



Musical Fidelity's huge M6 500i is billed as the last integrated amplifier you'll ever need to buy – said to combine vast power with super sound and useful facilities. Rafael Todes tries it for size...

Exit Strategy

It's been a busy year for Musical Fidelity, with a string of interesting new products from the MI CLiC network music player to the V-Link 96kHz USB to S/PDIF convertor. After a number of 'leftfield' designs, the new M6 500i amplifier you see here is a return to the company's heartland. It's a thoroughly conventional, smart looking, very well finished, large integrated. Antony Michaelson likes his big amps; the kW range is still a vivid memory, as is his enthusiasm for vast amounts of power. Surprising in a way, considering he also makes an excellent range of relatively low

powered pure Class A designs, but there you go! As its nomenclature suggests, the £3,995 M6 500i is a 500 Watt integrated in the M6 series, said to draw on the technology of the M6i (which has a trifling 200 Watts per channel). If a product of this sort isn't powerful enough for you, frankly you need your ears syringing, a more efficient pair of loudspeakers or a smaller listening room!

Mr Michaelson defines the M6 500i as an 'exit product', which is an interesting piece of terminology. No, it's got nothing to do with assisted suicide; rather he says it's the sort of amplifier you'd buy if you can't be

bothered with faffing around with pre-power combinations and all their associated wires and bulk. It's a 'fit and forget' sort of thing, which shouldn't be bought with your next upgrade in mind, because there likely won't be another. He's something of a fan of this paradigm; it's the latest in a long line of integrated amplifiers going back to 1990 with the A1000, the New Vista M3, the Tri Vista 300 and kW500, which were all around the price the M6 500i sells for today.

The design uses four power amplifiers in bridge mode to create two monoblock amplifiers. The preamp and the power amps each

have their own dedicated power supplies and heatsinks. The pre and power amps are connected on the PCB by a short track. This eliminates the need for an expensive and ultimately destructive cable to link the two. After all, no cable is even better than good cable!

The front panel exhibits the usual Musical Fidelity solidity, made from an extrusion of milspec aluminium. The sides are a series of metallic fins, which form the heatsinks, and get quite warm after a few hours usage. Not AMS100 warm, of egg-frying capability, but more like a car on a hot day.

There is a 7-segment LED display on the front panel showing the volume, which can be adjusted at 1/2 dB steps. When I first hooked up the amp, no sound came out, and I ran the usual checks but was at a loss as to why I was experiencing silence. I rotated the volume control, but still nothing. It was only when I had turned it a few more revolutions that I was greeted by the amplifier blasting music at me. The volume control is rather low-g geared, and needs quite a lot of rotation to significantly change the volume.

There are four RCA line inputs with solid-looking gold-plated connectors, and a balanced XLR input for lower noise, and a pre-out connection, to enable bi-amping via a second amplifier. It would be possible to use this to have a valve power amp serving the upper frequencies and the M6 500i doing the bottom end. Unusually for Musical Fidelity, the feature count is modest. Unlike the M6 PRE for example, there's no built-in DAC, USB connections, phono stage and what have you. It does come with a remote control unit however, which works reasonably well, albeit a bit on the sedate side for volume control. The unit is taller than the M6 PRE at 160mm high, 440mm wide and 460mm deep, and it weighs in at a mighty 28kg unboxed – so you should get the impression that this is a monster integrated amplifier, more Krell than Kenwood!

SOUND QUALITY

Kicking off the listening with digital, I connected my reference digital source, a Cyrus XT SE transport and Chord Indigo Plus cable with the Weiss DAC202, using the balanced connections to the integrated amp. Mozart's Magic Flute overture as conducted by Solti on Decca is beautifully recorded, and shows so much about a piece of equipment's ability to realistically render ambience, tone colour, and presence. The M6 500i started well, capturing

and savouring the opening three 'masonic' chords. Its sound proved most bombastic; its vast reservoirs of current meant it had no problem generating this magnificent opening. There was good spatial detail, and a slightly 'rubberised' bass which proved fast and elastic as opposed to Stygian. There was plenty of grip and bite to the beginnings of notes, which made for a most animated and engaging sound. Unsurprisingly given its reserves of power, at anywhere near normal listening levels there was no hint of any distortion that I could detect. I am used to a bit more

highly adept at capturing the delicacy and resolution of this excellent digital source.

