



Primo Facie

This new preamplifier's beauty has to be more than just skin deep to justify its heady price tag. David Price auditions Musical Fidelity's new £7,900 Primo...

Of all the products in the hi-fi jungle, the preamplifier remains the most unfathomable beast. Let us forget, in the old days it was universally regarded as vital to the correct functioning of the overall system. After all, it came with a range of tone controls and warp and scratch filters, plus a variety of phono equalisation settings, all absolutely necessary to make any sense of the records, vinyl or shellac, of the day. By the nineties however, many were questioning the need for a preamplifier at all - what with Compact Disc players outputting line level, surely all you needed was a passive volume control?

In the space of thirty years then, the breed had gone from hero to zero - almost. These days, I think the pendulum has swung a little back the other way. First, a 2009 hi-fi system now regularly runs a wide variety of sources, from Sky box to DVD player to network music player. Second, at the high end, there's been a move to fully balanced operation - which undoubtedly gives better sound - and this has sparked renewed interest in preamplifiers as a breed...

It's still hard to figure, though.

Spending my formative hi-fi years in the eighties, the conventional wisdom of the day was 'less is more'. The ultimate preamp, went the reasoning, was *no* preamp, and if you couldn't have that, then get a passive volume control and simple hard wired source switching unit. The idea that you should have a massive box, packed with components like Musical Fidelity's Primo was an anathema...

Packed the Primo certainly is, being a pure Class A, triode based, fully balanced affair running no less than fourteen selected ECC81 tubes. Both the balanced and single ended output stages have two pairs of output tubes in parallel, rather than driving the load with a single tube configuration. These are all obligingly illuminated by blue LEDs from underneath, so one peek inside through the case ventilation grille proves a sight for sore eyes for those of the tubular persuasion!

The Primo's power supply is housed in a rare earth, mu metal screen to ensure that there is no magnetic interaction with any of the delicate signal-handling components. There is a separate, fully regulated HT and heater circuit for both channels. They both have a 'soft on'

feature which helps to ensure long tube life. Musical Fidelity claims the Primo's tube life will be around ten thousand hours, subject to the vagaries of tube manufacture.

The result is excellent claimed technical performance, including very low noise and distortion regardless of the volume control setting, and with a flat frequency response [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE]. Musical Fidelity says it is capable of driving "any amplifier in existence with any reasonably conceivable length of cable", in a highly linear fashion.

As befits a product costing £7,900, it is very well made and finished - easily superior to the equally massive, albeit cheaper £6,000 ECS Pre I reviewed back in May 2007. This is one of the few British designed products that gives the sort of Japanese battleship build that so impresses when you use it - you can see it's been designed with one eye on the US high end market! The front panel is machined from solid military specification aluminium billet, with a quality of finish similar to that achieved on the latest Apple MacBook Pro laptops, for example (which is high praise, for those who



haven't been to their nearest Apple Shop recently). The inset 'Primo' badge is made from medical grade stainless steel. The top and sides are machined from solid and finished in a superb satin/matt black, and all the bolts are neatly countersunk - no nasty screwheads poking out here. Source selection buttons work crisply - all that's needed is a gentle touch to activate them - and the volume knob moves smoothly, although doesn't quite have the sublime silkiness from that of the Marantz SC-7S2, for example. Full marks to Musical Fidelity for the remote control, which is a thing of beauty - but don't lose it because a replacement will cost you £175!

Round the back, the Primo's rear panel is a declaration of high end intent. There are four line inputs via balanced XLR or RCA phono, all switchable by associated sliders, plus tape monitor inputs (a nice touch for those like me currently running a three head reel-to-reel), and a choice of either RCA phono or balanced XLR outputs, unswitched and working in parallel. There's also the usual IEC mains in, with a master on-off power switch. My one single criticism is that, despite the obvious solidity of the build (there's more metal in this preamp than in most power amplifiers), the case is a little too resonant. Rap the top with your knuckle and it's not *quite* as well damped as it could be; possibly this is the sexy looking top mounted black wire mesh Musical Fidelity use to provide cooling air to the case? Antony Michaelson assures me that with later production samples this won't be an issue.

