



Red magic

Musical Fidelity has conjured up a compact, affordable separates system in the shape of the Merlin 1. **David Price** thinks it's wizard

Nowadays many people listen to music by swiping their smartphones to stream their favourite tunes. Within seconds, the chosen song flows forth via their wireless speaker system from the great digital music cloud in the sky. But what goes around comes around, and suddenly some music buyers appear to be looking at pastures new – or rather old. Not all of them admittedly, but enough to cause vinyl record sales to hit an 18-year high in 2014. Young people it seems are now digging the old breed and re-evaluating black plastic as the funky music medium that it always was.

The Merlin 1 is described as “a multi-format digital system designed with vinyl at heart”. It features the Merlin digital amplifier and Bluetooth turntable and the unique Merlin 1

speakers. If ever there was a crossover product to bring together both music buyers young and old, then this is surely it.

Looks are highly subjective, but I think the designer has hit the sweet spot. It is elegant, harmonious and well proportioned. The softened lines of the turntable's plinth allied to its deep piano gloss shine lend it a classy feel and it doesn't look like it's simply a rebadged deck from another manufacturer's range. The amplifier feels like a full-size Musical Fidelity that has shrunk in the wash – no bad thing – and is again well finished. The loudspeakers have a nice twist in that they are elliptical and can be configured vertically or horizontally. The turntable and speakers come in a high gloss painted finish, but the amplifier casing is made from a matt black custom aluminium extrusion. Purchasers can choose to mix and

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity
Merlin 1

ORIGIN
UK/China/Czech
Republic

TYPE
Mini separates
system

WEIGHT
Turntable: 6kg
Amplifier: 1.9kg
Speakers: 2.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
Turntable:
482 x 100 x 342mm
Amplifier:
220 x 55 x 240mm
Speakers:
130 x 220 x 200mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power
output: 2x 50W into
4ohms
• aptX Bluetooth
input
• 3.5mm jack and
MM phono inputs
• USB and optical
digital inputs
• Headphone
amplifier

DISTRIBUTOR
Musical Fidelity

TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
musicalfidelity.com

match their system; the turntable comes in red or black finishes, the amplifier is in black only and the speakers offer a choice of red, silver or black.

The Round Table turntable is bespoke made to the company's specifications by Pro-Ject. The £599 belt drive design has been configured to ensure that the deck is statically balanced and that its centre of gravity is at the pivot point of the main bearing, which partly explains the slightly unusual proportions. It sports a polished high carbon tool steel bearing, which is claimed to have “an exceptionally long life and friction free performance”, and the chassis has been designed to be as inert as possible. The pick-up arm is a good quality item, that feels smooth to use with very little bearing play and is fitted with an Audio-Technica AT95E moving magnet cartridge.

The Merlin amplifier offers a claimed 50W of power into 4ohms. It has inputs for the turntable, USB, aptX Bluetooth and digital or analogue line in. The USB input is primarily for updating the system's firmware, but can play music from a computer. Digital audio is taken care of courtesy of twin 24/192 Texas Instruments PCM 1789 DAC chips in dual differential mode. Power is provided by two Texas Instruments TAS5708 Class D modules in dual

mono configuration. The amp has a good headphone amplifier section based on Musical Fidelity's dedicated V90 HPA model (on test *HFC 378*), and a subwoofer output for a forthcoming low-frequency speaker that is due out in a few months' time. The 3.5mm socket on the back automatically switches between an optical digital input or RCA mini line-in, and there's another 3.5mm socket that can be switched between RCA fixed line out or variable, making the Merlin a preamplifier. High-grade 4mm speaker binding posts are at the back, too.

The Merlin 1 loudspeaker package is arguably the most interesting of the lot, featuring an elliptical cabinet with what Musical Fidelity calls a “diffraction multiplier system” designed to give relatively compact speakers a larger soundstage. This is effectively a multi-stepped baffle, and works with a single Balanced Mode Radiator (BMR) driver. BMRs are relatively unusual and show a certain imagination on the part of the designer.

Sound quality

This system has been designed to sound good and be easy to use across a variety of sources, but it's not intended as an alternative to an expertly assembled separates system, tuned to within an inch of its life. What really counts is how enjoyable a

With its mix and match colour scheme and innovative design, the Merlin 1 is a real head turner

IN SIGHT



- 1 Diffraction Multiplier baffle
- 2 Bass reflex port
- 3 4mm speaker binding posts
- 4 Balanced Mode Radiator driver

system such as this is to play, and how much closer it gets the listener to the music compared with mass market rivals. In this, the Merlin 1 succeeds without reservation; even by purist hi-fi standards it's fairly impressive.

The reason for this is that each separate component pulls its weight. The turntable has an open and accessible sound with a nice gentle easy musical feel. The Rolling Stones' *Emotional Rescue* shuffles along at a pleasing gait, throwing out a lot of detail and a pleasingly wide soundstage. The Audio-Technica cartridge tracks well, showing its basic high quality and also that of the arm. The sound is reasonably secure, yet nicely musical too. Tonally the Merlin 1 turntable is a light, breezy, spry sounding device. It does not deliver vast amounts of subterranean bass, but then again you wouldn't expect it to. Rather, it serves up a smooth and open soundstage without harshness or any of the other problems of budget vinyl sources.

