

Cambridge Audio Minx Xi

by Jason Kennedy

In the time before it fell under the auspices of Audio Partnership, Cambridge Audio was an audio innovator of note. Back in the early 1980s, Cambridge Audio's founder Stan Curtis launched the first multi-box CD player at a time when CD was almost sci-fi to most listeners.

Although the company itself has changed out of all recognition since the 1980s, it has remained at the forefront of innovation, and has its finger firmly on the pulse of contemporary demands. The Minx Xi is the latest example of this thinking; it's an amplifier, streamer and DAC in a compact and attractive box. It has considerably more features than you can shake a Wi-Fi antenna at, yet costs less than most high-end audio accessories. But as you will have surmised this is not high-end audio, though neither is it lo-fi; it's designed for people that want a better result than can be achieved with one box solutions that incorporate loudspeakers (such as the Minx Air and Bowers & Wilkins Zeppelin), a market sector that would seem to be growing at the pace of an upwardly mobile Chinese city.

The Minx Xi's gamut of features includes Bluetooth aptX and wired or wireless network streaming, net radio, analogue and digital inputs, USB media inputs, headphone and subwoofer outputs. All of this comes packaged in a case just 27cm wide, that's less than 11 inches in old money... and its even got a 40 watt amplifier onboard. It is essentially a combination of technology from Cambridge's NP30 streamer, the converter from an Azur 351C CD player and a class AB amplifier based on that in an Azur 351A integrated. This means it's good up to 24/96 and can stream any format except those related to DSD. That it doesn't cope with PCM 24/192 and beyond or DSD could prove a stumbling block for a high-end streamer with intent to conquer the new digital market, but when it comes to products in the Minx class, they are intended for people that prize good sound and value over the audiophile acronym *du jour*.

Plug it into power and the network, then add speakers and it's up and running with alacrity; Wi-Fi takes a little longer because it needs a password, but as set-ups go in this branch of audio, it's as easy as pie. The trickiest bit is the speaker terminals. These look pretty normal, but actually consist of 4mm plugs to which you can clamp bare wire or spades. To use the 4mm plugs on your speaker cable, you take the terminals out all together and put them in the box.

At turn on the Minx Xi gave me Radio Paradise and I discovered that the first six net radio presets had been allocated to this station and BBCs 1 through 6. If you want to add stations there is no need to go online as is the case with some competitors; you can search with the Stream Magic app or via the unit itself, but it's a lot easier with the app. As the app is free and works on iOS and Android platforms it's hard to see why you wouldn't, I used an iPad for most things and though it ▶





► has a few foibles, I found it an intuitive piece of software. It didn't display album art, but this was more to do with my poor metadata management skills than faults with the app.

I started out using the Minx Xi with a pair of Cambridge Aero 6 floorstanders; a speaker I have been getting great results with on more expensive amplifiers. Here, however, it didn't seem to gel. The speaker is remarkably clean and smooth thanks to its BMR mid/tweeter, but it can't be all that sensitive because the relatively low power of the Minxi Xi failed to deliver any dynamics. Voice was good and detail pretty high, but overall not a happy pairing. So I took the next, ahem, logical step and put the PMC Fact.8 in place. This rather unnatural 'mullet' pairing was considerably more happy, delivering life and energy in the context of slightly lazy timing, but with good detail levels. Scale is somewhat wanting, but it can do reverb and – while there is a distinct lack of grip by standalone integrated standards – it produces enough welly to enjoy Massive Attack's 'Inertia Creeps' at a reasonable level.

It's a smooth and full sounding device that lacks the pace and dynamics of separates, but does a very passable job considering the price. A Naim UnitiQute 2

costs £1,150 and doesn't have as many features (but offers DAB reception), which might be why it's able to deliver a considerably more engaging if relatively dry sound from a smaller box.

One of the things that differentiates the Minx Xi from the UnitiQute 2 is Bluetooth streaming, which in the Xi is achieved with a plug-in USB dongle. Cambridge uses an aptX device which offers clear advantages over the standard system. Unfortunately neither my iPad nor my mobile support aptX so I wasn't able to enjoy the benefit. The tablet however produced a pretty tolerable result when it was streaming content from the NAS drive via PlugPlayer. By this point in the proceedings I had moved over to a pair of speakers that seemed more appropriate to the Minx Xi; specifically Q-Acoustics 2010i bookshelves. These are compact and inexpensive (£130) speakers that work remarkably ►

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► well with the Cambridge. With these in tow the lyricism of Joni Mitchell's *Court and Spark* was not lost and while the Bluetooth seemed to undermine timing quite badly, it delivered adequate levels of detail. MP3 direct from the mobile phone, however, was relatively dull and ponderous however; you can discern the difference between bit rates, but it's worth getting an aptX capable phone if you want to do this regularly. Streaming wirelessly from the network is considerably more rewarding; an Ahmad Jamal recording managed to put across most of the snap if not the scale of his performance in the context of decent tonality and atmosphere.

Net radio is generally good. I like the way it's so easy to find stations on the the Stream Magic app and the fact that the Minx Xi holds onto radio streams so consistently, as this is a distinct weakness with some competitors, even those at higher prices.

If you are looking for a system to put in the study or fancy sticking a toe in streaming water, then the Minx Xi is an easy recommendation. It has the same sonic limitations as you find with any budget amplifier, but the feature set is strong and ease of use very high. It even comes in white so it is genuinely domestically friendly. Well worth checking out. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital to Analogue Converter: Wolfson WM8728

Power output: 40 watts RMS per channel (into 8 ohms)
47 watts RMS per channel (into 6 ohms)
55 watts RMS per channel (into 4 ohms)

Connectivity: Network music playback (Wi-fi & Ethernet), 16-24-bit 32-96kHz
2 x local USB media inputs, 16-24-bit 32-96kHz

Toslink input, 16-24-bit 32-96kHz

S/PDIF input, 16-24-bit 32-96kHz

BT100 Bluetooth receiver: A2DP plus aptX

2 x RCA analogue inputs

3.5mm analogue input

Headphone output

Speaker outputs: 2 x 40W RMS

Subwoofer output: ALAC, WAV, FLAC, AIFF, WMA, MP3, AAC, HE AAC, AAC+, OGG

Standby power consumption: <0.5W

Max. Power Consumption: 300W

Mains Inlet Voltage: 100-120V AC or 220-240V AC

Dimensions (H x W x D): 90 x 270 x 285mm (3.5 x 10.6 x 11.2")

Weight: 5.8kg (12.8lbs)

Price: € 799

Manufacturer: Audio Partnership

URL: www.cambridgeaudio.com