SOUND QUALITY

The 'best preamplifier is no preamplifier' mantra that so many audiophiles merrily chant is not easy to disprove, but that doesn't mean it is necessarily correct. In practice, most preamps are so bad that, yes, it's best to dispense with them altogether - and I have to say that it's particularly the case when there are transistors inside. However, a good valve preamplifier (which by its very nature has relatively simple and straight circuit topology) has a far better chance of working well and actually bringing something to the party rather than walking away with it. Indeed, any colourations, character or differences it lends to the sound *can* be beneficial, whereas with transistors it's almost always the reverse. Put simply, solid-state sucks the life out of the music, whereas valves seem to breathe life in. And so it proved with the Primo...

However, whilst a nice euphonic valve preamplifier might work wonders with low to mid priced ancillaries, removing as it would their generally bright and hard nature, this is not what you want from a high end design such as this, which has to aim for as much transparency as is possible from glowing glass bottles. I'm happy to say that the Primo also proved able to carry the original signal through very faithfully, sprinkling just a little 'magic dust' on it as it passed through. Here we have a preamplifier that's about as transparent as valve preamplifiers get, yet retains the 'best of bottles' in the sense that it's still unmistakably a valve preamplifier. It's very clean and open, yet there's that slight sense

of, "hang on, is this recording really supposed to sound this good?"

Fun Lovin' Criminals' 'Love Unlimited' positively strutted out of my speakers. Massive, majestic, swaggering and so obviously pleased with itself, the Primo produced a wonderful sound, one that just left me wanting more, and wondering why I hadn't heard it like this before. Tonally it was as if everything had been, as someone once said, "psychedelised". The music took on more colour, with bright, glistening highs, deeper and richer bass and a midband that made most transistor preamps seem like a black and white photocopying machine. At the same time, the Primo served up an infectious musical groove, sounding as fast as you like yet relaxed and unfazed with it.

Simple Minds' 'Someone Somewhere in Summertime' via SACD was a fascinating case in point. Via an MF Audio Passive Preamp (transformer coupled, balanced), the song was delivered very cleanly and matter-of-factly with a tidy recorded acoustic and oodles of



detail breaking through. Switching to the Primo, I found that vocalist Jim Kerr took on an altogether more ethereal presence, sounding larger but a little further away. At the same time, the drum track gained a decibel or three, the Primo being able to showcase the punchy rock rhythm of the song, spotlighting the kick drums and making the cymbal work sparkle. The MF Audio by contrast, was tidier but more constrained, offering a less exuberant and ultimately more disinterested musical performance.

This is a fascinating comparison, as the MF Audio has fared very well against every other preamplifier I've ever had in my system - except this one. Still, I can't let the Primo have it all its own way, as compared to the MF Audio's transformers, the Musical Fidelity's complement of valves does seem to be adding just a smidgen of character - there was an ever so slight loss of focus at the back of the recorded acoustic, and less precise imaging within. Yet the Primo's 'character', if you can call it that, was wholly positive. It was like pressing a 'stereo wide' button, pushing the song out into the room with such enthusiasm that it was hard to go back to the more prim and proper MF. It also shone a light on the leading edges of the bass drum, snares and cymbals, giving an apparently faster and more energetic rendition of the song. Surely this is the 'magic dust' that a great valve preamp is supposed to dispense?

Soul II Soul's 'Keep on Moving' was another joyous occasion through the Primo, being a perfect partner for its style of music making. Caron Wheeler's creamy vocals were an arresting counterpoint to the hard Roland TR808 drum machine beats, and that contrast wasn't missed through this preamplifier. It gave a wonderfully sumptuous bass drum sound, driving the song along like a swinging sledgehammer. Meanwhile, those gorgeous string flourishes and piano pads filled in the mix to make an expansive, powerful sound. Switching to the MF Audio, and the result was less convincing. Despite showing a tad more grip on the sequenced bassline, the music was less emotionally engaging and drier tonally, hi-hats in particular losing their glint.

