

Back In Black

Musical Fidelity returns to the affordable audiophile DAC market with a brand new box, entitled M1. David Price celebrates...

UPSAMPLING
D/A CONVERTOR | **M1DAC** by MUSICAL FIDELITY

POWER

32kHz

Musical Fidelity are on a roll at the moment. The company rarely puts out poor products, but the past year has seen it hit a purple patch. We've got an AMS50 stereo power amplifier ensconced in our reference system at *Hi-Fi World*, meanwhile at *chez Price* there's an AMS35i gleefully gobbling bucketloads of Watts from the National Grid every day and every night, acting as my jobbing hack reference integrated amplifier - something it does with rare distinction.

Now it's round two, as Mr Michaelson's M series hits the streets, and the equipment shelves of reviewers worldwide. The M1 DAC is one of the cheapest in the range, and judging by what I'm hearing as I write this, it seems Musical Fidelity haven't yet lost their knack. The princely sum of £399 buys you an extremely well finished and packaged digital to analogue convertor, claiming 'true 192kHz upsampling' at a maximum of 24bit depth. Unlike many of its rivals at this lowly end of the market, it sports four digital inputs, and very usefully (in my book at least) has LED indication of the input sampling frequency, plus a little light to indicate 192kHz upsampling (although this isn't defeatable). It works at 32kHz, 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88kHz, 96kHz and

192kHz.

The company says it sports "state-of-the-art circuit design and PCB layout, with the use of top quality digital components", plus a "high quality power supply" with choke filtration on the mains input. "This, effectively, is a mains signal conditioner which increases the performance", it is said. The result is excellent measured performance, according to the company, which is borne out by our own measurements [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE]. Coaxial (accepting 32 to 192kHz sampling frequencies), optical (up to 96kHz), USB (up to 48kHz) and XLR digital inputs appear on the back panel, along with RCA phono and balanced XLR outputs. For the purposes of the review, I used the latter into a Musical Fidelity AMS35i amplifier. Vital statistics are 220x100x300mm and 3.4kg.

SOUND QUALITY

Regular readers will have noticed I've ceased my inane polemicising against CD of late, and this is no accident. dCS have - for the moment at least - forgotten to ask for their £10,000 Paganini DAC back and so I've dutifully decided to look after it for them. Knowing that under use can often be a form of abuse, I've solemnly found myself playing it more regularly than I normally use

any digital product (this is someone who has gone for long and happy spells without any CD player, you understand). So going to a DAC that (I imagine) costs less than the dCS packaging box and connecting cables (well, there are a lot!) could have been a digital disaster of epic proportions. So sweet and silky is the Paganini that it still surprises me that it doesn't have a pointy diamond bit with Koetsu inscribed on one part of it, or a revolving platform big enough to hold a Dominos pizza on another. How then could I handle a £400 black box in lieu of my new found paramour? Well, it was easier than I thought, as it happened...

The single most impressive thing about the Musical Fidelity M1 is that, switching from the dCS, it didn't feel like someone had completely pulled the rug from under my system. No, it wasn't anywhere near as good as the aforementioned DAC at twenty times the M1's price, but nor was it anywhere as bad as I'd expected. Indeed, it wasn't bad in any sense of the word; actually it was very good and easily comparable with a number of DACs I've heard at over £1,000. The entirety of my listening session was spent with the uneasy feeling at the back of my mind; why was the M1 doing what it was doing, considering what it is?

It needs good ancillaries. A very



decent transport, such as Cyrus CD XT SE, is a must. As is an excellent, full bodied sounding amplifier (valves are a particularly synergistic mix). Open, dimensional and subtle loudspeakers are also essential, preferably with a smooth top end, as if there's any distinguishing mark to this DAC, it's a well lit top end. I certainly heard the M1's brightly illuminated treble through my system (the dCS sounds a tad smoother and duller), although that's not to say the Musical Fidelity is harsh. It is not; this I would suggest is down to its exceptionally low distortion. The result is a very vivid, spry sounding device, but underneath that 'headline' brightness there's actually real smoothness and sophistication. And it's this latter characteristic, plus a wonderful midband focus that just ekes right into the bowels of the mix, stripping out the fog, hash and mush, that is the party piece of this new digital to analogue convertor. I've

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never heard anything at its price that comes close in this respect.

4hero's 'Our Own Place' was a case in point. A beautiful, bang up to date slice of urban soul alloyed with gentle jazz, this breezy ballad is recorded to the very highest standards, and showcases a to-die-for list of classic electronic instrumentation allied to an angelic vocal line from Carina Andersson. This DAC cut right to the centre of the song, throwing out those sumptuous Fender Rhodes keyboard pads, soaring violins, silky vocal harmonies and gentle drum kit work with delicious ease. Tonally, the M1 is superb at the price, giving every instrument a really natural timbre. Strings had 'wire' but didn't grate,

cymbals came across with a sonorous metallic 'zing' but lacked harshness, female vocals were direct and expressive but silky almost to the point of being ethereal.

Matt Monroe's 'On Days Like These' is a sublime rendering of a brilliant song, but not the last word in state-of-the-art recording techniques. My transcription, from 'The Italian Job' soundtrack, comes over as a tad thin and scratchy (it's 'digitally remastered, don't ya know!'), yet the Musical Fidelity didn't blink. Although its brightly lit high treble gave the maracas a slightly summary quality, and horns rasped with just a little too much sparkle, Mr Monroe's voice was caught in all its sultry, smokey beauty. As Paul Rigby points out in



Classics (p130), his was a unique vocal talent, and the M1 shows why. Sublimely phrased, delicately expressive and dripping in nineteen sixties Mediterranean cool, his voice was captivating - and the Musical Fidelity did a great disappearing act, leaving the song to issue forth from the loudspeakers as if unsullied by 'high fidelity equipment' of any type. The song's instrumentation gently followed the vocal line, with a bouncy and supple yet understated nineteen sixties-style bass guitar pushing things along. Soundstaging was wide and deep, the M1 again seemingly imposing no limits on its scale.

