



Three Of A Kind

David Price finds Musical Fidelity's new M3 CD to be one of the most charismatic affordable silver disc spinners of late...



The world of £1,000 CD players is a crowded one; there are umpteen I can think of around that price. It's not an inconsiderable sum of money, yet it's nowhere near the amount that some people spend on devices to spin their silver discs. Think of this market as 'entry level audiophile'; it betokens a certain seriousness on the part of the purchaser; they're into hi-fi sufficiently to splash out a sizeable amount of

moolah on something that can also be experienced for free on a computer near you, but then again they're not mortgaging their future on this fading format...

What buyers expect at this price is something that looks and feels just a little better than your average £600 or £700 machine, and the new Musical Fidelity M3 CD certainly gives that. Its chunky front panel is a custom-made aluminium extrusion with a neat satin finish, and is finished to a very high quality by the standards of the class; even the Cyrus CD8 SE feels a little low rent by comparison. The largish (440x375x100mm, 6.6kg) pressed

steel casework disguises its humble origins well; Electrocompaniet use the same but it feels a lot less luxurious on the £2,500 EMC-IUP, for example. The finish on the Musical Fidelity is very good then, but if you rap it with your knuckles it finally gives the game away, resonating just a *little* too much so as not to have an effect on the sound. After the warranty period is up, I'd counsel lining it with Deflex Sorbothane panels or similar, to cut down on airborne vibration. Before Musical Fidelity get the hump, it must be added that the same goes for most sub £3,000 machines!

One real highlight of the M3 CD is the slot loading arrangement;

for countless years I've moaned *ad infinitum* about wobbly plastic disc trays and now it seems I'm not the only one who's fed up with them, as slot loaders are appearing everywhere from Meridian to Rotel. Actually, Musical Fidelity's implementation feels very nice indeed; the Cyrus CD8 SE, which was the first to 'go slot', has a loader that feels just a teensy bit unsure of itself by comparison, whereas the M3s is slightly smoother and sure of itself and what it wants to do with the disc. This is tied to reasonably fast track access, which makes for a pretty positive 'action' when using the machine; it's slick and you don't trip over your fingers. Unless you have particularly fat ones, that is, as the M3 CD's buttons are tiny round affairs; they have a nice action but they're not overlarge. Next time I have the chance, I shall make a point of looking at the size of Antony Michaelson's fingers; do clarinetists have especially dinky digits?

The display is good in its way; it's a gently backlit inverse white on blue LCD affair; no prizes for legibility; you won't see it from the other end of your room, indeed some will struggle to see it from the other end of their equipment rack. But it looks classier than many, including the truly horrible display of Astin Trew's AT3500; it's amazing how a poor display can spoil the whole user experience, isn't it? Anyway, the overall effect is of a sophisticated product that's tastefully and distinctively designed, well built and nice to use. The back panel sports just a pair of gold plated RCA phono sockets and a single coaxial digital output, plus IEC mains in.

Inside, Musical Fidelity makes a point of using a "unique high-tech digital-stream noise filter", and the M3 CD is claimed to be unique for having a mains choke filter to remove unwanted noise from the mains and "allows the M3CD's five independent power supply units to work properly, regardless of mains irregularities", the company says. There's a 24bit Delta-Sigma dual differential DAC with 8x oversampling digital filter taking care of the arithmetic and analogue sound generation.

SOUND QUALITY

This generation of Musical Fidelity products has quite a strong 'house sound' right across the range. From the humble £400 M1 DAC to the mighty AMS50 power amplifier costing many thousands of pounds, the engineers have voiced everything in a very uniform, predictable way. It's best described as clean, open and detailed, with a pleasant lilting

musicality, underlined by a strong backbone. In this respect I could be talking about any one of the M series, or indeed the AMS series. The M3 CD deviates from this not a jot; it's a very mature and polished performer at the price, but one that still has

Fidelity was full of detail, getting right into the mix and throwing out loads of information about percussive instruments, as well as giving a fine timbre to flutes and Hammond organ. It's a subtle performer in this respect, allowing the listener to enjoy nuances

"a relaxing and even handed musical performer with more polish than you'd expect at this price..."

a good deal of musical enjoyment stamped through its DNA like 'Blackpool' through a stick of rock.

