

AZUR BET?

Cambridge Audio's budget Azur range is rapidly gaining a reputation as 'the NAD of the noughties'... In this latest instalment, Dominic Todd auditions the new 540d DVD player...



Unlike its ancestors, the 540d doesn't push expectations on the spec per pound basis. Indeed, the lack of SACD decoding actually puts it at a slight disadvantage to truly universal rivals such as the Pioneer DV565. Yet when it comes to the quality of both componentry and casing, the Cambridge is at a definite advantage. Whilst most rivals use 11-bit video DACs, Cambridge use six 12-bit/54Mhz devices. To further enhance the picture, progressive scan is also provided in both PAL and NTSC formats. This, combined with the component video outputs, has a beneficial effect to the pictures depth and stability. If your TV is so equipped it's well worth using. On the sound front, Cambridge uses a Crystal CS4360 24/196 DAC. It's interesting to note that although this is totally different to the Wolfson chip found in their 540c CD player, the quoted measurements are remarkably similar.

Short of the lack of SACD, there's really very little else to criticise about this machine. Every output you could want has been provided, and the IEC mains connection will please those who prefer to upgrade their mains leads. Of further interest to audiophiles is the casing that, like the rest of the range, has been developed to quell resonance and vibration. For a £230 pound DVD player this is highly unusual and unlikely to be found amongst rivals. Rivals aren't as prolific as you might think yet, perhaps most formidable of all, is the Pioneer

DV565 (£250). At technically a little more money you've got the Sony DVP-NS930V (£300) and the Marantz DV4300 (£250). I say, "technically" as in reality you're quite likely to find all three for considerably less on the high street, thanks to an intensively competitive DVD market place.

As is customary, I began by evaluating the 540d's picture quality. Obviously those 12-bit video DACs have an effect as I found the picture to be comfortably above average. Even without the progressive scan, there was a fine depth of field and decent stability. Colour performance can often be a matter of taste, but few would argue with Cambridge's natural balance. I felt it lost some of the rivalling Sony and Pioneer's vitality, yet more than made up for it in other respects. Flesh tones, for example, were portrayed with a greater sense of realism than anything else I've seen at this price. Overall, then, the picture quality will suit those who prefer realism to intensity, and is amongst the best at this price.

With the DVD teamed up with its matching 540r AV receiver and a Mordaunt Short Avant 'speaker package, I initially began by listening in stereo, with an Azur 540c CD player alongside for comparison. First off was The Divine Comedy's 'Charmed Life'. To begin with I was slightly disappointed by a rather weak piano tone and flat sound stage. It certainly didn't appear to be as good as its CD namesake. Yet all was not lost. Although the vocals didn't have quite the presence of the CD player, they

were at least richly textured. Likewise the detail from both guitar and, what sounded like, banjo was excellent in comparison to the competition. Bass has a surprising weight too, although without quite the control of the dedicated CD player. Whilst the banjo was neatly separated from the rest of the orchestration, the sound could occasionally become a little muddled. That said, it was at least smooth, and had a rare sense of flow. Rare, that is in context to rivals, many of whom still sound somewhat mechanical.

Raising the tempo somewhat was Jeff Healey's 'The Damage is Done', which proved surprisingly involving with foot tappingly sharp timing and plenty of detail from the guitars. Vocals were well separated from the rest of the mix, even if they lacked the reach into the room of the standard CD player. My only real concern was the somewhat vague percussion presentation. Even given the limitations of a £230 DVD player I hadn't expected quite as much, "splash", from the treble, especially as the 540d was so refined in other respects.

