



EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Musical Fidelity M6i integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Antony Michaelson, *Grande Fromage* of Musical Fidelity, is nothing if not forthright. "We messed up," is the PG version of his assessment of the last few years of MF twists and turns. Having spent time and energy convincing the audiophile world that we all need an amp the size of Norway to accurately portray the dynamic range of a mouse fart, MF's next product was, of course, a revisit of the A-1, a classic low-powered Class A design. Good – and, it must be said, not so good – products drifted in and out of the Musical Fidelity catalogue at speed. It got to the point where you asked for a product for review and in the few weeks between getting it and printing it, the product disappeared from the line up. Not a good way of keeping the client base sweet.

So, Michaelson made one of the boldest decisions a man at the head of a company can make. He killed off product lines and walked away from whole swathes of audio business that hitherto included MF products. Traditional MF heartlands were suddenly without one of the biggest names in their sector. In other words, Michaelson took stock, Scarface style! He recognised (correctly, in my opinion) that the lower and middle parts of the audio bear pit are already filled to bursting with components (but there is still room for well-designed accessories, like DACs, phono stages and headphone amps). So, neat little high-volume V-series products and more glitzy X-series components remain true

to the cause first kicked off with the X-10D tube buffer all those years ago.

Products that can capitalise on the strengths of Musical Fidelity, Michaelson thought, start further up the price points. And so, Musical Fidelity today concentrates on the M6 series (for rank and file audiophiles) the AMS series (for the hardcore collector) and the Titan power amp (for the no quarter given statement product lover). The M6i integrated amp therefore represents the foundation stone of nu-Musical Fidelity.

It's one heck of a foundation stone, too. Dual mono construction, chucking out a healthy 200 watts per channel into eight ohms and 45 amps peak-to-peak current, that puts it up in the beefy mono power amp class. The preamp stage has four phono single-ended inputs and one XLR balanced input, but like many audiophile products sings at its best in single-ended mode. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with balanced, and the XLR sockets work well here, but single-ended is a better route overall. No idea why particularly, I just liked the sound of single-ended a fraction more. ▶

▶ Two sets of single-ended phono outputs (one tape, one preamp out) and a pair of speaker terminals complete the deal. It's worth noting there's a switch at the back to select between AUX and HT (home theatre) – if used in HT mode, the amp becomes effectively a power amp and signals are at a very high level. If you have a surprisingly loud tuner with no volume control, that's probably the reason.

It's a sign of change in the industry that phono is not included on the M6i, but the amp includes a Type B USB input for a computer. It's clearly an amplifier with one eye on the future. It doesn't need a driver (the DAC is both Mac and PC chummy) but will need you to select it for output. A cynic might say the reason for the lack of phono stage is the availability of Musical Fidelity's V-LPS and X-LPSv8; a realist would point out that as the V-LPS is

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pretty much the best value phono stage on the market at this time, there's not much to moan about.

The amplifier is a very physical beast; big and big boned, in black or silver with a large central silver knob and a row of silvery ball-bearing push-buttons with accompanying LEDs. As is often the case, the remote control is more basic; just a plastic handset that's been standard MF issue up and down the product lines for years. Functional and useful, yes... but low on bling. Some bling would be good, though; those basic speaker terminals look a bit too basic on this class of amplifier.

There are some products that are best summed up by Macbeth; “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” These products come and go, passing through the audio system “like a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.” This is not that kind of product. This is not a whizz-bang-fireworks kind of amplifier – it can do all that, but it also has staying power.

