Crossing the stream

BEST KNOWN FOR ITS AMPLIFIERS, DACS AND CD PLAYERS, UNDER ITS NEW PROPRIETORS MUSICAL FIDELITY HAS ADDED A STREAMING TRANSPORT TO ITS ENTRY-LEVEL MX LINE-UP. ANDREW EVERARD FINDS IT BOTH EASY TO USE, AND CAPABLE OF REAL SONIC BENEFITS

Experienced audio industry watchers will be familiar with the history of Musical Fidelity: founded back in 1982 with products famously made on the kitchen table of owner Antony Michaelson, for many years it operated out of premises in the shadow of the old Wembley Stadium, where products were both developed and assembled.

Over the years, I visited the company many times, enjoyed many lunches with Michaelson – it seemed there was one every time he had a product to launch, and several when he just wanted to make his opinions felt! – and even attended one of his recording session at Snape Maltings, with Tony Faulkner at the controls, way back in 2001.

Musical Fidelity always was very much about Michaelson, so it was something of a surprise when, in 2018, it was announced that the company had been sold to Austrian-based Audio Tuning Vertriebs GmBH, owned by Pro-Ject founder Heinz Lichtenegger. At the time it was said that the sale had been set up 'in a manner that protects [the Musical Fidelity] name, prestige and heritage for years to come,' with the retention of key design staff, and that the plan was 'to grow with new products and push into new markets.'

The little MX-Stream we have here, selling for £859, is indicative of those aspirations: it's a network audio transport, designed to connect to any DAC or amplifier with a USB audio input, such as the £629 MX-DAC digital to analogue converter that's also part of the company's entry-level range of compact

audio components – the others are the MX-HPA headphone amplifier also at £629, and the £749 MX-Vynl moving coil/moving magnet phono stage.

While clearly – how does one put this tactfully? – informed by existing products from the Pro-Ject stable, in that it has a similar feature-set as the Pro-Ject Stream Box S2 Ultra, the MX-Stream is definitely a Musical Fidelity, its 22cm-wide enclosure built and finished to the same high standards as the other MX models, and indeed the company's full-size components. These currently run to a range of digital and amplification products, split into four levels above the MX line-up, and topping out with the M8 trio of integrated, pre- and power amps, with a maximum output of 700W per channel from the M8S-700m monobloc for what looks like a very reasonable – given the power on offer – £3599.

The basics of the MX-Stream are very simple: it has both Wi-Fi and Ethernet network connections, with the latter strongly recommended for optimal performance, Musical Fidelity saying that, 'Realtime audio applications, such as the MX-Stream with high-resolution audio, benefit from stable cabled Ethernet connections like you wouldn't believe,' and outputs

its signal via a USB Type B port, enabling it to be used with DACs and amplifiers so equipped. That makes it a cost-effective way to add network audio capability – whether that means playing music from storage on the home network or accessing online streaming – to many a system with a 'computer audio' input.

Beyond the laptop

Of course, that does beg the question why one shouldn't just do everything with a desktop or laptop computer connected into the system – but as we'll see, the benefits of using the MX-Stream go far beyond the practical ones of not having to trail a cable across the room.

In fact, you can still connect a computer to the MX-Stream should you wish: there's a USB Type C port provided for just this purpose, and this features the computer audio 'detox' system also found in Pro-Ject's Stream Box S2 Ultra: designed by John Westlake, this buffers and re-clocks the data incoming from the computer, before outputting it via the USB-B port. A front panel switch selects between network and USB-in operation.

Further USB-B ports on the front and rear panels allow the MX-Stream to play music from storage devices, and it can also accept music from iOS devices connected to the same network via Shairport, and is Roon-ready, enabling it to be used as an endpoint in a Roon-equipped system. And as another neat trick, one could connect a USB optical disc drive to one of the Type B ports, and a storage device to another, and use the MX-Stream to rip music from CD to storage.

