

Stage two

Looking for a low-cost phono stage to give your vinyl a boost? One of these should do the job...

PRODUCT Cambridge Audio 540P and 640P

TYPE Phono stages

PRICE (540P) £40; (640P) £60

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🌐 www.cambridgeaudio.com

Vinyl is enjoying a revival on an unprecedented scale. Sales of seven-inch singles are up 80 per cent, which equates to 800,000 small black discs finding their way into people's homes. But what are they playing them on? There's been an upturn in 'quality' turntable sales over the last few years, but not on this scale – there are clearly lots of souls that need saving in terms of getting the most from the groove. To the rescue comes Cambridge Audio, with a brace of cost-effective phono stages.

These compact boxes contain the amplification and equalisation required to turn the pitifully small voltage coming out of a turntable's cartridge into something that any normal amp can, well, amplify.

The 540P is a basic, moving magnet stage with inputs and outputs alongside the requisite earthing post. According to the literature, it's built with Class A gain stages, active equalisation and discrete transistors, the latter setting it apart from most of the phono stages you'll find in budget integrated amps. Power is delivered by a plug-top supply and the whole lot comes in a neat steel and aluminium box.

The dearer 640P offers moving coil and moving magnet inputs as well as a rumble

filter to cut out undesirable low frequency energy. Inside the case, paralleled capacitors are used to achieve RIAA equalisation accurate to 0.3dB up to 50kHz; the power supply is also slightly different, though no more ostentatious. It does not specify what impedance is offered to the moving coil cartridge, but to be fair it's not aimed at high-end cartridges which can be fussy about such things.

SOUND QUALITY

Used to amplify the robust output of a Music Maker MkIII moving magnet cartridge, the 540P put in a stout performance reflecting the solidity of bass that this cartridge is capable of extracting. Vocals – especially female vocals – are not perhaps as well defined as possible, but it's easy enough to hear what's being sung and the detail of the presentation is not impeded.

More energetic tracks produce a suitable response from the 540P. It does what even quite ambitious CD players struggle to achieve, and produces acoustic space in a natural fashion. This level of performance puts it on a par (at least) with other inexpensive stages around, like those from NAD and Pro-Ject, which means it will better those found in budget amps as a rule.

The 640P is a more refined beast. It adds dynamics and weight as well as improved image precision to the 540P's sound. We particularly enjoyed the fact that voices and instruments became palpably more lifelike and real in the room, thanks to the greater level of resolution it brings to the party. Everything from the bass up is more articulate and as a

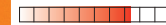
result, the music is more engaging. It's well worth the extra £20, if you can stretch to it.

With the weedier output of a van den Hul Condor moving coil cartridge, you can appreciate the improvement in high-frequency extension and detail, but you don't get a good idea of the dynamic and spatial skills of the cartridge. That said, this is a silly combination (the cartridge costs over two grand) and with lower-cost systems, the 640P makes a lot more sense. If your turntable and amp are in the sub-£500 category, it's a cost-effective way to get more from your vinyl. **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT – 540P

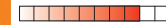
SOUND >> 74%



FEATURES >> 60%



BUILD >> 80%



VALUE >> 96%



CONCLUSION

A great phono stage for the money, capable of putting a good budget turntable on a par with a digital source of twice the price.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> **85%**

VERDICT – 640P

SOUND >> 83%



FEATURES >> 75%



BUILD >> 80%



VALUE >> 96%



CONCLUSION

The 640P shifts the goalposts, bringing dynamic contrast, tonal variety and bass weight to the vinyl it amplifies. It's worthy of mid-price systems.

HI-FI CHOICE
>> **90%**

