



Eighties throwback

Nick Tate feels the heat with this new version of a renowned Eighties Class A classic integrated amplifier

While students of hi-fi history will tell you the Seventies shaped today's audiophile scene, it's just as valid to claim that the Eighties was specialist audio's equivalent of year zero. This decade saw the emergence of some great mainstream companies, including Musical Fidelity – and the product that put it on the map was the aptly named A1.

Launched in 1985, this compact but striking-looking Class A amplifier was the antithesis of what was then popular. British brands Linn and Naim were very strong, and had supportive media backing. Their products had a distinctive sound based around the latter's bright (and sometimes brash) Class AB solid-state amplification. It was fun for sure, but delicate or accurate it was not.

The A1's sound was almost the opposite; super-sweet, soft and beguiling with not a lot of power. And now, some 38 years later, it's back with a vengeance.

The new A1 is a close reproduction of the original, but not exactly the same. The company says it has: "only made changes to improve specific

technical characteristics and satisfy modern requirements". The amplifier has been made about 15 percent bigger, the ventilation holes on the sides have been enlarged and a new power supply section has been fitted with dedicated feeds for left and right channels. More efficient dual-mono split-rail windings are used. The power amp section now has double the supply capacity, and can

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'dynamically slide' into Class B mode when the allowable current draw is exceeded. Beefier power transistors are fitted, and the result is a claimed 2x 25W RMS into 8ohm, with 25A of maximum current output. At 150, the quoted damping factor is low for solid state, but higher than a valve amp.

The preamplifier section remains largely the same, apart from there now being a 'Direct' switch to bypass the preamp gain stage before the

DETAILS

PRODUCT Musical Fidelity A1
ORIGIN UK/Taiwan
TYPE Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT 10.5kg
DIMENSIONS (WxHxD) 440 x 68 x 283mm
FEATURES
 • Quoted power: 2x 25W RMS (8ohm)
 • Inputs: 1x MM/MC; 5x RCA phono
 • 6.35mm headphone socket
DISTRIBUTOR Henley Audio Ltd.
WEBSITE musicalfidelity.com henleyaudio.co.uk

volume control, losing approximately 10dB. This makes the amplifier better suited to modern line-level components and cuts out some active circuitry from the signal path. Finally, there's a new ALPS RK series motorised volume potentiometer, said to have better channel accuracy – and of course, remote control functionality.

The original, switchable MM/MC phono stage has been retained, which is nice. The back panel sports five RCA line inputs, plus fixed-level and variable outputs.

In use, the new A1 consumes 130W, which is way more than your average Class AB design, but is not prohibitively expensive to run. The amp still gets as hot as the original, which means you'll burn yourself if you touch the cooling fins for any length of time.

Sound quality

The allure of pure Class A amplifiers is, of course, the clarity and purity of the sound. Because the power transistors are always powered up, rather than switching on and off at high speed according to the demands of the music, distortion is significantly reduced. The A1 precisely demonstrates this effect, as it has an uncannily open and near-translucent sound.

It's not all good news however, as Class A amps have huge heat dissipation problems and for this reason the power output is usually quite limited. This amp's quoted 25W is small when compared with rival Class AB designs offering two or three times that. All the same, compared with the original A1, it feels like a powerhouse. It's got a lot more get up and go than its Eighties precursor.

You'll still need to use reasonably efficient loudspeakers that don't drop too low in impedance, but this version is far less fussy about what it's driving. In my system it aspirates everything

from B&W's 607 S3 standmount to Acoustic Energy's Corinium high-end floorstander with reasonable force. Yet still, it's not your first choice for Saxon or Metallica heavy rock fans or indeed Goldie or Manix drum and bass.

The A1 is far gutsier sounding than before, but still you never forget you have a modestly powered amplifier. When you work around this fact, with sensitive speakers and/or used in small-to-medium-sized rooms, you can get a sound that is unbeatable at the price. The original was very warm and euphonic, but too soft sounding and a tad dynamically flat. This is much more tonally neutral – closer to Sugden Class A designs like the A21SE – and can almost sound bright with tracks like Supertramp's *Oh Darling*. This is a late-Seventies classic rock track mixed to stand out on FM radio that can be fierce on a highly resolving modern hi-fi system. The A1 doesn't go this far, and instead strikes just the right tonal balance.

The midband is the star of the show, being really open and revealing. It's as if it shines a bright searchlight on

Musical Fidelity's A1 has an uncannily open and near-translucent sound

this area of the music and illuminates it with vigour. So, you get really close and intimate vocals and a magnificently lustrous piano tone, with all its harmonics twinkling like stars in the night sky. Percussive instruments like snare drums and rim shots are revealed in all their glory. And this is set into an expansive soundstage that also falls back more than you'd expect. In all of these senses, the A1 doesn't sound like a £1,500 amplifier – it could be much more expensive.

Bass and treble are very good too, but not as outstanding as the stellar



Naim's Nait 50 (HFC 509) is another 'reimagined' version of an amp that was originally launched in the mid-Eighties. It too delivers 25W RMS per channel and looks very similar, but not identical, to its ancestor. The Naim is nearly twice the price, though, yet struggles to better the MF in any way except dynamics, and in some aspects is inferior. The Naim is a less transparent-sounding design, and doesn't have such an expansive three-dimensional soundstage.



midband. The former is taut and sinewy, with much less overhang than the original. It has fine articulation too, meaning that within normal listening levels, the amp doesn't feel like it's running out of puff on strong bass transients. The Supertramp track sounds tight and propulsive, the song rolling along in a most engaging way. It's even better with well-recorded jazz like Herbie Hancock's *The Prisoner*. The double bass is snappy and rhythmically expressive, and stretched to reveal superb midband detail inside the recorded acoustic.

Treble is excellent too – although not quite as magic as the midrange. It has that typical Class A purity; there is no sense of coarseness, no 'sandpaper' to cymbals. Indeed, the A1 sounds very silky up top, giving the Herbie Hancock track a lovely, liling quality. Feed it a bit of thumping house music such as Sueno Latino's *Sueno Latino* and it lacks a bit of bite; it's just too polite to really do this track justice.

Overall then, although the new A1 is way more versatile than the mid-Eighties original, it's still what you'd call a niche product. It won't appeal to everyone, but hook it up to easy-to-drive speakers in a modestly sized listening room and it is an amazing performer at the price – especially if you're a fan of more measured music.

Conclusion

This amplifier retains all the great aspects of the innovative original – and gold plates them. At the same time, most of the Eighties amp's faults have been ironed out. The result is a great-sounding design at a surprisingly affordable price. Listen to this and you get a clear sense of why the first A1 was so special, and how it put Musical Fidelity on the map. This update should work wonders to consolidate the brand's prestige – and remind us why the decade of big hair, shoulder pads, Filofaxes and VW Golf GTIs was such a special time ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Gloriously clean, musical sound; value

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Limited power output

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** True budget esoterica

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★