Down to the DAC

File-handling will, of course, be determined by the capabilities of the DAC to which the Musical Fidelity is connected, but it can pass through formats up to 352.8kHz/32 bit and DSD256, which should be enough for most users.

Controlling the MX-Stream is simple: without a display, on-unit buttons or a remote handset, one must resort to an external device on the same network, but this can be as simple as a web browser running on a computer or handheld: all one needs do is type in *musical-fidelity.local*, and the control page will appear. Alternatively, being based on the open-source Volumio streaming platform, the unit can be controlled via the Volumio app, of which a 'skinned' version is available for Android and iOS as the MX-Stream app. The unit will work with various other UPnP/ DLNA control apps, but it would seem somewhat churlish to insist on using these when Musical Fidelity's dedicated version does the job so well.

Finally, there's a real hairshirt option, involving the connection of a keyboard to one of the MX-Stream's

USB Type B ports, and a monitor to the HDMI port on the rear of the unit for just this purpose: this is, after all, basically an audio-focused computer, and some may well prefer to use it in this manner, even though it may limit one's ability to connect local storage devices. I guess you pays yer money…

So, it's a computer, then – what does that mean the MX-Stream actually adds to network audio playback? Well apart from the physical benefits already mentioned, it also removes the USB-borne noise very possible when using a multifunction computer as a source, and adds to the equation the elements of that 'detox' process.

It's based around the Raspberry Pi Computer Module 3, which is a more flexible version of the familiar Pi formula, designed for industrial applications like this by losing the usual MicroSD storage and running its operating system on a fitted eMMC Flash device. On top of this CM3 board sits a heatsink, to keep the processor on an even keel.

To this CPU the MX-Stream adds separate power supplies and voltage stabilisation for each circuitboard within the unit, downstream of the external 18V mains supply unit provided to power it, and what's described as 'an audio-optimised master clock' to run everything. There are also the benefits of a rigid casework to cut the vibrations reaching the circuitry, with additional stiffening bars running from the fascia to the rear panel.

A computer for music

So yes, it's a computer, but it's one designed just for playing music. And while I've already mentioned that the connected DAC will determine the file-handling of a system using the MX-Stream, so that DAC will also have a major effect on the sound quality of the whole enterprise. That's immediately clear when one tries the Musical Fidelity with a range of converters, from simple 'USB stick' types to both desktop and full-sized devices.

However, with some experimentation and equipment-switching, it does soon become clear that the MX-Stream does add something to the sound of a system using a USB DAC – or should that be 'adds less', given that the most obvious downsides of employing a conventional computer as a source are noise, both from the processor and stray electrical interference on the USB line.

And before the 'bits is bits' fundamentalists start banging on about 'if there were differences then Word documents sent via USB to a printer would come out jumbled, or the colours in photographs would be skewwhiff,' I'm not talking here about the basics of data sent and received in a static system, but about streaming in real time, and the effects of noise and digital timing errors on the work required by the error-correcting in a DAC.

Specifications

Musical Fidelity MX-Stream	
Type	Network audio transport
Price	£859
Inputs	2x USB A, USB B
Outputs	USB A, HDMI for monitor
Networking	Ethernet, Wi-Fi
Other connections	Bluetooth, Apple AirPlay, Roon
Control	MX-Stream, Volumio or third-party UPnP/DLNA apps; Roon; browser or mouse/screen
Other connections	MC-BUS remote, PSX-R upgrade port, firmware upgrade
Accessories supplied	Mains power supply, Wi-Fi antenna
Dimensions (WxHxD)	22x5.3x21.5cm
Weight	1.91kg

musicalfidelity.com
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Those effects are all too clear even with vintage recordings brought up to date, such as the stunning new remaster of The Beatles' *Revolver*, which makes the familiar tracks sound fresh, vibrant and dynamic to the extent that one can appreciate just how impressive Ringo, apocryphally once described as 'not even the best drummer in The Beatles', was behind his kit. (By the way, it seems the comment was originally written by the celebrated performer and producer Geoffrey Perkins, and spoken by Phil Pope, impersonating Lennon's often-acerbic wit, in a 1981 BBC Radio 4 comedy show.)

