despite its calm, sophisticated looks, the 540R/540D pairing is an all action monster package*

easy to use compared to much of the competition's NASA-grade tweaking minutiae.

The 540D DVD player on the other hand sports a full-colour GUI broadcast out over its HDMI ports as well as analogue video connection and video upscaling of all your DVD's to a not insignificant 1080i resolution.

Not so long ago that sort of uber-tech would have set you back at least E 1200 and the 540D ices that cake with DivX and MP4 playback too.

I can hear you saying,

'1080p would have been better,' but you can't have everything for beer-budget money.

There is a dedicated stereo output for two-channel music listening, control bus in/out and IR repeaters for multiroom use and a rather slick acoustically damped chassis to further improve the way the sound massages your ears. Not too shoddy at all for just E 500.

### Niggled

I do have a couple of niggles though. Look closely and you'll see these two devices have not been designed as holistically as you might imagine. Both the colour and texture of the black finish on our samples were slightly different if you caught them in the right light; all the legends and labels on the receiver were white, yet grey on the DVD; and the amp uses a dot-matrix display compared to the DVD's segment type. Even the on/off switches have clearly come from a different

supplier. The biggest bug on our pairing was a noticeable mains hum when switching to an analogue input if an HDMI cable linked the two units together. This may be down to the early samples secured for the review, but look closely at the finishes and try before you buy.

### All-action monsters

Thankfully the cracking picture and sumptuous sound will divert your attention anyway from any such foibles. With DVD's upscaled to 720p for a 720 native projector or the 540D outguns many a DVD player at twice or even thrice its price. The picture is

smooth, richly textured and completely free of the artificial edge-glare that many designers implement to improve perceived sharpness. The picture looks softer than my reference Denon DVD-3910, for example, but the Azur's imaging is beautifully easy on the eye and hits all the right tones where the colour palette is concerned.

Despite its calm, sophisticated looks and reserved demeanor on the rack, the 540R/540D pairing is an all-action monster package at the movies. The sound is bold and punchy with huge sweeping effects and a crisp edge to the dialogue that makes

COMPATIBILITY	
DVD-V	○
DVD-A	×
SACD	×
CD	○
MP3	×
WMA	○
JPEG	○
MPEG4	○
CD-R	○
CD-RW	○
Video CD	○
SVCD	○
DualDisc (CD)	×
DualDisc (DVD)	○
DIVX	○
DVD+R	○
DVD-R	○
DVD+RW	○
DVD-RW (Video)	○
DVD-RW (VR)	×
DVD-RAM	×

  

LAB REPORT		Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
PLAYBACK					
Video jitter (5ns)		✓			
Signal-to-noise ratio: Composite (-72.6dB)		✓	✓		
S-video (-79.6dB)		✓			
Component (-73.6dB)		✓			
Chroma AM/PM					
AM (-71.2dB)		✓			
PM (-66.5dB)		✓			
Chroma crosstalk (-51.5dB)		✓			
Freq response @5.8 MHz					
Composite (-1.8dB)		✓			
S-video (-1.77dB)		✓			
Component Y (-0.8dB)		✓			
Audio jitter (145.2ps)		✓			

SPECIFICATIONS		
Cambridge Azur 540D		
ITEM	SUPPORT	DETAILS
Video upscaling	○	Upscales to 720p/1080i
Progressive scan	○	Compatible with 480p with 576p
Multiregion	×	Nope (not officially anyway...)
Composite video	○	1 output
Phono stereo audio	○	One dedicated stereo pair
S-video	○	1 output
HDMI/DVI	○	1 HDMI v.12
Scart	○	1 output, RGB capable
Component	○	1 set, HD-compatible
DV (i.Link) input	×	No, not here
Digital Audio	○	Coax/optical and HDMI
Dimensions: 430(w) x 70(h) x 310(d)mm; Weight: 3.8kg		
Also featuring		
Analogue 5.1 output, DivX playback, MP4 playback, on board Dolby Digital 5.1, ProLogic II and DTS decoding; acoustically damped chassis; Incognito multiroom ready; IR emitter In; Control Bus in/out		



## System perfection - Cambridge Audio's €1320 combi receiver/DVD is an AV thriller

even verbally challenged characters (think Rocky Balboa) articulate and intelligible. The sonically complex pub-scene in *Hot Fuzz* when Simon Pegg's Nicholas Angel arrives in Stanford village, is awash with detail and dynamics from every channel. The Azur goes long a way to crafting the scene in your living room, complete with chinking glasses, a believable babble of the crowd and a snug enveloping atmosphere of a low-

beamed ale house. And I speak from a great personal experience from the latter:

### Pastiche

Step up the pace to *Hot Fuzz's* hilarious cop-film pastiche of a conclusion and the combination drives along with pace and passion. *The film is not as overly loud as many of the action films it apes but the fifteen-minute long orchestra of shotguns and machine guns amidst fabulously timed dialogue and comedy is pure movie magic.*

*Few packages at this price manage to illicit such a marvellously enveloping sound, one that seemingly removes the hardware from the experience and leaves you*

*with the movie itself.* The hum issue aside, the dynamic range is impressive for such budget pretenders, the balance is nicely tailored to the warm side of neutral and there is low-frequency punch that drives home dynamic points in film soundtracks with ease. Whether characters are leaping through the air shooting two pistols or riding a horse up a cobbled street amidst Sergio Leone style ambience, the Azur duo begs you to wind up the volume and throw up your feet for real quality popcorn entertainment.

### Conclusion

Okay, the 540R doesn't have the grace of those

amps with higher power figures and the lack of features such as active HDMI control can be a bit of a pain.

*But in terms of sheer home entertainment value this partnership is unstoppable as Angel and Butterman. With the Cambridge duo set up in good situ and a good supply of Chunky Monkey on standby, the only question left is: Point Break or Bad Boys 2 - which one first? WhatHomeCinema? October 2007*

### 540R RATINGS

Highs: Build quality; looks; simplicity and solid home cinema performance  
Lows: Low features count; no RoomEQ, no HD sound decoding

Sound	★★★★½
Build	★★★★
Features	★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½

### 540D RATINGS

Highs: Build, silky smooth picture, great colour, solid sound  
Lows: No 1080p upscaling; no hi-res audio playback

Picture	★★★★½
Sound	★★★★½
Features	★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½

