

A SOLO FOR THE CAMBRIDGE-DUO

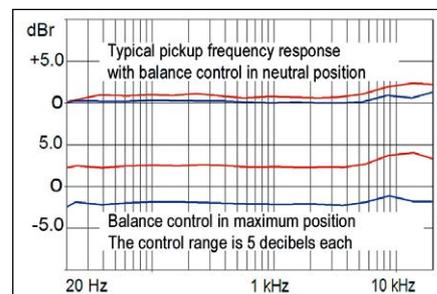
Cambridge Audio includes two entry-level phono preamps into its portfolio. Both have a balance control, and the larger one even a headphone-jack. How much more could we ask for?

Wow, do they look good! When unpacking the two new small phono preamps from the English company Cambridge Audio, the first impressions suggest significantly higher prices than the just 175 Euro required for the “Solo” and the almost 300 Euro that the larger “Duo” should cost. The devices with the titanium-colored front panels have an elegant and flawless finish. Their names derive from the fact that the Solo only amplifies MM pickups, while the Duo also manages MC.

Operation is simple. There are no options regarding input resistance, capacitance or gain and they needn’t be, because the British have fixed practical values: 39 decibels MM-gain plus 59 dB for MC on the Duo at 100 Ohm terminating impedance, which is optimal for most inexpensive MCs. With 47 kilohm and 100 picofarad for MMs, the flat amps behave, so to speak, “standard-compliant”.

Is there nothing else special apart from the noble appearance? You bet: both phono preamps have a balance control with center detent on their rear side,

◀ Since the balance control is no longer used after having been set, it is located on the phono amps’ back. The control range is a good four decibels in each direction (graph below, lower curves), which is usually more than enough to compensate for pickup errors. The front level control of the Duo affects the jack of the headphone output.



◀ The Cambridge pre’s connectors are conveniently double labeled so that they are easier to identify when leaning over the device from above.



which compensates for any channel differences of the connected pickup. These occur especially with inexpensive cartridges, for which the devices are predestined.

The important question is how an untrained person can recognize them. Of



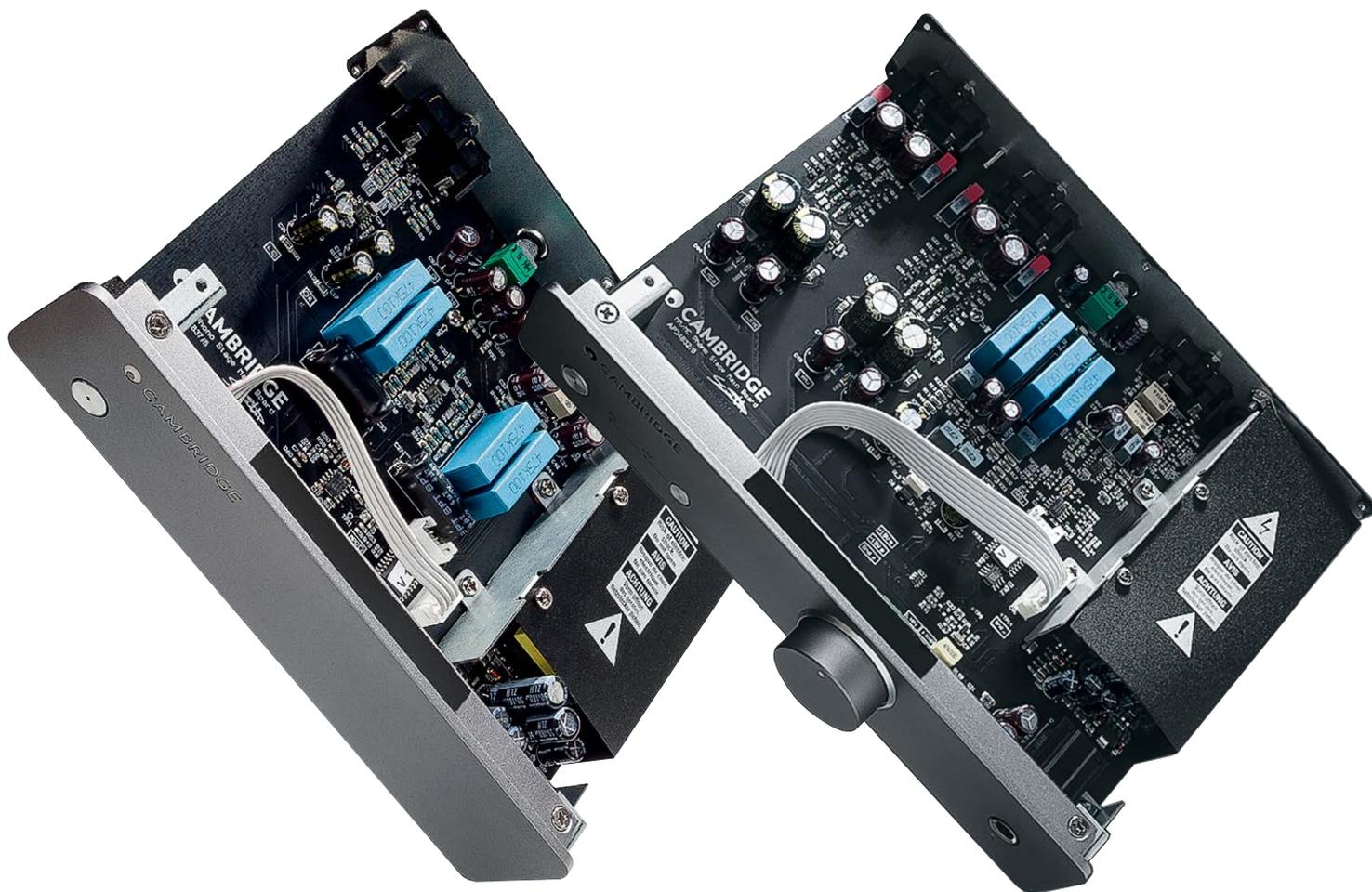
▲ The balance control on the rear panel only needs to be set once to match the used pickup and can then be forgotten. Its control range is completely sufficient.

