



Nifty Fifty

Adam Smith spends some time with Cambridge Audio's new Azur 350A amplifier...

Despite the ever-increasing popularity of microscopic portable speakers for MP3 players and the truly bewildering range of iPod docks on the market, it seems that the budget end of the hi-fi spectrum is still holding its own. Indeed, if any evidence of this is needed, just look at the way some big Japanese brands have re-entered this market sector. I suspect that some of this might have to do with the fact that some of those aforementioned docks are fairly unpleasant to listen to, and some of the tiny speakers are downright nasty, meaning that it does not take too long before aural fatigue sets in and even a half-keen music listener understandably wants something better...

I've had conversations with three people recently who all changed to AV surround setups a few years back that they enjoy, but are tired of the mess that their £20 DVD player is making of reproducing their CDs. In each case, the person in

question wanted to be able to set up a separate two-channel system either at the other end of the lounge or in another room and wanted an affordable but good quality amplifier and CD player to do the job. Was there anything like this still available, each one asked me? Fortunately I was able to say "yes", and give them a shortlist of models to audition. However, when compiling that list, it didn't take very long at all before the name of Cambridge Audio cropped up...

Of course there haven't been that many companies like Cambridge Audio able to make a success of good quality, affordable audio designs. It's true to say that there are other worthy contenders around, including the likes of NAD and the most affordable offerings from the likes of Marantz, Denon and Yamaha but, particularly since the introduction of the Azur range, no-one quite seems to have hit the level of sheer sophistication and affordable quality that marks out Audio Partnership's main

electronics range. This is largely due to their team of boffins beavering away in the top secret headquarters in London, including amplifier design guru Douglas Self and Technical Director, Matthew Bramble; a man who, rumour has it, recently designed and built himself an all-valve DAC "just for the hell of it"!

As the update of the Azur range continues apace however, the latest model to land on my doorstep is the 350A amplifier, spiritual successor to the 340A and tweaked 340A SE. I was very keen to try this beast because the 340A SE was a favourite of mine, being a big-hearted performer that never once made any noises that would give away its humble price tag.

Immediately noticeable on unpacking the 350A is the new casework, which is impressively solid and boasts a nice chunky brushed aluminium front panel and a set of the new Azur range knobs, which feel delightfully sensuous in operation.

Under the bonnet, Cambridge



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use high quality integrated circuit modules for each channel, all linked up by pukka passive componentry, including an ALPS volume pot which, last time I went to buy one was nearly a quarter of the cost of the whole amplifier, so this is an impressive fitment. Power comes from an oversized toroidal transformer and the whole shebang is enclosed in a new and more solid wrap-around case. Again, like the XTZ CD player I reviewed last month, the 350A's construction quality belies its modest price tag.

At the business end of things, the 350A offers five line level inputs plus a tape loop with proper tape monitoring facilities at the rear, plus front-panel mounted sockets for headphones and MP3 player connection. The latter duplicates the MP3 phono sockets at the rear but overrides them once anything is plugged in. Naturally the 350A comes with one of Cambridge Audio's scrumptious remote control handsets which has also been pre-programmed

with the control codes to various iPods, meaning it can control them as well when used in conjunction with Cambridge's iD50 iPod dock. Finally, two pairs of loudspeakers may be connected to the 350A; it measures 86x430x340mm and tips the scales at 6kg.

SOUND QUALITY

Connecting the Cambridge up to an XTZ CD100 silver disc player and a pair of Mordaunt Short Avant 902i loudspeakers sat on Atacama SL600 stands, I was quite taken by the way in which the Azur 350A sounds in no way like a budget amplifier. The sound that greeted me was poised, confident and filled the area between the loudspeakers with style and scale. As one might expect from a more affordable item, the Cambridge did not push the action past the physical limits of the loudspeakers by a great deal, but equally everything tailed off smoothly to the left and right so that there was never any sense of an abrupt cessation to the musical

action at either side.

In the middle of things, the Azur 350A does not quite have the sense of depth and scale that vanishes off into the far distance, but neither did it compress everything into a flattened two-dimensional lump in between the loudspeakers. Once the amplifier had been warmed up for a few days it began to give an effortless sense of atmosphere and authority to recordings, dealing with aspects like central image solidity and the arrangements of performers on a live stage in a very capable manner. The location of each individual Eagles member from their 'Hell Freezes Over' CD was easy to place and as the vocal and instrumental action passed between them, the Cambridge made sure it was easy to follow and very well highlighted.

