

"Delivers more faithfully than a Catholic Labrador"

Cambridge Azur 851N

€1699 ★★★★★

Rega Elex-R

€1299 ★★★★★

ATC SCMI1

€1065 ★★★★★

Like an open fire on a winter's evening, with the attendant magnificence produced when you throw on another block of wood and the homely taste of the whiff of smoke that escapes the mouth of the chimney, there will always be a home for physical media in the world of hi-fi. Yet, as central heating has in many ways usurped the wood fire, the rising prominence of network streamers is pushing home listening into an ultra-convenient 21st-century domain.

And who could complain when that domain is occupied by wares such as the Cambridge Azur 851N? If you're in search of your first network streamer, want to future-proof your system with a healthy investment but aren't quite prepared to fork out an extra grand for a Naim ND5 XS, there's no better way we can fathom of spending €1699.

Budget statement

When it comes to streaming-based systems, it's best if you can build up a healthy budget rather than skimp on quality just so you can get your kit more quickly - if, that is, sound quality is as much a priority for you as convenience.

Once you've gathered the requisite funds, the good news is you won't necessarily have to forego features in order to enjoy good sound quality. The Azur 851N, for example, is far from sparsely specified: it doubles up as a pre-amp, meaning you can plug straight into a power amplifier; music signals pass through two 24-bit Analog Devices DACs working in dual differential mode, meaning lower distortion, more transparency and greater detail. And it

boasts two coaxial and optical inputs with three USBs and an AES/EBU input, thereby providing no small measure of versatility for partnering kit.

In this system, we're pairing the Cambridge with Rega's Elex-R amplifier, with built-in phono stage (so you don't have to bin all your vinyl just yet), and a pair of ATC SCMI1s.

In essence, this pair, each of which held onto their respective Awards this year, are just great across the board - they're detailed, dynamic, great with timing and hugely transparent. We've long used them as reference when testing a similarly priced source, and the rule sticks - take care with what you place at the front of the chain, and this Rega/ATC combination will deliver more faithfully than a Catholic Labrador.

So when we play Bon Iver's *22, A Million*, we are entirely unsurprised to hear the Cambridge's performance in all its glory. That glowing midrange, so characteristic of Justin Vernon's latest work, washing vocal harmonies in ethereal reverb, comes across as gorgeously full-bodied and warm,

though without any sacrifice of detail or evenness in the balance.

There's also a widescreen view of the Azur 851's spacious soundstage, placing instruments and samples naturally among each other, in their own space but undeniably tethered to one another. That's a sign of the sense of timing these products share as well - it's one of the aspects with which streamers sometimes struggle, but here all three components are easily capable of organising the various off-beat and off-kilter rhythms that make up this sonic collage of an album.

Quality to spare

As we alluded to, the glory of this Rega and ATC marriage at the end of the chain is such that, if you have the extra budget to invest in Naim's Award-winning ND5 XS, they would be more than capable of showing off the jump in quality of your source. But for sheer value, the Azur 851N, with its full-bodied, rhythmic and spacious sound, more than earns its place here. For insight and transparency, we can't show this system enough respect.

Or swap in one of these...

Revel Concerta M16 €1058

★★★★★

Quite simply, these are the best speakers under £1000 we've heard. As well as a spacious soundstage, the M16s offer strong dynamics and a weighty bass. The Cambridge and Rega complement them nicely - over-aggressive kit can make the M16s' searing insight sound edgy.



Naim Nait 5si €1300

★★★★★

Much as the Rega/ATC combo is a match constructed in paradise, this Naim amp has what it takes to shake that stable relationship. It delivers a dynamically and rhythmically solid performance that also supplies stacks of detail plus huge scale and authority.

Cambridge Audio CXN €1099

★★★★★

Cambridge has obligingly assured you needn't shell out over a grand to take home one of its Award-winning streamers - for £500 less than the Azur 851N, you may own this fine specimen. Fully decked out with all the latest streaming features, it gives a thoroughly entertaining performance.



The Azur streamer is an Award-winner but, should you want to upgrade, the Rega and ATC will be up to the job



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