



Fast lane for new M3i

Musical Fidelity has gone back to basics with its new, affordable M3 Series. **Ed Selley** test-drives the 'engine' behind the new range

Over the last fifteen years, Musical Fidelity products have literally come in all shapes and sizes. They have sported both extremely high and comparatively low power outputs and frequently mixed a variety of valves into the mix.

This has, of course, resulted in a number of interesting products, all of which incorporate design thinking from the flagship Titan power amplifier (see the *Talking Point* box opposite).

The M3i tested here is the entry-level, full-width Musical Fidelity amplifier and it finds good company in the matching M3 CD player. It's also a styling match for the new M1 DAC, if you have moved beyond CD for music replay.

The M3i pitches into the keenly contested £1,000 amplifier market with a relatively conventional

specification. Unlike MF's rather pricier AMS units, which are entirely Class A, the M3i retains a Class A preamp stage, but the output stage is class A/B, which is a more practical proposition at this price point. This arrangement gives a claimed 70 watts per channel and in use seems unfazed by any remotely normal speaker load. This is due, in part, to the customary care that Musical Fidelity has paid to the power supply of the M3i. The preamp section has its own power supply with separate transformer windings, effectively separating it from the power amp section. The transformer itself gives the M3i good current reserves and contributes to the ease that the M3i sets about most speaker loads.

Specs appeal

The M3i sports six line-level RCA inputs, one of which can be switched

► DETAILS

PRODUCT: Musical Fidelity M3i
ORIGIN: UK/Taiwan
TYPE: Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT: 9.2kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 440x100x400mm
FEATURES:
 • 70w integrated amplifier
 • Class A preamp and AB power amp stage
 • Circuitry related to the flagship Titan power amplifier
DISTRIBUTOR: Musical Fidelity
TELEPHONE: 020 8900 2866
WEBSITE: musicalfidelity.com

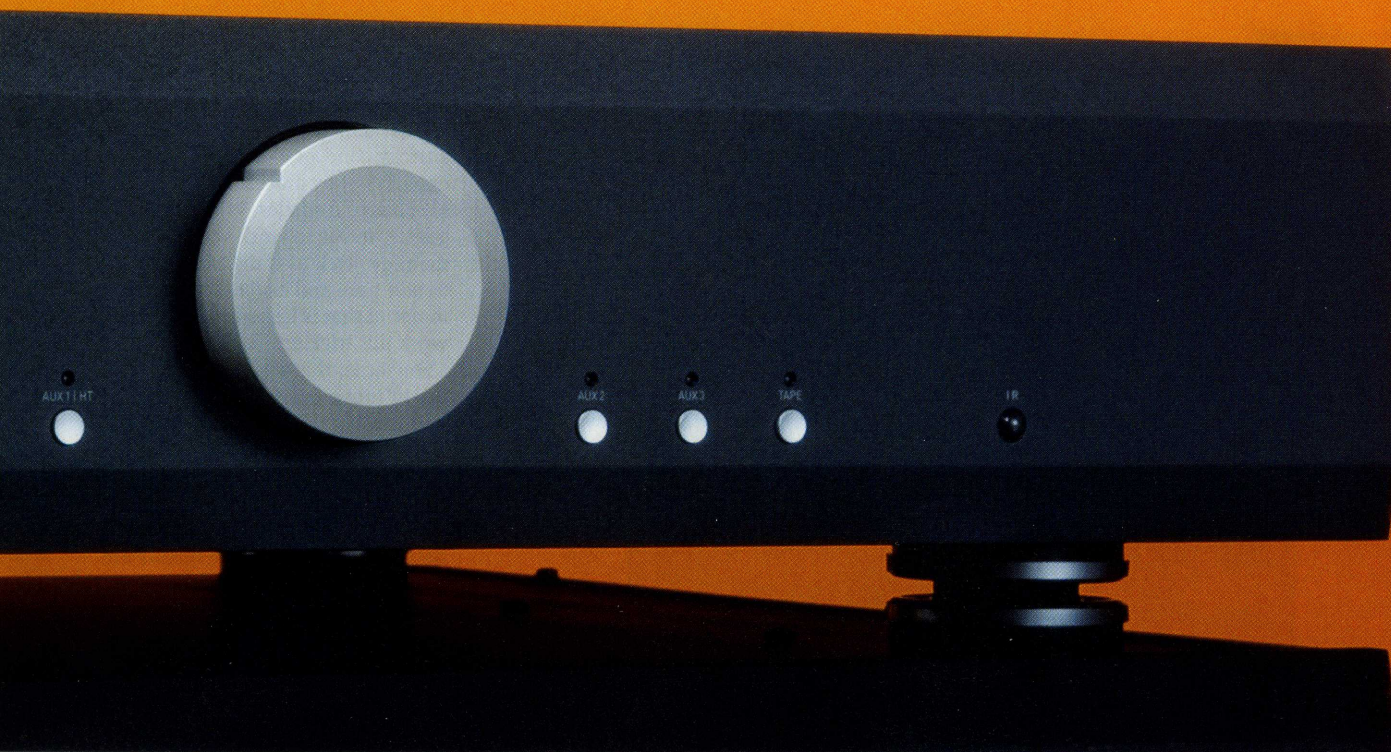
to act as a fixed input should you wish to use the M3i in an AV system. The balanced input and USB input of the larger M6 are lost, which is a shame but understandable given the M3i is less than half the price.

