

Sam Tellig

I still use as a transport. And Cambridge was one of the first companies to offer a music server: the Azur 640H.

John Bevier, of US distributor Audio Plus Services, arranged for me to receive two components from

Sam Checks Out Cambridge Audio

He doesn't need to wear a jacket and tie. But will someone buy Matthew Bramble a proper shirt?

It was a hot summer day when I visited Mr. Bramble, technical director of Cambridge Audio (not to be confused with Cambridge SoundWorks), at the company's headquarters in London. I spied not a single jacket or tie in the whole of Hankey Place, sometimes known as Richer House. That's right, no "suits." My kind of place. It was one of those rare times I've felt overdressed.

Cambridge Audio is part of Audio Partnership PLC.

Research and development take place at Hankey Place.

Manufacturing is outsourced to the People's Republic of China.

Up till now, Chinese hi-fi manufacturers have tended to be behind the curve with new technologies, especially digital. Their designs tend to be derivative, not original. This is true of driveunits and finished loudspeakers, too. *So you hire a team of top British engineers, design your products in London, and have the stuff made in China under close supervision*, by trusted factories that won't turn around and produce knockoffs of your products under another name. Bambridge Audio, anyone? I made that up, but you get the idea.

Much British "eye-fye" is now made in China. Quad and Wharfedale are owned by a Chinese company, International Audio

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Group. A good thing, too: the never quality has been better. B&W's 600-series of speakers are made in a new "purpose-built factory in China, owned and managed by B&W."

Matthew Bramble, whom Audio Partnership hired away from Musical Fidelity, had spied my Musical Fidelity wristwatch.

"That's the mechanical model," he said. "Very nice. I've got one of those, too)."

Does he wear it to work? Ah, no. Apparently not.

Mr. Bramble has a distinguished history on which to build: Cambridge Audio was founded in 1969 and was managed for a while

by British hi-fi legend Stam Curtis. Colorful chap. Haven't seen him in a dog's age. Cambridge was one of the first companies in the world to produce an outboard digital processor-and a good one too. Stan was one of the first to recognize, in the mid-1980s, that digital playback didn't sound so hot. The principal perpetrator: jitter. Stam sent jitter to gaol, as it were.

As part of Audio Partnership, *Cambridge Audio has kept its position as one of the world's more technologically advanced hi-fi companies. Their CD players, in particular, have consistently offered excellent sound for very little money.* I have a Cambridge Audio D500SE player in the basement that

Cambridge's current Azur series: the 740C CD player and 740A integrated amplifier. Each has a suggested retail price of E 995 - upmarket for Cambridge Audio. The Azurs' dimensions are identical: 16.9" (430mm) wide by 4.5" (115mm) high by 12.4" (315mm) deep. The 740C weighs 14.1 lbs (6.4kg), the 740A 23.5 lbs (10.7kg) -more than our cat, Maxik (11 lbs). Both are available in silver or black. The silver looks okay; the black is somewhat funereal.

I welcome a quirky Cambridge Audio touch, which I think is found on all models: The inputs and outputs are silk-screened upside clown as well as right-side up. What genius thought of this? Maybe Stan Curtis. Suppress your smile -this is not risible. When you stand in front and bend over to make connections on the rear, the wrong-. side-up labeling is right-side up.

Cambridge Audio Azur 740C CD player

The 740C is the second-from-the-top CD player in Cambridge Audio's Azur line. The 840C, which has been selling for E 1395, yields some more goodies, including costlier DACs, upgraded power supplies, and fully balanced analog outputs. If your budget allows, you might want to stretch.

The 740C's drive and laser mechanism is sourced from Sony. The drawer mechanism operates with reassuring solidity -there's nothing cheap or flimsy here. You



Matthew Bramble shows off some of Cambridge Audio's newest gear. Priced to move.



Cambridge Audio Azur 740C CD player in funereal black. Get the silver instead.

can dim or turn off the display from the remote control, which the Azur 740C shares with the matching Azur 740A integrated amp.

Unusually, the 740C has two digital inputs, for using external sources such as HD radio, a Slim Devices Squeezebox, or any other digital device. Whatever. It can be upsampled to 48, 96, or 192kHz at 16-, 20-, or 24-bit resolution, with or without dither. When you play regular CDs through the 740C, you're preset for 24-bit/384kHz. Each input allows for TosLink or S/PDIF connection.