I've sat in on blind tests of amplifiers before, and Musical Fidelity amps are the ones that get spotted quickest by listening panels. The reason for this is the deep, tuneful bass. No change here, then, because the M6i delivers some of the most solid and ‘likeable’ deep bass notes you'll hear from an integrated – at least from an integrated that doesn't come with a sharp intake of breath when

discussing price. It's an abstraction, but some amplifiers sound like a ‘top down’ design – the final listening stage begins by getting the treble right and then the amp is tweaked and adjusted to fit – while the M6i is very much a ‘bottom up’ design. The bass works to provide an underpinning of what comes next up the frequency range. This applies across the board; whether it's the tympani of an orchestra, a close mic'd cello, the complex interplay between contrabass trombone and bass on ‘Track A – Solo Dancer’ from Charles Mingus's *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* or a Bootsy Collins layin' down some funk phatness on James Brown's ‘Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing’. Don't mistake this for a strong bass character, though; the amp isn't bass-forward, or anything-forward. It just has a better class of bass than many of its peers. At the top end of things, it's almost a calming influence over wayward metal dome tweeters. Once again, this is not a laid back sound, but one that is only raucous and aggressive when the music demands such things.

Whether it's due this control over the sound is almost moot, but you get a feeling of unshakable authority, meaning that something really complex (whether intellectually complex – like the aforementioned Mingus cut – or simply a room full of instruments playing as one, like the opening to Mahler's Eighth) is left completely unfazed. This is not the sort of amplifier that limits you to well-recorded small groups, it likes to get its hands dirty playing music at volume with right sort of scale each piece of music deserves. ▶





▶ There's two kinds of 'effortless' in audio. The first is the effortless charm of a flea-powered SET amp... musically enticing. This is not that sort of effortless; this is the sort that makes you think there's no running out of steam, that your ears, your neighbours or your loudspeakers will wimp out long before the amplifier does.

The word 'unfussy' kept appearing. It's not source fussy – it makes a good fist of music whatever you use and however you use it. Even the USB input was nicely balanced in this respect, and didn't demand the absolute pinnacle of carefully looked after lossless files (although the better the recording, and the better the quality of MP3, the better the sound). It's not speaker fussy, although as with any amplifier that doesn't double up as a welding torch, use with crushing loads is not a good idea. It's not music fussy and you can throw everything from Chopin to the Clash at this amp without a problem. And it isn't fussy-fussy, meaning the usual power conditioner, cable demands made by most products are not so important here. Just think 'good' rather than 'outstanding' and you'll get surprisingly fine results.

If you are expecting a revolution (or even an evolution) in amplifier design, this isn't it. There is a lot of the Musical Fidelity genome in the M6i, but that doesn't make it a bad thing. Indeed, some of the best amplifiers available today are essentially not dissimilar to the best amplifiers of a generation ago, just recast in 2010 garb. This is belt-and-braces, no-nonsense audio for those who like their amps unflappable. It's what Musical Fidelity has always done well, with designs like the A300 integrated of a decade ago – a powerhouse that delivers and is cheap relative to the performance it delivers.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Musical Fidelity M6i integrated amplifier

Connections:

Line level inputs: 1x XLR, 4x phono line
level outputs: 1x phono, 1x tape phono
output, 1x preamp outputs

USB input: USB type "B" (square) socket

Speaker outputs: 3-Way Binding Posts

Output Power: 200 WPC @ 8 Ohms
(23dBW)

Voltage: 45 Volts RMS, 20Hz to 20 kHz;
onset of clipping (126 Volts peak-to-
peak)

Current peak-to-peak: 45 Amps

Damping factor: 170

Output devices: 2 pairs per channel

Line Input THD+N: <0.01% typical, 20Hz
to 20 kHz

Signal / noise ratio: >100dB 'A'-
weighted

Input impedance: 38k Ohms

Frequency response: +0, -0.1dB, 10Hz
to 20 kHz

Power consumption: 680 Watts
maximum

Black or silver finish

Dimensions (WxDxH): 44x12.7x40cm
(including terminals)

Weight: 16.5kg

Price: £2,500

Manufactured by

Musical Fidelity Ltd

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So here's the challenge to Musical Fidelity on the M6i – don't change nothin'. This is a fine amplifier, capable of delivering a performance that leads the listener out of the need to go box-swapping. I want to be able to recommend this product as a fine example of a good integrated amplifier for the next half-decade, not have to read its obituary in the next half-year. The M6i is in it for the long term; it's an amplifier that will be used by listeners for years and years... but only if MF keep it on the order books for years, too. +