The good news is that the M3i retains the sturdy, all-metal casework of its bigger brother (albeit in a slightly smaller size) and less the external heat sinks. As such it joins the new Musical Fidelity aesthetic that we, at least, think is rather handsome.

The fit and finish is good – the all-metal casework feels sturdy and the controls are solid. Round the back, the connections are gold-plated and well spaced, while the speaker terminals are solid enough to accept heavyweight cabling without baulking.

The M3i is also fully remote-controlled, with both volume and input selection being available from the handset, as well as controls for the matching CD player. The handset itself is not the last word in elegance, but it is logically laid out and is easy to use. A slight gripe is that the motor in the volume pot is not especially fast, so quick changes in volume are better done by hand.

The result is a solid proposition at the asking price. It is possible to find more highly specified amplifiers for the same money – internal phono stages are available, as are balanced inputs, USB or other digital connections



and more power. While, the M3i does not have these features, it retaliates with solid internal engineering and sturdy build.

The power output is unlikely to constrain your choice of loudspeakers, or require you to change existing ones and the six line inputs and AV bypass ought to allow it to slot into most hi-fi or AV systems without a problem.

Ultimately, the decision on whether this is sufficient will rest on any requirement you might have for the features that the M3i does not have. It is also worth considering that elsewhere in the range, the very

competitive V Series components can give the M3i, digital inputs, a headphone amp or a phono stage for a small increase in cost.

Of course, we would always encourage that any purchasing decision of this type be reached with the aid of a demonstration and should you do this, the case for the M3i grows rather stronger than from the specification alone.

Heavy-hitter

Out of the box with zero running-in time, the M3i gives a good impression of what it can do. None of the key personality traits

change dramatically with more hours under the belt, but there is slight sense that the amp frees up a little and becomes a little more open.

This amp is a revealing and insightful performer, able to extract great amounts of detail from recordings without losing sight of the performance as a whole. In part, this is due to a slight lift in the top-end performance, which pushes detail which can often be overwhelmed a little further forward and gives a pleasing vibrancy to performance. This could potentially become too much of a good thing