The digital datastream then goes to something called an Adaptive Time Filtering (ATF) system, from Anagram Technologies of Switzerland. (You didn't think the Chinese would invent this stuff, did you? Not yet.) This system "intelligently" interpolates 16bit/44kHz CD data to 24/384. Ah-ha—the magic bullet again. Upsampling can trick one into thinking there are more than 16 bits on a "Red Book" CD. It's splendid stuff: ask The Chief (John Atkinson). Okay, there aren't any more than 16 bits on a "Red Book" CD. But hi-fi is an illusion anyway.

Are you going to measure the damned stuff or listen to it?

This is not Swiss cheese. Matthew Bramble writes that the digital prestidigitation "almost completely eradicate[s] jitter." That's something Stan Curtis was on to nearly 25 years ago.

Why 384kHz? Wouldn't 96kHz or 192kHz be enough? According to Bramble, 384kHz moves "aliasing artifacts way above audible frequencies." And this, in turn, permits kinder, gentler analog filtering. Those aliasing artifacts? Nasty stuff.

So...you have this 24/384 datastream flowing in from the shores of Lake Léman in Prévèrenge, Switzerland, home of Anagram Technologies. Then it travels to Edinburgh, Scotland, via two Wolfson Microelectronics WM8740 DACs operating in dual-differential mode, which allows the left and right channels to operate independently of each other for superior separation, soundstaging, etc. The pity is that, having equipped the 740C with dual-differential DACs, Cambridge didn't include balanced analog outputs as well. For that you need the 840C. The 740C offers both optical (TosLink) and S/PDIF digital outputs -*although I can't see much point in bypassing the 740C's sophisticated onboard digital processing.*

For the most part, I used the Azur 740s together. I also tried the 740C with Cary Audio's SLP 03 preamp and CAD 120S amplifier. Speakers throughout were Verity Audio's new Rienzi, which, at E 7995/pair, is probably too costly for most Cambridge Audio customers.

Never mind. 'The Azur 740C is close to the best CD player I've heard to date. I particularly liked the way it handled good piano recordings: the attack of the notes, their percussive quality, the decay. 'The retrieval of ambient information was exceptional. I laugh my evil laugh. Magic bullet! Can you hear the pedalwork? 'The imaging was precise, the soundstage wide and deep. Bass notes had an extension and authority that you might expect from a E 1500 or E 2000 CD player.

These areas are where budget

players -even some E 1000 machine- wimp out. They don't have that bass authority, that dynamic range, that precise and certain timing. If you're listening to a less expensive player -say something you bought -say, or around E 500- prepare to be amazed by the Cambridge Azur 740C. The 740C also sounded sweet - especially when used with tube gear. ***Its midrange and treble were exceptional: smooth and extended. Voices and violins sang. I heard nothing hard, brittle, or shrill.***

This is the sound I've long expected from Cambridge Audio, since the days when Stan Curtis designed and made the stuff-in Cambridge, England. *Stan may be long gone from the company, but the Cambridge house sound remains: clear, clean, quick, well extended at bottom and top. A tact lean. Or was it just neutral?* I no longer had the Rega Saturn CD player on hand for direct comparison, but I recall that it had a fuller, warmer, tonal character -at more than twice the price. 'That's the Rega house sound: fullbodied, richer. (Sorry, Mr. Bramble.) 'The Rega Apollo CD player, too, is long gone from my listening room, and, like the 740C, it sells for E 1000. From memory, *I think the Cambridge Audio Azur 740C may offer greater low-level resolution, ambience, air, and openness.* But then there's that rich Rega sound. I do love the Rega's way of optimizing itself to play each disc. And the Rega is a British player that's actually made in the UK. Ultimately, these things come down to matters of personal preference. Now would someone buy Matthew Bramble a proper shirt? Maybe some new underwear, too. Perhaps his old boss, Musical Fidelity's Antony Michaelson, can take him shopping. On Jermyn Street.

Cambridge Audio Azur 74011 integrated amplifier

Inevitably, Cambridge Audio's Azur 740A integrated amp excited me less than the matching CD player.



