

Musical Fidelity M6 Encore Connect

NOT ONLY IS MF DESIGNING AND BUILDING ITS NEW HARD-DISK MUSIC PLAYER IN-HOUSE, IT ALSO SAYS THIS IS THE START OF SOMETHING BIG



To some eyes, Musical Fidelity may appear to be latecomers to a very popular party by recently launching its *M6 Encore* products, which combine CD player/ripper, hard disk storage and online services. After all, there's no shortage of variations on the 'computer music' theme out there, from simple devices designed to access the likes of Spotify via a network connection through to high-end network attached storage products claiming optimisation for playing music.

But according to Musical Fidelity the *M6 Encore* is different. For a start it comes in a choice of flavours: you can buy it as this £3299 *Encore Connect* version, complete with CD ripping, 1TB internal hard drive, and preamp-level outputs. Or the *Encore 225*, which costs £700 more and has internal power amplification.

The fact that it's called an *M6 Encore*, not just an *Encore*, is very significant. From the whiteboard I was not supposed to look at in the company's listening room, it was clear that a whole family of *Encore* products is in the pipeline, extending upwards and downwards from the *M6* models. In fact, each of the company's main product lines, from the entry-level *M3s* to the flagship *M8* and *NuVista* models, could eventually have *Encore* products.

The technology we see in the *M6 Encore Connect* is – to quote a current buzzword – scalable, both in terms of the products in which it will find itself and what it is able to do. As Technical Director David Popeck explained, the platform on which the *Encores* run includes a Dual core 64-bit Intel processor, and has been designed with rather more than 'wiggle room' for future development: "Even when it's doing

everything it can at the moment, it's only using a fraction of the built in capacity".

So it's sensible to look at what the *Encore Connect* can do now, what's imminent, and what's on the horizon. Right now it offers computer music for those who like music more than computers: you can rip from CD to internal hard disk, or copy content from an existing network store (be that a computer or a NAS) using a handy browser interface. The *Encore* will also access Internet radio stations and Spotify, and make the music stored on its internal drive available to other network music players, including the Sonos wireless range.

By the time you read this it should do even more: when I visited the company in mid-November it was planning to roll out Tidal compatibility, and I saw a sample running a final test version of the Qobuz hi-res streaming service. Both should be functional around the end of the year. A large update was pushed out during the time I spent with the unit, ironing out some bugs and adding front-panel USB socket functionality, which can now auto-copy content from memory devices to the hard drive as well as playing music from USB. And while the *Encore* range now has 24-bit/192kHz compatibility (early samples were limited to 24/96), don't rule out further format capability extensions in the future.

All of this rolling upgrading is achieved via the Ethernet connectivity to the rear of the unit. When first powering up a new *Encore* unit, it will initially 'contact base' and update itself, during which it will appear not to be working. (MF includes a note in the box telling the user not to disconnect the power during this process.) This happens only once unless

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you unplug the unit, but has confused the hell out of at least one ‘who needs the manual?’ reviewer (not me!)

After some internal debate, MF has decided that the unit will ‘phone home’ at 3am local time each day, ask if anything’s new, and download as required. Assuming the product is powered up and connected to a home network with internet access, that should ensure it is always running the latest software – and extra features may pop up from time to time too.

Incidentally, if you just want the *Encore Connect* to function as a local store, ripping your music to it and playing it out through a system, it doesn’t need a network connection. Just use the large, clear display and the remote control supplied. The only downsides are that the network-based App and browser control won’t work, and the database used for metadata look-up won’t be updated automatically. Instead the *Encore* will carry on working using a ‘snapshot’ database of the last update, and may be a bit shaky with brand-new albums until re-connected to the internet. However, it is well worth making the connection, if only to access the internet radio and streaming services.

Note also that this unit also has three analogue input pairs, two optical and two co-axial digital inputs, and two Type A and one Type B USB inputs (the latter described as ‘for future expansion’). It can therefore function as a digital/analogue pre-amp as well as a simple CD/HDD player. And the 2.5in hard disk is user-replaceable and -upgradable, a couple of bolts to the rear releasing the caddy in which the drive is mounted.

In Use

With all that going on, I’ve taken quite a while to explain how the *Encore Connect* works and sounds in use, for which apologies – but to compensate for the extensive preamble, the ‘executive summary’ of what is to follow is ‘works very well’ and ‘sounds very good indeed’.

When I first tried one of the Musical Fidelity *Encore* products the *iPad* App wasn’t quite finished, and left some things to be desired, but now everything is sorted, and operation of the system using the *Encore* App is very smooth, as is the browser-based copying from network sources. But I suspect most users will take advantage of the unit’s ‘computer music made simple’ appeal, and rip music from CDs straight to the hard drive. This it does smoothly, efficiently and accurately: slip a disc into the front panel slot and it is ripped and then ejected with minimal fuss. The metadata look-up proved reliable with everything I tried, except the odd Far Eastern compilation disc (which I have to admit I

mainly keep just to test such recognition software).

Even connection, set-up and operation is simplified by the presence of an online manual as part of the browser interface, plus connection diagrams and ‘how to’ videos on the company website at musicalfidelity.com.

Sound Quality

And the sound? The biggest tribute I can pay the *Encore Connect* is that it doesn’t have one, but merely takes CDs and makes them available in an entirely transparent manner from its hard drive. Under the lid the *Connect* uses 384kHz/32-bit digital-to-analogue conversion, but the pre-amplifier section is all-analogue, which no doubt plays a major part in the sound purity, even when used with analogue sources.

There’s no sense of coloration or sonic modification here, but rather crisp clarity: listening to the ‘with amps’ 225 version a few weeks back I sensed more of the slightly warm, rich but detailed sound I’d associate with the company’s products, but with hindsight that character seems to have been more from the power amplification than the playback and pre-amp end of things, so neutral does the ‘amp-less’ *Connect* version sound.

That’s as true whether you choose to run the unit as a line source into a conventional integrated amp or pre/power combination, or feed it straight into a power amp or even active speakers using the pre-amp outputs: it makes the *Connect* the kind of product you could easily slip into an existing system, and then expand or build a system around.

And with styling to match the other current MF ranges, I can imagine quite a few owners of set-up from ranges above or below the *M6* wanting to consider this *Encore* model rather than waiting to see what the company does next: in the Wembley listening room a sample sat between the Nu-Vista player and pre-amp, and looked not one bit out of place.

Conclusions

As I suggested at the start of this piece, the *M6 Encore Connect* might have started out with the impression of the late arrival about it. But it makes quite an entrance, and looks to be starting a whole new path for its manufacturer.

Manufacturer’s Specification
Musical Fidelity M6 Encore Connect
Hard disk:
1TB 2.5in SATA II HDD
Inputs: CD drive, 3xUSB-A plus USB-B,
two optical and two co-axial S/PDIF,
three analogue pairs
Outputs:
Fixed and variable line,
optical/coaxial digital,
headphones (independent volume)
Remote control: included,
browser, or Android/iOS Apps
Finishes:
Black/silver, silver
Size (WxHxD): 44x12.5x40cm
Price:
£3299 (Encore 225 £3999)

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