

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Cambridge Audio Azur 851N streaming DAC

by Jason Kennedy



The world of audio streaming may be split between those who are committed to keeping the signal as pristine and unfettered as possible, and those who'll take the easier option, and take up a remote control, whatever the ensuing compromises in quality. But at the end of the market that Cambridge Audio inhabits, things are clearly rather different. As this range-topping streamer suggests, Cambridge caters for both those music lovers for whom ease of access and avoiding cables are apparently more important than sound quality, and those who want serious sound delivery, regardless of the impediments. Cambridge does, however, realise that both such people are not ready to don a hair shirt and sit on the spiked throne of audiophilia; the Azur 851N is for those who still want easy access and as many features as you can fit on the box.

Even at a fundamental level, the Azur 851N does more than most. A wired or wireless network streamer, a DAC, and a digital preamplifier are the core features, but you also get Airplay, Bluetooth (with an optional dongle), as well as digital outputs – almost a unique feature among streamers. These are

all on balanced and single-ended connections. Furthermore, the Azur 851N can access internet radio, has a new dedicated Connect control app, and will stream the world's favourite music service (Spotify) via its sonically beneficial (albeit not free) Connect service. The 851N upsamples everything to 24-bit/384kHz, and can stream from your library with or without wires, or you can plug in your PC and push signals through its USB input. The latter seems like overkill when you have the option to stream from the network, but it's an easier way of getting computer audio up and running.

The Azur 851N is also the best-looking piece of Cambridge Audio yet. Its anodised aluminium casework is to be found across the Azur 851 range and gives it a very classy look for a product at a sensible price. The remote handset is a button festooned, reading glasses inspiring, full system driving beast, but does offer luxuries like digital filter switching among other niceties. The LED display on the player is the biggest and nicest yet encountered; album artwork looks superb, and moving around the menu system with the chunky rotary control is quite a fizz inducing experience. ▶



▶ The new Connect app is not a million miles away from Linn's Kinsky, inasmuch as it lists libraries on the left and the playlist on the right - a sensible design that's intuitive to use. One small fly in the ointment is that you can't save playlists, apparently because the 851N can be used with so many disparate sources - USB, Bluetooth, network etc - whereas most network streamers stick to a single library. Another foible is that the app works best if you tell it not to let the tablet sleep, but this means that batteries will drain if you don't turn the thing off manually. If you put it into the 'allow sleep mode', it's necessary to find your place in the library from the top when you wake it; something for Cambridge to consider for a future update one hopes to see.

The fact that you can search for internet radio stations by name on Connect is a big improvement over the need to search via location or genre, as is the case with most systems. It's even easy to preset stations from the app once you've found the right button, but the fact that selecting radio as the source brings up a blank list in the first instance could be improved by making 'presets' the default. The Azur 851N's interface adds a "more stations like this" option to the radio features that isn't on the app.

You can use the Cambridge Azur 851N as a fixed output source or a digital preamplifier simply by changing its settings; in the latter mode, it has a relatively short 30 position volume range. Inputs are available in pretty well all digital flavours, including AES/EBU and USB A for external hard drives, while attached drives can be accessed from the Connect app, including drives formatted for Mac, another first in my experience.

The question that has to be asked, of course, is whether all these features get in the way of the sound. The short answer would appear to be no. But it's pretty much impossible to separate the 851N as a whole from its potential without the widgets. As a whole, it sounds pretty good - about as refined

and revealing as you would expect at the price from something with a far simpler array of options. It combines good drive with a clean, wide bandwidth and neutral presentation, which means that you can hear plenty of detail in the context of an engaging sound. For the most part I used it with the Ethernet output of a Melco N1A digital transport, a rather better source than it might be expected to partner, but one that gave it every chance to shine. And with Sam Amidon's 'Walking Boss' [*Lily-O*, Nonesuch] that's what it did: the pace of the rhythm section was well-defined thanks to strong bass notes and clear cut leading edges. It kept me listening too, which is always a good sign, but deadlines wait for no reviewer, so I pressed on and chose Daniel Barenboim's *Beethoven For All*, Symphony No.7 in A, Op.92 [24/96, Decca] to see what it could do with the opener of this powerful piece. It could do the scale and drama certainly, string tone could be sweeter, and the mids and highs a little more open and refined, but ultimately, nothing grated. There's a very slight sense of grain when viewed through the magnifying glass of a high end system, but surprisingly little all the same.

As the 851N has three filter settings, I gave these a spin and discovered that the first, linear phase, has the sharpest definition but is a little thin and 'digital'. Minimum phase has always been the favourite on previous Cambridge designs and remains so here, it has the best timing and the best compromise, in tonal terms, between linear and the relatively warm sound of the 'steep' filter. It's nice to have these choices though, and different systems, tastes, and music types will mean that opinions will vary, perhaps even from track to track.

While the 851N cannot stream DSD, it can process DSD64 through USB. However, Cambridge currently neglects to mention this, anywhere. Regardless, I thoroughly enjoyed the version of 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat' on Jeff Beck's *Live at Ronnie Scott's* [Eagle Records]. This came through in full scale with plenty of power and detail, demonstrating that it's not the ▶



- ▶ smoothest of streamers, but neither does it make a screaming guitar too edgy.

Given that the Melco also has a USB output, I contrasted it with the network connection and the result came out in favour of the USB, but only just. Both have similarly strong imaging capabilities, but the USB has the edge in terms of timing, a result that could be down to the cables used, which are far from identical. Oddly, I had the opposite result when making this comparison on my regular streamer/DAC, the Resolution Audio Cantata. Comparing these two very differently priced streamers with a network connection reveals that the Cambridge is fundamentally less dynamic and has higher noise; but then you'd hope that the £5k difference would buy you more than nicer metalwork.

I also gave the onboard volume control a try in an effort to see whether the Cambridge could be successfully used with a power amp alone. The result was pretty decent for a digital volume control: it didn't seem to have a compressing effect on dynamics, and the treble remains much the same rather than the distinctly grainy texture you can get with other systems. There are clear advantages to using a really decent preamplifier, but given the price point of the source, this is not a likely combination, and you would probably have to spend at least the same on a preamp to get a distinct upgrade over the onboard controller.

Back in the full system, I carried on enjoying a variety of pieces, Jean-Efflam Bavouzet's rendition of the Haydn's piano sonatas [Piano Sonatas Vol 1, Chandos] being one highlight. Here the piano has shine without glare, and the playing is delightfully nimble, almost as punctual as Bach, but with a lighter touch.

The Cambridge Azur 851N is a spectacularly well equipped piece of kit. It's pretty much all the source you need if your music is in an unpackaged or media file state. Even if it isn't, you just need a transport; and if the USB results are

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state network streamer, DAC, digital preamplifier

Analogue Inputs: none

Digital Inputs: Two coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jacks), two TOSLink, one AES/EBU, one USB B, three USB A

DAC Resolution/Supported Digital Formats: FLAC/WAV/MP3, etc. Sampling rate for D/A conversion 384kHz/24 bit, DSD64 (DoP)

Music services/Wi-Fi inputs: Spotify Connect, Bluetooth, Airplay

Analogue Outputs: One stereo balanced (via XLR connectors), one stereo unbalanced (via RCA jacks)

Digital Outputs: One coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jack), one TOSLink, one AES/EBU

Frequency Response: Not specified

Distortion (THD + Noise): Not specified

User Interface: 4.3inch display (on main unit), Cambridge Connect application software for iOS, Android

Dimensions (HxWxD): 115 × 430 × 360mm

Weight: 8.1kg

Price: € 1699,00

Manufacturer: Cambridge Audio

URL: www.cambridgeaudio.com

anything to go by, the 851N's DAC is up to the job and then some. Features, it seems, are no barrier to sound quality, but are a boon to flexibility, and that's almost as important in the fast moving world of streaming audio. +