Cambridge Audio Azur 740A integrated amplifier. Maybe a little better dressed than Matthew Bramble, but what counts is inside.

But that's because the 740C wouldn't be out of place with far more expensive gear. If you ask me to recommend a solid-state integrated amplifier for a kilobuck, the 740A would be tops on my list. There are six RCA line-level inputs plus one tape input, and two preamp outputs, for use with additional power amplifiers or a powered subwoofer. The two pairs of speaker terminals are not quite as crummy as the ones Cambridge used to use. Of course, there are tone controls -defeatable at the press of a button.

There should be ample current delivery from two pairs of bipolar output transistors per channel, but the Azur 740A is no balls-to-the-wall powerhouse that can double its output into 4 ohms. On the other hand, it's not some itty-bitty Britty integrated that puts out a piddling 60-70W into 8 ohms on a good day. (Cambridge Audio rates the 740A as delivering 100Wpc into 8 ohms or 150W into 4 ohms.) I gave the 740A a workout with Verity Audio's Rienzi speakers. It did the trick in terms of power delivery most of the time, but when pressed hard it could run out of steam, as you might expect.

The instruction manual has 98 pages. That's because it comes in eight languages, including Russian, Danish, Deutsch, and Dutch. Still, the 740A is not a doddie (as the Brits like to say) when it comes to setup. While only a two-channel amplifier, it also features Control Bus Input/Output and an IR emitter input for multiroom systems. This allows for Cambridge Audio's Incognito modular multiroom system but, alas, Incognito's complexity as well: "Featuring two dedicated outputs, you can easily

link your new Cambridge Audio amplifier or home cinema receiver to Incognito keypacs and passive speakers or directly to active in-ceiling speakers for an incredibly simple multi-room system."

Then Cambridge fesses up: Setting up the 740A for a multiroom system calls for "a custom install professional or experienced amateur." Do you like snaking wires? Drilling holes in walls, ceilings, and floors? At the very least, Cambridge Audio could supply an instructional DVD. I shudder to think about folks who buy this thing from an Audio Advisor catalog without proper dealer support. (If AA doesn't have a network of fee-based customer installers, they should have.) Did someone say "incredibly simple"? I used the 740A's standard features and stayed out of trouble.

"[S]ophisticated software afford a plethora of features," rambles Bramble in his introduction. Plethora or plague, depending on your point of view. Volume and channel balances are set by "silicon gate" control, said to be an improvement over standard potentiometers. There's a standard 1/4" headphone jack, which I thought sounded quite good through my AKG 701 headphones. There's no onboard phono stage.

The Azur 740A and 740C use the same remote control, which includes a feature you might like: You can control basic Apple iPod functions, such as volume and track selection. This boon (or bane) requires an Apple or other universal dock. I suggest you get something like an iMod, from Red Wine Audio, then feed its digital output to the 740C for upsampling.

In the 740A I detected the

Cambridge house sound: lean, clear, open, very detailed, slightly lacking in warmth. It's what you might want from a CD player-but an amplifier? The 740A is a solid-state amplifier, after all -one that uses bipolar rather than MOSFET output devices, and bipolars aren't known for sounding particularly tube-like.

They're better when it comes to punching out current, however. And they may be more practical when it comes to playing more than one pair of speakers at a time.

The sound was detailed enough for a E 1000 integrated amplifier. Bass notes punched through with solidity, authority, and timing. If you listen at loud levels in a big room, you'll probably need a bigger amp with even greater current delivery. But you know this.

Once again, as with the matching 740C CD player, I can't say that the 740A sounded edgy or shrill. But it could have been just a tad sweeter, and there could have been more low-level detail -as there is, let's say, with a Creek integrated amp. Austere might be the right word for the Azur 740A. Cold might be another.

Cambridge Audio makes a more expensive integrated, the Azur 840A, which has been selling for E 1395. The 840A uses Cambridge's proprietary XD biasing scheme (XD stands for crossover displacement) and looks to be, essentially, a class-A/B design. But class-A doesn't switch to class-B at zero volume. In other words, the transition from class-A to class-B might be smoother and less noticeable than with conventional class-A/B designs. *I heard a prototype of the 840A when I visited Cambridge Audio's London HQ and was impressed by its sound. So it might be advisable to pay the extra E 400 and get the Azur 840A.*