

## CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 840A & 840C

# Adding value to the audio mid-market

Known for budget components, Cambridge shows its high-end aspirations, says Tony Williams

How you view Cambridge Audio is probably down to your age. You may remember it as an innovative British brand of the latter part of the last century, making the world's first two-box CD player, or consider it as no more than a house-brand in more recent times. The first "new" Cambridge Audio products of some years back sounded very good, yet felt a bit cheap and used strange oval control knobs. However, for quite a while now the company has been producing audio electronics that look as good as they sound, and stand comparison with the output of just about any specialist audio manufacturer. A major part of that development is down to the company's impressive R&D team at its London headquarters, and its products are now distributed in almost 50 countries. You can still buy an A1 Mk3 amp, complete with oval knobs, for just £110, but the company is fast acquiring a reputation for innovative technology, and the combination here represents current state-of-the-art. The CD player has an upsampling system to take the standard 16-bit, 44.1kHz data coming off the disc all the way up to 24-bit 384kHz resolution, while the amplifier uses a proprietary Class XD technology, the subject of a pending patent. This is said to give "the quality of Class A amplification, the power economy of Class B designs, and most amazingly of all, avoid many of the distortion pitfalls inherent in Class AB

designs". In greatly simplified terms, by feeding a controlled current into the output stage, the design ensures the crossover point occurs at a higher output level, avoiding the abrupt switchover of more conventional designs.

And the two products certainly look worth the money in a choice of black or silver, with a high standard of fit and finish, they use aluminium for the front and side panels, and are built on acoustically damped chassis.

The CD player uses a direct coupled servo design, with no capacitors in the signal path, has two digital to allow other components - a DAB tuner, for example to be run through its dual-differential Analog Devices DAC's. and is fully equipped to connect into multiroom systems.

The amplifier meanwhile, has twin toroidal transformers, one each for pre-amplifier and power amp sections, the same system connection options and resistor ladder/relay attenuation volume



Solid engineering: the massive transformer in the Azur 840A amplifier

control, with relay switching for input selection. This is said to give greatly reduced crosstalk between inputs, more accurate channel balance and considerably less distortion. The 120W-per-channel design also uses two very high current output devices for each channel.

Eight inputs are provided, one also on balanced XLR connections, and these can be named on the backlit display panel on the fascia, and have their gain trimmed individually to match levels across a system. There are bypassable tone controls, pre-amp out/fixed level input corrections and two sets of speaker sockets.

#### PERFORMANCE

I've always been impressed with Cambridge Audio products over the years and the recent "budget" products have seemed to offer excellent value. *So I approached these models with some anticipation, and I'm pleased to say both units not only lived up to expectations but exceeded them by some considerable margin.*

These are really components to hold their own with the best sub- £2000 bracket and, unlike many of their rivals, they offer a range of convenience features rather than the kind of stripped-down specification more usual in the enthusiast market, making



The 840A has more than a hint of the super-amplifier about it

them a pleasure to set up and use.

I listened to the CD player and amplifier both together and in isolation, and it was soon clear how mature and involving a sound has been reaped from all that technology. In

particular, the CD player's upsampling seems to work extremely well, giving an organic, fluid quality that eludes all but the most accomplished hardware. It doesn't attack the rhythms quite as hard as can some machines with a brasher, more upfront overall balance, but it has the and elegance particularly well suited to the intricacies of classical music.

*Orchestral works benefit from this definition and resolution, while the very low noise-floor ensures beautiful atmosphere and space in the sound, plus precise positioning of elements in the sound stage.*

It has power and weight too, and that's something on which the amplifier builds, *thanks to its own clean, wide-open sound, achieved without a hint of sharpness or brittleness.*

Indeed, the 840A sounds a lot more powerful than its 120W nominal output suggests, simply

because its able to drive demanding speakers at very high levels while seeming to have plenty in reserve. And for all that flexibility and technology on board, it manages to fulfil the amplifier ideal of doing little more

than taking signal in at one end and outputting it at much higher level at the other unmolested. The 840A has more than a hint of the super-amp about it: many rivals at this price level and above are prone to imposing more of their character on the music being played, *whereas the Cambridge just delivers to the speakers, as loud as you like and with scintillating speed and dynamic range. This is an amplifier you'll want to play louder than usual: there's nothing wrong with the way it sounds at lower levels, but the superbly linear way in which it just gets louder as you wind up the volume control is a constant temptation.* It's fine for everyday listening, but even better when the neighbours are all out and you can let it off the leash!

Together, the CD player and amplifier make a highly attractive combination, fully capable of bringing out the best in top-quality speakers with which they should be used. *They're a real tribute to the importance Cambridge Audio puts on audio design and engineering.*

July 2007

GRAMOPHONE