Highly processed modern pop, albeit an excellent example in the shape of The Flaming Lips' 'One More Robot/Sympathy 3000', again proved pure pleasure with the larger than life Primo. The song's swaggering bass guitar runs, in which the bassist goes up and down the fretboard as it's panned across the stereo soundstage,

acquired a new importance with the big Musical Fidelity, and they suddenly made sense in the context of the song rather than sounding more like a good idea that didn't really work, via the MF Audio. Likewise, its massive soundstage gave the song a far more 'other worldly' quality, which is just what producer Dave Fridmann was doubtless trying to achieve. With few instruments present in this song that weren't heavily flanged, wah-wah'd or other effects pedalled, it was hard to appreciate the Primo's neutrality, but again switching to the MF Audio I found the sound lost its lustre.

Moving to a Linn SACD of the Scottish Chamber orchestra (Sir Charles Mackerras conducting) playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.3 in C minor, and this preamplifier duly served up its trademark galactic recorded acoustic, wonderfully wide and deftly projected right into the room when needed, but also able to hang seemingly miles back. Piano had a beautiful tone, the instrument's



harmonics captured with every last glint and gleam present, yet there was real richness in its lower registers, which invested body not boom. Strings shimmered and scraped in equal measure, this preamplifier showing it doesn't simply airbrush out an instrument's natural patina. And once again I found the performance captivatingly musical, with bold dynamic shading and a pacy, purposeful gait.

CONCLUSION

Normally when assessing preamplifiers, it's about measuring how much it detracts from the listening experience - it is very rare that you find one that actually elevates it. But so it is with the Musical Fidelity Primo - an admittedly extremely expensive design that uses a big brace of valves and meticulous circuit design to give an expansive, punchy and musically expressive sound - infused with

REFERENCE SYSTEM

- Michell GyroDec/Michell TecnoArm a/vdH The Frog
- Note Products Phonote phono stage
- Arcam CD192 SACD player
- MF Audio Passive Magnetic Preamplifier (silver)
- NuForce Reference 9SE monoblock power amplifiers
- World Audio Design K5881 (modified) power amplifier
- Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

just a hint of that trademark tube tonality. It's not often that I hear a preamplifier that actually adds to the listening experience, but this is one and for that reason I come away very impressed.

It is of course impossible to assess the Musical Fidelity Primo in strict value for money terms, other than to say it compares very favourably indeed with my long-time reference MF Audio Passive Pre, which itself has sent virtually every other preamplifier of any price I've heard home with its tail between its legs. That the Primo is so obviously more fun to listen to, and yet no less capable in other respects, is all the

more impressive - and shows that the sort of performance it delivers is more than just competitive at its price point. As such, if you're looking for your ultimate preamplifier, then it warrants serious attention.

VERDICT

Commandingly musical sound infused with a dash of that old valve magic makes this one of the very best preamplifiers around.

M. FIDELITY PRIMO £7,900

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FOR

- natural musicality
- cavernous soundstaging
- tonal beauty
- dynamic ease
- remote control

AGAINST

- price

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Via its phono input and output sockets (i.e. unbalanced) the Primo offers a gain of x4.3, a normal but unexceptional amount. Whilst this is good for most purposes, it is insufficient for a low gain (e.g. x100) MM phono stage feeding a 1V input sensitivity power amplifier, where twice as much gain is needed. In balanced mode (in and out) the Primo does give a healthy x8.5 gain, but at present few phono stages (which often have very low output) have a balanced output and few power amps a balanced input, so it is impossible to use the gain available.

Bandwidth was wide, stretching from 4Hz to 80kHz (-1dB) through unbalanced and balanced inputs, and at all volume control settings. There was a little more noise in absolute terms from the balanced output, due to higher gain, equivalent input noise - which is what counts - was lower. Noise will be inaudible in use, and hum too as levels were low overall. Distortion was also lower in balanced mode, at 0.003% half that of unbalanced.

Like most good valve preamps the Primo accepts vast input voltages and will produce no less than 40V output in balanced mode.

The Primo measures very well, balanced and unbalanced, the latter measuring best. NK

Frequency response	4Hz-80kHz
Separation	103dB
Noise	-83dBV
Distortion	0.007%
Gain (unbal/bal)	x4.3 / x8.5
Overload	4V in / 18V out

DISTORTION

