

Budget amplifiers are one of the essential building blocks for your first hi-fi system – but they can sound far from basic

WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION

GROUP TEST



WINNER

Test Express

STEREO AMPLIFIERS £220-£400

Class revamp for amp champ

Cambridge Audio Azur 640AV2.0



£300

IT'S NOT OFTEN we're blown away by the performance of hi-fi kit, especially something costing just £300. But Cambridge Audio's 640AV2.0 amplifier is quite simply out of this world... not to mention the Solar System.

The original 640A was special, but the boffins at Cambridge have now taken the performance at this price point to a completely new stratosphere.

The 640AV2.0 delivers music within a breathtaking, crystal-clear soundstage. Whatever your musical vice, this amp will oblige, providing insight and inspiration.

Sound quality that'll have you in a spin

Spin *The Battle*, from the *Gladiator* OST, and you'll want to hear it over and over again. You're drawn right into the heart of this rousing track, as the Cambridge picks out all the dynamic subtleties to stir the senses.

Switch to the hip-hop beats of Eminem, and this

FOR

Sensational dynamics; superb transparency; delivers a bucket-load of detail

AGAINST

Build quality is 'only' good for the money

VERDICT

Without doubt the best sub-£500 amp we've heard

amp gives the competition a lesson in rhythm. Your feet stomp away to the powerful bassline of *White America* with alacrity.

So, with its good-quality build, power rating up from 65w to 75w per channel, plus the addition of outputs for Cambridge's Incognito multiroom system, we haven't a word against Cambridge's budget powerhouse. We can't wait to test it against even better components: watch out Rotel's £500 RA-03.

"We can't wait to test it against something like the £500 Rotel RA-03"

Its predecessor, the 640A, was a barrel of fun. This V2 is even better!



FACTS AND FIGURES

PRICE RANGE £220 - £400	CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 640AV2.0	NAD C320BEE	QINPU A-1.0X	SAXON A300
SPECIFICATION	£ 300			
PRICE	75w	£ 220	£ 300	£ 400
POWER OUTPUT	6	50w	100w	50w
LINE LEVEL INPUTS	No	5	4	4
PHONO STAGE	Yes	No	No	No
TAPE LOOP	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
PREAMP OUT	2	Yes	Yes	Yes
SPEAKERS	Yes	1	1	1
TONE CONTROLS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
HEADPHONE OUTPUT	Yes	Yes	No	No
REMOTE		Yes	Yes	Yes
HOW THEY RATED	★★★★★			
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VERDICT	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

POWER OUTPUT The power rating tells you the claimed power output in watts per channel, using the RMS measurement. Don't accept this as an indication of quality or loudness, though.

LINE LEVEL INPUTS This tells you how many stereo phono inputs there are,

typically, around the back of your amp. Beware of amps with a small number if you have numerous components.

TAPE LOOP These allow you to record out of your amp, and simultaneously monitor what's being recorded.

PREAMP OUT Allows you to use the

preamp stage with a separate power amp
SPEAKERS Some amps can drive two pairs of speakers, but not at high levels.
TONE CONTROLS It has 'em, or it doesn't.
HEADPHONE OUTPUT Lets you monitor the sound using a pair of headphones.
REMOTE CONTROL It has one, or it doesn't.

TEST RESULT

The Cambridge Audio Azur is the undisputed best of these budget amplifiers

LET'S KEEP THINGS short and sweet – the Cambridge wins at a canter. We haven't heard anything quite like it at this price before, and perhaps never will again. If you're after a mind-blowing all-rounder, it has to be the 640AV2.0.

However, if your budget is tighter, the NAD remains a fantastic alternative. It still manages to hold its own against some more expensive models.

The Qinpu lacks all-round ability, but it does have a certain appeal thanks to its open and detailed delivery.

That leaves us with the A300. Unfortunately, the Saxon struggles mainly due to the high quality of the opposition. If it weren't for that pesky Cambridge, then the A300's prospects would have been much brighter.