By way of dramatic change, next in the disc tray was The Spice Girls' 'Wannabe'; anyone around in the nineties will know this to be a mind-numbingly compressed pop ditty designed to pour out of Vauxhall Astra vans tuned to Gold FM the world over. The M1 impressed again, in the way it scythed through a recording that wins no prize for audiophile best practice. I was impressed with the accuracy with which strands of the mix were located, the Musical Fidelity DAC showing an architectural rigour in the precise way it hung lead vocals in the room. Behind this however, bounced the full Stannard/Rowe composition in its entirety, with a pounding four-on-the-floor baseline and razor-sharp electronic snare and cymbal work, brilliantly syncopated. The M1 cannot be described as the world's greatest boogie machine, but it's still great fun to listen to; it works through sheer grip and insight rather than trying to sugar the pill with an over exuberant bassline.

Moving to the more cerebral guitar rock strains of REM's first album aproper, 'Murmur', and the Musical Fidelity DAC really sang. The lovely Rickenbacker refrain that permeates 'Talk About The Passion' was carried most skilfully by the M1, which again showed its finesse. Hear we had a wonderfully crisp, cutting sound to guitars, but they also sounded rich and fruity. The spirited playing was there in all its glory, the DAC bouncing along with zest, really enjoying the relatively rudimentary recording. Again, bass

wasn't exactly overpowering, but the glassy clarity of the midband made sure the rhythm section punched out of the mix, pushing the song along with zeal. I couldn't help but be taken with the sheer composure of this DAC, thanks to its rock solid grip on the music's timing and the placement of instruments within the recorded acoustic. It really is exceptional considering the retail price of the unit. The result was once again a direct, fluent and engaging listen but one that was never less than clean and well comported.

Given its dexterity with recordings of questionable quality, I felt the time was right to feed the Musical Fidelity with a superlative classical production, released by Esoteric no less, Mozart's 'Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor'

(English Chamber Orchestra/Clifford Curzon, Britten). The first movement of this breathtaking classic (1970) recording taxed the M1 not one jot. Presented with a massive, cowering soundstage of great depth and immense atmosphere, this DAC showed its mettle. Massed strings had vast body and breath-taking speed allied to incredible dynamics, while solo piano rang with a sonorous quality and a sublime rhythmic gait. This particular disc is an epic recording (and indeed a memorable performance), and the only thing that detracted was the M1's ability to spotlight the tape hiss; the sunshine that it casts upon source material can sometimes show its wrinkles. In this case, it didn't spoil things one jot (it was more obvious on the REM album, in fact), but potential purchasers

should remember that, brilliant as the M1 is, it's not a flatterer of recordings or ancillaries.

CONCLUSION

Given good partnering equipment, in a system that's not exactly bass light, the Musical Fidelity M1 will amaze, considering its very modest retail price. Its abilities are so high considering the market sector it inhabits that it puts an awful lot of pressure on old favourites such as the Stello DA-100 Signature at twice the price. Its combination of insight, clarity, precision and punch are formidable, and even at under £1,000 rarely seen. The only caveat is that for all its value, it's not a terribly good partner for budget hi-fi. Such is its incision that it could push already uncouth ancillaries into shrillness; so you've been warned. However, I suspect this will find favour with those already fairly well up the hi-fi tree, wanting an inexpensive way to convert their ones and noughts, so they can spend more money of their digital source, or save up for that amplifier they've always wanted. Think of this as a piece of budget esoterica and you've captured the essence of this black beauty.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Musical Fidelity AMS35i integrated amplifier
MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier
World Audio K5881 power amplifier (modified)
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

VERDICT

A brilliant value budget audiophile digital convertor, but must be matched to superior quality, smooth sounding systems.

MUSICAL FIDELITY M1 £399
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FOR

- spacious, airy treble
- massive midband insight
- soundstage precision
- wide range of inputs
- build, finish, value

AGAINST

- well lit treble not ideal for budget systems

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the M1 rises toward high frequencies, our measurements showed. This is an unusual characteristic and commonly results in obvious treble sheen. The anti-alias filtering used is very sudden and fast in its roll down and this filtering is responsible for the lift. As the M1 had low levels of aliasing products too under measurement, it may sound less hard and digital than is common. Only listening can sort this out.

Distortion levels were very low over the DAC's dynamic range and close to the noise floor. As a result EIAJ Dynamic Range was a little better than that of rivals, measuring 101dB. Fed a 24bit signal distortion dropped to 0.016% at -60dB and just 0.17% at -80dB, exceptional figures. Noise was 4dB lower in the right channel than the left, an unusual result, but at -115dB and -119dB still too low to be detectable.

The unbalanced phono socket outputs gave 2V and the balanced XLRs 4V. Apart from this, they gave identical results.

The M1 DAC measured well in

every area and is very linear. Its tonal balance is likely to be brighter than that of others, though. NK

Frequency response (-1dB)	0.7Hz - 20.1kHz
Distortion (%)	
0dB	0.0017
-6dB	0.0017
-60dB	0.18
-80dB	4.7
Separation (1kHz)	113dB
Noise (IEC A)	-115dB
Dynamic range	101dB
Output	4V

DISTORTION

