

Power Ranger

Rafael Todes fires up Musical Fidelity's punchy mid-priced transistor integrated power amplifier, the M6 PRX...

In recent months Musical Fidelity have come up with some interesting products. I recently had the company of an AMS100, a one hundred Watt power amplifier for a month, it took two burly men a good five minutes to haul this 150kg crate up a single flight of stairs. This is a £14,000 monster, pure Class A, and 100W of vice-like control. Musically however it is a cool customer and I never saw it break sweat in the time I had it. Its smaller sibling, the AMS50 has been adopted by *Hi-Fi World* as a reference due to its neutrality, super bass qualities, and ability to present detail.

Personally speaking, I am a worshipper at the thermionic temple. I love the sound that valves bring to acoustic instruments, particularly strings and voice. Typically, you can expect a liquid midrange that is sweeter than a transistor amplifier, and a sound stage that is deeper, and more holographic. There can be an airiness to the sound which is incredibly lifelike, or perhaps even *Über-real!* After all when was the last time you heard that airiness in a real concert? The downside can come with valve amplifiers' control of bass frequencies. Often you will hear a soggy or bloated bass which lacks the same incision and accuracy of a

transistor amplifier. These days, this downside can be partially alleviated by the use of a beefy, well made transformer, and high quality valves.

Is this beauty of tone genuine or not? Anti-valvistas would claim that the beauty of sound comes from second-order harmonic distortion, which is not present in well-engineered transistor amplifiers. This age-old debate will run and run, and ultimately people tend to chose the family of sound they want, and stick to it!

The maintenance costs of running valve amplifiers should not be forgotten. A new set of valves can cost anything from a hundred quid to



"a big, no-nonsense, ballsy sound, extremely low levels of distortion, with plenty of grip..."

over a thousand for new old stock. They can last a couple of years with moderate to heavy usage, but when they go, they can take parts of the circuitboard with them, and this can be expensive to repair, thus valves are not for the faint-hearted. Transistor amplifiers are much more reliable and maintenance-free. It is not uncommon for a well-built transistor amplifier to last over twenty years without seeing a soldering iron.

Musical Fidelity's founder Anthony Michaelson started life as a Clarinetist, and a rather accomplished one at that, recording the Mozart Clarinet Concerto as well as the Mozart Clarinet Quintet. He started building valve preamps as a hobby whilst still a student, and this cottage industry grew into what is now Musical Fidelity. It is interesting that Musical Fidelity operate on both sides of the great thermionic divide, with the Primo, the flagship preamplifier designed to accompany the Titan, being pure Class A triode. He is no stranger to the benefits of valves, and his use of this excellent

valve preamplifier with the AMS100 is clever, bringing the best of both worlds.

SOUND QUALITY

It struck me listening to Mozart's charming A major Symphony no 29 (Neville Marriner and the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields on Argo) comparing the M6PRX with my VAC Auricle Musicbloc valve power amplifiers, that the two were not a million miles apart. Sure, strings and woodwind were slightly more mellow with the valve amplifiers, but the differences weren't as large as I had expected, there is a smoothness to the M6PRX that is almost valve-like, it didn't ever shriek, and there was none of the hash or graininess from which lesser transistor amplifiers suffer. The soundstage was wide and multi-layered, and the wit and beauty of this magnificent symphony shone through like a ray of sunshine.

Listening to Bernstein's earlier (1959) CBS recording of Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue' with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra, I was

immediately struck by the amplifier's command of this huge, brass-laden orchestra. When the big orchestral climaxes arrived, with forces blazing, I was impressed at the amplifier's ability to keep a cool head. It reminded me of the control I heard from its £14,000 cousin.

When the orchestra breaks into cross-rhythms against the piano, the boogie factor zoomed up and the amplifier really danced. The transients caused by the solo piano sounded really clean, no hint of any distortion, as did the big brass moments. Visceral power oozing from the speakers.

In Coleman Hawkins and Red Allen's 'High Standards' album, remarkably recorded in 1958, the track 'All of Me', shows a thunderous double bass line, tight and musical, while Coleman Hawkins jams on top. It is not the most flattering of sax sounds, it doesn't have the warm mellow sound of valve, it's cool and detached, but quite life-like.

On to Mahler's Sixth Symphony, and the last movement, which has a huge range of orchestral colours,



flourishes, and textures. I had been so impressed at AMS100's ability to spotlight the individual instruments' miking, as well as making me feel that I was standing in the midst of the string or woodwind section during the relevant passages. I feel this quality much less with its cheaper cousin, the sound feels like you are in the fifth row of a concert hall. But at £11,500 less than its smarter relative, this criticism is totally unreasonable!

