



Blue Cheer

McIntosh has introduced a new entry-level solid-state power amplifier in the shape of the MC152 – but it still packs 150 Watts per channel and sounds sublime, says Jon Myles.

One of the undeniable joys of reviewing hi-fi equipment is that every so often a component comes along that literally blows your socks off.

It doesn't happen every month – but when it does it's enough to have you sitting on the sofa with a big, fat grin on your face and rifling through your music collection as you play track after track long into the wee small hours (preferably with a glass of nicely-matured Scotch in your hand – but that's not strictly a necessity).

So it was with me (well, apart from the Scotch) when the mighty McIntosh MA8000 integrated amplifier arrived at Hi-Fi World last year. Here was a beast of a product – weighing over 100lbs and capable of delivering some 300 Watts per channel of power yet possessed of

such subtlety, finesse and outright coherency that it put most of its rivals to shame. The very definition of an iron fist in a velvet glove.

It's only drawback was the small matter of a £10,000 asking price. Not that it wasn't worth it – but let's be honest, not all of us are fortunate enough to be able to spend that sort of money on a single piece of equipment.

But don't fret. Because if you fancy a slice of the McIntosh sound at a rather more wallet-friendly price then the company has just introduced its new entry-level solid-state MC152 power amplifier.

Being McIntosh (perhaps the very epitome of big and beefy in the amplifier world) entry-level still translates to a weight of 75lbs and a rated power output of 150 Watts per channel – which is highly conser-

vative as we measured a massive 235 Watts into 8 Ohms (see Measured Performance for full details).

Much of that weight is down to McIntosh's use of transformers in the output stage to ensure consistent power delivery regardless of the connected loudspeaker's impedance (see Noel Keywood's piece for a complete explanation).

The MC152 is, though, rather svelte compared to some of the brand's other power amplifiers – being a slim 6in in height with a depth of 21in and width of 17.5in. One word of caution, however; users of three-legged racks will find the power socket at the back of the MC152 falls just where the rear support stands making the use of chunky specialist mains leads a little tricky.

Once in situ, there's no mistaking



this is a McIntosh amplifier – entry level or not. The front panel is dominated by the traditional two big, blue illuminated power meters and the green company logo. A switch allows you to dim the power meter display if you wish while the only other control is the on/off button. Those power meters and big green love them or hate them; I unashamedly love 'em.

On the rear are sturdy binding posts with taps for 2, 4 and 8 Ohm 'speakers, as well as XLR balanced and unbalanced inputs. There's also a power save slider control which when activated automatically turns the MC152 off if it doesn't receive a signal for 30 minutes.

SOUND QUALITY

The MC152 may not have quite the prodigious arc-welding power of some of its bigger brethren but it still has the traditional McIntosh strength of exercising a firm grip over virtually any loudspeaker you care to pair it with.

Hooked up to our reference Tannoy Definition DC10Ti floorstanders (via the 4 Ohm 'speaker taps) and fed a variety of files from CD to 24bit/192kHz high-resolution via the impressive Chord

2Qute DAC (see review elsewhere this issue) and the MC152 impressed from the off with its big, spacious sound.

On King Tubby's 'Dub Fever' collection the MC152 proved capable of generating earth-shaking levels of bass yet without losing the sense of air and atmosphere that pervades these tracks and makes them work so well.

Electronic beeps and chopped, distorted guitar effects emerged from seemingly nowhere – swelling into the mix and then disappearing in the blink of an eye.

Just as importantly the McIntosh threw a big, wide soundstage into the room which made the listening a truly immersive experience.

