

Musical Fidelity M5si

Combining sharp looks, solid build and effortless power, the latest arrival from Wembley, UK (via Taiwan) is a strong contender in the integrated amp arena
 Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Times may be tough in the hi-fi mid-market, as sales in consumer electronics continue to polarise into a cut-throat budget arena and surprisingly healthy high-end – thus proving that those who have money are continuing to spend it. However, that doesn't stop the old campaigners of hi-fi from not only continuing to stick in there, but also keep on looking for the 'sweet spot' product to catch their attention.

In recent times Arcam has launched upmarket integrated amplifiers made in the upstate New York factory of its Canadian owners, while Audiolab has the latest version of its classic 8000-series amp [HFN Mar '16], and Naim has reinvented its entire one-box amplifier range. And then there's Musical Fidelity – its latest arrival is the £1699 M5si amplifier here, complete with fashionable USB input for 'computer audio' and a more than healthy 150W claimed output [see PM's Lab Report, p59].

It's quite a looker, in an understated manner far from some of the company's styling extravaganzas of the past, from the tubular X-series all the way through to the Chronos and Odysseus models of blessed memory. By MF standards, the M-series styling is restrained almost to the point of stealth. The relatively compact dimensions help here so while the M5si looks fairly conventional in plan view, it stands just 10cm tall, meaning that it would be dwarfed by the likes of the AV-receiver-sized Arcam A49. Add to that the simple fascia layout, with its silver-on-black controls and a marked absence of glowing displays, and this is clearly an amplifier without any macho posturing.

Add to that what Musical Fidelity describes as 'excellent hunky build quality', as witnessed by an all-up fighting weight of 14.4kg, and you have an amp that manages to be purposeful without becoming excessively imposing. So what

of the specification and design? Well, the layout of the M5si draws on both the more expensive M6si and the upmarket Nu-Vista series, most notably the massively powerful Nu-Vista 800 [HFN Nov '14], as Musical Fidelity's Antony Michaelson explained to me. He described the M5si's internal design as 'a peculiar hybrid of the M6 circuitry implemented in an M3 style layout, with M6 casework and topology inspired by the Nu-Vista designs.'

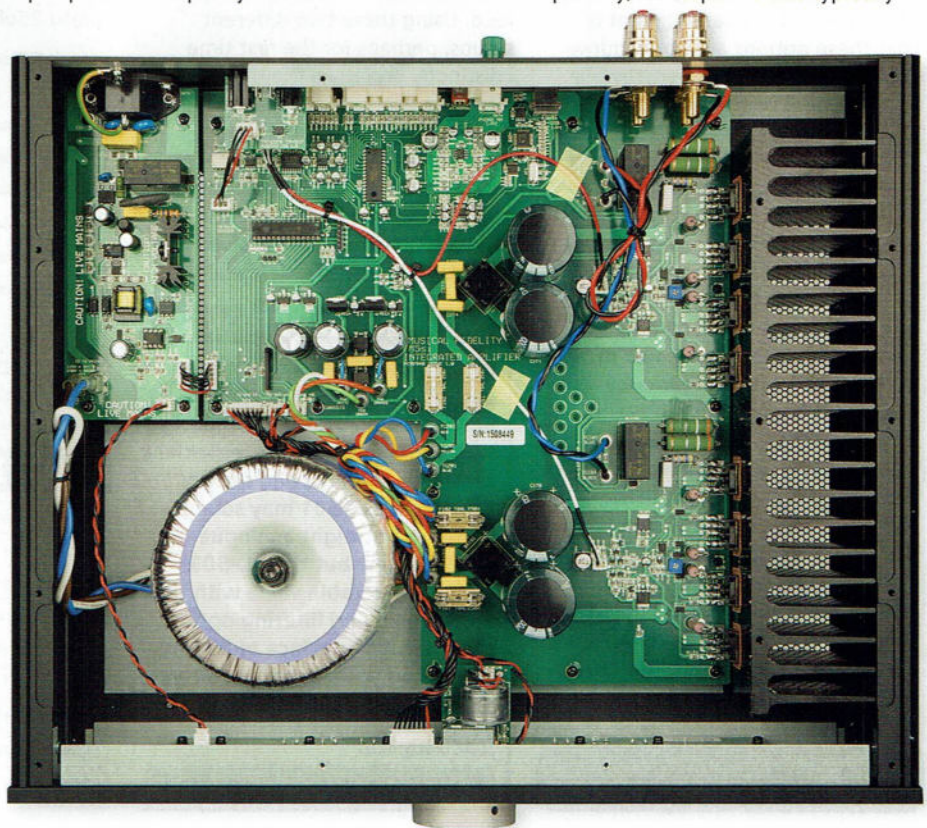
A CLASSIC DESIGN

Well, that's clear, then! In practical terms, this means that the M5si is of relatively classic design, the preamplifier feeding dual monoblock power amplifiers ('with both channels absolutely identical, rather than just approximately so', says Michaelson) but with a twist, as the whole enterprise is built onto a single PCB. The input provision is pretty conventional for a

