



# Plan B

With the affordable integrated amp market ticking over nicely, **Ed Selley** sees if the B1xi can up the ante even further

It's been an excellent few months for anyone shopping for a sub-£1,000 stereo amplifier and we've seen some strong new arrivals in the market of late. The B1xi (borrowing the name of a simplified version of the original A1, which appeared in the late-Eighties) is Musical Fidelity's entry into the category and the first of a series of Xi models to replace existing versions. The B1, however, is a new amp that sits in the same price band as the long-running M2si (HFC 446). This was an exceptionally minimalist device that concentrated on wrapping some solid casework around a hefty amp and not offering a great deal else. The B1xi represents a considerable departure from this approach.

When dealing with the amplifier section, the B1xi is down on the M2si – 72W (at lower quoted distortion) versus 60 – and the peak-to-peak

measurement that Musical Fidelity placed great emphasis on the older amp is not given here. But, out in the real world and tested with the usual suspects, the B1xi certainly doesn't want for power. The amplifier section is in keeping with the company's design priorities. It's a Class AB unit

## The phono stage is excellent and right up at the top of the pack at this price

that benefits from a large toroidal power supply by the standards of amps at this sort of price. Musical Fidelity quotes 140W for 2ohm peaks, so it is likely that the B1xi will be stable in use in most domestic situations. It is certainly entirely competitive with rivals.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Musical Fidelity B1xi  
**ORIGIN**  
Austria/China  
**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
7.2kg  
**DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
430 x 90 x 324mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power output: 2x 60W (8ohm)  
• Inputs: 3x stereo RCA; 3.5mm; MM phono; coaxial; optical; HDMI ARC; Bluetooth  
• Supports PCM to 24-bit/192kHz  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henley Audio  
**WEBSITE**  
musicalfidelity.com  
henleyaudio.co.uk

Where this update improves significantly over the older amp is the connectivity. Three analogue RCA inputs are supported by a front panel 3.5mm socket and moving-magnet phono stage. There is also an RCA stereo pre out rather than a single sub out, which means that using the B1xi as a preamp is an option. It also means there is no internal crossover for connecting a sub, but this shouldn't be too much of an issue. Speaker connections are via a single set of sturdy terminals.

The B1xi includes a digital board, which adds four more connections: one optical and one coaxial plus a Bluetooth input built around a V5.1 platform that supports aptX and AAC codecs on top of the default SBC. Finally, there's an HDMI ARC port to simplify hook up to a TV. This is slightly odd as it functions as a direct input to the power amp section and bypasses the front panel volume control – so one of the two TVs it's tested with starts at full volume.

This isn't a huge spread of connections, but it closely matches what other amps at the price offer. What you won't find is any form of on-board streaming; Musical Fidelity has an impassioned section on the product page of its website explaining why this is. Usefully, there is a 5V USB power output, which can be used to

drive a Wiim or Bluesound streamer without requiring a second plug.

The design and appearance of the B1xi is in keeping with Musical Fidelity designs dating back well over a decade now. The result is hardly cutting-edge modernity, but it should date gracefully. The standard of build is good, although some might lament the absence of a silver finish and the Bluetooth aerial is fairly large. Several aspects are comfortably in advance of rivals at the price (and indeed well beyond). You can select inputs directly from the front panel and adjust the volume level the amp starts at while it's powered off – both of which sound minor, but are increasingly rare nowadays. The remote handset is small but effective and has decent functionality.

### Sound quality

Whatever the notional power deficit between the B1xi and its ancestor, I don't find it an issue in use. It forms a very happy relationship with a pair of Mission 700 (HFC 496) standmounts. There's a potency to the sound that is entirely in keeping with the Musical Fidelity brand. The B1xi is able to exert a grip over the bottom end that gives the huge percussion that underpins Svanenborg Kardyb's *Vakler* the sort of weight that you feel as much as hear. The Mission is a reasonably large speaker with decent low end, but the B1xi gives it a texture and immediacy that's notable for an affordable amplifier.

Further up the frequency response, the performance stays convincing. Listening to the fabulously quirky *Ness* by Hayden Thorpe, the top end is 'well lit' but doesn't provoke the slightly forward presentation of the Mission speakers. If you really lean on the volume, things harden up a little but those levels are going to be fairly antisocial by this stage. Also well thought out is the presentation balance, which is very consistent across both analogue and digital inputs. Using a Bluesound Node Nano connected to the optical input,



Audiolab's 6000A MkII (HFC 528) costs the same but has a better finish and a far less quirky HDMI ARC implementation. It also has a higher performing digital board with more inputs. The B1xi hits back with a better phono stage and the ability to gel more readily with more speakers than the Audiolab. When I tested the 6000A MkII with the same Mission speakers, it was outstanding, but the Musical Fidelity is happy with some other speakers where the 6000A MkII is less effective. A side-by-side demo is essential to figure out which is best for your purposes.

it's fractionally warmer than when the Nano is used via the analogue out. There are some higher performing digital boards available at the price, but the B1xi holds its own.

The phono stage is an excellent performer and right up at the top of the pack at this price. It combines low noise levels with a very close tonal match to the rest of the amplifier section. Where the B1xi has a definite edge over many rivals is the levels of gain on offer. I test it with Audio-

## Tested in the real world with the usual suspects, it doesn't want for power

Technica's AT-VM760xSL – a fabulous cartridge but with a relatively low output for an MM design. Crucially, the Musical Fidelity never runs out of gain and its performance with Chvrches *The Bones Of What You Believe* is potent and engaging. There's plenty of input space for a phono stage, but I suspect most owners won't rush to add one.

This consistency of performance applies to the ARC and Bluetooth connections as well. Having tested more than a few ARC-equipped stereo products now, I can't say with any

confidence that the decision to bypass the preamp has any effect on the performance aside from the occasional volume foible. The basic qualities of the B1xi make for a convincing partner for TV viewing, however, with plenty of headroom and enough detail retrieval to ensure that dialogue remains clear and easy to follow. The Bluetooth connection genuinely warrants the term 'hi-fi', delivering a level of performance with aptX that is within touching distance of the other digital inputs. Combined with reliable reconnection and impressive range, it's a convenience feature that lives up to the name.

### Conclusion

In fact, the Bluetooth connection encapsulates what the Musical Fidelity does very well. This is a potent and capable amplifier that delivers a consistently enjoyable musical performance across a spread of connections that is both comprehensive at the price and ensures you can use the B1xi pretty much however you want. This is a clever and capable new amp that demonstrates enough strength in depth to warrant being on any sub-£1,000 audition list ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Potent, engaging performance; flexible connectivity; build  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Quirky HDMI implementation; no shortage of rivals  
**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** With great strength in depth, the B1xi is another fine arrival in the affordable integrated category  
**FEATURES** ★★★★★

### OVERALL

