

Musical Fidelity M2scd/M2si

The iconic visuals belie Musical Fidelity's recent change in ownership – so will this familiar M2 series CD/amp combination still tempt the budget-conscious enthusiast?
Review: Adam Smith Lab: Paul Miller

In these evolving days of digital music, cloud storage and online streaming, it might seem counter-intuitive for Musical Fidelity to release a line-only amplifier and 'plain vanilla' CD player. The £799 M2si integrated has no inbuilt DAC, no Bluetooth, no Wi-Fi and not even a phono stage, or indeed the option of one. And, peer round the rear of the matching £799 M2scd compact disc player, and the only connections you will find are outputs. Once again, it has no digital inputs, no antennae sticking out and no wireless wizardry up its sleeve. What's going on?

But perhaps this is not as strange as it first seems. These are affordable components after all, and so loading them with bells and whistles would draw attention, and more importantly, budget away from the important bits. Instead, the amplifier can simply be used with one of the numerous DACs already on the market, or one of the phono stages standing ready to satisfy the vinyl fans. Musical Fidelity itself currently has no fewer than three DACs and five phono stages on its books [but see PM's boxout, p71].

SILVER SOUNDS

Equally, for the CD player, sales of compact discs may be waning but there are still many being sold. Furthermore, there are millions languishing in secondhand music shops, on market stalls and on well-known online auction sites. The classic silver disc is still a highly viable music source and a dedicated player should, in theory, get the best out of the format. Yes, the company could have added a basic DAC and streaming capability but it is far better to stick to a dedicated device for these sorts of things, I have found.

The result of this thinking are the two modestly priced units we have here, components that promise simply to 'do

what they say on the tin'. Available in silver or black finishes, both amplifier and CD player are smartly styled and offer just the right number of facilities needed to satisfy the market they are aimed at. In the case of the M2si amplifier, this means five line level inputs – one of which can be switched to function as a unity-gain home theatre bypass – a tape loop, preamp output and a single pair of loudspeaker sockets. The amplifier also comes with a decently specified remote handset that not only controls both units but adds extra facilities, such as a muting function.

As for the M2scd CD player, access to its slot-loading CD mechanism is found on the fascia, which also sports a small display above a row of basic transport control buttons. The remote handset supplied with the amp adds track skip, search, repeat and programming functions, plus the ability to dim the display. The only thing

I found counter-intuitive were the icons used for 'Track Skip' and 'Track Search'. Usually double arrows denote the button for searching within tracks while double arrows with a line at the end symbolise track skip. Here the icons were reversed.

READY TO GO...

The M2scd has standard unbalanced analogue outputs on RCAs, plus both coaxial and optical digital outputs. Neither unit offers a headphone socket, but the amplifier's instruction manual states that the tape output is the 'ideal output to connect our headphone amps into'.

Both components are user-friendly. The amplifier powers up without drama – a soft click after five or so seconds disables the muting relay and it's ready to go. The CD player's slot-loading mechanism is a very smooth operator and takes and returns the disc in a delightfully 'polite' manner.



RIGHT: The M2si includes a toroidal transformer and linear PSU [lower left and centre] feeding a discrete output stage with one pair of devices per channel [on heatsink, far right]. Note motorised volume control [bottom]



I remember one similarly equipped player I reviewed a few years back behaving like Arkwright's *Open All Hours* till, virtually snatching the disc then spitting it back out at me with apparent venom!

In fact, the only quirk I found with the operation was on first start-up. The player initially informs you that there is 'No Disc' but then activates its loading mechanism to try and pull in this non-existent CD. It then switches to show 'Eject', with more whirring, before finally settling down in silence to declare 'No Disc' once more. Still, once you do load a CD, access times are good, the unit reading it and being ready to go in ten seconds.

POUNDING THE BEAT

From the first few minutes of listening it became clear that the company's change

in ownership [see PM's boxout, below] appears not to have affected the house Musical Fidelity sound one jot. Yes, the fine details vary from unit to unit, but every MF component I have ever reviewed has had the same sense of *joie de vivre*. The M2 pairing is no different, sounding punchy,

bouncy and beautifully dynamic. It's almost as if the M2si and M2scd enjoy making music and are setting out to make sure they please you!