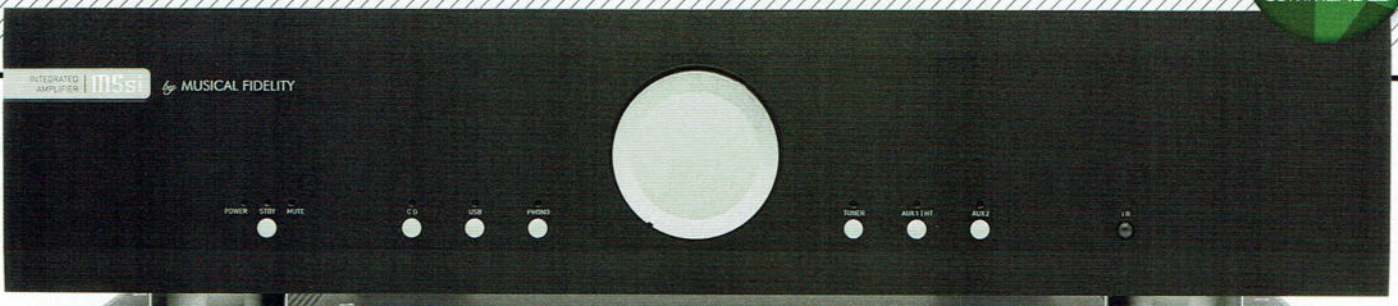
modern amplifier, it offering a decent MM phono stage along with four line inputs and both a fixed-level line out – what we used to call a 'tape output' – and a set of variable-level preouts, allowing the M5si to be used as preamplifier into a suitable power amplifier.

With an eye to integrating the amplifier into a home cinema system, a switch beside the 'Aux 1' input allows it to be turned into a unity gain 'HT' (home theatre) connection, to which the front left/right preouts of a surround processor or AV receiver can be connected. There's also a Type B USB input here, suitable for the connection of a home computer for audio playback. It's an asynchronous input, but limited to 96kHz/24-bit.

When I asked Michaelson why, given that similar products these days offer up to 192kHz/24-bit input, and some even DSD capability, his response was typically



RIGHT: Beyond its single mains toroid (with dual secondary windings) the M5si is configured as two monoblock power amp sections, with independent PSUs, driven by a stereo preamp



unequivocal. 'It's a matter of cost... along with the fact that the majority of people won't be able to hear the difference with higher-resolution files, especially with an amplifier like this.

'To fully appreciate higher resolution, you really need an amplifier with even higher power and the dynamic range only really available when you get to models offering 500W or more.'

It's a familiar Michaelson theme, and will come as no surprise to those who remember the company's celebrated 'sliding scale' calculator, designed to show the benefits of greater power. It was launched around the time of the Musical Fidelity Supercharger add-on monoblocks [HFN Sep '07 and Apr '08], which were designed to boost the speaker-level output of an existing amplifier by around 10dB.

The benefit of the relatively simple USB capability here is that no drivers will be required by either Windows or Mac users, but whether or not the 96kHz maximum is limiting will be a matter of personal taste and belief. I suspect for most users it will be more than sufficient, and if it isn't there's no shortage of add-on DACs available to offer a cost-effective digital format upgrade.

Completing the M5si specification are 12V trigger in/out sockets, again handy when integrating the amplifier into more complex systems, and a comprehensive remote control handset. While not quite offering the style or heft of the amp itself, this has the ability to drive a complete

Musical Fidelity set-up thanks to CD transport controls as well as those for the amplifier. Finally, it's worth noting that the M5si doesn't have a headphone socket, so the extra cost of one of the company's standalone headphone amps, such as the very good V90-BHA [HFN Aug '15], may need to be factored in.

GRIP AND DRIVE

So, compact it may be in physical terms, but the M5si proves no lightweight when it comes to playing music, thanks to its healthy dollop of power combined with excellent openness and control. This is an amplifier wearing its heft very easily indeed, and shows what it can do not only with its ability to drive and grip even demanding speakers without breaking a sweat, but also in the powerful, free-breathing dynamics it delivers.

Indeed, the sound of the M5si reminds me of the even more powerful Arcam A49, complete with its rated 250W output and £3995 price-tag, which means the Musical Fidelity M5si is already off to something of a flying start. It has the same sure-footed balance without any sense of holding the music in check, and a similar sense of being entirely unburstable – even when the volume is cranked up to the kind of levels only usually attempted by death metal fans and hi-fi reviewers throwing caution to the wind!

