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Stream On Baby

Legendary American manufacturer McIntosh's new compact MB50 is aimed at adding streaming to existing hi-fi systems. Jon Myles likes what he hears.

There's probably never been more ways to listen to music. You can choose vinyl or CD, plump for headphone listening through a digital audio player, store and playback on a laptop – and there's even reel-to-reel tape and

cassettes for the real enthusiasts.

The latest technology to join the list is streaming with more and more users choosing to store music off-board – whether it be on a network attached storage (NAS) device, computer or subscription service such as Spotify and Tidal – and send

it to their hi-fi via a dedicated device.

Given streaming's growing popularity it is little wonder that ever more manufacturers are entering the market, the latest being venerable American brand McIntosh with their MB50.

It's a compact device measuring

8.9cm x 11.5cm x 39.4cm (H/W/D) and weighing 3.9kg. But despite its small form factor the MB50 is classic McIntosh in looks with a glass front panel and glowing green logo matching the rest of the company's components.

The front panel contains small buttons for selecting the input, network source and volume along with standby/on at right and headphone socket at left. However, as is usual nowadays, full functionality is only achieved via a free dedicated app for Android or Apple iOS smartphones and tablets (more of which later).

On the rear you'll find both balanced and unbalanced analogue outs for connecting to an amplifier or pre-amp, coaxial and optical outputs for linking to a separate DAC, alongside similar digital inputs for connecting the likes of a CD player or DAP. Two wi-fi antennae are provided for a secure network connection.

There's also a USB input for firmware updates which can also be pressed into action for hardwiring the device to a home network if desired, although this requires the purchase of a special USB-to-ethernet connector. At higher bit rates a wired connection is preferable to lessen the chance of drop-outs, but in my hours of listening the McIntosh worked flawlessly via wi-fi both from a NAS drive some 18 feet away and with streaming music from Tidal over the internet.

Do note, though, that there are two playback modes – the standard which downsamples files to provide a more robust wi-fi connection and Critical Listening Mode which retains bit rate and frequency up to 24/192. If your wi-fi is struggling it might be best to engage the former. I had the MB50 in the latter mode most of the time with no problems. Switching to the standard setting did see a slight diminution in outright detail on the highest bit rate files although there was little change on anything up to 24bit/96kHz.

The MB50's streaming capabilities are provided via the Play-Fi system developed by DTS – the American company better known for its

multi-channel technology. Download the app to your Apple or Android device and the MB50 will discover all digital music stored on devices attached to your home network, as well as giving you access to streaming music and radio services from the likes of Amazon, Deezer, Pandora®, Rhapsody®, SiriusXM, Spotify® and Tidal – with their apps built into Play-Fi (just sign-in with your username

you (personally, I can take it or leave it).

SOUND QUALITY

The MB50 may be relatively small but it has the traditional big, bold, beautifully solid McIntosh sound. Connected to Hi-Fi World's reference McIntosh MC152 power amplifier the combination immediately brought the new Q Acoustics Concept 500

"There's a lovely organic sound to the presentation which brings the band to life and weaves the instruments together into a coherent, totally captivating whole"

and password).

The app has all the usual features such as volume control, album artwork, genre, search etc, and is easy to set-up. I had the MB50 up and running and was playing music from my cloud-based Amazon collection within five minutes. This is one system where there's no need to elicit the help of an IT specialist or teenage son or daughter to get it going.

The only thing seemingly missing in the MB50s spec sheet is Bluetooth – which may or may not be important to

loudspeakers (see review this issue) to life.

With the testing low frequencies of James Blake's 'Limit To Your Love' (24/96) there was firmness and punch to the bass – with impact that hits me in the chest. Blake's plaintive, high-pitched vocals were clear and above the rolling electronic backing, pitched perfectly between the 'speakers with both height and depth.

Moving to CD-quality streaming from Tidal with Django Bates and the 14-piece Frankfurt Radio Big Band and their



The MB50 has two antennae for a secure wi-fi connection plus balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs as well as a full range of digital in and out connections.





The neatly laid-out circuitry of the McIntosh MB50. Note the two wi-fi antenna on the rear for a more stable network connection.

jazz reinterpreting of The Beatles' most famous album with 'Saluting Sgt Pepper', Tony Lakatos's tenor saxophone solo in 'With A Little Help From My Friends' pressed along at a furious pace, the McIntosh capturing all the nuances of his fingering, as well as the hard-edged timbre of the instrument.