Anyway, back to the music, and apart from revealing Ringo's sticksmanship, the new masters really make explicit the contributions of each of the Fab Four, as is apparent even running a computer into a USB DAC such as the Chord Mojo 2 or iFi Neo iDSD. However, with the Musical Fidelity in harness there's greater clarity, sufficient to make the computer-sourced music still seem a bit murky. The studio ambience is superbly apparent in the various out-takes and working mixes on the lavish five-disc set, and George Martin's legendary 'Fifth Beatle' contribution to the sound of the finished recordings is laid bare in all its finely-nuanced glory.

A force of nature

What the MX-Stream does, reliably and repeatedly, is open up the presence of recordings – where it exists – creating something capable of taking the listener by surprise and then going on to delight. Play the Arctic Philharmonic's recording of the evocative soundscapes of Lasse Thoresen's *Lyden av Arktis*, in which an orchestral performance meets the sounds of frozen nature, and Morten Lindberg's sensational recording for his 2L label is as unsettling as it is dramatic, with powerful percussion and brass storming at one moment, and atonal strings blowing across the tundra the next, the spacious concert-hall acoustic clear in the soundstage.

That ability to bring out the power and nuance of music is also on parade with the 'Fantasia and Fugue in F major' from *Recommended by Bach*, the recent Bart Jacobs organ set on Ramée, the sound

of the 1770s Contius organ, built by a contemporary of the composer, filling and energising the acoustic of the Leuven church where it resides. It's that sense of space the MX-Stream refines as much as it demonstrates the sheer power of the instrument, and the way notes just hang in the air is nothing short of magical.

And that ability with ambience and musical detail also serves well the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic/Vernon Handley 1991 Hyperion recording of *Hymnus Paradisi*, the heart-rending masterwork of composer Herbert Howells. Orchestra, choir and soloists are all on top form in this performance, made on the Philharmonic's 'home turf', and the way every detail of the piece, which lay unperformed for well over a decade after Howells wrote it following the death of his nine-year-old son Michael in 1935, and was only 'brought into the light' at the insistence of Vaughan Williams in 1950. This is truly a recorded sound that immerses the listener in the composer's grief, and the richness and detail the Musical Fidelity, feeding an accomplished DAC, amplification and speakers – here my usual Naim/PMC combination – really brings out the sumptuous scoring and emotion of the piece.

Change pace completely to the intimate jazz of Enzo Pietropaoli and Julian Mazzariello on their *Likewise* set, recorded by Foné Jazz's Giulio Cesare Ricci in the small auditorium of the Piaggio scooter company's museum in Pontadera, Italy – the location of many of the label's sessions – and the sound again draws you in with its unforced, natural ambience. With just piano and bass, the focus is absolutely on instrumental timbres and the ambience around the performers.

That clear, vital sound also imbues everything played with real snap and rhythmic drive, for example in the rhythms of the Romo-Agri-Messiez Tango Trio's *Ahora* set for Aliad: the recording may trade some closeness of focus for a more natural impression of the three musicians before the listener, but it's impossible to argue with the 'in the room' presence of the resulting sound of the bandeon, violin and piano. There's no bass in the ensemble, but never do the performances lack weight or drive, whether it's just Romo's squeezebox and Agri's fiddle playing off each other, or when Messiez adds the scale of his piano to the group, as on the stately 'Un Vals a les Tres'.

Add in the simplicity with which the Musical Fidelity can be operated, however you choose to do so, and this is clearly a convincing way to bring more to a network audio system, not to mention forming a powerful bridge between an existing digital-based system and the pleasures of streamed music.