'The M5si delivers a sparkling view of the guitar and Mark King's voice'

ABOVE: Move along, not much to see here... the front panel is an exercise in understatement, with small buttons and LEDs for power and source selection, and a central volume control

That means it has plenty in reserve under more usual domestic listening conditions, the ability to go loud when exuberance takes over or a favourite piece grabs the imagination, and a clarity and expressive nature always on the right side of pushing things into hardness or excessive brightness.

Musical Fidelity amplifiers have often been described in terms of warmth and generosity, with some even recommending them as the antidote to the bright presentation of some mass-market

competition, but there's nothing so overt going on here. Yes, the listener is treated to a big, well-extended and rich bass, but there's nothing slow or bloomy about it, as

is clear with the crisp playing of Charlie Haden on his posthumously released *Tokyo Adagio* set with pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba [Impulse! 472 992-6].

TAKING YOU THERE

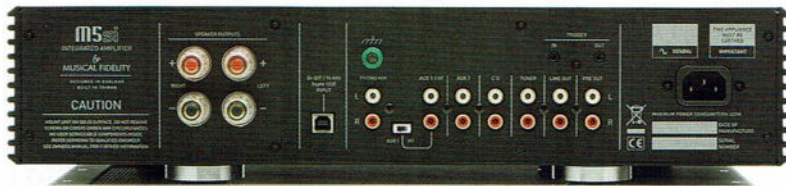
Recorded live in 2005 in the fine-sounding Blue Note venue in that city, the album has superb definition and ambience in its 96kHz/24-bit download form, along with a real 'you are there' presence. This is delivered in convincing fashion by the M5si when connected to a high-quality network player via its analogue inputs, and to only a slightly less transparent degree when played on a computer via the amp's USB input. It's not audience ambience on the frankly irritating 'clattering plates and clinking glasses' *Jazz At The Pawnshop* level, but just the sense of listening with others in a realistic space, and this is something the MF amp delivers so well.

Talking of bass, the combination of low-end weight and speed here is also heard to good effect when the M5si is tackling the signature sound of bassist Mark King on Level 42's 1987 *Running In The Family* album [2012 two-disc Deluxe Edition, ↻

UNRAVELLING THE RANGE

At first glance Musical Fidelity's comprehensive range borders on the confusing. Actually, it can look like that at the second and third glance, too! The core M-series starts below the M5si model with the M3s line-up, at around £1100 for the M3si amp, progressing through the M6s to the £3499 M8Pre [HFN Jul '14] and M8-700m monoblocks, at £3999 apiece. The flagship Nu-Vista range tracks back to the 1998 preamp using the sub-miniature valve from which the line-up takes its name. Today it culminates in the 300W, £7999 Nu-Vista 800 integrated amp [HFN Nov '14]. As side dishes, there's the entry-level V-series, including two headphone amps – one designed for the MF-200B balanced headphones [HFN Aug '15] – a phono pre, DAC and even a miniature integrated amp, the USB-input only £150 V90-AMP. The MX-series bridges the gap between V and M, again in compact casework, with a phono pre, DAC and balanced headphone amp [HFN Apr '15], and the Merlin system combines Bluetooth/USB playback, innovative tabletop speakers and its own turntable, the Round Table [HFN Mar '15]. Phew!

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: One of the four line inputs has a unity gain bypass, and there are MM phono and USB digital inputs, plus decent speaker terminals and fixed/variable preamp outs

Polydor/Universal 0602537100064]. The opening synth flourish of the title tracks swaggers from the speakers before the bass-line kicks in with metronomic precision, helped by the amp's speed and definition.

A FINE PHONO STAGE

But it's not all about bass. With the acoustic version of 'Lessons In Love' on the second disc of this set, the M5si delivers a sparkling view of the guitar and King's voice, in stark contrast to the Shep Pettibone remix – all syndrums and processed handclaps – of the same track on the same disc. It even did a fine job when I fired up my Rega turntable, dug out an older vinyl copy of the original album and gave it a spin, for the phono stage here is as precise and musical as the rest of the amp.

Speaker-driving ability? For much of the review period I had the M5si running into B&W 803 D3 floorstanders [HFN Mar '16], which are quite demanding but shine on the end of an amp with good grip, and whether with these speakers or my usual PMC OB1s the impression was that the amplifier had things fully under control without ever seeming to be holding back.

