

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 650BD

Stunning universal Blu-ray player was well worth the wait

This player gives new meaning to the term "long-awaited", but Andrew Everard is glad time was taken to get it right

Cambridge Audio's Blu-ray player kept the *Coming Soon* column in this section busy throughout last year, as behind the scenes the company was striving to get the machine on sale, despite setbacks such as a complete rethink of the transport mechanism, due to circumstances beyond its control.

In the meantime, at least one rival was announced, delayed, almost launched and then cancelled; another player unveiled at the same time, from British company Arcam, seems to be on hold; and Blu-ray prices fell through the floor. You can now buy a machine for well under E 150.

Now the Cambridge Audio Azur 650BD is in the shops at E 800, and while you can buy a Blu-ray player for much less, hardly any machine on the market offers as much. It may

appear simple but functional in its best basic black finish, but the 650BD not only offers Blu-ray playback, but also "universal" capability, handling DVD-Video, DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD - as well as, of course, CD (and its HDCD variant).

It can deliver audio from all these formats in native form, or as PCM, over its HDMI output, and also offers full onboard decoding, complete with an array of eight multichannel analogue outputs to feed suitable receivers, processors and amplifiers lacking an HDMI input.

In addition, there are component, S-video and composite video outputs, and optical and electrical digital audio feeds, making this a player you can connect up to any AV system, however old, with the reassurance that it will work and, when you come to upgrade, will be able to move with the



times. Those who store their entertainment on computers will be pleased to know that the 650BD can also play a wide variety of compressed audio and video formats, either from disc or using one of two USB sockets - one to the front, the other to the rear. The full list is in the specification panel.

Completing the socket-count is an Ethernet port on the rear panel: this allows the player to access extra content via an internet-enabled home network using the BD-Live system, with 1 GB of internal storage provided for such content. It also allows future updates to the player's firmware or software via download.

What's more, the review sample, though ostensibly a Region 2 DVD machine, played Region 1 discs with no problems at all; this multiregion capability may be useful for those who want to buy discs from further afield. Many music titles are actually region-free (Region 0), but it always seems to be the title at the top of the



wishlist that's the wrong region.

Separate region-coding applies to Blu-ray titles, which are coded A, B or C, although again some music titles carry no coding. The 650BD as sold is Region B, but there is a solution — I'll come to that later.

As with all Blu-ray players, the Cambridge Audio offers upscaling to 1080p resolution for DVD-Video discs, and it uses 24-bit/192kHz conversion for audio, with audio playback further boosted by a Pure Audio Mode, which switches off the video circuitry. And yes, it will output DSD from SA-CD direct to a suitable receiver or processor.

In common with some other players on the market, the player is based around the Mediatek platform, the two companies having worked together on past products, and this means the layout of the on-screen display menus may appear familiar. But this is no badge-engineering exercise: the Cambridge Audio team has done extensive development work here, making

this a unique product.

PERFORMANCE

The clear, simple menus and an excellent remote control from Cambridge Audio's "Navigator" series make this player quick and easy to set up. I connected it to my home network using a wireless Ethernet bridge, while connections to my AV receiver used a variety of methods, including HDMI, component video and multichannel analogue audio.

If your receiver can accept audio and video over HDMI, that will be the only connection needed, but I was also keen to see what the Cambridge could do using analogue hook-ups.

Menus let you choose the format priority for several disc types, and also make output mode selections, such as whether SA-CD audio is delivered as DSD or Linear PCM, and whether Blu-ray audio is decoded onboard or bitstreamed to an offboard decoder.

One problem unable to be sorted by the menus is the Region B lock, but fortunately help is at hand from **Bluraychip-dk**, an online vendor making a multiregion kit for the 650BD, at around £47.50 at the time of writing. This allows you to startup the player in any one of the three Blu-ray regions, although I have to make it clear that installing this modification will affect your warranty.

The headline on this review has given away my view of this machine to an extent that further explanation may not

seem necessary, but it's worth adding that it excels at everything it does, from playing films and music Blu-rays to upscaling DVDs and delivering DSD from SA-CD into a suitable receiver.

But impressive though it is when using its digital outputs, both audio and video, this is also a player sufficiently accomplished as a pure audio player to bear comparison with many an affordable CD player. Running in stereo using its analogue outputs, it has power and refinement in equal measure, and would work well with a sub-E 600 amplifier and price-comparable speakers, while also offering Blu-ray and DVD playback.

However, loading up a high-quality SA-CD disc such as those highlighted on these pages, or one of the growing number of classical Blu-ray titles, allows the 650BD to put on a real display of sonic and visual prowess, with an assured, vibrant sound packed with detail and — when relevant — crisp, rock-steady and beautifully-nuanced images to match.

Simply, this is one of the finest Blu-ray players on the market today, and as suited to the buyer with a modest surround system as it is to a role fronting truly high-end home cinemas.

Which is a bit of a relief all-around — after all that anticipation, something special was clearly called for. The Azur 650BD more than rewards the (very long) wait. **G**

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 650BD

Type 'Universal' Blu-ray player

Disc formats played Blu-ray Disc (BD-Rom, BD-R, BD-Re), DVD (DVD-Video, DVD-Audio, DVD-Rom, DVD-R/R DL/RW, DVD+R/RW), CD (CDDA, CD-Rom, CD-R/RW), Super Audio CD

Video decoding MPEG2/2 HD, MPEG4/4 AVC, VC-1, XviD, WMV/HD, VCD, AVCHD, MPEG ISO, JPEG/HD
Audio decoding DTS/HD Master Audio/HD High Resolution, Dolby Digital/True HD/Digital Plus, LPCM, DSD, WMA, MP3

Digital to analogue conversion (audio)

Crystal CS4345/CS4361 24 bit/192kHz

Audio outputs 7.1-channel analogue out, optical/electrical digital/HDMI

Video outputs Component, composite and S-video, HDMI

Other connections 2xUSB2.0, Ethernet, infrared remote input

Internal memory (BD Live) 1GB

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43x8.5x31.2cm

Made by Cambridge Audio, London