The amplifier also works very well, and is obviously blessed with a decent quality phono stage. It suits the system perfectly, with a light, easy, open sound that can fill a normal-sized room comfortably. It is especially enjoyable when listening to vinyl; for example I cue up some classic eighties pop in the shape of the

Pet Shop Boys' *Opportunities* and the Merlin amplifier quickly gets into the swing of things. It may not be the most dynamic performer in absolute terms, however it is very good at reproducing the more subtle inflections of the music and this makes for a quite inviting and immersive sort of sound. It follows the rhythm of the music well, and invites the listener to play more. At the same time, this little integrated is never hard or strident, refusing to give away its modest place in life.

Indeed you can hear the same characteristic friendliness when you switch to other inputs. Via the analogue-in it's clean, even and punchy with a decent amount of detail. Moving to the digital input, you can hear the stereo image tightening up and getting better defined, although perhaps you might say that things fall back slightly less behind the plane of the speakers.

The Bluetooth input is also very impressive; I find it works reliably, is easy to configure and ends up sounding better than it has any right to. It is hard to understate just how handy this is, especially when you have a lot of music on a portable device. It gives a most enjoyable rendition of Daft Punk's *Get Lucky*, giving little away in sound quality to the standard digital input. The music ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Turntable earthing point
- 2 Loudspeaker 4mm binding posts
- 3 Optical/3.5mm jack output
- 4 USB/optical/3.5mm jack input
- 5 MM phono input

Q&A

Antony Michaelson
Musical Fidelity founder



DP: Who is the Merlin aimed at?

AM: It's a response to two factors: the massive increase in streaming and growing vinyl LP sales, which have hit a 20-year high. Indications are that a large percentage of those customers are 16 to 25-year olds who are used to streaming but new to vinyl and often don't know of an easy way to play their new LPs. We wanted to offer them an easy route in through a stylish, compact system that gave them both streaming and a turntable, and sounded fantastic. Having said that, there are also plenty of over 50s returning to vinyl and we offer them a choice. They can buy a Merlin system or can just buy the Round Table. We were not aware of a value-for-money system that gave them everything they wanted – a streaming digital amp with a phono stage and a turntable. All are welcome!

Why did you choose to use BMRs in the loudspeakers?

In our opinion, the key to a really good audio experience is stereo imaging, but very few – even expensive – systems image properly and although the general consumer may not understand the concept, they know and like good stereo imaging when they hear it. The new Merlin loudspeakers combine the fine dispersion characteristics of a Balanced Mode Radiator drive unit with the new technology of the Diffraction Multiplier baffle to produce a wide but accurate stereo image that is truly exceptional in our view.

Why does the Merlin 1 amplifier use an analogue-to-digital converter?

This is designed to give a configurable digital output from all inputs, whether analogue or digital, which we thought was a very useful thing to have on a flexible, modern product such as this.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Motor drive pulley with 33 & 45rpm belt grooves
- 2 Tonearm assembly
- 3 Audio-Technica AT95E cartridge
- 4 MDF platter

bounces along, bass is supple and the superb rhythm guitar playing of Nile Rogers is well carried.

The loudspeakers are surely the most innovative part of the package, and are very likeable. They suit the rest of the system very well indeed. It will come as no surprise to hear that they are limited in the bass and high treble regions, but that's not to say they cannot entertain across a wide range of music. Indeed the midband is most engaging, and projects extremely well into the room. The amplifier is not especially powerful, yet the speakers make the absolute most of it and fill the listening space in a most harmonious way. This is

the Merlin system captures this song's feel really rather well – better than many full-size separates systems at the price. The key is the naturalness with which the rhythm is carried, getting the foot tapping and the shoulders moving even at fairly modest volumes.

Conclusion

Overall, Musical Fidelity's new Merlin system works extremely well; you might even go so far as saying it is greater than the sum of its already respectable parts. First and foremost it is enormous fun to listen to, letting you connect with the music. Secondly, it has a decent amount of power and proves able to work in a reasonably sized room, filling it up with smooth and warm stereo sound. Thirdly, it is compact and a good visual match, as well as being available in several smart colours. Last but certainly not least is the fact that it is easy to set up and will integrate well with most people's listening rooms. Although not quite magic enough for wizard status, this system might have enough to cast a spell on you ●



The clever thing about this system is that it does not have any direct rivals. Instead you are forced to mix and match components. Rega sells the fine RP1 turntable with bundled cartridge (£230), and matching Brio R integrated amplifier, (£550) together, then you need to add speakers such as Wharfedale Diamond 210s (£150) and a wi-fi receiver such as Musical Fidelity's V90-BLU (£200).

This 'mix and match' system sounds very good, but struggles to better the Merlin in terms of sound quality. It does better in some individual aspects of performance, but isn't as dramatic and you lose the small footprint nature of the Merlin 1.

Even by purist hi-fi standards the Merlin 1 system is fairly impressive

one of the key benefits of using BMR drivers, and they have been well implemented here.

Another bonus is, of course, that with a single BMR, the speaker doesn't need a crossover. This in turn helps phase coherence and the general sense of musical flow. The result is that the Merlin loudspeakers sound unexpectedly lucid – music seems to stream out of them in a seamless way, both tonally and rhythmically. I find myself really getting into some early seventies rare groove courtesy of Donald Byrd. The seminal *Lanasana's Priestess* from the Blue Note LP *Street Lady*, proves to be lots of fun. Despite the speakers' limited low-frequency extension this bass-driven track still motors along, sounding rich and smooth. Indeed,

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Style; ease of set up; compactness; pleasant sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks bass and treble extension; limited power
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A charming and stylish compact separates system
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL

