

**THREE OF THE BEST**



**Rega RP6/Exact**  
£1000 **Page 14**  
Simple appearance - but a startling performer



**Denon D-M39DAB**  
£360 **Page 24**  
The micro champ is back and better-sounding than ever



**Sony XBA-2iP**  
£130 **Page 26**  
Fantastic bass and superb timing - a top in-ear upgrade

**THREE OF THE REST**



**Leema Acoustics Elements** £1295 **Page 10**  
Likeable DAC that lacks the poise or weight of the best



**Sony NSZ-GS7 with Google TV** £180 **Page 11**  
The potential is there, but apps and function aren't



**Black Rhodium Disco**  
£3.95/m **Page 26**  
Nice price but falls short in precision and bass

**EXCLUSIVE**

## Marantz, move over...

### Cambridge Audio Azur 351C/351A | CD player/stereo amp | € 499 each

**Which company makes** the best budget hi-fi separates? The answer to that has been surprisingly easy over the past few years - and it's not one to make Cambridge happy.

In our opinion it's Marantz who is the king of budget stereo kit, and it has been for a while. Its 6004-series CD player and amplifier set the below-£500 standard thanks to their fluid, refined yet entertaining sound. Their fine build quality and a hefty feature list doesn't hurt either.

So the task facing Cambridge's new 351 components is a daunting one - but first impressions are good.

**Complex and convincing turn**

Let's concentrate on the 351A amplifier first. This is a solidly built integrated unit that belies its price when it comes to finish and appearance.

Those well-crafted front-panel controls feel solid and precise to the touch. Its Marantz rival - the PM6004 amp - feels a little insubstantial in comparison.

It never ceases to surprise us how well-specified budget amps are compared with their more expensive counterparts. Pricier products tend to throw out features to benefit sound; budget products tend to cram everything in from headphone sockets to speaker switching while still trying to perform well, and that's the case here.

While the built-in phono stage is a thing of the past as far as 351A is concerned (Cambridge makes fine, affordable outboard units, if you need one), it still boasts a generous spec including five line level inputs, subtly acting tone controls and remote operation.

The Azur 351A pulls ahead of its rivals by also featuring a built-in digital-to-analogue converter. Input to the DAC is limited to USB-only however, which is a shame as an optical option would have been useful.

Still, if you have music stored on a computer (PC or Mac), then it's an option worth having. The input signal is limited to a sampling rate of 48kHz, which means that 16bit/44kHz CD rips will be accommodated. If high-resolution material replay is important to you, however, it would be wiser to use a better-quality dedicated outboard



unit, such as Arcam's rPAC or Audioquest's DragonFly.

Look inside the 351A and you'll find neat circuit layouts, a motorised Alps volume controller and a hefty power supply.

The amp's rated power output is 45W per channel - not a startling amount, but it means this little amp can still drive most price-appropriate speakers to high levels in small-to-medium-sized rooms.

Partner the 351A with suitable kit - we used the matching CD player, and the Marantz alternative, along with Q Acoustic 2010is (see *Use It With*, p8) and Monitor Audio Bronze BX2s along with our usual reference ATC SCM50s. Results are good.

The 351A is a clear and precise-sounding amp that foregoes the overt warmth and smoothness of its Marantz rival for a clean and analytical balance.



**MORE EXCLUSIVES**

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NaimUniti 2  
£2795 p16



**Tablet**

Samsung Galaxy  
Note 10.1  
£400 p22



**Style speaker package**

B&W MT-50  
£1095 p28



**The CD player is the real star here. When it comes to disc spinners, Marantz finally has a rival to worry about**



As with most Cambridge products, this amp doesn't hold back in the treble department, so avoid partnering kit that can sound bright or aggressive.

Partner sympathetically and the 351A's detail and punch will impress. Despite the ordinary power output figure this amp can kick hard. It has the dynamic reach to do justice to, say, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, and can cope with musical complexity without degrading into a confused mess.

Move onto the likes of Jay Z's *The Blueprint 3* and the 351A continues

to impress with its low-end grip and agile nature - this is an upbeat and exciting product. However, the amp falls short when it comes to conveying subtleties, and just isn't expressive enough to deliver Nina Simone's version of *Here Comes The Sun* with enough delicacy. Nor does the 351A convey the spaciousness present in Arvo Pärt's *Litany* with total conviction.