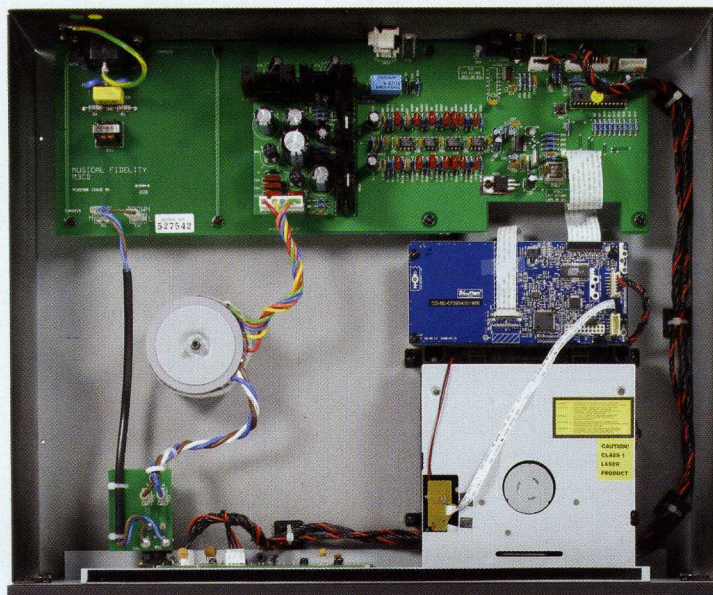
It's important to say here that the M3 really benefitted from a good warming through; it didn't really start reaching its true potential until it had been on three or four hours, and after twenty four hours left on repeat it was really shining. Corduroy's 'One Born Every Minute' showed a deep and fulsome bass that was nicely fluid and bouncy, but just lacking the bass grip of its rival Cyrus CD8 SE. The M3 seemed stronger down below, but less controlled.

Moving up to the midband, and it proved impressively capacious, with a wide left-to-right soundstage that seemed to swell outwards ever more assuredly the longer it was left on (right at the beginning of its warm up cycle, the M3 CD almost sounded 'dual mono', but then filled out like a teenager with a fast food fetish). Inside this wide recorded acoustic, instruments and vocals were located accurately, although by the standards of your typical £2,000-plus machines the soundstage was a little lacking in depth. Also, whilst it just edged the Cyrus on scale, the latter just bettered it in front-to-back image placement. The Musical

of the performance that others gloss over. In a way, it rather reminded me of the M1 DAC in this respect; I wonder if there's a very strong resemblance in their respective circuitry designs?

This detailed, insightful yet engaging rhythmic sonic nature continued up into the high midband and treble, you'll be pleased to know. Indeed again its clean, extended treble was reminiscent of the M1, something which seriously impressed me last year. There's real atmosphere to the treble, yet silkiness and subtlety too; this you don't get in your average one grand CD spinner very often; the Musical Fidelity was a master craftsman at rendering those deliciously recorded hi hats on Corduroy's '10:28 from Shibuya'. I've not heard a Compact Disc player at or near this price deliver them with such silky smoothness, such intricacy and delicacy. Compare that to Astin Trew's AT3500 (now considerably more expensive, but once a £1,000 machine) and the latter sounds scratchy, rough and rolled off, despite its tube buffering). In this, again I could hear shades of the great M1 DAC.

Moving to Fun Lovin' Criminals' 'Up on The Hill', and the M3 CD



showed it was no cerebral perfectionist. Here's a beautifully crafted piece of modern pop with a rap attitude and a soul groove; the Musical Fidelity captured it nicely, giving a surprisingly fluid (for CD) rendition. It caught the spaces between the notes very dextrously, at the same time throwing out pleasing amounts of subtle detailing. This is no barnstorming bruiser; rather it falls on the subtle side, but isn't soft and dull either. Vinyl users will understand this analogue; if it were a tonearm, it would be a Naim ARO unipivot. The M3 CD doesn't quite give you the full ten tenths of dynamics though; it's plenty good enough but its rival Cyrus just pips it with a fraction more force to rhythmic accents; the phrasing is ever so slightly more conspicuous on the CD8 SE. But then again, the Cyrus lacks a touch of the Musical Fidelity's grunt at the bottom end. You pays your money...

