

Exclusive reviews of the latest kit

FIRST TESTS

MORE FIRST TESTS



Marantz CD6005
£350 **Page 12**
Absolutely brilliant CD sound and great value



KEF M200
£150 **Page 14**
KEF's earphone debut is a strong performer



Arcam iDAC
£400 **Page 10**
An incredibly talented DAC. Scintillating...

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EXCLUSIVE

Seriously clever... and seriously good

Cambridge Audio Aero 5.1 speaker package | £1950

We know Cambridge Audio best for its great-value electronics. Even its range-topping 851 series of components (around £1200 each for the CD player and amplifier) pack in an awful lot of tech for the money.

However, over the past year or so we've noticed it shift towards speakers of all kinds. The new Aero range marks a move to establish the brand as a serious alternative to the likes of B&W, KEF and Monitor Audio in the heartland of full-size speakers.

It's always tough to go up against such established rivals. So Cambridge's solution is to offer something different.

At the heart of this range is BMR (Balanced Mode Radiator) technology. This kind of driver covers a much wider frequency range than a conventional driver could (see panel, below).

The 46mm unit used in the front three speakers stretches from 250Hz to 22kHz. That's impressively wide, and moves the crossover point to the dedicated bass drivers to a region where our ears

are far less sensitive to the inevitable phase and crossover distortions that are part of any such frequency handover.

Innovative driver design

This 5.1 package is made up of a pair of Aero 6 floorstanders (£650), an Aero 5 centre speaker (£250), a pair of Aero 3 bipole surrounds (£300 each) and a relatively compact subwoofer, the Aero 9 (£450).

The Aero 6 towers are decently big at 98cm tall, but their relatively slim proportions keep them just on the right side of imposing. Below the BMR sits a pair of 16.5cm bass drivers. The speakers use a single front-firing port, which should make them a little less fussy about placement in relation to a wall.

In the centre speaker the BMR is centrally mounted and flanked by a pair of 13.5cm bass drivers, while at around 34cm³ the subwoofer is a decent size.

We like the Aero 3's bipole surround speaker design. Each unit has two 85mm BMR drivers with a frequency range of 80Hz-22kHz for a convincing surround field. While these can work as a conventional bipole design, Cambridge Audio has configured them so that each of the two BMRs can be used independently, creating some interesting possibilities (see panel on p10). Put it all together and you have a very talented 5.1 package.

Seamless integration

Straight from the off it's obvious that this Aero package is something different and, yes, special.

There's a wonderful cohesion about its sound that few conventional alternatives get anywhere near. The use of identical BMR drivers on the front three speakers works brilliantly, achieving stunningly direct and focused results. The sound pans seamlessly between the speakers, which is a pleasure to hear. This quality extends to the rear channels too.

Balanced Mode Radiator drivers

The 46mm BMR used in the Aero's floorstanders and centre channel goes down to 250Hz. That moves the crossover point into an area where our ears are less sensitive – a huge advantage, and a clever way to mask inconsistencies. A BMR works as a conventional driver until the frequency rises to a certain point. Then it uses bending mode radiation to reach further, ensuring wide dispersion even at high frequencies.



Conventional tweeters can only be used down to around 2.5kHz. Not these...



Is it better than the old rDAC?
It's in a different league - bigger,
bolder and more detailed

Arcam irDAC, p20

Some innovative
driver design and
connection options
make the Aero a truly
interesting prospect



WHAT IT HAS TO BEAT...



Dali Zensor 55.1 | £1430 | ★★★★★

It's just gone up a little in price, but this Award-winner remains a top-class performer. It delivers an enjoyable sound but lacks the seamlessness of the Cambridge when it comes to panning effects.

Aero 3 connection options

As standard the Aero 3 can be used as a bipole speaker. Bipole designs are great for surround sound as this configuration fires sound both forward and behind the listener making the soundfield more 'wrap-around'.

However, there's more flexibility here. Take out the connecting strips between the terminals and you can connect each driver to a separate channel, so the more forward driver can act as the surround speaker while the rear unit handles surround-back duties.

A single Aero 3 could also be put into service as a surround back speaker; the wide dispersion of the BMR drivers makes it ideal.