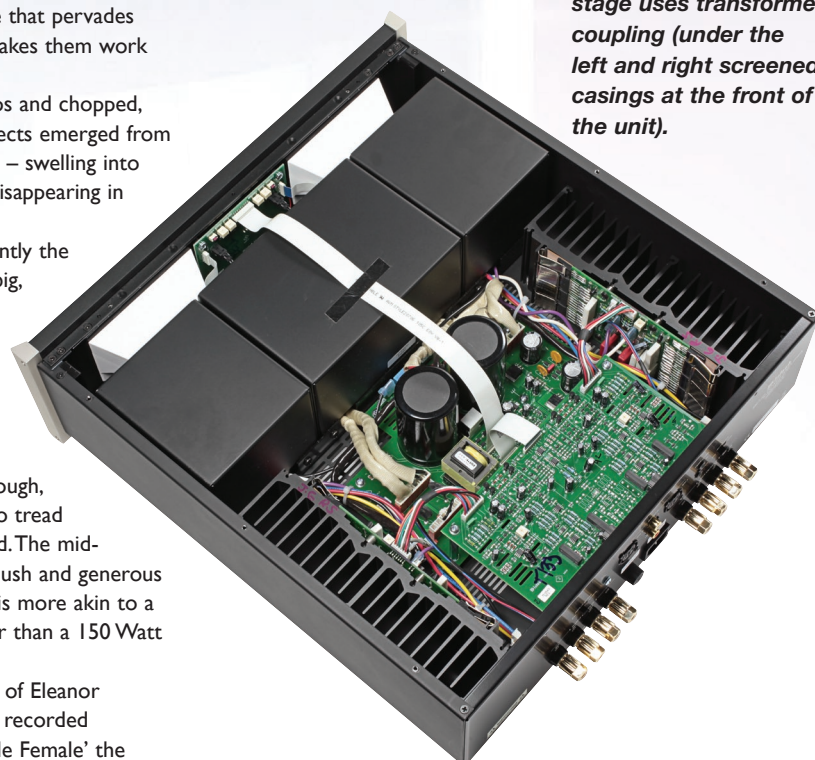
Importantly, though, the MC152 can also tread gently when needed. The mid-band has a slightly lush and generous quality to it which is more akin to a good valve amplifier than a 150 Watt solid-stater.

On a 24/96 rip of Eleanor McEvoy's delicately recorded 'Non Smoking Single Female' the

McIntosh imbued the walking bass part with real timbre while vocals were wonderfully rich and romantic. The track simply flowed in a natural, organic manner.

Yet this isn't done at the expense of essential detail. The MC152 has the

The MC152's output stage uses transformer coupling (under the left and right screened casings at the front of the unit).



ability to catch the leading edge of notes and subsequent decay without the artificial haze some transistor amplifiers impart. This made it sound wonderfully lifelike.

Moving onto something a little fiercer in the shape of The Sex Pistols' 'Never Mind The Bollocks...' and I could hear why McIntosh has long been a favourite with rock fans. The marching boots at the start of 'Holidays In The Sun' had me thinking an invading army was streaming across the room while Steve Jones's opening guitar chord wasn't just big, it was positively gargantuan. And when the pile-driver drums and bass kicked in I could thoroughly understand why one reviewer famously described this album as a big, bad beautiful sound. The McIntosh MC152 made it sound all of those things – and in all the right ways.

Overall, it was the combination of power, control and overall coherence that made the McIntosh work so well with seemingly all musical genres. I'd never mistake Stanislaw Skrowaczewski and the Minnesota Orchestra's rendition of Ravel's glorious 'Rapsodie Espagnole' for the Sex Pistols, but it was just as thrilling via the MC152.

Individual instruments were located firmly in place within the stereo image, with good height and depth, while the dynamic contrasts between the various movements were handled with pinpoint precision.

The work ends with an exuberant burst of orchestral colour in the fourth movement and the McIntosh captured all the joie de vivre of the finale without ever letting it spiral out of control or congeal into an indistinct cacophony – even with the volume pushed well higher than usual.

If I'm going to level any criticism then I have to say that the same piece played through the mighty MA8000 did have slightly more air and space to its delivery than on the MC152 – giving it a little more overall grandeur and impact. But if you'd never heard the former it's not something you'd ever be worried about.

