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## Magnifique!

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A Sneak Peek at Esoteric and Sonus faber

# McIntosh MB50 Streamer

By Greg Petan



**I**t has never been a better time to be a music lover and audiophile. With the multitude of sources available to play back your favorite music, there is something for everybody. Whether you choose vinyl, CD, laptop, even cassette or reel-to-reel tape, the music lover is free to indulge their passion in any which way they feel fit. The latest entry into the world of musical sources is the digital streamer. With wireless operation from a handheld device and the ability to explore hundreds of thousands of songs at the touch of a finger, the streamer has opened a gaping chasm into the world of music in a way that was simply unimaginable in the past.

The McIntosh MB50 streamer is a compact component that despite its diminutive stature, is all McIntosh; the glass front panel and glowing green logo is in keeping with the rest of the herd. As does hassle free set up and operation, and sound quality which is pure McIntosh. Having reviewed the MC301 mono amplifiers and the C52 preamp from McIntosh (issue 79), the MB50 is in keeping with where McIntosh is going sonically with their latest offerings. That combination possessed a sweet, smooth, colorful and organic presentation that was anything but “solid-state” in the worst sense of the word. Like that powerful duo, the MB50 has an accessibility, a musically rewarding character that gets out of its way putting the music first.





Analog outputs for both balanced and unbalanced cables connect the MB50 to your system's amplifier or preamplifier; digital outputs are also included if you choose to use an outboard DAC. One analog, plus two digital inputs let you connect audio components such as CD players to the MB50, allowing it to act as a mini-preamp; a very handy feature. Two Wi-Fi antennas help ensure a secure network connection for smooth playback; the MB50 can be hardwired to your network via a USB-to-Ethernet adapter (not included).

A significant advantage of DTS Play-Fi compared to many other

streaming options is that with its Critical Listening mode, native playback of up to 24-bit/192kHz high-resolution files is available with no down-sampling as of January 2017 (Existing Play-Fi customers only need to update your Play-Fi app to the latest version to utilize this feature). Many common audio formats are compatible with the MB50, including mp3, m4a, FLAC and Wav files; along with support for DLNA.

#### Don't let the size fool you

I first heard the MB50 confidently take control of a system made up of Audio Research amplification and Sonus Faber speakers at the McIntosh Group's WOM (World of

McIntosh) townhouse around the corner from my home in SOHO NYC. I was a bit shocked that such a little box could provide such big musical sound and when the ever enthusiastic Joshua Delinger, McIntosh Group Experience Director for WOM installed an MB50 in my system, we had music within a matter of moments. While I still had some lingering reservations solely based on its small size, they quickly melted away. What we have here is relatively modestly priced (\$2,000 MSRP) streamer that easily holds its own in my reference system.

With Spotify and TIDAL pre-installed in the DTS Play-Fi App

along with Apple Air-play, a universe of music is available in a flash. Delanger's great taste in music and the ability to download his recommendations at will has expanded my library in some unexpected ways. The Techy yet always soulful James Blake and modern prog-rockists Animals as Leaders are just a couple of hip, super cool additions to my classic rock and Jazz heavy playlists. While not every customer will have access to the factory guy's set up savvy, worry not. The few minutes required to install and configure the DTS-Play-Fi app is all you need. If you can install Angry Birds on your iPhone, you can

set up the MB50.

The MB50 joined the duo of the now discontinued Krell Connect, and the streamer section of the Dan D'Agostino Master Audio MLife integrated amplifier/Streamer/DAC in my system. Each component possesses a sonic profile; a way with the sound that defines the manufacturer's musical point of view. The Krell Connect's dynamics give music a propulsive thrust and "Jump" that is incredibly engaging. The MLife streamer, while unable to isolate the streamer section from the integrated amplifier section, is uber-resolving and controlled from the very top to the deepest depths. *(continued)*



### Extended listening

The MB50 competes on its own playing field. It's priorities lay in the way it liquifies textures and renders densely colored instrumental timbre. Instruments and voices sound incredibly real in a way that allows the brain to relax and become deeply engaged. These qualities were unheard of from modestly priced digital a decade ago and still evades some even more costly designs of today. The MB50 is a digital source neutral enough to clearly define each recordings inherent character while squeezing musical nuggets from even badly flawed re-

cordings, expanding the musical universe in all directions. It has enough resolution to offer something special when you feed it a great recording.

Listening to the above mentioned James Blake "Voyeur" From *Overgrown*, the MB50 presents the swelling, looping themes with lucidity and smoothness. Textures and musical color fill the room, and instrumental lines remain distinct and un-tangled from one another. The ability to effortlessly follow each musical idea is very compelling particularly in music as densely packed as this. Deep bass pours

into the room in a more organic way rather than the D'Agostino's presentation handles low bass. The layers of swirling synth chords surround the vocal line, yet the whole piece holds together superbly. Mr. Blakes "Ret-rogate" follows the recipe with a build up of circulating themes adding up to a deep, dense, intensely musical if a bit dissonant experience.

The MB50 handles classic rock with ease as well. "Hold on loosely" from .38 Special flat out rocks. The MB50 has a temporal rightness that is never slow or plodding. *(continued)*



The music has great swagger, and the guitar solo is gripping. The MB50 at holding a recording together with great cohesion and musicality. There are no odd distortions, be it upper midrange glare or high-frequency grain that irritate the ear destroying the immersive experience. Transients are clean, clear, and utterly natural. The music feels a bit more relaxed without being sleepy or bogging down the presentation. When necessary, the soundstage provides a significant expanse from front to back in addition to providing plenty of left to right information. The Mlife has a bit more focus down to a granular level giving images slightly more inner detail and presence, but the MB50 matches it punch for punch when it comes to over all stage size. Very impressive.

### Love it

These days in high-end audio, the term “Value” is thrown about with casual abandon. \$20K amplifiers and \$30K speakers are often referred to with such terms. My system is an excellent example of modern high-end audio excess. In this context, the only way to characterize the McIntosh MB50 Streamer is that of a flat out steal. Whether your

system has evolved into one like mine, populated with uber-expensive components, or you are just beginning to build a modest system with hopes to expand up the food chain down the road, you can rest assured that the MB50 will rise to the demands of either and all scenarios. Add the fact that it has optical inputs and outputs as well as volume control capability makes recommending the MB50 the surest bet in some 20 years of reviewing gear. Would I still love a \$100K DCS digital stack? Sure I would but for now I’m having a ball with the MB50.

**The McIntosh MB50 Streamer**  
MSRP: \$2,000

### MANUFACTURER

McIntosh Laboratory, Inc.

### CONTACT

[www.mcintoshlabs.com](http://www.mcintoshlabs.com)

### PERIPHERALS

#### Analog Source

Triangle Art Signature/  
Osiris Arm/Ortofon  
Cadenza Black

#### Preamplifier

Pass Labs XP-25

#### Power Amplifier

Pass Labs XA200.8

#### Cable

MIT