

# Musical Fidelity M6CD, M6PRE and M6PRX

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**Y**ou know how it is with Musical Fidelity. They are like buses; nothing for ages, then along come three at once. The M6i integrated amplifier was an impressive debut for Musical Fidelity's M6 series. A CD player, pre and power were on the cards. The first was expected, the second two slightly feared. My worry was that Musical Fidelity would simply take the M6i to bits and rebuild it into two separate parts. Actually, it did nothing of the sort.

All the boxes share the same clean lines of the original M6i. It's very Musical Fidelity, 21st Century style. Black or silver facings with side heatsinks, dimpled brushed alloy pushbuttons and other control surfaces. In other words, understated elegance. The differences – and similarities – stack up pretty quickly though.

The CD player is a fine place to start. No great display wonders from the front panel (it's a standard blue readout), the key elements are inside the player. Basically, it's a great DAC with a CD transport attached. Upsampling to 24bit, 192kHz precision ('true upsampling' says MF... as opposed to fake upsampling?), with coax, optical and USB inputs, digital, analogue and balanced analogue outputs, it's possible to consider the M6CD as a digital hub as much as a standalone CD player. With the marked downturn in fortunes for CD, this represents a fine way of future-proofing the player, although a slight confusion is there is a second USB input in the preamp.

Fully balanced from front to back, the M6PRE runs in Class A mode. This makes it warmer than most solid-state preamps, but is designed to give the best possible performance. There's a built in MM/MC phono stage, a USB input and a home theatre by-pass circuit for home cinema fans. It looks almost identical to the M6i too, although

the logo – made from surgical steel, apparently – differentiates it from the front. No tone controls (of course) and no headphone socket (MF makes its own headphone amp, so perhaps no great surprise there), but otherwise this is a pretty good, pretty standard preamp.

The M6PRX owes more to the company's titanic, er, Titan power amplifier than it does to the M6i. A fully dual mono affair, the M6PRX sports a dual mono bifilar choke regulated power supply. Those weaned on switch-mode designs might have a head-scratching moment, but choke regulation was a big thing with valve amplifiers back when they could be built big. It makes a profound difference to the performance of a design, as evidenced by the Ongaku-like change to the Pure Sound integrated amplifier when it received a Border Patrol choke-regulated PSU. The downside to choke regulation is it's big, heavy and needs an expert to design it. Musical Fidelity has been making choke-regulated power supplies for decades, so it knows what it's doing here. Which is why the 'bifilar' part is key, too. Basically, bifilar winding allows one side to cancel the other's magnetic field and noise characteristics. It's a quiet way of making a very powerful amplifier. If 'power corrupts', then the M6PRX chucking out 260 watts per channel and

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a peak current of 140 amps must make it a very corrupt amplifier.

The first potential question on a potential customer's mind must be 'which USB input do I use?'. From a sound quality perspective, the CD player has the edge, but it's not a marked and significant improvement. The CD player is best used as a complete digital hub, acting as platform for computer and other digital sources, but it must be tempered by making sure you don't end up switching to the preamp USB input by mistake. I guess true platform agnostics could use a PC on one USB input and a Mac on the other, but I recommending picking one, and whether you go for convenience or quality, you don't really sacrifice much of either in the process.

A far easier question is 'balanced or single-ended?' The answer is balanced. Every time. Unless you are comparing four-figure single-ended interconnects with DJ-chummy £10 a pop XLRs, you will struggle to find any justification to stay with single-ended between CD, preamp and power amplifier. That's not just for noise rejection over hundreds of metres of cable. It sounds better balanced through this MF combo.

Used as a threesome, the M6 package really shines. It's very much in the Musical Fidelity Power Product mode (as in, it doesn't sound like the A1, more like the old A370). That means neutral, crisp and dynamic to some, with a slight graininess to the sound that people tend to ignore, or even enjoy. Yes, there will always be someone who gets stuck on this and calls it hard-edged, but realistically this is a very neutral system with the right speakers.

The system in general cries out for good speaker designs like ProAc or Spondor (do these

three ever sing with ProAc Response D Twos or Spondor S9s... wow!) rather than designs with metal dome tweeters. That being said, many love the combination with Monitor Audio. A little-known but truly delightful pairing is with Sonus Faber Cremona M floorstanders, as the neutrality of the electronics blends perfectly with the sweetness of the speaker sound.

The MF trio throw out an interesting conundrum for the reviewer. They don't seem particularly stand and cable fussy. The difference between a Townshend VSSS and a Quadraspire, the difference between Vertex AQ Kinabalu and Ensemble Zorba platforms (why do audiophile platform makers come up with such left-field names?), moving from Crystal to Audience to Cardas to a set of ancient Exposure virtually identikit versions of Linn's K20 cable made little difference to the basic performance of the Musical Fidelity. So why the conundrum part? Because it makes reviewers ask if this a good thing or a bad thing. Certainly from a keep costs low aspect, the fact that the MF gear sounds virtually the same on a sideboard as it does on a state-of-the-art platform is a good thing and it certainly saves splashing out large amounts on good mains, interconnect and speaker cables, but does it mean it holds the sound back in the process? It certainly doesn't seem to in reality.

There's an earthy 'rightness' to the sound produced by the Musical Fidelity package. Sounds are rooted in a three-dimensional soundstage. Vocals are neither recessed or forward in the mix and very articulate. But the most immediate impression you get from the trio is the dynamic scaling it has. This comes across with most music, but especially on solo piano.