The M3 CD's spacious midband,

of the product, placing the band on a vast stage and giving a sense of their physical presence. Instead of being treated to a searing, crash-bang-wallop of a song as with some £1,000 CD spinners, the Musical Fidelity sounded altogether more refined and elegant. It's an interesting dichotomy, because I imagine many Who fans loved their muscular aggression, whereas others found them brilliant songsmiths and musicians; the M3 CD certainly indulges the latter.

CONCLUSION

In the genesis of the M3 CD, I rather imagine that the folk at Musical Fidelity had one ear on the class leading Cyrus CD8 SE, and the other on the Astin Trew AT3500 which is now too expensive to be regarded as a direct rival but has a lovely lilting musicality. In a way, the Musical Fidelity attempts to be a 'greatest hits' of both, bringing much of the

REFERENCE SYSTEM:

Cyrus CD8 SE CD player
dCS Debussy digital to analogue converter
Musical Fidelity AMS35i integrated amplifier
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
Black Rhodium Phantom interconnects

grip and detail and atmosphere of the former, together with the slightly sweet, tonally fulsome nature of the latter. In this it succeeds; it's not quite as grippy and the Cyrus, and not quite as lyrical as the Astin Trew, but it has few of their respective drawbacks either. Rather, it treads a very well judged path as a relaxing, even handed, musical performer with just a little more polish than you'd expect at this price; both in its musical performance and the build and finish of the product itself. At £999 I'd say it's extremely keenly priced for what it is and as such should win many friends.



and satisfying tonality mean's it's a delight with classic music. The exquisite Linn recording of Gottlieb Wallisch's reading of 'Mozart in Vienna', 'Sonata in D major, K.576 - I Allegro' showed this player to have a decently deep and creditably wide soundstage, with fine image placement. Its low level detail was such that you could almost hear the entire recorded acoustic of the concert hall, let alone the performers inside. The piano sound was a delight, with an unusually sonorous rendition of its glorious harmonics; so often I find piano via CD just wrong; kind of like someone's disconnected your tweeters; but not here. This player's natural fluidity and detail all came to the fore, along with its tonal purity.

Classic rock music, in the shape of The Who's 'In Tune', was also great fun. This player concentrated less on imparting the thunderous power of this great band at their peak, and more on the beauty of the song's arrangements and the great melodies. It also really pulled out all the finer aspects

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response measured ruler flat from 2Hz up to 21.1kHz, as our convolved impulse frequency response shows. The M3 will have an even tonal balance without either warmth or edgy treble, although a response like this does nothing to smooth less than perfect recordings.

Distortion levels were low through the player's dynamic range, the 0.202% figure at -60dB being good, if not quite up with the best and our analysis shows upper harmonics exist. The EIAJ Dynamic Range value reflects this, a value of 96dB being below what is possible, 98dB being common and 100dB the very best. It isn't a big shortfall but the M3 is not class leading all the same.

Jitter levels were very low and here the player is particularly strong, returning a random jitter level of around 5pS and slow rate clock drift of 60pS, whilst signal related jitter measured a low 50pS with a 1kHz, -60dB test signal.

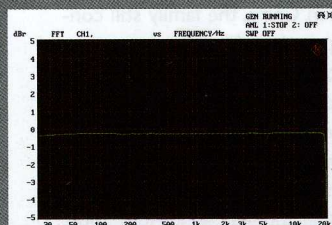
The M3 CD measured well all round, although it is not quite as linear as the best. NK

Frequency response (-1dB)
CD 2Hz - 21.2kHz

Distortion

| | |
|-------------------|--------|
| 0dB | 0.0014 |
| -6dB | 0.0012 |
| -60dB | 0.202 |
| -80dB | 4.4 |
| Separation (1kHz) | 102dB |
| Noise (IEC A) | -111dB |
| Dynamic range | 96dB |
| Output | 2V |

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION



VERDICT

Highly refined yet musical mid-price silver disc spinner with excellent build and finish.

MUSICAL FIDELITY

M3 CD £999

Musical Fidelity

☎ +44 (0)20 8900 2866

www.musicalfidelity.com

FOR

- spacious, airy soundstage
- midband detailing
- rhythmic fluidity
- build, finish

AGAINST

- softish bass