Most noticeable about the Cambridge's overall presentation is its sheer sense of smooth assuredness and its velvety composure. I strongly suspect that the benign and unchanging



A well equipped back panel isn't what you'd expect on an amplifier of this price...

distortion patterns that it produces are at work here [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE] and the result is an amplifier than never seems flustered or on the edge of falling apart. At the top end, the treble is a liquid delight; although lacking the sheer icy clarity that more expensive discrete designs can muster, the 350A was never less than neatly and cleanly detailed, whilst simultaneously retaining a sense of liquid ease. It may be heresy to say such a thing but there was even a *hint* of valve in its easy-going but transparent nature; a complete anathema to some of the hard and lacerative budget designs that have graced the market over the years!

Across the midband, the Cambridge continued to perform in a way that belied its simple heritage. Vocals were beautifully rendered, the 350A imbuing Norah Jones with just the right sense of huskiness at the back of her throat but equally having no problem when it came to the hard-rocking grunge offered by the likes of Pendulum.

Instrumentally the Azur continued to perform with confidence and bravado, but its simpler innards did start to become more obvious at times when it came to midrange detailing and really getting to the heart of an acoustic instrument's nature. The 350A will never disguise what type of instrument is playing, but it lacks the ability to really capture the innate nature of, say, a grand piano. In this case things were just a little recessed, the amplifier missing out on that last hint of air around the notes, and slightly veiling the actual strike of hammer upon string. Equally, however, violins and the like actually benefitted from the Cambridge's smooth and ever so slightly opaque nature, ensuring that they never became harsh or screechy.

At the low end, the Azur regained its ground, turning in a punchy and well ordered performance. The Avant 902is are snappy and tight at the low

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end, and the Cambridge matched them very well indeed, resulting in a bass performance that was well weighted, eminently tuneful and nicely detailed. I even took time to plug the Azur into my reference Ferrograph S1s to see if it would run into a corner and hide, but it came out fighting!

The Ferrographs are not a difficult load but they are insensitive at 84dB and respond best to an amplifier that can grip them by the scruff of the neck and slap them into line a bit. Paired with the 350A, they responded well, and their deep and solid bass was still very much in evidence. However, the 350A lacked the grip to keep them in line, meaning that the very bottom end became just a little too fruity and overblown. Still, I have heard far more

expensive amplifiers do a worse job, so the Cambridge actually came out of this little experiment very well indeed.

CONCLUSION

It may seem a forgone and even slightly dull conclusion, but Cambridge Audio can notch up another success on their corporate bedpost as far as I am concerned. The Azur 350A is a worthy successor to the 340A and builds on the latter's strengths to move its whole sonic game up a notch or two. Anyone who thinks affordable amplifiers are splashy and messy owes it to themselves to hear the Azur 350A; it really is a composed, smooth and inviting delight to listen to, and will be a strong beat at the heart of a budget separates system.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The 350A produced a modest 48 Watts into 8 Ohms and 56 Watts into 4 Ohms, enough power to go very loud in conjunction with sensitive floorstanding loudspeakers of 87-90dB sensitivity. The maximum output voltage swing dropped a large 5V from 8 to 4 Ohms so the 350A is unlikely to have a lot of grunt, but it will exercise reasonable control over bass cones, with a useful damping factor of 40.

An interesting feature of the 350A is a consistently benign distortion characteristic, where innocuous second harmonic distortion dominates at all power output levels, with a 10kHz signal. The distortion characteristic stayed remarkably stable under all conditions and this usually results in an easy presentation free from colour and a patina of coarseness.

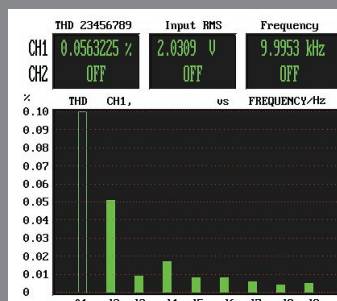
Input sensitivity was low at 400mV and external phono stages will need plenty of gain. Frequency response was wide and remained so as volume was wound down. It was also flat with Direct selected or not, the tone controls being set to their detents. Both tone controls worked well, offering trim at

spectrum extremes, below 300Hz for the bass control and above 5kHz for the treble control.

The 350A amplifier turned in a neat set of measurements in every area. It should give a nice sound. NK

Power	48 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	6Hz- 72kHz
Separation	73dB
Noise	-103dB
Distortion	0.03%
Sensitivity	400mV

DISTORTION



VERDICT

A smooth, composed and highly musical performer, the 350A is another budget stormer from Cambridge Audio.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO
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- FOR**
- fine low end weight
 - smooth, velvety nature
 - build quality

- AGAINST**
- midrange insight