Cambridge Audio

These bipole units can also act as combination surrounds and rears

In our set-up we used the Aero 3s in bipole mode, and it works really well, delivering a solid and convincing surround effect. Watch a film like the rather silly *Wrath of the Titans* and this Cambridge package is right at home, its sound packed with detail, strong in dynamics and with a totally enveloping sound field. There's no shortage of attack, and we were often surprised by the punch on offer.

Move to a music Blu-ray such as Michael Jackson's *This is It* and this package continues to impress. It renders rhythmic drive really well, letting tracks such as *Smooth Criminal* charge along at full throttle, yet delivering the requisite subtlety and articulation for the likes of *Man in the Mirror*. Jackson's vocals are as expressive and emotional as you like.

Cambridge has pushed new tech into a conservative market, and come up with a package to challenge the best around

Tonally, this system sits on the lean side. The upside is a lovely agility that can track changes of intensity with ease. But it means care must be taken with the rest of the system. Choose bright or aggressive kit and this system will give you nowhere to hide.

Flaws? We've noticed a lack of top-end refinement with earlier BMR drivers and there are still some signs of that here. The new generation is more refined at higher frequencies, but there still isn't quite the sweetness, discrimination and refinement of the best conventional tweeters around.

We like the subwoofer. It's agile and detailed, and integrates really well with the rest of the system, although you can get it to bottom out early if you push it hard. We had to turn it down more than once.

Our review samples were straight from the first production run. While overall build was fine we noticed the front firing port from one of the floorstanders was a little loose - we'll give Cambridge the benefit of the doubt, as the rest of the package was nicely made for the price.

Cambridge has been brave here. It has pushed what is still a new technology into a relatively conservative part of the market, and come up with a package to challenge the best around. It isn't perfect but its cohesiveness, punch and articulation still makes it a class-leading prospect.

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Articulate, detailed and punchy; great rhythmic drive with music; fine integration

AGAINST Not the last word in refinement; subwoofer reaches its limits relatively early

VERDICT Cambridge has delivered an excellent 5.1 package: exciting, informative and seamless

TECH SPECS

Front 120W • **Biwireable** No • **Dimensions** 98 x 24 x 34cm **Rear** 120W, bipole • **Biwireable** No • **Dimensions** 18 x 46 x 15cm **Centre** 120W • **Biwireable** No • **Dimensions** 15 x 43 x 21cm **Sub:** 500W • **Driver** 25cm, forward-firing • **Cabinet** Passive radiator • **Line inputs** 2 • **Phase invert** Yes • **Dimensions** 34 x 33 x 36cm • **Finishes** 2

SYSTEM BUILDER

Perfect partners for the Aero package



BLU-RAY PLAYER

Panasonic DMP-BDT330

£200 ★★★★★

An excellent picture and smooth tonal balance makes this a fine source for the Cambridge package



AV RECEIVER

Yamaha RX-A1020

£1000 ★★★★★

This is a big, powerful and refined amplifier that will work a treat with the Aeros



PROJECTOR

Panasonic PT-AT6000E

£3000 ★★★★★

A big sound system needs a massive picture and Panasonic's excellent PT-AT6000E is as fine a projector as we've seen for the money

Total build £5150

REVIEWER'S NOTES... 5 DAYS WITH THE CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AERO

- 1 We take the Aeros out of their boxes and aren't impressed. The packaging is poor and fell apart without much provocation. The speakers on the other hand are nicely put together on the whole.
- 2 Connecting everything up, we note that Cambridge Audio has stuck to single wire-terminals, even on the floorstanders. That's no bad thing in our book as it saves on extra cable runs.
- 3 We're impressed by what we hear, particularly the seamless way the sound flows between the speakers. It's obvious that more running in is needed. The treble sounds a little crude.
- 4 Things are getting better now. There's a greater sense of refinement and nicer treble, but still a little way to go. We play around with the connection options on the surrounds, settling on bipole.
- 5 It's time to start using the system in anger, and we notice that the subwoofer bottoms out a little early. That apart, we're taken with the detail and agility on show. This really is a terrific package.