

Cambridge Azur 640P

Cambridge Audio Azur 640P phono preamplifier. \$249

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Thanks to several months of reviewing digital equipment, it's been a while since I've spent any quality time with my cherished turntable and record collection. But no longer, for the editor had kindly arranged for me to receive the new phono preamplifier from Cambridge Audio.

Two years ago Cambridge introduced the first of the Azur range of audio components, designed to offer the high performance and value for money of the Classic series with a more contemporary design aesthetic. Previous issues of *AudioEnz* have looked at the 640 and 540 series of CD players and amplifiers.

Talk vinyl

New to the 640 series is the Azur 640P phono preamplifier, suitable for moving coil or moving magnet cartridges. There's also a 540P available overseas, but the importer has chosen not to bring this model into New Zealand.

Buyers get a well built (0.9kg), damped steel chassis with a nicely machined aluminium faceplate, simply adorned with the Cambridge Audio logo on the left, model designation to the right and a small blue power on LED in the middle.

The rear panel has the input socket for the supplied wallwart power supply (no power switch as

the unit is supposed to be left on all the time), gold plated L/R RCA outputs, slider switches for subsonic filter (rarely seen nowadays, even on more expensive phono stages, but useful for filtering out low frequency rubbish) and MM/MC selection, more gold plated RCAs for MM or MC input and a grounding post.



The unit is finished in a classy matt silver.

As is the norm at this price point, the Azur does not offer a high level of user adjustability. Gain, sensitivity and loading are fixed at relatively standard levels; 39dB/3.35mV/47k Ohm for high output MM cartridges and 55dB/0.5mV/100 Ohms for low output MC cartridges. Nominal output is 300mV. These settings should make the 640P compatible with most cartridges and amplifier line stages.

Feeding time

Fed a high quality signal from my Well Tempered turntable and tonearm and Shelter 501 cartridge, I was not prepared for the sound from this modestly priced unit.

It's been said that the true test of hi-fi amplifier design team is how well they design a phono stage. It is with tiny signal levels that expertise in areas like circuit layout and power supply design pays off. With the 640P, the English Cambridge design team (design is in the UK, manufacture in China) has hit the bulls eye, producing an affordable unit worthy of comparison to much more expensive phono preamps.

Many would-be listeners may well have the 640P pegged with the similarly priced NAD PP2 but extensive listening showed the Cambridge to be quite a bit more capable. Capable enough to be closer to the better sub-\$1000 phono stages like the Plinius Jarrah (my reference) and the current under \$1000 best buy, the Dynavector DV-75, than the \$249 NAD PP2.

Music is reproduced with the same vividness and naturalness that characterises the more expensive units. Noise levels are very low. There's little of the roll-off at the frequency extremes common to budget equipment. Highs are clear and extended with ample detail. Midrange is smooth and natural. Bass

goes down fairly low, missing just a bit of the effortless sense of scale that allows music to fully develop. Dynamically the 640P is more alive sounding than the NAD and surpasses the Plinius in transient speed.

Well-focused, realistically sized and dimensional images are placed on a large soundstage. The stage is placed further away from the listener, starting well behind the plane of the speakers, coupled with a slight reduction in transparency, results in a reduced sense of immediacy to music when compared to the more expensive phono stages.

Goosebumps

The sound of the 640P moves away from the cheerful but somewhat oppressed NAD style, leaning more towards the taut, well controlled precision of the Dynavector. There's a sense of realism that will raise goosebumps with good recordings. This is a remarkable achievement for a product that retails for less than half the price of the Dynavector.

In the 640P we have another class leading product from Cambridge Audio, one that raises the bar for affordable high performance. If the 640P's gain and loading suits your cartridge then this is definite must listen. Don't be fooled by the low price, this is a real giant killer of a phono stage—*Michael Wong*

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