



Pay azur go

You'll spend more than usual for Cambridge Audio's new player, but you get what you pay for

PRODUCT Cambridge Audio Azur 840C
TYPE CD player
PRICE £750
KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43x11.5x36cm
 • Weight: 8.5kg • Analogue outputs: balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (phono) • Digital outputs: S/PDIF electrical and Toslink optical • Digital inputs: S/PDIF electrical and Toslink optical • 24-bit/384kHz resolution
CONTACT ☎ 0870 900 1000
 🌐 www.cambridgeaudio.com

In *HFC 281*, we raised an eyebrow at Cambridge Audio's upmarket aspirations as exemplified in the very fine Azur 840A integrated amplifier. Forewarned by that experience, we were still taken aback by the present suspect. £750 is not, after all, a 'real' high-end price for a CD player, and the typical machine at that price offers considerably fewer novel features than does this one.

The most obvious technical selling point of the 840C is its use of upsampling; not just to 192kHz, but to 384kHz. This is something not

(as far as we know) previously seen outside the rarified realm of handbuilt esoterica. In fact, there's a whole story in this, for Cambridge has joined forces with Swiss digital audio specialist Anagram Technologies, buying in the latter's class-leading upsampling technologies. Anagram employs the full processing power of a high-performance Digital Signal Processing (DSP) chip to offer features not available in off-the-shelf solutions. Admittedly, the most extraordinary ability of Anagram's upsampling, potentially enormous up- and down-sampling ratios, doesn't apply to a CD player at all, but the high performance in audio terms is still welcome and it is still one of very few ways to offer 24-bit/384kHz performance.

Having such processing power on hand is too good an opportunity to waste, and Cambridge has cleverly harnessed it for other digital devices by adding digital inputs at the rear of the 840C. This means that you can plug in, say, a DAB tuner or a PC's digital output and enjoy the benefits of the 840C's upsampling and high quality digital-to-analogue conversion.

What's more, the digital outputs on the unit can be fed with an upsampled version of the data on the CD or from the digital inputs.

Converting 384kHz data to analogue would appear to be beyond most current DAC chips, but the type used in the 840C has a special input for data from an external filter. This bypasses the DSP within the converter itself and in fact reduces the amount of 'bit twiddling' that the data undergoes, compared with conventional upsampling CD players. This in turn means that the performance really is defined by Anagram's software alone, rather than in combination with the DAC manufacturer's filter implementation. While in principle this should not matter, at a very subtle level, there are minute distortions that can arise when digital signal processes are combined, and who's to say they won't be audible under some conditions? Regrettably, Anagram has still missed a trick in making the 'brickwall' filtering performance only slightly better than average, so there is still some aliasing going on above 20kHz.



“One feels no urge to sit and analyse what’s so good about it. It’s a great music player... and that’s all one needs to know.”

In terms of construction, this player features a swift CD-Audio transport that loads discs in as little as three seconds, plus an external servo board to control the transport and provide a stable source of digits for the DSP. All the various audio bits are contained on a single board, spanning the width of the player at the rear and filled with surface-mount components. Following the DAC chips, high performance op-amps perform what little analogue filtering is needed and buffer the signal for the balanced and unbalanced outputs. The power supply uses a toroidal transformer and a bank of filter capacitors.

The player’s standard of finish is good and the appearance smart and modern, although the dark-grey-on-light-grey liquid crystal display will not be everyone’s idea of beautiful. Frankly, we regard it as a bit of an anachronism, but there’s no denying it conveys the information perfectly well and very legibly.

SOUND QUALITY

Cut to the chase – we found this player upliftingly excellent in almost every way. Indeed, we found ourselves thinking dark thoughts about just how much more the high end of audio can offer in real terms.

A possible criticism of the 840C is that it’s a bit boring. But in fact it’s just very, very realistic sounding. If you like your music reproduction enhanced in some way, you simply shouldn’t bother with the Cambridge Audio Azur 840C. This is life in the raw, as it comes.

Well, very nearly, at least. Just on the odd occasion, we were dimly aware that the merest hint of precision in images was lacking, with performers seeming ever so slightly vague around the edges where true ‘reference’ CD players had in the past shows them more clearly delineated. Yes, ‘dim’, ‘odd’, ‘mere’ and ‘vague’... this is subtle stuff. It is important to note, though, that nothing at or near the 840C’s price exceeds its performance in this regard, and we really are talking about the last ‘nth’ part of the performance envelope here.

Tonally, the player is highly neutral. It may have a smidgin of coloration in the upper midrange/lower treble, which probably relates to the filter limitations noted above. Then again it’s at least the equal of anything in its class. Bass is truly excellent, deep, powerful, tuneful, rhythmic and controlled, and extreme treble is crystalline and pure.

But that honesty thing... it’s what kept us putting disc after disc in the player. It has that

rare knack of preserving the polish of a Haydn string quartet without prettying up the Sex Pistols, belting the bejazus out of a dramatic finale in an Italian opera without fudging the simplicity of Nina Simone. It’s hard to put a finger on just what combination of technical qualities makes for this admirable characteristic, but in the end it’s clear that a quite effortless approach to detail lies behind it, together with (probably related to) a lack of the subtle grunge and noise that dirties up the sound of lesser reproducers.

The real joy of this player, though, is that one feels no urge to sit and analyse what’s so good about it. It’s a great music player... and that’s all one needs to know. Dig out some favourite discs, spin them up and don’t resist the urge to grin. This is technology transcending the merely technological, and we’re delighted to have encountered it. **HFC**

Richard Black



VERDICT	
SOUND >> 90% [Progress bar]	PRO Fine tonality, fabulous bass quality, great detail – but above all a degree of musical honesty that really involves the listener.
FEATURES >> 90% [Progress bar]	CON Vices are minor in the extreme: a touch of upper midrange lift, a very slight smudging of images, both only audible in painstaking A/B comparisons.
BUILD >> 88% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 96% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION One of the most involving and rewarding music replay machines we’ve come across at such a sensible price and an excellent partner to the fine 840A amplifier. There simply isn’t a CD player at the price that offers anywhere near as much!	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 93%	