There is some controversy about the attribution of Bach's famous Toccata and Fugue in D minor, there is recently scholarship that suggests it was written after 1850, due to a number of kitsch musical touches that did not exist in Bach's time. In this excellent recording by Peter Hurford on the organ of the Ratzeburger Dom (Argo ZRG943) the huge range of the organ is a good indicator of the tonal evenness of an amplifier across different registers. The M6PRX passes this test with flying colours. Its neutrality can be heard across the different registers of the German organ, and both the earth-shattering bass and the clarity with which it portrays the massive hell-raising diminished chord, is extremely impressive. You can distinguish every note of the chord, a feat that is not always possible amongst lesser amplifiers, in fact I heard a passing note that I have never heard before! The amplifier here has both muscle combined with clarity.

Ray Gelato's 'The Full Flavour' is Linn Records' tribute to Louis Prima, brilliantly recorded by Callum Malcolm. On this CD through a Naim CD5X and Flatcap 2X, the amplifier seemed in its element. It made a stunning rendition of the vocals by Ray Gelato and guest star Claire Martin, silky smooth, natural, and highly realistic. The band was beautifully portrayed in space, punchy bass, real zing on the drums, and the amplifier had no problems deconstructing the playing to reveal layers I hadn't

M6PRX UNPLUGGED

The M6PRX uses the same basic circuit topology as the AMS family. It has twin amplifier sections, in mono configuration, with twin choke-regulated power supplies for optimum supply noise filtering, is rated at 260W and has the ability to drive a wide range of loudspeakers, due to the stability of the voltage source. Usefully, there are two sets of RCA inputs, balanced XLR inputs, as well as a loop which can feed line level to another amplifier, which could be useful in the case of bi-amping or home cinema use. The unit weighs a substantial 20kg and has dimensions of 44cm wide, 12.5cm high and 39cm deep. It has a custom made front panel extrusion and heat sink extrusions, which are in the form of slats on the sides of the amplifier. The badge is made of medical grade stainless steel. The amplifier is manufactured in Taiwan, whereas the AMS range is built in Europe. There is a M6PRE preamplifier which makes a good bedfellow for the M6PRX, in the same series which shares common values with the latter.

heard before. There seemed to be real synergy between the Naim and the M6PRX for this type of recording.

CONCLUSION

Anyone looking for a well-built power amplifier around the £3,000 mark shouldn't miss auditioning one of these. It has a big, no-nonsense, ballsy sound, extremely low levels of distortion, with plenty of grip down below. It really excelled on

CD playing studio-recorded jazz. It images well, and has many of the qualities of its more expensive relatives, at a price that represents fine value for money.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Nottingham Analogue Hyperspace turntable
Cartridgeman Conductor tonearm
Ortofon Kontrapunkt A cartridge
Icon Audio PS3 Signature phono stage
VAC Auricle power amplifier
B&W802D loudspeakers

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

This M6 delivers 220 Watts into 8 Ohms and 380 Watts into 4 Ohms so it is massively powerful. It is also quite efficient, barely getting warm on the test bench even when delivering full power for one minute or so.

Like most Musical Fidelity amplifiers distortion was very low even at high frequencies, measuring just 0.024% at 10kHz, 1W into 4 Ohms. Our analysis shows this was second harmonic too, with no sign of crossover distortion visible on the analysers. The amplifier will have very clean treble as a result.

Bandwidth extended way past 100kHz, up to 150kHz -1dB. At the low frequency end, gain extended down to 4Hz before rolling away, so there is plenty of low end power, kept in control by a high damping factor of 36, so bass will be tight.

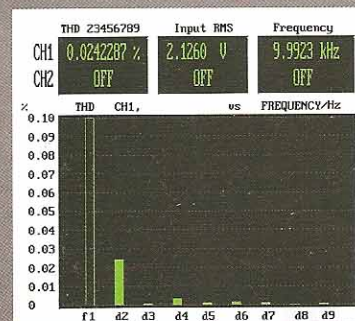
Both unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR inputs had a sensitivity of 1.35V for full output.

The M6 is a massively powerful

but clean amplifier that delivers current with considerable ease. NK

Power	220 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	4Hz-150kHz
Separation	96dB
Noise	-123dB
Distortion	0.024%
Sensitivity	1.35V
Damping factor	36

DISTORTION



VERDICT

Clean, detailed, precise and well ordered sound, but with lots of life and visceral punch to match. An excellent mid-price transistor power amplifier, well worth audition.

MUSICAL FIDELITY

M6PRX £2,995
Musical Fidelity
+44(0)20 8900 2866
www.musicalfidelity.com

FOR

- precise, focused sound
- airy, spacious treble
- articulate bass

AGAINST

- lacks a sense of romance!