

Cambridge Audio Duo £250



Rear panel is busier than most with balance level

Yes... it does sound as smooth and clean as it looks

FOR Full, detailed sound; timing; MM and MC; features

AGAINST Rega Fono MM MK3 offers a tad more punch



Producing any five-star duo requires complementing talents, different enough to validate the inclusion of both while similar enough to form a cohesive whole.

The Duo referred to by the moniker of Cambridge Audio's latest phono stage - released alongside the moving-magnet-only Solo pre-amplifier - seems to refer to its ability to handle both MM and MC turntable cartridges. But, likewise, it could indicate the Duo's inclusion of an on-board headphone amplifier, for use in either a traditional hi-fi system or solely as middleman between your deck and a suitably talented pair of cans. Or it might be that so-often-elusive relationship between striking design and sumptuous sonic performance.

Aesthetic appeal

Few phono stages at this price offer such a sophisticated visual - from the offset volume dial dominating the otherwise-minimalist fascia, to the smaller, intuitive quirks such as mirrored labelling on its rear (so you can easily connect wires while peering over the top of its chassis).

It's not short of connections or features either. There's a 6.3mm headphone input and buttons for power and cartridge options straddling the substantial dial, with MM and MC ins and single-ended outs and a small balance level on the back panel.

Aesthetically, the Cambridge is a delight - uncluttered, understated and stylish.

Cambridge has also paid courtesy to the little things in terms of the Duo's running and performance. The subsonic filter is there to help eliminate low-frequency rumbles, while its auto power-down after 20 minutes of inactivity, and 0.5W usage in standby, keeps power consumption under control.

A promise fulfilled

Good intentions do not a five-star review make, of course, but such attention to detail is often indicative of a honed sonic performance. So it is with some anticipation we hook the Duo up to our reference system and shuffle our first record from its sleeve.

Our confidence is repaid within the opening title track of The Blue Nile's *A Walk Across The Rooftops*. It's a detailed, dynamic performance that doesn't shy from the warmth of the record, but nor does it wallow or warble in it either.

Pizzicato strings are buoyant, the bass guitar stabs with sufficient weight and agility and the snare cuts through with reverb allowed to decay in its own time. The presentation is spacious but cohesive, offering ample dimension yet making its distinctions clearly felt.

KEY FEATURES



6.3mm headphone jack



MM and MC cartridges



Auto power-down

While the Duo doesn't perhaps match the punch harnessed by Rega's Award-winning Fono MM MK3, it doesn't lack bite either. More driven tracks on the album such as *Stay* or *Tinseltown In The Rain* are delivered with verve, though the Cambridge's smoothness and warmth come into their own with its opulent performance of the more-sentimental, inward-looking *Easter Parade*.

Warmth and fullness

That kind of sonic glow is one reason you might opt for the Duo over its class-leading counterpart. It flourishes under these kinds of conditions, offering similar levels of detail, timing and dynamics but with a fuller body and perhaps more wholesome presentation.

Rarely does Cambridge Audio fire wide of the mark, but the Duo hits right at the heart of the target. For a full-bodied, dynamic performer with all the class of a white tiger in a smoking jacket, you really can't go wrong.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

VERDICT The Cambridge Audio Duo's performance already earns it five stars - the headphone amplifier is a welcome bonus