

## REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

# Cambridge Audio Minx Xi

Affordable all-in-one streaming system proves an attractive package



### CAMBRIDGE AUDIO MINX XI

**Price** € 799

**Inputs** Three line (two on RCA phono, one on 3.5mm stereo socket), optical and coaxial electrical digital, three USB

**Outputs** One pair of speakers, subwoofer, headphones

**Other connections** Ethernet

**File formats played** (Network and USB) MP3, AAC, WMA, Apple Lossless, AIFF, Ogg Vorbis, FLAC, WAV, max resolution 24-bit/96kHz

**Accessories supplied** Remote handset, USB Bluetooth dongle

**Dimensions** (WxHxD) 27x9x28.5cm  
[cambridgeaudio.com](http://cambridgeaudio.com)

The idea of streaming music from a network store has definitely caught on here in the UK. While other markets may prefer the 'Macs and DACs' route of a wired connection between a computer and a digital-to-analogue converter, British consumers now have a wide choice of equipment able to access and play music from a computer or network-attached storage device. You can buy dedicated players to be connected to high-end hi-fi systems, inexpensive internet radios suitable for streaming in the kitchen, bathroom or wherever, and all-in-one systems designed to make this whole streaming business as simple as plugging in, hooking up some speakers and starting the music.

Just about every mass-market consumer electronics company worth its salt now has systems of this kind, following a trend Naim more or less kick-started with the arrival of its original Naim Uniti a few years back. Now UK-based Cambridge Audio is the latest to join the fray – the company has had streaming players before but this is its first all-in-one system.

Part of the Cambridge Audio Minx range, which extends to compact speaker systems as well as Bluetooth and Apple Airplay standalone speakers, the new

Minx Xi combines the technology of the company's previous streaming players with onboard amplification in a compact package requiring only the addition of a suitable pair of speakers. You could use the company's Minx 212 stereo speaker system, complete with active subwoofer (the system has a dedicated subwoofer output in addition to its standard speaker terminals and headphone socket), or perhaps one of the entry-level models in the new Cambridge Audio Aero range; but whichever you choose, the little Minx Xi should have enough power to drive them, thanks to a 40W-per-channel output into 8 ohms, rising to 55W into 4 ohm loads.

The €799 system is little over half the size of a conventional hi-fi component at just 27cm wide and standing 9cm tall, and yet a lot is packed into those slender dimensions. There's both wired and wireless network connectivity, over which the Minx Xi can play content at up to 96kHz, while it has similar capability on its three USB inputs – two to the rear, one on the front panel – plus optical and coaxial electrical digital ins.

Two sets of stereo analogue inputs are provided on standard RCA phono sockets and there's also a 3.5mm stereo analogue input socket for portable devices. Or, should you want to make a direct wireless connection

from a smartphone, tablet or notebook computer, the system comes complete with a plug-in Bluetooth receiver 'dongle', able to handle both the default A2DP USB audio format and the better-sounding aptX.

In addition to streaming music from local storage, the Minx Xi also uses the Stream Magic service to allow it access to the many internet radio streams available, along with services such as BBC iPlayer

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Radio, Pandora and Rhapsody. And of course users with other services such as Spotify can stream those direct to the unit using the Bluetooth connectivity.

Control of the system is via a conventional remote control handset, supplied as standard, and the menu-based front-panel readout, which can also be operated by the combination of buttons and a single rotary control. However, for the smoothest user experience with this system I'd suggest the use

**SUGGESTED PARTNERS**

The Minx Xi is an excellent 'just add speakers' system: here are some speakers to add...

**CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AERO 2**

Designed by the same team as the Minx Xi, the Aero 2 speakers use a Balanced Mode Radiator for optimal dispersion and integration, and are sensibly priced at € 499

**Q ACOUSTICS CONCEPT 20**

Also designed in the UK, these compact speakers, also selling for £350, use innovative 'cabinet within a cabinet' construction with Gelcore isolation to damp out resonances



of the Cambridge Audio Stream Magic app running on either a smartphone or preferably a tablet – it's a free download from Apple iTunes for iOS devices or via Google Play for Android portables. Stream Magic may not quite be the slickest app of its kind out there but it makes using the Minx Xi a much more comfortable experience – unless of course you're sitting right next to the unit itself – and allows smoother scrolling through playlists, radio station menus and so on. Drill down a little through the menus and you'll find detail adjustments are possible – you can even call up virtual bass, treble and balance controls, and rotate them on the screen.

