

# Group test BUDGET AMPLIFIERS

**Cambridge Audio Azur 540 A V2.0 E 459**



**CAMBRIDGE AUDIO'S EFFECT** om the world of budget hi-fi electronics can be justifiably compared to Apple's on the portable music market arena. *The British company's Azur range of integrated amplifiers and CD players has set new performance standards.* If we counted the number of times

**"Like the others, you can bypass tone controls to optimise sound quality"**

we've been asked about an Azur based set-up, the total would be, well, a big number.

This model builds on the original 540A model. One of the major additions is its 'Incognito-ready' status. Incognito is Cambridge Audio's multiroom system, and this amp can drive music in up to three different rooms. That's an extra zone compared to the rest of the amps here. Looking for a cheap and easy way towards multiroom? This is one.

Available in black or silver, the Azur 540A V2.0 is a chunky-looking fellow. *The build quality is great, and the best remote here backs up a sensibly laid-out fascia.* There are five line-level inputs, plus a couple of tape loops and a preamp out. However, there's no phono stage built-in, so you'd need to partner it with something like Cambridge's E 85 540P.

Like all the amplifiers here, the Azur 540A V2.0 comes

**Picking out subtleties from music is one of the Cambridge amplifiers many strengths**

with tone controls, and as with the rest, you can bypass the controls to optimise sound quality.

## System-matching matters here

In operation, the Azur sounds incredibly clear. It puffs hard into the balloon that is your system's soundstage, enabling a large-sounding delivery. *The Beatles' Come Together fills your room, and the tune drives along with purpose. There are great amounts of detail on offer, and you can detect the boys' layered vocals.*

*Dynamics and timing also impress, and the Cambridge delivers the increasing sense of urgency towards the tune's end.*

So far, so very successful budget stereo amp. There is, however, one area of the 540A V2.0's performance you should be well aware, if not quite beware, of. Higher-frequency delivery's 'on the edge'. Create the wrong environment for the amp - say, choosing bright-sounding system partners, or setting it up in a hard-surfaced, bright-sounding room - and you might find the treble grates.

On the other hand, if you select your partnering kit wisely, this Cambridge machine's performance belies its price by a Duty Free Toblerone-size chunk. This is one tasty stereo amplifier, and it's one that's well worth unwrapping.

**↑ for**

Great clarity for the money; dynamics and timing excite; smart build and stylish remote; multiroom adaptability

**↓ Against**

Can sound bright with wrong partners

**→ Verdict**

For the money, it's brilliant, but sounds best with neutral or warmsounding partners



## FACTS AND FIGURES

PRICE RANGE	CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 540A V2.0	MARANTZ PM4001	ROTEL RA-04	ROTEL RA-05
€ 299 - 600				
SPECIFICATION				
PRICE	€ 459 (includes RC)	€ 299	€ 400	€ 600
POWER	60w/channel	40w/channel	40w/channel	40w/channel
LINE LEVEL INPUTS	5	5	6	6
PHONO STAGE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
TAPE LOOPS	2	2	2	2
PREAMP OUT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SPEAKER OUTS	2	2	2	2
TONE CONTROLS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
TONE DEFEAT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
HEADPHONE OUT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
REMOTE CONTROL	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
FINISHES	2	2	2	2
DIMENSIONS	10 x 43 x 32cm	11 x 44 x 34cm	7 x 44 x 34cm	7 x 44 x 34cm
WEIGHT	7kg	6kg	6kg	6kg
HOW THEY RATED				
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VERDICT	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

**POWER** Don't judge an amplifier on its power rating. This is only a very rough guide to how loud it will go, and says nothing about how good it will sound at any volume. Any of these amps will drive a modern, typical pair of loudspeakers.

**LINE LEVEL INPUTS** These are suitable for most sources, such as CD players, tuners, MP3 players, MiniDisc players, and so on. They're not suitable for turntables, which require a phono stage.

**PHONO STAGE** Only the Cambridge isn't deck-ready. If you're planning to use a turntable with it, then budget an extra £40-£60 for an off-board phono stage, such as Cambridge's own 540P.

**TAPE LOOPS** Allow you to attach, and also monitor, recording devices such as analogue cassettes, Minidisc, or a CD recorder.

**PREAMP OUT** Let you output an unamplified signal, which can also be altered using the volume control. Useful for sending a pure signal to a recording device such as a computer.

**SPEAKER OUTS** All allow at least two pairs of speakers to be attached, while the Cambridge will drive three pairs of speakers. Don't expect to play them all at ultra-loud volumes, but it's a good basis for a simple multiroom system.

**TONE CONTROLS** Switch off for the purest sound

**HEADPHONE OUT** For silent listening

**REMOTE CONTROL** The circuitry involved in controlling the unit remotely does affect the sound detrimentally. Read the Rotel reviews.

## MULTIROOM MAGIC

All these machines power at least one extra pair of stereo speakers in another room. (Cambridge can actually manage three rooms if you buy some extra kit). This could be a route to a simple-yet-effective, multiroom entertainment system