course one could use the mono level tone of a test record and a previously with tuner noise adjusted VU meter of, for example, a cassette deck or CD recorder. Too complicated? An easier way would be to put on the headphones and play a record with a distinctive, exactly centered voice. If this is perceived to be slightly offset to the right or left, the small balance control button is used to pull the voice exactly into the center, with the control range being around five decibels to each side. This should be sufficient in any case, since already with a deviation of more than three dB, the pickup may be confidently described as defective. Usually a maximum of 1.5 dB is enough.

The large knob on the front of the Duo controls the volume of the headphone jack, by means of which Cambridge Audio is responding to the clear trend towards “private” music enjoyment. The manufacturer recommends types with impedances between 30 and 600 ohms, hence offering the listener a broad selection. We ourselves recommend headphones with

higher efficiency, as the amplifier stage of the Duo does not have endless power reserves, so that especially people with a taste for high volume could otherwise quickly reach limits. In terms of quality, there are no objections to the reproduction. It is natural, spatial and therefore long-term suitable. Bearing in mind that the phono amp in question costs less than 300 Euros, it is hardly worth mentioning that high-quality headphone amplifiers offer even more momentum and power. However, they often cost a multiple of the Duo, which is anyway supposed to, first and foremost, take care of phono matters.

Due to the additional MC-section and headphone amplifier, the component expenditure is higher in the Duo. Discreetly clicking mini relays are located close to the inputs. As in the Solo, a metal plate protects the electronics from possibly interfering radiation from the highly clocked switching power supply. ▼



Brilliantly detached sound

Unlike many other small phono amps, the ones from Cambridge Audio are not powered by an external power supply, but have solid sockets on the back. Internally, an, apparently well-shielded, switching power supply unit controls the electricity. Our initial fears this could harm the delicate input section were proven wrong. Neither our ears nor the laboratory's sensitive measuring instruments could detect disturbing influences. By the way: after about 20 minutes without a music signal, the phono pres go into standby mode. This is bound to come in handy, but especially during the initial warm-up-phase it can also be rather annoying. Fortunately, the automatic shutoff can be deactivated, which shouldn't be a reason for guilty conscience, in view of the idle consumption of just around four watts.

So far, so good. The really remarkable thing about the Cambridge couple is, however, their sound - especially that of the Duo. The weightlessness, spaciousness and dazzling transparency it offered in MM and MC mode is unprecedented in this price-class. Even our 30 times more expensive reference could not do it better. What the hell happened here? Okay, to be honest, the Duo did not even come close to the Brinkmann Edison in terms of color, conciseness and momentum, but with its almost holographic transparency it nevertheless did an outstanding job.

