

HOT STUFF



David Price basks in the heat coming from Musical Fidelity's massive A1001 Class A integrated amplifier.

Despite their immense popularity in Japan, high-end integrated amplifiers are seen by many British audiophiles as a soft option. After all, 'serious' hi-fi is all about millions of separate boxes, power supplies, cables and equipment supports isn't it? Well, Anthony Michaelson - creator of this huge, black beastie - would disagree. He reckons his new A1001 gives 'no-compromise' performance with the convenience of a single box, and power enough to drive absolutely anything.

"Hype", you may say, but experience it in the flesh and you may well change your mind. The A1001 is certainly the heaviest amplifier I've ever reviewed, as my aching back will testify. No monkey metal here - it's 30kgs worth of two 700VA shielded toroidal transformers driving monobloc power amp sections, plus another 100VA toroid for the pre-amplifier. And then there are the two massive heatsinks that dispel the heat wave

the heavily class A biased power amps produce.

All pre-amp inputs are buffered, and the power amp circuitry uses discrete transistors rather than op-amps. Full remote control is provided, and the pre-amp and power amp sections have their own rear-panel RCA phono sockets joined by gold-plated metal 'U' links. Since this is a line-level device, there's no phono section or optional phono card. Musical Fidelity would instead point analogue lovers to their X-LP at £129, or their high-end, two-box X-Tract 'monobloc' phono stage, due in June and selling for £800.

In use the A1001 is satisfyingly straightforward, with a handy remote, plenty of inputs and classy looks. The only problems are its enormous size - it's big and heavy enough to flatten most equipment racks - and its propensity to get hotter than your average Formula 1 exhaust manifold. This is completely normal, but don't harbour any

illusions about stacking other separates on top unless you want to test their thermal coefficients.

SOUND QUALITY

Downstream of a Michell Orbe, SME V and Ortofon MC 30 Supreme driving a valve phono pre-amp, through my Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers it was clear this monster Musical Fidelity was something special. Combining neutrality with jaw-dropping power, it gives remarkably little of its character away. And it seems completely in command at all times, showing an almost super-human disregard for difficult loads. Witness the way it drove my big Yamahas - it just grabbed them by the scruff of the neck and shook them. Normally, the Yams sit back and watch as the poor amp driving them struggles!

Most impressive though is that glass-clear midband, which is totally devoid of the low-level mush and hash that spoils most transistor amplifiers. Rather, the A1001 sets

up a vast, inky black acoustic behind the 'speakers, through which great quantities of low-level detail shine through.

Duran Duran's 'Ordinary World' evinced this perfectly. The Musical Fidelity gave out a spacious sound stage, with rock-solid stereo imaging and stage depth. Instruments were fixed in place with genuine precision - just as the mixing engineer intended - beneath a wash of bass and powerful Rock drums.

Then, as if from nowhere, vocals and acoustic guitars sprang from the extreme rear of the acoustic and hung between the loudspeakers. Simon LeBon's plaintive voice was clean and dry - perhaps a little thin, but that's digital recordings for you - and you could really feel his pain. Then the song's chorus kicked in with tremendous slam and no loss of control from the A1001. Nice!

Everything But The Girl's 'Sugar Finney' was no less a delight. From the song's opening bars the music came across with immense clarity and grip. Where other amplifiers simply ignore the heavy piano cadences underpinning the rhythm section, the A1001 conveyed them better than any amplifier I've heard to date, the 'speakers pumping more air around the room than a wind turbine. Meanwhile, strings and brass were located with pin-point precision, and Tracey Thorn's vocals projected clean into the air. Again the Musical Fidelity proved absolutely immune to the bass drum's swingeing dynamics, and even at ear-splitting levels seemed barely off idling!

Corduroy's 'London, England' was next on. This is a superb analogue recording with oodles of power and passion. The A1001 thought so too, giving one of the most impressive renditions of this number that I've ever heard. Bass was gob-smackingly powerful yet taut, tight and tuneful without the slightest hint of compression. Drums were tremendously punchy thanks to real clout and body, while cymbals were deliciously smooth yet sharp enough to shave with.

The amp's tonal palette was no less enticing. Although lacking the creaminess of valves, it was extremely good at capturing the

texture and colour of instruments. Rather than the bleak, dank greyness that comes from many solid-state amps, the Musical Fidelity was as clean and crisp as a frosty morning.

You could also say that the MF's treble isn't quite the sweetest around. Cymbals don't quite glisten and shimmer as they do on single-ended triode valve amps, but then

All of MF's power amps have the same sensitivity, and can be daisy-chained, making bi-amping from the A1001 easy.



Brass had a warm, satisfying rasp and strings were wonderfully sinewy - resonant and raw but never harsh.

The A1001's detail retrieval also shone - for the first time ever, I heard a 'lost' wah-wah guitar singing away at the back of the mix and the frame of the harpsichord resonating every time the keyboard player hit a note! This track also underlined the point that, despite this amp's immense reserves of power, it's as fast and fleet as a small £1000 integrated. Despite all the legwork it has to do in the bass region, it never dragged its feet and complained.

Criticisms? If pushed, I'd have to say that the upper midrange is a touch 'cool' and dry, but this could simply be because the A1001 isn't flattering the NS1000s, which have been criticised for just that trait. Neither is the Musical Fidelity quite the best at conveying those tiny little accents and subtleties of playing which let you know musicians are really trying. Still, as it's so superb when it comes to the big picture - communicating the scale and power of the overall performance - you barely notice.

again SEs don't deliver nearly a kilowatt of clean power on peaks! Still, as transistor amps go, the A1001 is no slouch in the high frequencies.

During the MF's stay I found myself going through another one of those banzai listening sessions as I ran through my records and CDs frenetically, leaving them strewn across the floor. Although the Musical Fidelity is an extremely capable all-rounder, I found it really made a name for itself with large-scale Classical works such as the Mercury Living Presence pressing of Stravinsky's Firebird, where its fine blend of clarity and authority was just the ticket. And, in marked contrast to the aforementioned, it's one of the best amps I've heard for Drum 'n' Bass - LTJ Bukem's 'Logical Progression' will never be the same again!

It looks like Mr Michaelson has come up with a deeply impressive amplifier that's cheap at the price considering what it does and how much more you'd have to pay for rivals to do it better. Heartily recommended, but don't forget to turn the central heating down!●

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£2499

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WORLD VERDICT



Awesome power, seismic bass and super-clean sound make the A1001 one of the best all-rounders on the market.

Measured Performance
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