

# EQUIPMENT REPORT



## Cambridge CXA80 Integrated Amplifier

Well Played

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In a newspaper article published a few months ago, a survey of Millennials had automakers worrying. Apparently car ownership was not nearly as important to this group as it was to previous generations. However, what was *crucial* in a new car purchase were issues of technology and connectivity. Expensive luxury cruisers? Not so much. A gas-conserving hybrid with top-notch Bluetooth/GPS interface, wireless surfing, and something akin to Apple's CarPlay? Now you're talking. Courting the youth vote in the high end also continues to be a tricky proposition, and like the automobile, excellent connectivity might just be the answer.

The new CX Series from Cambridge could be just the right ticket to engage this new generation. Offering components designed to partner with each other and to appeal to both audio and home-theater fans, the CX Series has a fresh look with a brushed finish and a nice "floating effect" created by the upturned corners of the chassis bottom plate. There are six models in the

series including a pair of integrated amps, the A60 and the A80, the CXN network music player, the CXC dedicated CD player, plus a pair of multichannel AVRs in 120W and 200W versions.

The CXA80 at €1099 is the top rung of the aggressively priced CX line. Besides featuring a major power bump over the CXA60, it's also equipped with a DAC, today's equivalent of the once-ubiquitous phonostage. Its Class AB amplifier outputs a healthy 80Wpc into 8 ohms (120Wpc into 4). Its toroidal transformer is a low-flux design with separate dual-mono windings—the tranny's prodigious size is proudly on display through the vented top plate of the chassis. The A80's internal circuitry has been designed from the ground up and includes a high-specification 24-bit/192kHz WM8740 DAC from Wolfson, and a bundle of digital inputs to manage the potpourri of today's digital sources. Thus, the unit features two optical inputs, a SPDIF input, plus asynchronous USB for a PC or Mac. An optional BT100 Bluetooth dongle is available for aptX streaming direct from smartphones or tablets,

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allowing access to music from Spotify, YouTube, and various other sources. Standby power consumption is a miserly 0.5W.

The front panel offers a host of controls including treble, bass, and balance. In addition, there is a headphone jack and a portable-player input. On the back panel are a trio of analog RCA inputs, a subwoofer out, and dual sets of speaker terminals. A balanced XLR input is also offered exclusively on the CXA80.

Ergonomically I found a couple of misfires. The front-panel buttons are small and hard to read, although repeated use will likely ameliorate this criticism somewhat. My larger grievance is reserved for the lack of a lighted alphanumeric front-panel display to specify volume level and input selection. Also the volume knob does not have a small positioning light or audible click to indicate changes. I was so surprised at these omissions that I considered the possibility that I'd overlooked something in the manual. But no, the user is left to fend for himself, using a best-guess estimate when navigating loudness levels. A real head-scratcher.

Fortunately, the strength of the A80's sonics made these minor annoyances fade into the background (at least most of the time). The A80 springs out of the blocks with a richly textured, almost exuberant midrange that persuasively propels a beat-driven groove such as the crunchy snare and dancing bass line that introduce Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean." And then there's the vamping piano and kickdrum opening of Steely Dan's "Time Out Of Mind"—a heavy rhythmic engine that drives this song forward. The A80 retrieves the low-level details of this precision-engineered track with finesse, especially the backing harmonies featuring the white-soul vocals of former Doobies heartthrob Michael McDonald. His voice, which often breaks into a breathy falsetto, is well captured by the A80, with a notable amount of air and space enlivening the mix.

And this amp has some real guts. It doesn't shrink from a big operatic track like Dire Straits' "Telegraph Road." This fourteen-minute cut has a wide dynamic envelope that intensifies into a meter-pinning crescendo before it begins a slow fade many minutes later. Any amp worth its salt needs to be able to hang on to the bite of the lengthy Knopfler guitar solo, the piano fills, and the runaway-train drum fills; otherwise the song loses its scope and scale. I've rarely heard an amp in this price range match the CXA80 in this regard.

At the other end of the dynamic range, Norah Jones' cover of "The Nearness of You" is reproduced with nice sensual intimacy on her close-miked vocal, and authentic weight and rich timbre on the piano accompaniment. Tonally, the A80 is firmly midrange-centric, but on a vocal like this one I found that there's a slightly artificial coolness and whiteness that hardens the edges of vocal transients. It's a narrow-band coloration, to be sure, and its relative presence will likely depend on the rest of your system.

Singling out the DAC for a moment, I found its performance lively, with swift, clean transients, stable imaging, and surefooted bass. It was very good in general (and excellent in this segment), but some fine resolution was lost. For example, it didn't fully exploit the dynamic gradations and the tactile and harmonic complexities that are revealed in the 24-bit/96kHz version of

Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams," and soundstage depth was slightly truncated during "Gold Dust Woman." Certain elusive musical elements, both intimate and tactile, such as the skin reverberation of a drum, fingertips on a Steinway keyboard, or a short breath escaping a singer's parted lips are a bit obscured.

When it comes to representing three-dimensional acoustic space, volume, and hall boundaries, nothing can match a great orchestral track. Most often I call on the brilliant recordings of Keith Johnson on the Reference Recordings label, which are nothing if not revealing of the exact balance of the music, the musicianship, and the acoustic space. No matter how many times you listen to one of his recordings, you never lose sight of how much liveliness and immediacy fill every moment. As I listened to the Rutter *Requiem*, and the array of the vast Turtle Creek Chorale, there was no denying the expanse of the huge, vaulted space, and the weighty voice of the pipe organ. Although the bottom octave of the pipe organ was less than fully realized in pitch and grip, the A80 did more than a commendable job delivering most fundamentals. Certainly if the A80 had a Soullution badge across its prow, I would have expected a more fully realized expression of dimension and ambient space, but given that the A80's price is missing a couple of zeros compared with that marque, I think I'll tip my hat instead.

So, well played, Cambridge. Except for one particular grievance, the CXA80 was a delight to have in my system. It's pleasingly styled, forward thinking, and sonically appealing. And priced in a sweet spot for audiophile first-timers. I haven't done any polling myself, but I would have to believe that the youth market would be nicely served by this highly connectable and competitive integrated amplifier and DAC. Recommended with enthusiasm. **tas**