Give the pairing a track with some rhythm and they absolutely lap and they absolutely lap it up, pounding out a beat with glee and filling the room with verve and vitality. Bass lines are taut and deep, with a good level of detail captured to ensure that nothing escapes the listener's attention. True, I have heard the fingers picking up and down the fretboard of the bass on Simply

'The pairing romped through classical and belted out rock'

WEMBLEY TO AUSTRIA

With product design and assembly so long associated with its factory in Wembley, Musical Fidelity was for decades a staple, home-grown hi-fi brand. So it will take time for the change in brand ownership to sink into the audiophile consciousness. The iconic style of MF's separates look to have been retained, right down to the cardboard packaging, but in tacit acknowledgement of its shift in geography, they now bear the label: 'Musical Fidelity – an Austrian Brand'.

Under the continuous direction of CEO Antony Michaelson for over 35 years, the brand had long been distributed in Austria by Audio Tuning Vertriebs GmbH, parent company of Pro-Ject Audio Systems, and owned by 'vinyl visionary' Heinz Lichtenegger. With Michaelson on the cusp of retiring, and the two CEOs having already worked closely for over two decades, the future of Musical Fidelity was secured by the sale of the brand name and associated intellectual property to Audio Tuning in May 2018. With worldwide distribution, after-sales support and its Far Eastern manufacturing relatively unchanged, this acquisition went ahead with very little fanfare. For the audiophile it is 'business as usual' and with the hope that – Audio Tuning's engineering team now on tap – Musical Fidelity will gain a new and vibrant lease of life. PM

ABOVE: Classic MF aesthetics with thick, textured alloy fascias populated with small pushbuttons for input [amp, top] and track skip/play for the slot-loading CD player [bottom]

Red's 'Sad Old Red' from their *Picture Book* album [Elektra 960 452-2] sound a little more vivid and finely etched. Yet I have also heard them sound a great deal more vague than when played through this duo.

Switching to something more challenging in the bass department only served to show this combination's true low-end strengths. The repetitive hip-hop beat underlying Primitive Radio Gods' 'Standing Outside A Broken Phone Booth...' from their *Rocket* CD [Columbia 483695 2] is accompanied by a loping synthesiser-powered bass line. Here the M2si and M2scd stepped right into their comfort zone, strutting their stuff with aplomb.

Not only was the presentation here tightly-paced and as consistent as a metronome, but all the backing effects that begin to populate the track as it winds to its conclusion were spread expertly wide either side of the soundstage. In short, anything remotely dance-oriented had the pair instantly hitting their stride.

UTTERLY SUBLIME

Yet don't be fooled for a minute into thinking that this duo is all bang, thump and little else. Feed these components recordings that are more subtle and they rein in their enthusiastic nature perfectly, doing the music full justice. Cara Dillon sounded utterly sublime when performing 'There Were Roses' from her album *Sweet Liberty* [Rough Trade RTRADEPR123] and the M2si and M2scd positioned her perfectly just left of centre stage. Even more encouragingly, it was easy to hear the studio effects applied to her vocal →

LAB REPORT

MUSICAL FIDELITY M2SCD/M2SI



ABOVE: Five line inputs, a tape loop and pre outputs join single sets of (switched) 4mm speaker cable terminals on the amplifier [top]. The CD player [bottom] has no digital inputs – just analogue output on RCA and S/PDIF out on coax and optical

during the main refrain of the chorus where her voice is split in two so that she provides her own backing vocal. It was also a delight to hear the supporting piano rendered so beautifully. The piano is a tricky instrument to reproduce well, but these two components did a superb job when faced with the task.

Aiding this fine sense of realism was a top end that was sparkingly detailed and deliciously crisp. The pairing definitely have a slightly forward balance, with the result that the Usher S520s loudspeakers used for the listening along with a pair of PMC Twenty5.24s sounded more up-front than I am used to. However, this was rewarding in its own way, for it meant that instruments were well defined in the soundstage.

What's more, while it's true that the M2si and M2scd did not position images particularly far back into the distance, this did mean that everything in the main focus of the action was well defined. At all times, it was easy to concentrate on the main content of the music yet equally easy to pick up on an instrument further back in the mix.

The only occasional downside to this bright top end was that the M2si and M2scd were not especially kind to sharper recordings. The sibilants that are part of Jeff Buckley's vocal performance on 'So Real' from his *Grace* album [Columbia 475928 2] were occasionally just

LEFT: Direct track access, repeat and program play are offered on the system remote, with input and vol. for the amp



too sharp and grated ever so slightly, while the explosive cymbal strike in the middle of the track did make me wince somewhat. In order to investigate this, I replaced each of the MF units with my regular CD player and amplifier, one at a time, and it would seem that while both MF components are similarly voiced, it is the M2scd that is mainly responsible for this effect.