That's because this new McIntosh power amplifier is a very impressive piece of equipment in its own right. It may be the smallest of the company's range of power amplifiers (both in terms of physical size and power output) but it still packs a significant punch – combining a big, punchy sound with a liquid, thoroughly



Both balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA inputs are provided, as well as taps for 2, 6 and 8 Ohm loudspeakers.

musical midband and a detailed delivery. I can well see it recruiting a lot more hi-fi lovers into the ranks of McIntosh converts.

CONCLUSION

McIntosh's new MC152 combines plentiful power output with a sonic signature that brings the best out of all genres of music. It can be subtle and fleet-of-foot when needed – yet is just at home pounding out deep bass lines, crashing guitar chords or orchestral crescendoes. Not just a cut-down version of McIntosh's bigger power amplifiers but a great performer in its own right.

NOEL SAYS -

The absence of distortion in big auto-transformer coupled McIntosh amps is eerie and I suspect the output stages swing more voltage and less current than is common, because as you reduce current you minimize both distortion and thermal modulation at the output transistor junction. This eases the job of the output transistors, protects them and also makes 2 Ohm electrostatic loads no problem.

Feedback is taken from the output devices direct, and from the transformer, via a summing network – neat design.

The MC152 is also fully balanced all through, currently a rare topology but one that will become more popular as sound quality benefits are better understood and appreciated.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The MC152 produced 253 Watts into an 8 Ohm load and slightly less, 225 Watts, into a 4 Ohm load. Unlike most transistor amplifiers the use of output transformers means it is effectively load matched, rather than being a 'constant-voltage source' so maximum power is the same into any load. However, McIntosh also use voltage limiting as protection and

the output was prevented from going into serious overload. The MC152 is very powerful all the same and its 2 Ohm output is meant for electrostatic loads.

Distortion was very low at all frequencies, measuring 0.005% in the midband and 0.02%, mostly noise, at 10kHz, 1 Watts output. Our spectrum analysis shows an absence of crossover distortion harmonics and this was maintained right up to full power out at 10kHz, an impressive performance. Low frequencies had no impact on the transformers either, distortion at 40Hz, full output measuring 0.007%.

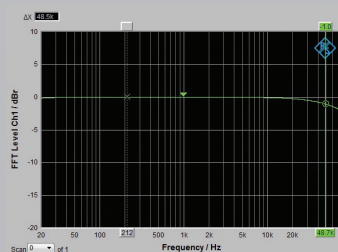
Frequency response rolls off slowly above 20kHz, and below 10Hz, but the amplifier measured flat across the audio band into 8 Ohm and 4 Ohm loads.

Input sensitivity was low at 1.6V through the phono inputs for full output, and no less than 3.2V through the balanced XLR inputs.

The MC152 is powerful and measures exceptionally well all round. It has very low distortion and can drive any load. Impressive. **NK**

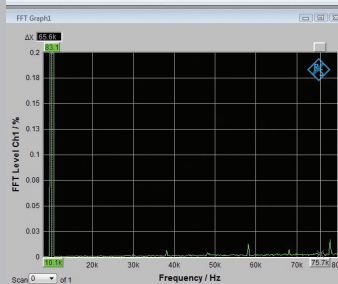
Power	250Watts
Frequency response	5Hz-50kHz
Separation	110dB
Noise	-121dB
Distortion (1W, 10kHz)	0.02%
Sensitivity	1.6V

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



DISTORTION

THD at dB	Level RMS	Frequency
0.0186 %	2.1271 V	10,000 kHz
OFF	OFF	OFF



MCINTOSH MC152
£4995



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

Iconic looks matched with a big, expansive and detailed sound make the MC152 one of the best power amplifiers you'll hear at its price. Highly recommended.

FOR

- smooth and musical
- controlled, deep bass
- slim case
- price

AGAINST

- weight

Jordan Acoustics
+44 (0)1592 744779
www.jordanacoustics.co.uk