

Double X-posure

MUSICAL FIDELITY

X-RAY^{V8}/X-T100 AND

TRIPLE-X PSU (£899/£899)

Musical Fidelity has stripped the power supplies from its latest X-series separates.

Do the CD player and amplifier have the X-factor?

X-RAY^{V8}
UPSAMPLING 24-BIT CD PLAYER



MUSICAL FIDELITY

X-T100
TUBE INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

AUX 1
PDI

AUX 2

AUX 3

PHONO

MUTE

POWER

FIDELITY

A quick trawl through the Musical Fidelity Hall of Fame gives the distinct impression that, while the company may well subscribe to the idea that the first few watts of an amplifier's output are the most important, it also feels that a couple of hundred more rarely go amiss. As such, the Wembley company's prodigious output of new models now finds mainstream products, like the current A5 integrated, offering no fewer than 250W/ch (*HFN* Jan '05). Of course, hundreds of high quality watts don't come cheap and, after launching the 'A5 Lite' A3.5 (*HFN* Oct '05), the future direction of its compact X-series was evidently up for grabs.

Although the original A Series amp and CD player bore very strong internal similarities to their X-A100R and X-Ray 'lozenge' contemporaries, Antony Michaelson decided that the latest incarnation of X components should have a unique identity. In a move that harks back to MF's iconic A1, the new X-T100 integrated turns the company's approach to amplifier output smartly on its head. With an output of 2x60W, the X-T100 will require significantly more efficient speakers to match the dynamic range of its larger amps, but the downsizing brings advantages beyond cost savings.

TRICKLE TECHNOLOGY

Under Musical Fidelity's trickle-down policy, the X-T100 contains a direct descendent of the kW500's tube pre-amplifier circuit, along with a power amp section closely derived from one side of the kW500's bridged output stage. In addition to the circuit similarities, the X-T100 shares the kW amplifier concept of an outboard power supply. The advantages of removing the transformer from the vicinity of delicate, small-scale signals go without saying, but the cost of an additional case mean that this approach is rare at the X-Series price point.

The Triple-X PSU includes outputs for the X-T100, the X-Ray^{V8} CD Player and the planned X-Plora^{V8} tuner. In a unique slant, the CDP and tuner are designed to operate in 'Siamese twin' mode, sharing the power supply with the partnering X-T100 amplifier. While MF's flagship products also boast separate power supplies