MATCH FIXING

One upside here is that the CD player may well be a boon for those with smoother-sounding systems. With the two pairs of loudspeakers used for the listening, the effect was more pronounced with the Usher S520s, owing, I suspect, to the rather more sophisticated tweeters employed by the PMC Twenty5.24s. As always, a little care when it comes to matching loudspeakers is the key.

With this caveat in mind, there is little to complain about here. The M2scd and M2si pairing romped through classical, belted out rock and rendered all the intricacies and emotion of jazz with just the right levels of atmosphere to make you want to return again and again. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

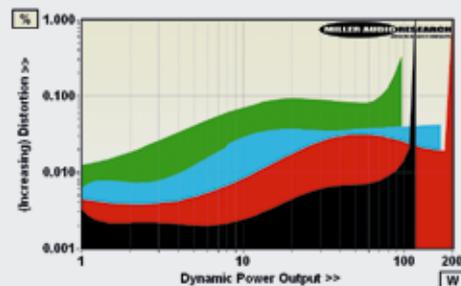
The Musical Fidelity M2si amplifier and M2scd CD player are a fine pairing and turn in an excellent performance, especially given their relatively low pricing. These inanimate objects give the impression they enjoy making music and will happily make the most of anything you care to feed them. Their bright nature means careful loudspeaker pairing is wise but, get this right, and they are unlikely not to satisfy.

Sound Quality: 82%

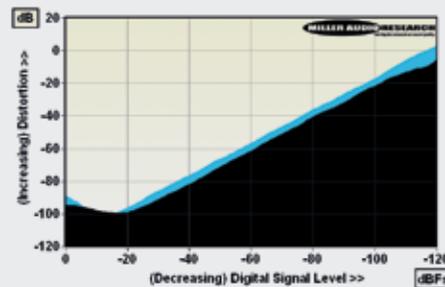


Time was when Musical Fidelity's integrated amps would be specified a little close to the wind, so when I saw '76W/8ohm' and '137W/4ohm' quoted in the M2si's press release (and on many 'hi-fi' websites) I raised an eyebrow. So it was refreshing to see a more measured view taken in the M2si's user manual where the power output is revised down to '60W/8ohm'. In practice the M2si delivers 2x83W/8ohm and 2x115W/4ohm with 118W/201W into 8/4ohm under dynamic conditions, limited to 169W/96W into 2/1ohm by electronic protection [see Graph 1, below]. So this is a beefy enough amplifier for most likely sub-£1k partnering speakers, the A-wtd S/N ratio an 'industry average' 86dB (re. 0dBW) and distortion within 0.002% over the first 25W of its range to 0.004% up to the rated 60W (all 1kHz). Distortion does not increase excessively with frequency – just 0.01% at 10W/20kHz – while the response is flat to within ±0.18dB from 20Hz-20kHz, rolling away to -3.4dB/100kHz.

The matching M2scd player is based around the Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC and offers a generous 109dB A-wtd S/N from a maximum 2.04V output. The 50ohm source impedance should prove fairly cable-agnostic while distortion is consistently low at ~0.0015-0.002% over the top 20dB of its dynamic range through midrange [black trace, Graph 2] right up to high 20kHz frequencies [blue trace]. MF has chosen a standard linear phase digital filter offering a good 98dB stopband rejection but with some inevitable transient pre-ringing. The frequency response has the merest (inaudible) treble lift of +0.1dB/20kHz while jitter is below the 16-bit test limit of 116psec. All-in-all, both components are very 'clean' examples of the art. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 9.8A



ABOVE: THD versus 16-bit CD digital signal level over a 120dB range at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	83W / 115W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	118W / 201W / 169W / 96W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.164-0.172ohm (46-52ohm, CD)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0 to -0.2dB/-3.3dB (Amp)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 0dBFS/0dBW)	0.0018-0.0031%/0.0016-0.0097%
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBFS/0dBW)	108.7dB (CD) / 85.7dB (Amp)
Digital Jitter	117psec
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	18W / 266W (7W, CD)
Dimensions (WHD) / Total weight	400x100x400 (375)mm / 15.5kg