There was a lovely organic sound to the presentation that brought the band to life, weaving the instruments together into a totally captivating whole.

In its overall sound the McIntosh doesn't have the outright detail of something like a Resonance Invicta Mirus DAC, nor the propulsive thrust of a Naim NDX streamer (both of which are dearer). Instead it has a warmer, richer sound but is none the worse for it, relaying music in a mellifluous, flowing manner without a hint of digital sharpness. So on Ars Nova Copenhagen's 'First Drop' the vocal ensemble's reworking of various choral pieces had a deep, vibrant tone with the individual voices picked out beautifully to create a sensuous sound palette.

It's a trick the McIntosh reproduced on all forms of music, from acoustic jazz to pounding rock and dance music – even reining in the more searing guitar parts on Oasis's 'Definitely Maybe' to present a less abrasive sound, without losing any of the excitement.

Streaming Spotify's lower bit rate offering, the McIntosh showed it doesn't unduly highlight the lower

quality of the service. There was less definition and bite, but again the innate musicality of the MB50 means it doesn't come over as bland or without punch.

On Elton John's 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' piano came over with body and a good presence – perhaps

not as great as via CD but still with enough tonality to make it highly enjoyable.

Overall, then, it seems this little streamer from McIntosh has most of the bases covered and could be one of the brand's most innovative products for a good few years.

In fact, it is one of those components that can turn even the most die-hard sceptic of streaming music into a convert, as it makes it so simple to browse through your digital collection once you have transferred it to a NAS drive or computer, or listen to music via one of the many subscription services on offer.

Which means that if you are looking to add high-quality streaming to your existing system then the McIntosh MB50 is one of the best ways to go about it.

CONCLUSION

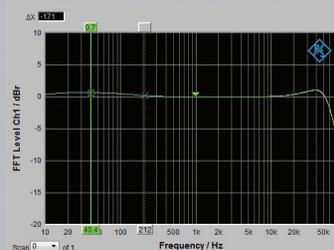
Yes, there are cheaper ways to stream music to an existing hi-fi set-up than the £3000 MB50, but in terms of flexibility, ease of use and sound quality it more than justifies its price.

It's smooth, rich, and powerful in its sound and boasts McIntosh's renowned build quality, making it a joy to own and use I found.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

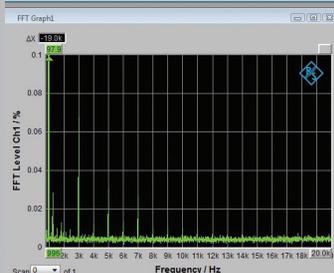
Frequency response of the McIntosh MB50 was characterised by an unusual lift in low frequency output. It was small, just +0.7dB at 40Hz our analysis shows, but covering the whole bass region it will bring a subtle degree of extra weight or

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION

THD at 1	Level RMS	Frequency
0.0906 %	11.703 mV	996.98 Hz
OFF	OFF	OFF



body to the sound.

The optical input accepted 192kHz sample rate digital (some reach 96kHz max) and analogue frequency response extended to 96kHz, as our analysis also shows.

Maximum output from the balanced XLR sockets was very high, measuring 16V. All the same, dynamic range measured a good if not exceptional 114dB, where top DACs exceed 120dB. The cause was the presence of a little distortion and noise, the former measuring 0.09% where 0.02% is possible nowadays. Again, the result is good, far better than CD (0.22%) but not up with the best.

The MB50 offers a good set of measured performance figures, in line with other streamers, if not up with top quality DACs. NK

Frequency response	4Hz-91Hz
Separation	98dB
Noise	-112dB
Distortion	0.09%
Dynamic range (24bit)	114dB
Output (XLR)	16V

**MCINTOSH MB50
STREAMER/
PREAMP £3000**



**OUTSTANDING - amongst
the best**

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

Great sounding network streamer which can access most digital music services as well as your own stored files.

FOR

- powerful sound
- easy-to-use, intuitive app
- robust wi-fi connection
- build quality

AGAINST

- no Bluetooth

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