As with other Cambridge Audio products, the Minx Xi is designed in the UK and uses selected high-quality components to maximise performance. There's a generously rated toroidal transformer to ensure there's power in reserve for the dynamics of music, and conventional Class AB amplification rather than the Class D more common these days in products of this type. The digital section uses 24-bit/96kHz digital-to-analogue conversion and a clocking system for external sources developed for the company's NP30 network music player.

Finally, the Minx Xi is finished in high-gloss casework, available in either the black of the review sample, or white.

**PERFORMANCE**

Setting up the Cambridge Audio isn't exactly tricky: plugged in via Ethernet, it found my various music storage devices with ease, while connecting using the Wi-Fi option is not much harder, involving little more than the keying in of a password (assuming the home network is password-protected). That done, and with the system connected to the speakers – in this case the excellent little Neat Iotas (a white pair of which would go very nicely with the white-cased Minx Xi) – and an iPad mini running the Stream Magic app to hand, the Cambridge Audio was all set to show what it could do.

What it can do is make playing a wide variety of content both simple and highly enjoyable, whether from network storage, streamed from the internet or from connected devices both digital and analogue. As you might expect from the compact dimensions, it has all the convenience of a

conventional mini-system, but with a sound unrivalled by all but the very best of the all-in-one competition.

There's good weight and power to the sound – and the system gets all the more impressive when a subwoofer is added, in the form of my slightly elderly MJ Acoustics Reference Pro 50 from about a decade back – but at the same time the Xi does a good job of sorting out all the detail in a piece of music and creating a credible sonic picture. Yes, the balance is a little on the warm and safe side, rather than wringing the last nuance of ambience out of recordings, but that does make it a particularly relaxing, undemanding listen.

Of course, there's not the kind of scale and substance you'd get with a more powerful amplifier, and there are times when large-scale orchestral pieces can sound a shade pinched or 'sat-on' when levels and complexity grow, especially if the Minx Xi is being asked to fill large spaces with music. However, in modestly sized rooms, such as the average British living-space, it's unlikely the limits of the system will ever be approached, and it will simply deliver what it's asked to play with fine control and clarity.

That the Xi sounds good with CD-quality files, and even better with higher-resolution content, is perhaps no surprise; what's more striking is that it's also more than respectable with lower-bitrate music and speech, making podcasts and internet-streamed radio perfectly listenable. Yes, that warmth and slight treble smoothness help no end, so if your interest is as much in programmes from around the world as it is in streaming the music you have stored locally, this could well be the system for you.

In fact, one could go further and say that this is a very suitable system for those wanting to explore internet radio, rather than being too concerned with storing and streaming music. Add a pair of speakers costing on the right side of €300 and you could have a very potent little package for exploring a world of free music out there, while at the same time having the ability to step up to the task of playing a personal collection if and when you get round to ripping and storing your CDs. Or, to put it another way, this is a very attractive digital system however you choose to look at it! **G**

**DESIGN NOTES****Mark Tweedale**

Hardware Engineer,  
Audio Partnership

**On saxophone,  
jazz-funk and  
Einstein on the Beach**



For two and a half years Mark Tweedale has been designing internet/network products for Cambridge Audio parent company Audio Partnership, having previously worked for streaming technology company Reciva and, before that, Arcam. He took up the piano at the age of seven, adding alto saxophone a year or so later: 'I'd only had three saxophone lessons before my teacher invited me to join the local wind orchestra!'

Seduced by 'the whole jazz-funk thing – the groove, the sound, the percussive nature of slap bass', he won a music scholarship at 16, enabling him to take up the electric bass, and 'I've held on tightly to that "groove" feeling in music ever since.'

He says that 'Pure classical music doesn't feature heavily in my collection but there's something really special about a full orchestra playing alongside pop, jazz or electronic instrumentation. My favourite composer in this field is the jazz guitarist Pat Metheny, particularly on the CD "Secret Story". The orchestra isn't just a backing track – its tonal colours are integral to the sound and feel of the whole album.'

However, he does rate as one of his most memorable experiences a live fully staged performance of Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* at the Barbican in May 2012. 'There's something about the minimalist repetition that captivates me.'

He suggests that the main problem with the iPod generation 'isn't so much that they're listening to a lossy audio format: things seem to have moved on from those hideous 128kbps rates to something more like 320kbps, making the encoding artefacts very much less apparent.'

'Even portable players, be it your smartphone or iPod, aren't too bad most of the time. The problem is with those awful, cheap earbuds that are packaged with them that leak sound everywhere, which are doing music quality an injustice. A certain fruity company seems to be the worst offender!'

**'There's something about the minimalist repetition that captivates me'**