Perhaps one of the acid tests of an amplifier, solo piano needs the electronics to be able to be both well controlled (to keep the speakers in check) and wild enough to cope with a sound that can push an amp from idle to its limits and back in a fraction of a second. Meanwhile, it needs to cope with those smaller, closer noises (the musician's breathing, squeaks of backside on leather, the pedals being used and so on). Brendel playing the first movement of Beethoven's 'Appassionata' sonata is a perfect example of this. Too little control and the right and left hand blur. Too much and it sounds flat and drab. The Musical Fidelity trio pass with flying colours.

What doesn't strike you at first but slowly burns into your brain in a wholly positive manner is the coherence. Not in a Mantovani 'cascading strings' sound, but where the instrument's tonal palette is accurate across its range. This is typically a function of the loudspeaker rather than the electronics, but the M6 trio show just how much a good set of electronics aid that goal. This seems especially important when

listening to bass guitar; the character of a Fender Precision bass is different from a Fender Jazz, or a MusicMan Stingray. This distinction can be lost on many systems, it just falling into the category 'bass guitar', but the MF trio – coupled with a good loudspeaker – can draw out the tonality behind the notes and you can easily hear who's playing what.

Once again, a lot of this comes down to dynamic range, and it does seem like the M6 system has a lot of reserves on tap. Much of this comes down to the M6PRX. OK, using it with an amp-crushing loudspeaker load will see it hit its limits perhaps faster than the bigger power amps on the market, but used in the context of the sort of speakers this product would likely be partnered with and the MF package has an effortless quality that makes you confident that no music will be a struggle. In that respect, it almost makes your speakers seem bigger and better than they really are.

Of the three products, the breakout device is the power amplifier. The CD player is a fine addition to the portfolio, but I suspect those buying it will

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be those who want a matching CD player for their M6 products, rather than those wanting a CD solution in its own right – this is a bit of a shame, because it lives up to the Musical Fidelity name, being both accurate and tuneful, and never puts a foot wrong. Meanwhile the preamplifier is both excellent and excellent value for money, but there are a lot of excellent preamps out there. Once again, I can see this forming the centerpiece of an expanding MF system, rather than the first MF product anyone would buy from the M6 range.

The power amp, though... that's a different proposition altogether. It's the perfect combination of motive force and grace that is not uncommon at twice the price, but hard to find paired up at this level. You can have an earthmover or a delicate flower power amp at this price, but not

the two together. It has the ability to grip onto your loudspeaker cones and never let go like a terrier with its blood up, but also has enough refinement to make the deft touch of Alice Coltrane's jazz harp and Pharoah Sanders lithe, abrasive tenor sax playing rise up out of the drone on the title track of Journey In Satchidanada, without undermining either. Most of all, though, it does what a good power amp should do, get out of the way of the sound. I played with this through a number of different preamps – including the Conrad-johnson ET3 tested last issue and the limited edition Siltech C1 pre coming soon – and it never imposed its character on the sound. That puts the M6PRX in with some very exclusive and very expensive company and at no time did it show itself up. There's a school of thought that suggests valve pre and solid-state power is the ideal set-up; the pre for 'show' and for 'glow' and the power for 'go'. The M6PRX adds a lot of weight to that argument. The fact that you can switch between inputs makes it something of a perfect product for the reviewer, too.

Played as a grouping, the power chord of M6CD, M6PRE and M6PRX are hard to fault. Best used balanced from one end to the other, the trio are unobtrusive, entertaining and a satisfyingly potent combination of sweetness and meatiness. I know that sounds horrid (like lamb cooked in Pepsi) but it works from a fundamentally musical position. Almost any one of these components on its own is good enough to stand alone and act as an introduction to the joys of Musical Fidelity sound, but it's the power amp that shines out as a true world-class product. The whole isn't far greater than the sum of its parts, but with parts like these, it doesn't need to be. +

## SPECS & PRICING

### M6CD CD player

**DAC Specification:** 24 Bit Delta-Sigma dual differential 8 x oversampling.

**Digital Inputs:** RCA Coaxial S/PDIF, Toslink optical, 1 USB type 'B'

**Analogue Outputs:** Line level 1 pair RCA & 1 Pair XLR

**Digital Outputs:** 1 RCA Coaxial S/PDIF 1 Toslink Optical connector

**Output Impedance:** 50 ohms

**Digital Output:** 0dB level

XLR 4.4V rms, balanced

RCA 2.2V rms, single ended

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 17"x5"x15"

**Weight:** 25lbs

### M6PRE

**Inputs:** 2x XLR balanced, 4x single-ended line (one HT by-pass), MM/MC phono, USB type 'B'

**Outputs:** single-ended, XLR balanced

**Voltage:** 9.5Vrms 19Vrms

26V peak to peak 52V peak to peak

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 17"x5"x15.7"

**Weight:** 25lbs

### M6PRX

**Output Power:** 260 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms (24 dBW)

**Voltage:** 46 Volts RMS, 20Hz to 20 kHz;

onset of clipping (130 Volts peak-to-peak)

Current peak-to-peak 140 Amps

Damping factor 210

**Output devices:** 4 pairs per channel

**Connections:** Line level inputs 1 pair line level XLR, 2 pairs line level RCA

**Line level outputs:** RCA connectors

**Speaker outputs:** 4 pairs 4mm banana plug/binding posts

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 17"x5"x15.3"

**Weight:** 43.4lbs

### U.S.

**M6CD CD player Price:** \$2,399

**M6PRE Price:** \$2,399

**M6PRX Price:** \$3,499

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(617) 314 9227

### U.K./E.U.

**M6CD CD player Price:** £1,999/1,999 Euro

**M6PRE Price:** £1,999/1,999 Euro

**M6PRX Price:** £2,999/1,999 Euro

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