

asweseit/are_you_a_sharpener_or_a_leveler): respectively, those who try to identify minute differences, and those who don't give a rat's ass. Bob is a cheerful sort—I'd even call him well adjusted. He should get into the happiness game.

Rubin recommends being an underbuyer—a role I find as comfortable as my \$4 clearance-sale bathing suit from Walmart. The less I pay for something, the more I like it.

But you can take frugality too far. Money *can* buy happiness, according to Rubin. It can buy you a very nice CD player and integrated amplifier, for instance. The trick is knowing when to stop.

You could treat yourself, yet curb your enthusiasm, with a pair of new "entry-level" components from Musical Fidelity. In fact, the company's founder and managing director, Antony Michaelson, has adopted my term to describe them: *exit-level* products.

Down with maximizers! Up with levelers!

For the past decade, certain editors and others have tried without success to declare the CD format dead. This includes most of the crowd at *Stereophile*.

I remember the Sony suits at *Stereophile's* High-End Show in Chicago in 1999. They predicted that the SACD would render the CD obsolete, even among what J. Gordon Holt called "the audio unwashed." This was before Apple ate their lunch. Apple Computer, Masters of the Hedonic Treadmill.

Astonishingly, SACD still lives—given new life, perhaps, by the crappy sound of MP3 downloads. Even more amazing, it survives mainly as a format for recordings of classical music, which is also supposed to be dead.

After High-End '99, I predicted that CD would still be the dominant digital format five years hence. I should have said 10 years—or 15. Or 20. Perfect sound forever.

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Musical Fidelity's M3CD is for CD maximizers who cling to their actual discs.

And CD players are selling better than ever.

Don't pay any attention to the critics—don't even ignore them. —Samuel Goldwyn

We consumers get a CD player every time we buy a car, a computer, a DVD or Blu-ray player. No need to buy a standalone, dedicated spinner of CDs unless you're . . . a CD maximizer!

Certain experts advised Antony Michaelson that he would likely sell more M3i integrated amplifiers than M3CD players. I would have told him just the opposite. I would have been right. So far, he reports selling more M3CD players than M3i integrated amplifiers.

If CD is washed up, how could Antony be cleaning up on machines that play them? It makes perfect sense. Many music lovers cling to the physical discs, and CDs—not SACDs—are where the music is. Moreover, the M3CD's remote control can operate most of Musical Fidelity's newer integrated amplifiers and preamps.

Musical Fidelity M3CD CD player

"There is something almost antediluvian about CD," Antony avers, even as he cheerfully sells you his new M3CD player (\$1500).

Handling a physical disc is not something that people in their teens, 20s, and 30s do, he assured me. "Once people use an iPod, their brains get reformatted as to how they access music. If you look at it a certain way, there is no advantage to a CD player. If your data is stored properly on your computer and you have your interfaces in order, then you will get that data into your DAC bit by bit, the same as you would from a CD player [or transport]. It's not bet-

ter or worse, it's the same.

"But most people don't manage the interface very well, and then end up losing data. There is a huge quantity of settings hidden away in the submenu, and these affect the performance. If you don't know what you're doing, you could be getting no better than MP3 resolution. In that sense, there is a foolproof argument for CD players: Take the disc out of the case, put it into the player, and you know what you are going to get. [But] if you know what you are doing with computers and you know how to set it up, then I don't see any particular advantage to a CD player."

Yes. But I don't see any particular advantage to computers.

I have upward of 8000 CDs. What am I supposed to do—upload them to a hard drive and then throw them away? What if my computer or music server crashes?

As for digital downloads, when I buy something, I want to be able to resell it, donate it to the library, give it to my kids. I want to be able to move it across platforms, or retrieve it in the event of a hard-drive crash.

No, it's Perfect Sound Forever for me. Antony can call me antediluvian or whatever. I should rename my column "The Audio Technophobe."

I recently bought a Sony D25S Discman, NIB (new in box), made in the early 1990s. I didn't "need" the player, but I thought it would be nice on my nightstand with a headphone amp.

The D25S is no killer in terms of resolution, but it has a certain direct, ingratiating sonic quality, as if it's not trying too hard to resolve. I hear an ab-

sence of processing going on. I reclaim my digital innocence.

In "Uncanny Voices: New CDs of Chopin, Thomas Larcher, and Bach," in *The New Yorker* (August 9, 2010), Alex Ross writes of "the atomization of digital recording, which even after the bitty refinements of recent years, still seems more detached, more inanimate, than the analog process that came before." (Ross's new book, *Listen to This*, has just been published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.) By "bitty refinements," I presume Ross means various schemes of prestidigitation, including upsampling.