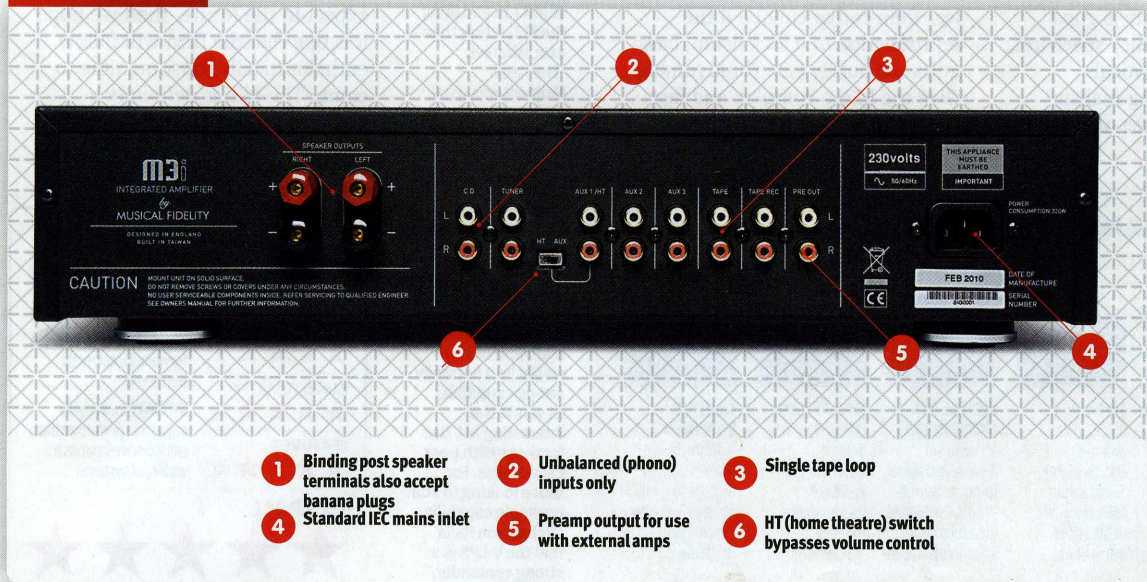
TALKING POINT

MUSICAL FIDELITY is justifiably proud of the flagship Titan power amplifier. As well as acting as the flagship of the range, it has also served as the template for all of the Musical Fidelity amplifiers in the current line up.

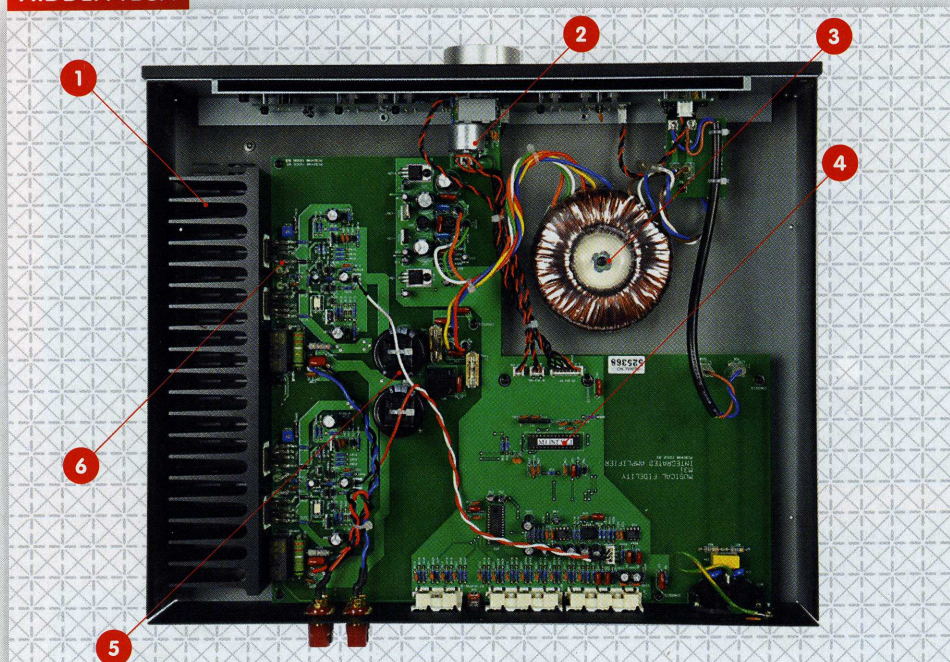
The basic circuit of the Titan is replicated in the M and AMS series of amplifiers and the sonic signature of the Titan (if not the awesome power output) now forms the basis and the design philosophy of the Musical Fidelity range. The circuit seems to prove amenable to being class A/B (as here in the M3i) and as class A in the AMS series.