**The two Cambridges make a formidable pairing: the 351A offers precision, while the 351C revels in the subtleties**



**The two Cambridges: In detail**



**Amplifier headphone output**

The built-in output isn't wholly convincing. It sounds bright, but we are impressed with the insight on offer.

**Amplifier USB input**

Useful, but input material is limited to 48kHz. The sonic results are clean and detailed, but a little edgy with it.

**Amplifier tone defeat switch**

Worth a go: it can improve transparency and resolution. The results are small, but worthwhile.

**Amplifier tone controls**

The design of the bass and treble control can help tone down the frequency extremes, or just add a bass kick.

**CD display off**

The 351C's front display can be turned off. It's worth doing for the gains in subtlety and resolution.

**Digital output on CD**

At the back there's the usual array of single-ended analogue connections, and (not always the case) optical and coax digital outs.

Put it altogether and this Cambridge integrated emerges as a good amp, but not one that satisfies across a wide range of recordings - and that's enough to rob it of that fifth star.

**Winning mix of power and poise**

So does the same fate await the 351C CD player? We really like it, and it'll come as no surprise to find it shares the amp's fine build and finish - this is a smart bit of kit.

The player's display is large and clear, and the transport responds to commands with swiftness and minimal noise. Cambridge makes a big thing of using a proprietary CD mechanism, and it's right to do so. Most rivals use multi-platform transports that are designed for DVD and CD replay. These transports can run at multiple speeds and aren't optimised for CD use. The one in the 351C is, and it really shows.

The 351C's sound character mirrors that of its partnering amp. There's the same overt clarity and plenty of detail, yet the player pulls ahead of the amp in its ability to communicate nuances and give a piece of music the space to relax when needed.

It's this broad spread of talents that mean the 351C sounds at home across a range of music, from Johnny Cash's low-key *I Won't Back Down* through to Hans Zimmer's bombastic *The Dark Knight* soundtrack.

As we'd expect, the CD player and amp work well together, with the common sonic signatures dovetailing well. Buy the pair and we think you'll be pleased, but for us the CD player is the real star here. When it comes to disc spinners at least, Marantz finally has something to worry about.

**TECH SPECS**

Azur 351C Type Integrated • **Inputs** None • **Outputs** Stereo, optical, coaxial • **CD text** No • **Memory** No • **Display off** Yes • **Finishes** 2 • **Dimensions (hwd)** 9 x 43 x 31cm  
 Azur 351A **Power** 45W • **Inputs** 5 x analogue stereo, USB, recording loop • **Outputs** 2 x speaker, headphone • **Tone controls** Yes • **Remote control** Yes • **Finishes** 2 • **Dimensions (hwd)** 9 x 43 x 34cm

**Cambridge Audio Azur 351C Rating ★★★★★**

**FOR** Plenty of insight and expressive dynamics; presentation has lots of energy and punch, but doesn't lack subtlety either; fine build and finish

**AGAINST** Up against tough competition in the form of Marantz's CD6004

**VERDICT** This is a fine player for the money, and a worthy rival to the Award-winning Marantz

**Cambridge Audio Azur 351A Rating ★★★★★☆**

**FOR** A clear and informative sound; built-in DAC; plenty of attack; pleasing build and finish

**AGAINST** Lacks a little finesse; treble could be more refined; no optical input

**VERDICT** The 351A is a good effort. It's worth considering if you prefer an overtly energetic approach to music replay

**REVIEWER'S NOTES... 5 DAYS WITH THE CAMBRIDGE 351C AND 351A**

**DAY 1** Fresh out of their boxes, and we're impressed. The mix of solid build, slick finish and smooth-acting controls set the standard at this price, making most rivals feel insubstantial by comparison.

**DAY 2** We like what Cambridge has done with the remote. While the basic design is one it has used for years, this sample looks tidier and easier to use. We also like its solidity and quality feel.

**DAY 3** Once properly run-in these products start to shine. Not sure about that top-end, though. It could do with more smoothness and refinement. More time, we think.

**DAY 4** We get to try them with a range of speakers. The 351A amp copes well, as long as the speakers aren't bright or aggressive. But once the right match is found this amp can really sing.

**DAY 5** We try the USB digital input on the amp - insightful results, but it emphasises high-frequency hardness. Still, the results are better than using our MacBook into the amp's line-level inputs.