But . . . on to the Musical Fidelity M3CD. This \$1500 player doesn't up-sample. Antony Michaelson describes it as accepting 16-bit/44kHz data. Its instruction manual refers to "24 bit Delta-Sigma (bit stream) dual differential 8x over-sampling." My eyes glaze over.

"You know what upsampling does, don't you?" he asked.

I played dumb. It comes easily enough. *It creates bogus bits?*

"No," he said. "You can't turn 16 bits into 24 bits. What you do with upsam-

pling is move noise out of [the audio] band and significantly improve the signal-to-noise ratio. You also get rid of the vast majority of clocking errors.

"Every player we have done for the last dozen years or so offers true up-sampling and reclocking. This player doesn't. We have made a breakthrough in design such that, apart from jitter, which is slightly higher, you wouldn't know the difference between this player and our standard upsampling CD players."

Antony remained uncharacteristically mum about the nature of his breakthrough. "I wouldn't want to direct competitors there."

When I asked about the CD drive mechanism and the DAC, he almost told me to bug off.

"We use a Sony laser mechanism," he said. A stony silence ensued. I think he then mumbled something about a Burr-Brown DAC.

"You can make oversampling achieve extraordinary results," he declared. "We can, anyway. The M3CD comes as near to our more expensive players as possible at a fraction of the cost."

When I pressed Antony about that Burr-Brown chip, he parried. "What's the customer going to do—go out and buy a Burr-Brown chip?"

He's right. Too much useless information.

What I heard from the M3CD, listening with Musical Fidelity's matching M3i integrated amplifier, was an ineffable sense of ease. I'm serious: the player has a direct, ingratiating sound, which I confirmed by running its output directly into my Musical Fidelity X-CAN^{v8} headphone amp with a pair of AKG-701 headphones.

I heard a similar sound last month from Audio Analogue's Crescendo CD player (\$995). I tried comparing the two players with different tracks, but gave up. If I told you one is superior to the other, I'd be bullshitting, and to no practical purpose. If you're buying the M3i integrated amp, then you'll want the Musical Fidelity CD player. Ditto with AA's Crescendo integrated amp (\$995) and CD player: you'd want the pair, if only for their matching cosmetics and shared remote.

Musical Fidelity M3i integrated amplifier

It would be a shame to pass on the M3i integrated amplifier, though, which matches the M3CD precisely in price (\$1500) and nearly in size: 17.3" (440mm) wide by 4" (100mm) high by 14.75" (375mm) deep. Actually, the M3i is said to be 15.75" (400mm) deep, but that's counting its protruding volume-control knob.

Which brings me to one of my few complaints about the M3i: The legends silkscreened on the faceplate are so microscopic I find them almost impossible to read. The buttons, too, are tiny. I suppose you'd mostly use the shared remote, or memorize which buttons are which.

Intriguingly, the faceplates of the M3 components state that they are "by Musical Fidelity." Why *by*? Is this to distinguish the M3 series from more expensive products that simply say "Musical Fidelity"? I rattled Antony's cage by transatlantic telephone but got little response.

Designed in England, the components are manufactured in Taiwan. Fit and fin-

SAM'S SPACE



Musical Fidelity's M3i integrated amplifier—the signal doesn't sound like it's slogging through silicon.

ish are fine for the price but fall short of the luxurious. Why not round off the corners of the faceplates? I quibble.

The M3i is rated to deliver 76W into 8 ohms. Not 75W, not 80W, but 76W. This is Antony's humor. No rating into 4 ohms is given. There are six line-level RCA inputs, one pair of constant-level RCA outputs, and one pair of variable-level outputs (for biamping or use with

a powered subwoofer or two). Musical Fidelity differentiates itself from brands such as Cambridge Audio, Rotel, and NAD in providing no balance or tone controls.

Look. The sound of a component is never enhanced by more features, more switches, more complex PCB layouts. The beauty of Musical Fidelity is that it does *not* cater to the audio unwashed.

Is 76W, or watever, enough to drive your speakers? It was enough to drive my Harbeth Compact 7 ES3s to desired listening levels in my living room. However, as I remember, NAD's 375BEE integrated amplifier (\$1299), claimed to deliver 150Wpc into 8 ohms, had a better grip on the bass, if not the M3i's refinement in the midrange and treble. I also felt that Cambridge Audio's 650A integrated approached the performance of the Musical Fidelity M3i for less than half the price (\$699)—a bit lighter, a touch brighter, perhaps not quite so resolving. Though I had neither unit on hand for direct comparisons, I can say for sure that the NAD has more balls than the MF. But again, the M3i has a direct, ingratiating quality—along with detail, definition, and overall tonal rightness—that, for me, sets it apart from and above the NAD and Cambridge models, although I could happily live with either of the latter.