MF's Anthony Michaelson feels that the sonic signature of the Titan is present and correct in the M3i which at one twentieth the price of its bigger brother is no mean feat.

CONNECTIONS



HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Massive heatsinks
- 2 Motorised volume control
- 3 Toroidal mains transformer
- 4 Microcontroller
- 5 Reservoir capacitors
- 6 Class AB output stages

and we would advise against partnering the M3i with very forward loudspeakers, but running into a pair of Neat Momentum 4i's, the results are lively and exciting without tipping over into harshness or aggression.

Pushed very hard indeed, the M3i will harden up a little and lose some of the sweetness it demonstrates at lower volumes, but the level this occurs at is a great deal higher than what we would regard as 'normal' listening levels. Tonality is good throughout the frequency spectrum, with instruments and vocals possessing a convincing realism and a very natural sense of attack

and decay. Special mention must go to the reproduction of piano pieces, which is a harder trick to pull off than is generally assumed and can prove a challenge for amplifiers that are rather more expensive than the M3i.

Sonic attributes

The well-lit top end and excellent tonality combines with a deep and musical low end that is amongst the best in class. The results are never less than convincing be it the reproduction of a kick drum, bass guitar or purely electronic rumble. Give the M3i a complex and fast-moving bass line and it will



THE M3i presents no serious obstacles to system-building. The 70w output and good current delivery mean that the M3i can handle most speaker options. Of more importance will be choosing models that benefit from the slight top end lift of the M3i rather than exacerbate it. The Neat Momentums used during the review worked well and indicate that metal tweeters should not be ruled out. Beyond the Neat range, Bowers and Wilkins CM series and PMC's FACT range would also represent strong candidates. Source-wise the matching M3CD would be a naturally strong candidate as would the interesting M1 Dac for those with post CD systems. For those looking to add turntable capability, Michaelson feels that the V-LPS is a strong contender.

reproduce it with fantastic speed and assurance that makes it a must-listen for anyone with preferences towards rock or dance music. Timing can be a tricky concept to define and explain but by most standards the M3i has it in spades. When given gentler music to work with, this can manifest itself as if the M3i is trying to add pace and excitement to material that is less suitable for it to work this trick on.

For some, this slight relentlessness might prove distracting while others will revel in this sense of liveliness. To round off an impressive set of sonic attributes, the M3i generates a substantial and convincing soundstage with musicians placed believably within it. The results are not as panoramic as some of the competition, but neither is there the sense of sound clinging closely to speakers and giving a very 'left/right' presentation.

Life in the fast lane

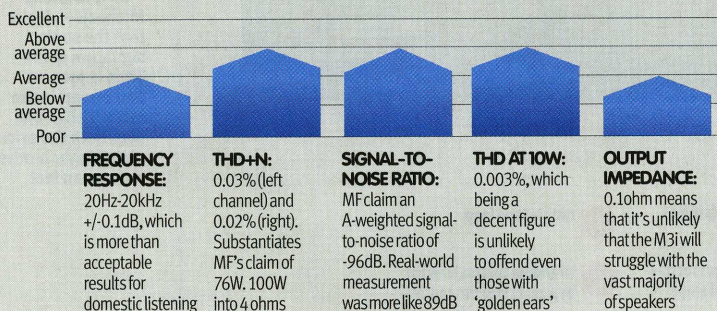
Summarised in one word, the M3i could only be described as 'entertaining'. It will replay anything with a sense of excitement and liveliness that is hard not to like. That this punch and timing is coupled to excellent tonality and soundstage and placed in a well-finished and relatively well-specified box, results in a very strong performer at the price point.

The slightly boisterous presentation it can sometimes display with gentler music may not be to everybody's taste, but many will revel in the sheer enjoyment that the M3i can bring to listening.

If this is the result of a new Musical Fidelity philosophy and an example of what we can expect in the future, then we hope it is one that the firm will follow enthusiastically for some time to come. The M3i is definitely a welcome addition to the fold. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Extremely engaging performer with excellent sonics and solid build
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** May be too forward if incorrectly partnered
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Thoroughly enjoyable performer that will work well across a variety of systems
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL