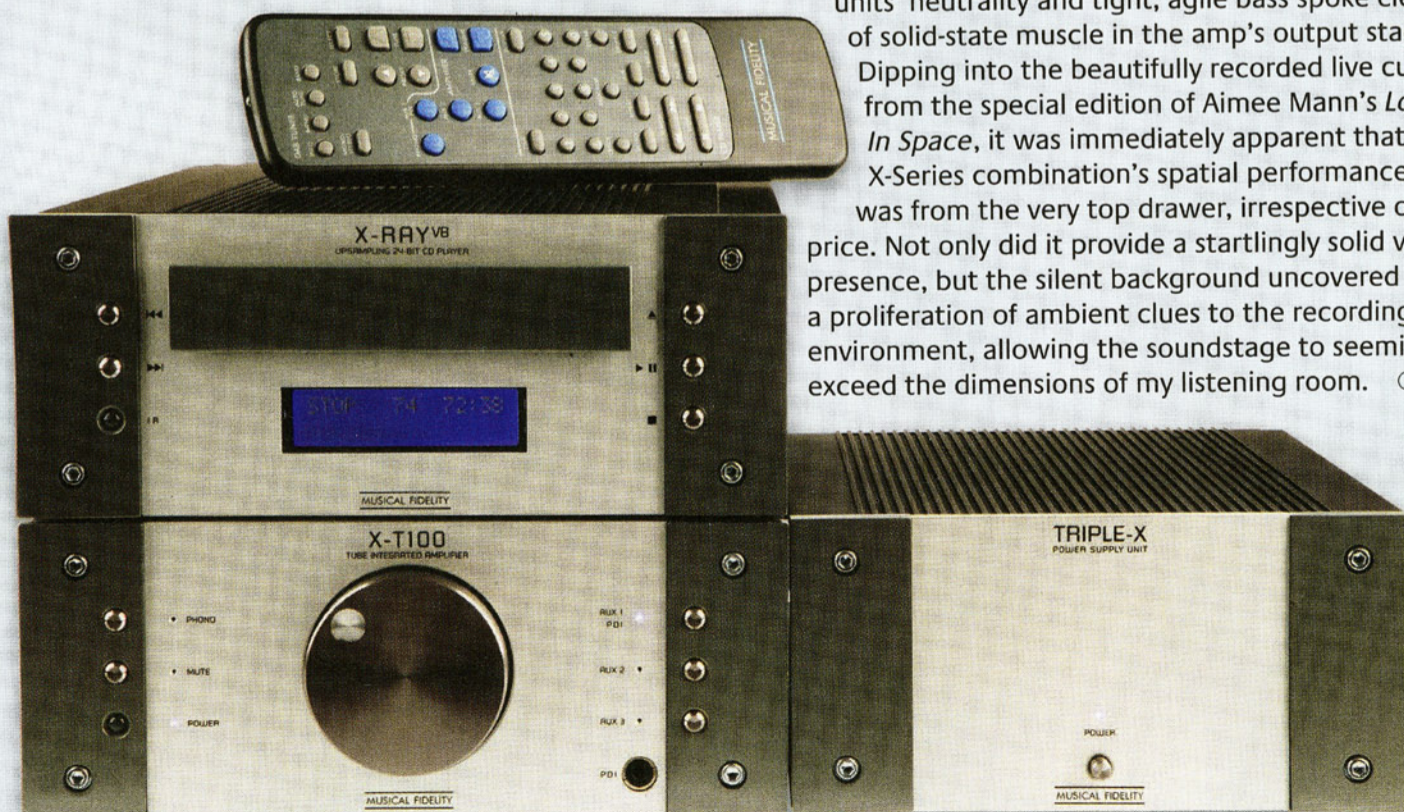
'From the squeak of finger on string to strumming of quite incredible intensity, the MF pairing offered an 'in-room' musical event of the highest order'

for different sections of individual components, Antony Michaelson is adamant that the advantages of removing the power supply from the CD player's casework hugely outweighs any disadvantage caused by sharing the transformer with the amp.

SOLID-STATE MUSCLE

Musical Fidelity has used hybrid circuits in all its recent 'Super-integrated' amplifiers, and this expertise showed from the very first bars played. The midrange had a body and immediacy that was pure valve, while the units' neutrality and tight, agile bass spoke clearly of solid-state muscle in the amp's output stage. Dipping into the beautifully recorded live cuts from the special edition of Aimee Mann's *Lost In Space*, it was immediately apparent that the X-Series combination's spatial performance was from the very top drawer, irrespective of price. Not only did it provide a startlingly solid vocal presence, but the silent background uncovered a proliferation of ambient clues to the recording environment, allowing the soundstage to seemingly exceed the dimensions of my listening room. ➔

ABOVE: The X-T100 offers a 3.5mm 'Portable Device Input' to allow connection of an iPod or similar device



LEFT: Standard pricing is based on the X-T100 with Triple-X PSU (£899) and the X-Ray^{V8} without PSU (£899); the Triple-X PSU costs £299 on its own

Trying some slightly larger scale material, the Largetto from Beethoven's Violin Concerto demonstrated the units' ability to combine sufficient delicacy to highlight the subtlest solo inflections with the weight necessary to provide convincing orchestral slam.

So far, so hi-fi. Moving onto something a little more rough and ready, Bruce Springsteen's *Born To Run* again highlighted the system's broad spread of abilities. This is not the most stunning of recordings, but the capture of every vocal nuance meant that emotion flooded through the speakers on poignant tracks such as 'Thunder Road' and 'Backstreets'. By contrast, the title track was reproduced with a driving rhythmic force. This more sonically congested material retained an impressive level of clarity, with each instrumental theme being readily distinguishable without detracting from the overall musical whole.

HIGHEST ORDER

As a final test, I spun up *Romance de Amor* by the Chinese guitar virtuoso Xue Fei Yang. This is a remarkable CD, combining a sublime performance with wonderful standards of production. Here the MF pair was in its element: stunning instrumental presence, lightning transients and the sweetest of tonality combined to create a listening experience beyond what could reasonably be expected at the X-Series price point. From the most delicate squeak of finger on string to strumming of quite incredible intensity, this was an 'in-room' musical event of the highest order.

In terms of the X-T100's ultimate dynamic capabilities, through my

89dB/W/m Spondor S8e, the amplifier had plenty of headroom on densely scored rock material to drive my 4.5m x 5.5m listening room. When playing classical material with extreme dynamic shifts, there certainly wasn't the visceral impact of the kW monoblocks, but any compression was dealt with in a wholly dignified manner. If more headroom is required, the answer is in more efficient speakers.

Overall, the X-Ray^{VS} is rhythmically surefooted, boasting a sweet, well-balanced tonality and an exceptionally quiet background, which allows it to retrieve an impressive level of detail without ever sounding unduly forward. Bass errs towards tightness and agility rather than ultimate weight, but this is ideal for the partnering X-T100 amp.

While the CD player offers excellence in terms of both sonics and value, to these ears at least, the amplifier is the star of the show. Even in absolute terms the X-T100 is a gifted product, when you take its sub-£1000 price into account, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that you are listening to something very special.

I'm not going to go down the road of stating that it out-performs rivals at several times the price as that judgment has to be made by the ears of the individual beholder. But if you have a suitably obliging dealer, an A-B demonstration against valve or solid-state components at double the price is likely to be an illuminating experience indeed. ☺

FOR:
Emotion,
musicality,
performance at
the price

AGAINST: Amp benefits from being used with sensitive speakers

BELOW: A single outboard power supply has outputs for the X-Series CD player, amp and planned X-Plora^{VS} tuner



Hi-fi news
Verdict

MUSICAL FIDELITY
X-RAY^{VS}/X-T100/TRIPLE-X
(£899/£899)

The X-T100 offers low-power for a Musical Fidelity product, but provides an extraordinarily high-end sound for the price. An absolute must-audition for those who value an amplifier's spatial performance. The X-Ray^{VS} CD Player follows in the footsteps of its forebear, offering a blend of sweet tonality with forensic levels of detail. Together, the pairing provides a beguiling, tube-like listening experience with none of the associated headaches.

SPEC/FEATURES



SOUND QUALITY



BUILD QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



Hi-fi news
OVERALL RATING **18/20**

Lab report

Getting this combination off to a good start, the X-Ray CD player combines modest levels of distortion (0.0015% at peak output), low-level linearity good to -100dB and very low ~130psec jitter. The suppression of digital images is superb at >126dB and the response flat to within 0.0/+0.1dB over the full 20Hz-20kHz range. There's some evidence of granulation noise with very low level signals, but the package seems pretty well judged. The partnering amplifier is not one of MF's powerhouses, however, offering ~2x65W/8ohm, increasing to 2x99W under dynamic conditions but limited to ~160W into 4ohm (or lower). Distortion from this valve hybrid is a little higher at low bass frequencies at ~0.013% (20Hz), but decreases to 0.0014% through the midrange and 0.006% at the highest treble. The response rolls gently away to -0.35dB at 20kHz and -3.35dB at 100kHz. The XT-100 is well-built, and to a budget.

Hi-fi News lab specifications

Power Output 8/4ohm (<1% THD)	66W/93W
Dynamic Power (8/4/2ohm)	99W/163W/163W
Output Impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.002-0.09ohm
Frequency Response (20Hz-100kHz)	0.01dB to -3.35dB
Input Sensitivity (for 0dBW/Full Output)	20mV/145mV
Distortion (10W/8ohm, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.0013-0.013%
A-wtd S/N Ratio (for 0dBW/Full Output)	85dB/103dB
Stereo separation, 20Hz-20kHz	>59dB

Contact numbers

UK DISTRIBUTOR: Musical Fidelity Limited
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Review system breakdown

SOURCE: Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD
SPEAKERS: Spondor S8e

We listened to

AIMEE MANN
Lost In Space

XUE FEI YANG
Romance de Amor

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
Born To Run

BEETHOVEN VIOLIN CONCERTO,
Wolfgang Schneideran/
Berlin Philharmonic