Don't tell anyone—least of all JA—but it doesn't matter whether or not you like a particular piece of equipment right away. It has to break in, for one thing. And you have to get accustomed to its sound. If it's good gear, you'll come to like it. Your ears will accommodate, and then it will be your reference. Stop being a maximizer!

Do you need a more expensive integrated amplifier than the M3i? It's my favorite integrated to date from Musical Fidelity. It has that quality of directness and immediacy. If the matching M3CD player doesn't have too much digital processing going on, the M3i doesn't have that transistor edge that lets me know the signal is slogging through silicon. The M3i reminds me of the integrated amplifiers from a small French company, Lavardin. It's been a while since I've had or heard one of their amps, but the M3i had the same spooky quality: as if, with all its resistors, capacitors, transistors, and PCB boards, the amp just wasn't there. It would be a shame to use the M3i with low-fidelity music streamed from your computer.

It would have been interesting to directly compare Musical Fidelity's AMS35i integrated amplifier (\$8999), which I met up with last March, and which is now listed in Class A of *Stereophile's* "Recommended Components." That amp was rated to deliver 35Wpc into 8 ohms in pure class-A. The M3i delivers more power for less money, but of course, it's class-A/B.

I'm not sure class-A/B is a sacrifice. I'd take the M3i rather than deal with the AMS35i's expense, size, heat, and power consumption. I didn't hear the same sweetness of sound from the M3i as I had with the AMS35i, but I noted a tighter grip on the Harbeths' bass (the consequence of more power, to be sure) and a certain directness that might come from having, in the case of the M3i, just a single pair of bipolar output transistors per channel.

Antony dismisses this two-transistors-per-channel business. It's fine to have multiple pairs of output transistors per channel, he says, so long as you properly design the circuit. The power supplies are critical, of course; even more critical is the layout of the PCB boards.

**NO ONE EVER DIED
FROM PLEASURE.
EXCEPT, PERHAPS,
NELSON ROCKEFELLER.**

It would be fun to pit the M3i against the AMS35i at a Musical Fidelity dealer. They use the same circuit, originally designed for Musical Fidelity's flagship Titan amplifier.

"Why not use it?" Antony asked, rhetorically. "[The circuit] is ours, and it costs little more to implement than an ordinary circuit."

So many integrations, so little time.

I still had on hand the Audio Analog Crescendo integrated amplifier (\$995) I wrote about last month. At 50Wpc into 8 ohms, the Crescendo is less powerful than the M3i, and strikes me as somewhat sweeter, if not quite so highly resolving. The bass seems less authoritative. But listening to one amp, I don't miss the other. The Crescendo has a beguiling sweetness of tone, most notable with strings and female voices, that other integrated amplifiers haven't matched, even the AMS35i.

Do you think that I am going to relieve *you* of the freedom—and burden—of choice? Heh-heh-heh.

Misery loves company. So does pleasure. Truly, I suffer from hedonic overload.

Hey, I think I invented that term. Well, as Sol Hurok is said to have said, no one ever died from pleasure.

Except, perhaps, Nelson Rockefeller.

"Is your sound system delivering the goods?"

Dear Music Loving Audiophile,

I hate to say it, but the answer is most likely "Nope—not even close."

I've been traveling around the country, voicing systems. Sadly, every single one was under-performing its real capability.

Audiophiles *don't have a reference* for how good their systems should be. Especially if their reference is sound at some show or at a dealer. They don't know that their sound quality should be *better* than any of those demos.

What happened?

All I did was to employ the same tips and techniques that you can find in *Get Better Sound*. No secret techniques, no silly tweaks.

What they said

"Wow! I couldn't have gotten that much improvement even if I spent tens of thousands!" *And they all say something to that effect, every time, no exceptions.*

Who is this guy?

When callers inquire about *Get Better Sound*, they often have a question. "*What is your experience?*"

You can Google "jim smith get better sound" and get pages of informative links. Heck, give me a call at 770-777-2095.

Still sold direct—no bookstores

To learn about *Get Better Sound*, including what readers and reviewers are saying, or to order your copy, visit our secure website at www.getbettersound.com. You can also order by phone—770-777-2095.

To get additional information, e-mail jim@getbettersound.com

Best regards,

Jim Smith

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