MF's Merlin System

ANDREW EVERARD CHECKS OUT A COMPLETE AND UP-TO-DATE
VINYL-BASED HI-FI SYSTEM THAT SELLS FOR £1,300

Never let it be said that Musical Fidelity is behind the curve when it comes to developing new products: in fact, the company has something of a track record for anticipating trends, not to mention attempting to starts trends of its own.

After all, it launched a standalone headphone amplifier in its tubular-cased *X-Series* range as long ago as the mid-1990s, and expanded that line-up with then-unfashionable products such as a DAC, a linear power supply for multiple units, and the first ever *X-series* product: the *X-10D* Class A triode line stage. The company's *SuperChargers* were launched back in 2007: powerful amps designed to fit between an existing amplifier and speakers, they had the simple task of boosting the power to deliver the full dynamics of the music.

In recent times MF has continued with a sometimes baffling range of products, from high-end amplifiers through to little boxes designed to add all kinds of features to a system, from headphone amps to phono stages to DACs and digital interfaces, and it was also one of the first British brands to have its own streaming solution.

So, it's not a company short on innovation – and the *Merlin* system looks like a fascinating combination of novel thinking and the addressing of current trends. Where's a lot of the action in the audio market at the moment? In vinyl, in Bluetooth streaming and in small systems: which is precisely why MF covers those bases with this £1299 'Multi Format Audio System' of miniature amp and speakers, and partnering *Roundtable* turntable.

In a bout of Arthurianism the company has gone back to Camelot to name its new products, but has thankfully resisted the temptation to go as deliciously overboard with the theme as it did with the massive Art Deco Michaelson Audio *Chronos*

of the 1990. However, the *Merlin* and *Roundtable* are very much of the moment, as I discovered when first encountering them at last year's National Audio Show, where company founder and boss Antony Michaelson was on hand to enthuse about them (doesn't he always?).

Michaelson has a very "well, we thought we'd give it a go, so here it is" way of describing his company's products, and in typical style he explained that he wasn't sure whether the new system was suitable for review in hi-fi magazines because "It's not for enthusiasts; it's designed for civilians". In common with other companies exploring new potential buyers and outlets (think Linn *Kiko* or *mu-so* by Naim), Musical Fidelity realises that we fanatics are a finite resource, and that an entire *iPhone* generation is out there, with money to spend on a system if only a) they can be shown that it'll make their music sound better, and b) no-one mentions the 'H-F' word.

The heart of this system is a *Merlin* amplifier that's fashionably desktop-audio-sized (just 22cm wide and 5.5cm tall) and has an absolute minimum of controls. It uses two digital amplifier modules within to deliver a claimed 40W, or 50W maximum peak, per channel into 4ohms, together with analogue-to-digital conversion to enable non-digital sources to be connected, and twin, 24-bit/192kHz DACs.

A solitary pair of RCA sockets can function as either a line-in or moving magnet phono input, the required function selected using a tiny switch. A dual purpose 3.5mm stereo/optical mini-Toslink input is able to handle the signal from the headphone output of a smartphone, tablet or whatever, or up to 24-bit/96kHz digital in optical mode. A USB-B micro socket provides connection from a computer (in place of the more common full-size USB-B): this is compatible with files at up to 16-bit 44.1/48kHz, and aptX Bluetooth connectivity is also available using an antenna supplied in the box.

It's worth noting that the USB socket seems a little more fragile than a full-size USB-B: reconnecting the micro plug for a quick listen after this review was completed, something gave way, and the socket vanished inside the casework, so servicing is required, so I'd suggest some care is taken with plugging this particular connection, and it should be left in place once it's made. (You might