Its reproduction was delicate, lucid and ethereal. The atmospherically arranged titles of Loreena McKennitt's new album "Lost Souls", for example, sounded like they were floating on clouds. On the other hand, it didn't handle The Blues Company's fat bass in "If I Could", from the STEREO Listening Test LP II, quite as comfortably, portraying it, as well as lead singer Toscho's vocals, rather slender than profound and powerful. In combination with a pickup that has a slightly reduced presence range, the tonal balance is perfect and the Duo played at a level that we would hardly have thought possible in this league. There, it had already qualified as a reference anyway.

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CAMBRIDGE AUDIO SOLO

Price: around 175 €
Dimensions: 18 x5 x14,5 cm (WxHxD)
Warranty: 2 years

A refined phono pre as long as only an MM pickup is used. The Solo can compensate for channel differences and sounds as open as it does structured. Especially recommended with a cartridge that subtly represents higher notes, which is rather common in the lower price-section anyway. Also accounting for the fine workmanship, the small Cambridge Audio is a real bargain!

MEASUREMENT RESULTS

Signal to noise ratio Phono MM (5 mV)	4 dB(A)
Overload resistance MM/MC	114 mV/—
Phono MM: Input resistance	47 kΩ
Output resistance	46 Ω
Maximum output voltage	10 volts
Stereo cross-talk (5mV/1kHz/1kOhm)	58 dB
Distortion factor at 400 mV	0.01 % /
Power consumption at standby/idle	<2 W/3.8 W

LAB COMMENTS

The MM amplification of three decibels above the usual value is absolutely practical. The high signal-to-noise ratio is complemented by effective channel separation, which is important for three-dimensionality, and low distortion. No negative influences of the switching power supply could be detected in the spectrum. There's nothing wrong with the Solo!

FEATURES

One RCA input and output each, balance control, deactivatable automatic switch-off

STEREO-TEST

SOUND QUALITY **78%**

PRICE/PERFORMANCE



OUTSTANDING

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DUO

Price: around 300 €
Dimensions: 22 x5 x18,5 cm (WxHxD)
Warranty: 2 years

Having MM and MC, a useful balance control and a headphone jack onboard, this phono preamp sounds extremely loose and detached. The nimble bass comes slender, sinewy and dry. Overall, the sound is rather present than sonorous. The fine workmanship and rich equipment suggest a significantly higher price.

MEASUREMENT RESULTS

Signal to noise ratio Phono MM (5 mV)	75 dB(A)
Signal to noise ratio Phono MC (0.5 mV)	54 dB(A)
Phono MM: gain factor	39 dB
Overload resistance MM/MC	86 mV/2.4 mV
Phono MC: gain	59 dB
Output resistance	46 Ω
Maximum output voltage 7	.6 volts
Stereo cross-talk (5mV/1kHz/1kΩ)	54 dB
Distortion factor at 0.03/0.3/1	V / 0.01 % /
Power Consumption Stby./idle (with)	<2 W/4.3 W

LAB COMMENTS

The Duo offers practical gain factors, low distortion and a high signal-to-noise ratio, at least in the MM branch. For MCs it could be a few decibels more, but there is no audible interference. Effective channel separation.

FEATURES

Separate, relay switched RCA inputs for MM- and MC-scanners, one RCA output, adjustable headphone connection with sufficient level reserves, balance controls, deactivatable automatic switch-off

STEREO-TEST

SOUND QUALITY **83%**

PRICE/PERFORMANCE



OUTSTANDING

Also great as solo

The Solo's performance was also convincing: although the two Britons are very similarly structured in their MM-sections, the cheaper model couldn't quite reach this dissolution of spatial borders and interior dispersion. It tended to sound more compact, with a heavy orientation towards the stage's front edge. However, it also had a nuance more substance and was structurally woven more tightly than its big brother.

Nevertheless, cross-checks with other phono pres, "classmates" as well as representatives of higher price spheres, showed that the Solo basically follows its light muse and focuses on a slim, sinewy bass and transparency. If you prefer such a style, you've come to the right place. Or you go all in and directly reach for the Duo, which hones this approach. Who knows, maybe at some point you'd like to switch to an MC or connect headphones.

Matthias Böde