Classical music highlighted an area of concern that isn't alone in afflicting the 540d DVD player. During the quieter passages of Finzi's Eclogue for piano and strings, I was conscious of a ticking noise from the transport. A second sample suffered similarly and is something to bear in mind if you listen/watch at low volumes with the unit close to your listening position. Otherwise, the piano tone was again not the strongest. A decent £150 CD

PAST TIMES

Cambridge Audio was actually in the DVD field from fairly early days. Like the new 540d, their first DVD player was very solidly built. Yet the performance of the 2001 (£250) DVD300 was barely above average. What turned around Cambridge's fortunes was the 50-series. The DVD 53, 55 and 57 may not have had quite the quality of finish of the earlier and latter players, but they all offered a phenomenal specification for the money. At £150, the DVD55 was the cheapest DVD player at the time to offer full Progressive Scan. Likewise, the £200 DVD57 offered DVD-A way before it was the norm at this price. Today the market has caught up but, judging by the success of the 540d, the experience obviously hasn't done Cambridge Audio any harm at all...

player, for example, would probably be better it, but it was certainly as good as Cambridge's budget CDs player. The string tone was far from being the richest or most lush, but it did have a smoothness characteristic of the Crystal DAC. Although the dynamics were ultimately rather softened, the fine timing and seamless response made for a pleasant listen.

Switching to DVD-A made the sort of marked improvements we've come to expect. With the sound now split between 5 'speakers, the dynamic scale improved immensely. With Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Ballet, there was also an element of control that had been missing from CD. Being surrounded by 'speakers also improves the sound stage, yet even ignoring this I felt that the front 'speakers alone were pushing the sound further into the room. Although the library of DVD-Audio discs is somewhat limited, you'd be foolish not to buy just a handful at least, just to hear the difference that it can make.

Although one could never call the

540d's sound quality stunning, the context has to be born in mind. As a £250 DVD player on which to play CDs I believe that there is none better. Whilst it's not as class leading sound quality is all very well, but is not conclusive in a DVD player. Fortunately the Cambridge matches its smooth, refined sound to an equally mature picture quality. I'd hesitate to call it class leading, as it comes down to personal choice, but it's certainly unlikely to disappoint most potential buyers. Certainly it produces ones of the most natural pictures for its price. Factor in the quality finish and decent feature count and it's clear that Cambridge have, yet again, produced a class leader. Now there's a surprise...

good as its dedicated CD brother it would perhaps be churlish to expect so. Dynamic scale and control simply aren't as good as the CD player, and neither is instrumental timbre. That said, the general flow and cohesive nature of the player is good enough to shame most rivals. The bass response is also surprisingly good. Move to DVD-A and the results are exceptionally good. Again I believe the Cambridge to be best in its class here too. It is something of a shame, however, that SACD wasn't also incorporated. Whilst the SACD catalogue is also looking a bit on the slim side, it can't be denied that the 540d's closest rival, the Pioneer DV565, receives a substantial boost here

for its inclusion. Of course, we shouldn't forget that

VERDICT

Perhaps not a landmark product, but without doubt one of the finest DVD players at this price.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 540D £250

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO

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FOR

- Class leading sound
- Natural picture quality
- Expensive feeling remote

AGAINST

- No SACD
- Transport noise

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

With a 96kHz sample rate test signal, frequency response was -5dB down at 48kHz and with a 192kHz sample rate test signal it was -10dB down at 48kHz. The roll off was smooth and analogue like in both cases, likely giving DVD Audio less openness in its sound, but less glassiness too. With CD, however, the player had response emphasis at both low and high frequencies, likely giving a small sneeze of 'loudness' enhancement.

Distortion levels were low, measuring 0.0003% at 0dB and 3% at -80dB, a normal result for DVD-A well implemented. With CD the figures were good if not exceptional, as a 108dB EIAJ measured dynamic range value indicates. Noise was low and output normal.

The Azur 540D is a bit of a mixed bag, audio wise. It will sound lively with CD, but softer with DVD Audio. Cambridge seem to be trying to counter common criticism of DVD players that they make CD sound dull and DVD

bright. Whether the Azure is successful here only listening can decide. NK

Frequency response	
CD	4Hz-21.8kHz
DVD	4Hz-23kHz
Separation	98dB
Distortion	0.004%
Noise	102dB
Output	2.1V

