



## CD PLAYER + INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

# CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AXC35 + AXA35

With the new AX series, Cambridge Audio seems to suggest that you bring your own preferred smart stuff, while these hi-fi components keep your cash for the all-important sound.

Cambridge Audio is celebrating 50 years since its original formation; it remains a UK-based company, unlike so many early hi-fi houses, and it marked the half-century by releasing its highest level products in decades, the Edge series of integrated, pre and power amps.

But it clearly didn't get its head stuck in such lofty clouds for too long, as it has just released a new AX range at almost the other end of its product lines — with two AX25 and AX35 pairings of CD player and amplifier, and two further AM/FM stereo receivers (which, for those born since such things were popular, are hi-fi amplifiers with radio tuners built-in). We have the AX35 CD player and amp pairing for review.

### EQUIPMENT

The pitch for the AX range seems to us admirable. 'Step up to hi-fi', says the company, presumably talking to those who now listen to music only through the little wireless speakers of this world, describing the AX system as "the perfect way for the Hi-Fi curious to build their first stacking separates system" and explaining exactly why you need an amplifier and a source of some kind. Hi-fi basics, then, although Cambridge does have models below this, in its Topaz entry-level separates. The goal seems for the AX range to provide a higher sweet-spot between affordability and performance.

The AXA35 integrated amplifier and AXC35 CD player certainly look above the entry-level,

being full 43cm-width hi-fi, with their metallic curve-cornered front panels especially striking in the 'lunar grey' (more referencing of the 50 years there), while a black finish is also available.

Some might think, of course, that a CD player is no longer the source for them. Many companies have countered the decline of CD by making their CD players double up as DACs, as streamers, as the digital entry point for all manner of modern sources. Cambridge has not done that here. The AXC35 CD player has no digital inputs to access its DAC in any other way. You load a silver disc in the front, and it delivers the music from the back via analogue RCA sockets, with the inclusion of a coaxial digital output (absent on the lower AXC25 CD player) in case you ever choose to upgrade the sound by adding an external DAC or an amplifier with a DAC inside it. (One of Cambridge Audio's first products under its current Audio Partnership ownership was just such an 'offboard' DAC, the DacMagic back in 1994, and its latest successor remains available.)

So the CD player is just a CD player. How about the AXA35 integrated amplifier — does it, then, cater to the modern age of digital inputs and streaming hi-fi? No it doesn't, not in the least. It is entirely analogue in its inputs, with not so much as a coaxial digital input to match the CD player's output, nor an optical input into which you



might plug the output of those TVs which no longer have an analogue audio output. It does look in the other direction, having a turntable moving-magnet phono input (not included on the lesser AXA25 amplifier), but the other five inputs are all line-level analogue, four at the back on the usual RCA phono sockets, one (sharing the A1 rear input) as a minijack stereo socket on the front. There's a 'Rec out' pair of RCA sockets as well (what we used to call a tape loop); these provide a fixed output, so you couldn't use them to drive a subwoofer or as 'preamp' outputs direct to a different power amp.

Being fully analogue in its inputs, is Cambridge just burying its head in the sand and pretending this is still 1994? Not quite. There's a USB-A slot socket on the back of the AXA35. You can't plug in your iPhone or give this a stick or a drive of files to play; it's there only to provide power. And the devices to which it might supply power? Cambridge has an optional Bluetooth adapter, which could then stream from your device of choice into one of the analogue inputs, powered from that USB socket. Another obvious choice would be an audio Chromecast, which for its not extravagant additional \$59 price would bring all manner of streaming and even multiroom playback abilities to the AXA35.

Why would Cambridge not build in Bluetooth and/or Chromecast? There are arguments both fiscal and sonic. We're quite prepared to believe that by the time Cambridge adds Chromecast circuitry and licensing costs to the AXA35 and sends it through the chain from manufacturer to distributor to retailer, it might well be cheaper for the consumer to buy a Chromecast and plug it in. It also leaves the platform choice to the consumer — you might prefer to add the Echo Input to bring Alexa skills rather than Google, or if you're already aligned to a particular streaming multiroom platform, you may prefer to add a Sonos Connect, a HEOS Link, a Bluesound Node or the Yamaha MusicCast WXAD-10, all of which can deliver streaming, many including Bluetooth, via an analogue output, into the Cambridge amplifier. Or add your own USB DAC and play from your computer. So with the AX series, Cambridge lets you bring your own preferred smarts, while it spends your money on the all-important sound.

## PERFORMANCE

We were impressed by the low-height style and solid build of the two AX components; the binding posts are solid, the press stud selector switches attractive; we'll call the front-panel white LED display 'retro';



so only the lightweight remote indicates the budget status. We soon had them warming through with CD playback, while we also attached a Chromecast, USB DAC, and turntable.

It took us some time to acclimatise to the sound; the CD player's own output was softer than our reference DAC could achieve from its digital output, though with the player less than half the DAC's price, that's to be expected. Meanwhile through a highly revealing pair of \$10,000 speakers, the amplifier sounded forward in its midrange, achieving hi-fi qualities of separation and imaging but not too relaxing a sound. We switched speakers to more likely partners for this amp, a pair of \$1000 bookshelf speakers of average sensitivity, nudged up the bass a few steps through the menu button and remote control, and the balance was then more to our liking. Indeed this combination was able to deliver Thom Yorke's new album impressively emotively, with all the square-wave beats of *Twist* intact and tight under Yorke's soft and smooth falsetto vocal, and a good sense of the ominous depth underlying *Traffic*.

Exhuming a Cafe del Mar CD compilation we enjoyed Zuell's *Olas De Sal* and Moby's *Whispering Wind*, both tracks open and again notably tight for timing. And if we were sometimes wanting a little more warmth, we found this from two sources: streaming (especially from Tidal) through the connected audio Chromecast, and from our vinyl collection, our Thorens plugged through the phono inputs of the amp. Both delivered a richer more tempered balance than had the CD player, easily good enough to drive through our even our more revealing speakers. Led Zeppelin and Kate Bush remasters came through hard and sweet respectively; Tidal playlists pumped away. Note we powered the Chromecast externally, as using the amp's USB power seemed to create interference.

## VERDICT

The bigger star here is the amplifier; the CD player is just a matching source for those who still want one. But add a streaming source and for vinyl fans a turntable to the AXA35, and you have all the makings of a nice solid and well-priced hi-fi system — real hi-fi that will leave the portable wireless speakers of this world for dead. No digital inputs? Who needs them. Bring your own. ■

### Cambridge Audio AXC35 + AXA35 CD player+amplifier

- Sound-first design
- Classic components, easy to use
- Easy to add smarts and streaming

- No digital inputs or smart stuff included

#### AXC35 CD player

**Price:** \$599

**Internal DAC:** Wolfson WM8524

**Outputs:** RCA analogue, coaxial digital

**Dimensions (whd):** 430 x 75 x 305mm

**Weight:** 4.3kg

#### AXA35 integrated amplifier

**Price:** \$599

**Power output:** 35W into 8Ω

**THD (unweighted):**

<0.01% (@1kHz, 80% of rated power);

<0.15% (20Hz-20kHz, 80% of rated power)

**Quoted frequency response:**

5Hz-50kHz -3dB

**Inputs:** 4 x RCA, 1 x Phono, 1 x 3.5mm auxiliary input (front panel)

**Outputs:** speakers out, rec out RCAs, USB (5V power only)

**Dimensions (whd):** 430 x 83 x 335mm

**Weight:** 5.6kg

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