

Cambridge Audio Duo | Phono stage | €299 |

"A dynamic performer"

FOR Full-bodied presentation; times well with good dynamics

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 parties, 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, as we're about to find out, it might be that so-often-elusive relationship between striking design and sumptuous sonic performance.

"Aesthetically, it's a delight – uncluttered, understated and almost objectively stylish"

Few phono stages at this price offer such a sophisticated visual. From the offset volume dial dominating the Duo's otherwise minimalist fascia, to the smaller, intuitive quirks such as mirrored labelling on its rear, allowing for the easiest of connections whether looking face on or peering over the top of its chassis.

Well-connected

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 other side. Aesthetically, it's a delight - uncluttered, understated and almost objectively stylish.

Cambridge has also paid courtesy to the little things in terms of the Duo's running

Note the thoughtful labels you can read either way up



The minimalist exterior is proud and classy

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 to a reasonable minimum.

Dynamic sounds

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 and 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 that is allowed to decay in its own time. The presentation is spacious but cohesive, offering dimension while hanging its image in front of our noses, impossible to ignore.

Clear dynamics help the music drive rhythmically, supporting the Duo's definite timing with beats of varying intensity, while also etching in the expression of Paul Buchanan's soulful and often mournful vocal.

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

ALSO CONSIDER



Rega Fono Mk3
£200

The MK3 is virtually flawless.

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*.

That kind of sonic glow is one reason you might opt for a phono stage such as 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.

Hitting a bullseye

That isn't to neglect its compatibility with moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges, nor, more importantly as far as we're concerned, its in-built headphone amp. Those additions make the Duo a unique prospect as a five-star performer at this price, and ought to earn it a reasonable amount of admirers regardless of its sonic character.

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.

KEY FEATURES



6.3mm headphone jack



MM/MC cartridges



Auto power-down

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

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