I then turned to my vinyl front end, in the shape of a Timestep Technics SLI 200/SME V/Ortofon Cadenza Bronze, going through the sumptuous Icon Audio PS3; this gives a distinctively different sound that's less about clinical precision and more about power and passion. Listening to Kurt Weil's Second Symphony, I was aware of a very different sounding midrange to the one to which I'd become accustomed. The Musical Fidelity makes the oboe solos a

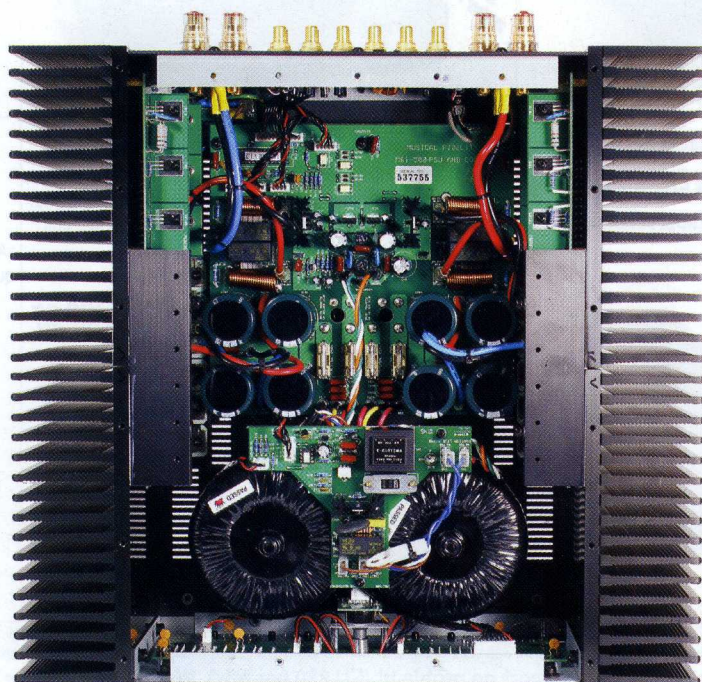
"the crescendi and diminuendi are lightning-fast, and can make you jump out of your skin..."

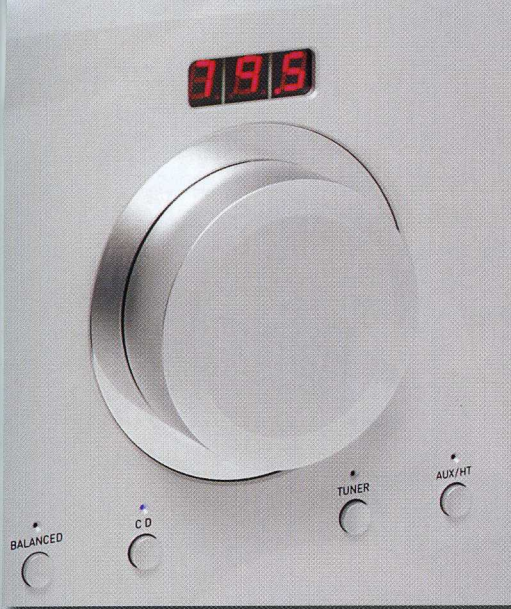
texture to the string sound with my valve VAC Auricle valve monoblocs, however they don't have quite the slam of the M6 500i. Such is the classic trade-off with transistors and tubes...

I found that voices came across very convincingly through the M6 500i. The amplifier's innate smoothness makes vocal delivery powerful and free of the edge that can sully the sound, especially when a tenor goes towards his upper limit. As the amplifier warmed up, I found myself increasingly gripped by some of the more beautiful sounds I have heard from digital. There seemed to be some great synergy between the Weiss Dac, the Cyrus and the Musical Fidelity; the latter proved

touch more reedy, and the cello solo at the start of the second movement had great detail, but lacked some body. There was less depth in the soundstage, but plenty of wallop; the amplifier seemed to go down an extra octave below my valve amplifier, and put a spotlight on the lower recesses of the Icon Audio PS3's activity. The *crescendi* and *diminuendi* are lightning-fast, and in the last movement of the Weil, they can make you jump out of your skin – it's at times like this that I wish the volume control would be more responsive!

Switching to some classic jazz in the shape of 'The Duke Meets Colman Hawkins', and the M6 500i showed its masterful sense of timing. There was great clarity in the walking





combination playing through my valve amplifiers, where you really heard the great man playing so close to the bridge that the bow noises were at their loudest, along with the overtones produced, bordering on the scratchy. He must have insisted that the microphones were virtually put inside the violin, capturing the noise they did. The big Musical Fidelity carried the thrust and scale of the orchestra well, with fine spatial detailing and plenty of grip below.