This mix of 'go for it' brio and refinement serves the Musical Fidelity amplifier well, as is clear with the San Francisco Symphony's own-label recording of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 4, with Emanuel Ax [96kHz/24-bit download from www.downloadsnow.net]. Recorded live in 2009, again what comes over so well through the MF amp is the entirely natural balance between solo piano and orchestra, plus the way the acoustic of the Davies Symphony Hall plays its part in creating an experience way beyond a dry studio-bound recording.

Given company founder Michaelson's listening priorities – 'I'm not really an audiophile' he said to me when we discussing

that digital input limitation, before making the point that he listens to music, not the hi-fi – it's hardly surprising that this amplifier performs so well with music such as this, even when fed directly from a relatively modest digital 'source' in the form of my MacBook Air.

Still, it's very refreshing to revel in the sense of a live performance in one's listening room with all the ambience of a large hall, without any need for surround trickery to create the illusion. The combination of delicacy and dynamics does a particularly thrilling job with the closing *Rondo*, where the piano and orchestra are beautifully balanced.

Oh, and in case you were wondering – yes, the M5si can rock out too when required, as was clear from some time spent with the live 'off the desk' recordings by Gov't Mule [www.muletracks.com 48kHz/24-bit downloads] which demonstrated the amp's ability to drive hard with the band's good-time rock/boogie style. They were clearly on good form in Eugene, Oregon, back in February 2015, joined by guitarist John Scofield, and all that excitement and fine musicianship was freely on tap through Musical Fidelity's M5si. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The M5si's USB input, though limited, will be more than adequate for most. Regardless, this is a pretty special amplifier for the money, with a winning combination of refinement and sheer power enabling it both to drive hard and sound mature and involving at the same time. Forget the idea that Musical Fidelity amplifiers have 'a sound' for this powerhouse just shows real all-round ability, and is a must-listen.

Sound Quality: 83%

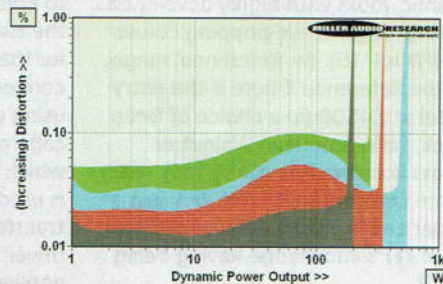


MUSICAL FIDELITY M5SI

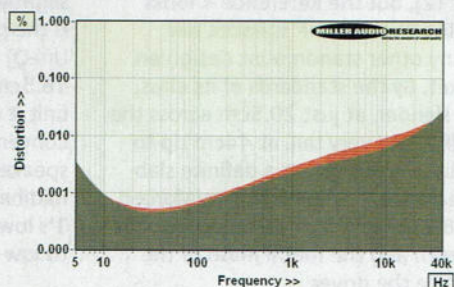
Rated at 150W/8ohm, the latest in Musical Fidelity's 'super integrated' amplifiers achieves 2x165W/8ohm and 2x265W/4ohm with 200W, 355W and 545W possible under dynamic conditions into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads, respectively. The output impedance is a little higher than with previous MF amps at ~0.2ohm, which may influence the system response when driving low/variable impedance loudspeakers. Similarly, while its output into the lowest 1ohm loads is protected at 275W or 16.6A [see Graph 1, below], the M5si still looks capable of grappling with any likely partnering loudspeaker.

Despite its moderate output impedance the M5si does not lack for compensation (feedback) judging by the controlled levels of distortion. This falls from a minimum of 0.00045% through the low bass before climbing gently with frequency to reach a perfectly acceptable 0.01% at 20kHz [see Graph 2, below]. Versus output power, distortion remains impressively consistent and hovers at ~0.002% from 1-100W through midrange frequencies, increasing marginally to 0.005% at the rated 150W/8ohm.

Into 8ohm loads the M5si's frequency response is flat and extended, reaching -0.2dB/20Hz and -0.1dB/20kHz with -3dB points at 4Hz and 105kHz. This is a sensible tailoring if the M5si is being used with 'hi-res' (wide bandwidth) digital downloads where the useable musical output rarely extends beyond 70kHz [see p92]. However the M5si's USB implementation has been used in earlier MF amps and is suitable for files up to 96kHz only. Readers may view an in-depth QC Suite report for Musical Fidelity's M5si's integrated amp by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 16.6A



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended frequency at 10W/8ohm (5Hz-40kHz, left = black; right = red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	165W / 265W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	200W / 355W / 545W / 275W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.15-0.24ohm
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.15dB to -0.15dB/-2.6dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/150W)	21mV / 270mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/150W)	86.4dB / 108.2dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz re. 10W/8ohm)	0.00045-0.011%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	36W / 480W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	440x100x405mm / 15kg