

# Musical Fidelity EB-50 in-ear monitors

By Alan Sircom



**A** big name in the traditional hi-fi business, Musical Fidelity has always had an ear (pun intended) to the ground. The company has survived for the longest time by always being proactive toward changes and trends in the audio business. So it's perhaps no big surprise that the first traditional hi-fi brand – that isn't a loudspeaker maker – to grasp the personal audio nettle would be MF, with its EB-50 IEMs.

The clever thing about these IEMs is they manage to continue typical Musical Fidelity product design values into the ear. So, the exposed part of the IEM is a large alloy cylinder, with nicely knurled ends and – cleverly – colour-coded screws to show orientation (think, 'red is right, what's left is left' – in this case, bluey-turquoise is left). The IEMs include a generic microphone/play/pause control, MF hasn't gone down the additional iThing control route, in part because the whole smartphone market is now more open than it's ever been and having controls that do nothing may – even unconsciously – ward off an ever-increasing group of Android and Blackberry users. Apparently.

The cables join in a little metal woggle. The cables themselves are standard black plastic sleeved copper; for £150, I'd have preferred something more textured and with less propensity to tangle, but the little rubber cable tidy is useful and the angled mini-jack plug is the right balance of being designed for wrapping the cables round the player (admit it – we all do it) and being in the right place for general playing. Overall, microphonic conduction from the cable is relatively low, although suit-wearing commuters might consider using the supplied clip to prevent the microphone banging against your lapel every few minutes.

I'm not a fan of 'unboxings', but it's worth taking up the whole package here, because MF delivers an extensive and handy box of tricks with the EB-50s. Alongside the little leather pouch, the ¼" jack and the two-pin made for aircraft, there's a hard case with a cleaning cloth, a plastic croc clip, the

over-ear hooks and a multitude of sets of ear tips (10 pairs, not including the set they are shipped with).

The key part to the EB-50s design is it uses a balanced armature (or 'BA'). That allows treble to be both in the acoustic centre and time aligned with the mid and bass, but it comes with a fairly heavy caveat. A balanced armature design can be easily misaligned in the ear; not 'knocked out of alignment' – you'd pretty much have to break the sturdy alloy shell of the EB-50 to do that – but it means you need to be exceptionally thorough in matching the right tips. Musical Fidelity does supply an extremely comprehensive set of tips in the box, but the difference between getting it right and getting it almost right is the difference between a 'peaky' or a 'rolled off' IEM sound and one that's engaging and impressive.

This holds for any BA design, but is especially important with the EB-50 because they sit relatively high in the ear-canals for IEMs and the alloy cylinders that at the back makes them liable to work loose. Looping ▶



▶ the cable over your ear helps (the package comes complete with useful little plastic guides to better facilitate this), but the more secure the fit, the better the performance. A set of Comply foam tips would be a worthwhile add-on here.

No matter how you use them, the common factor is a great midrange. Vocals are clear and distinct, acoustic guitar clear and vivid and precise and there's nothing in the way of fatigue in the midrange presentation at all. Get the right tips and that great midrange extends up and down. Musical Fidelity has patently gone after a very flat overall frequency response, which might come as a bit of a surprise when used to the more tailored sound of many earbuds and IEMs, especially some of the more popular crowd pleasers with big, overblown bass or a gently rolled off treble.

The EB-50s do none of these things. They do honesty. Studio monitor-like honesty. And honesty whispering this close to your

ear can be a discomforting experience, especially when faced with something clipped and compressed and brash enough to sell millions of downloads. The super-clean high frequencies are a boon when listening to well-recorded music – especially well-recorded classical music – but can shorten your desire for exposure to lo-fi sounds. Similarly, those who measure their bass by the yard might find the sound of the EB-50 too lean; but in fact, the balance is about right – play female vocal, solo piano or spoken word (the three great arbiters of tonal accuracy) and the EB-50 doesn't disappoint. They are inherently uncolored, dynamic and fast, just as good hi-fi always should be.

A product should be judged in absolute, but also in context. The EB-50 ultimately does better in the first than the second. I sat and listened to the complexity of Stravinsky's conducting (in the early 1960s) his own *Rite of Spring* and marveled at his unique and impeccable timing. I was taken by Bill Evans perfect phrasing on *Portrait* – and the subtle bitterness of Nick Cave's 'Higgs Boson Blues', but if I wanted the wub-wubby-wubness of the first James Blake album to shake out my sinuses, this goes for precision over flub. I'd chalk that one down as a good thing.

There's a curious thing about the EB-50, though. Although they aren't made uniquely for use with phones (microphone notwithstanding), they are perhaps the only IEM I have ever encountered that shines brighter when used with a phone than with a dedicated amp. Not that they sound poor through a headphone amplifier; it's just they work so well through something like an iPhone you feel no compulsion to bring more amplifier to the party. This is more of a good thing (save you hundreds on a dedicated amp) than a bad thing (so unresolving the difference between the two is not audible).

The Musical Fidelity EB-50 IEMs are not the best thing ever; as they will be joined by in-ear and headphones above (and below) the EB-50's price of admission, they probably aren't even the best we'll see from Musical Fidelity. But they are good. You need to be extremely thorough in your choice of ear tip, otherwise you'll never hear quite how good they can be. But when it's right, it's very, very right. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity: 100dB SPL/mW (1kHz)

Impedance: 26 Ohms ±15%

Max input power: 11mW

(rated power 5mW)

Frequency range: 10Hz-20kHz

Distortion: <1%

Noise isolation: better than 96%

Driver: 6mm balanced armature

Weight: 28g

Cable length: 1.2M

3.5mm Gold plated Stereo jack plug

Microphone and answer button

included

Price: £149

Manufactured by: Musical Fidelity

Tel: +44 (0)208 900 2866

URL: [www.musicalfidelity.com](http://www.musicalfidelity.com)