CONCLUSION

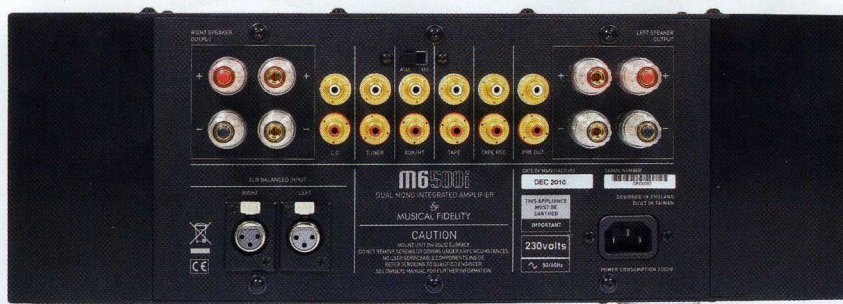
So, here we have it. A big bruiser of an integrated amplifier, but with delicacy and detail too. It offers immense power

and control, allied to an unflapability which means it's never an unimpressive listen. True, there are other (tube) amplifiers out there with superior rendition of texture and tone, but this comes at the expense of the M6 500i's iron grip – so as ever 'you pays your money and takes your choice'. A fine 'last' amplifier, this new Musical Fidelity offers a combination of style, sonics and substance that's hard to beat at the price.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Timestep SL1210/SME V/Ortofon Cadenza Bronze turntable.
Townshend Rock 7/Excalibur turntable.
Icon Audio PS3 phono stage.
Cyrus CD XT SE/Weiss DAC202 CD player.
VAC Auricle Musicbloc power amplifiers.
B&W 802D loudspeakers.

pizzicato bass line, all tight and accurate with lovely lean shimmering cymbals which start and stop on a whisker. Tonally it's a bit more brassy than I'm used to, with a touch of 'razz' to the sound, lively and powerful but not quite as tonally translucent as you'd get from the best tube amplifiers.



On to the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto, a vintage Decca recording with Vladimir Ashkenazy, and there is an interesting passage in the first movement where the soloist is having a dialogue with the string section. With my reference valve amplification, I'm afraid that this wasn't so obvious to me, but via the Musical Fidelity – and the weight it gives to the bass – this duet now seemed to make perfect sense. The lower strings suddenly sounded like equal partners with the soloist. Although I have my quibbles with the piano sound, the MF has the ability to do the big orchestral thing. It's both fast and weighty, and communicates the excitement of this seat-of-the pants musical experience. The amplifier is really in its element when the brass is going full-blast, and the tutti orchestra is behind this; the amp calmly takes this in its stride.

Heifetz and Mozart is not obviously a match made in heaven. With his recording of the 5th Mozart Violin Concerto, I got the impression that the M6 500i was smoothing out the jaggedness of Heifetz's sound. It sounded pleasant, in fact much more palatable than the same

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The M6 turns out massive amounts of power, we measured 450 Watts into 8 Ohms and 576 Watts into 4 Ohms. It is difficult to know what loudspeaker could absorb this or what situation demand it, but many people are convinced power equals quality and the M6 is for them. In this case the M6 delivers Musical Fidelity quality, which means virtually no distortion under all conditions, meaning all frequencies and powers. Only when getting close to full power at 10kHz, rare in practice, did distortion rise to 0.03%, a very low value. Musical Fidelity amplifiers consistently deliver vanishingly low levels of distortion and modulation of distortion is not a problem.

To help give a feeling of power to a user input sensitivity has been raised to a very high 68mV, comparable to that of Naim amplifiers. This means a small twist of the volume control makes the amplifier go loud quickly, but the electronic volume control used has very high resolution to control this. High sensitivity also provides good matching to old equipment and low gain/output external phono stages, so it has real benefits. The balanced XLR input was identical in sensitivity to the unbalanced phono inputs.

Frequency response was flat and wide, although Musical Fidelity have chosen to roll down gain below 15Hz, either to lessen warp info when (if) LPs

are played, or to enhance d.c. servo performance.

With a high damping factor of 73 and oodles of power the M6 will likely have grippy bass. It will also control lightly damped loudspeakers, but sound a bit too tight for some over damped designs. The big M6 can provide massive power if need be, cleanly and with great control. As high power audio amplifiers go it measures very well. NK

Power	450 Watts
CD/tuner/aux.	
Frequency response	15Hz-46kHz
Separation	106dB
Noise	-80dB
Distortion	0.006%
Sensitivity	85mV
Damping factor	73

DISTORTION

THD	23456789	Input RMS	Frequency
CH1	0.0067647 %	2.0769 V	9.9964 kHz
CH2	OFF	OFF	OFF

VERDICT Highly convincing premium priced integrated amplifier with excellent sound, rock-like build and attractive styling.

MUSICAL FIDELITY
M6 500i £3,995
Musical Fidelity
+44 (0)20 8900 2866
www.musicalfidelity.com

FOR

- power, dynamics, grip
- expansive soundstaging
- low level detailing
- build

AGAINST

- lacks romance