



Sprinkle a little DAC magic on your setup

Austria's Musical Fidelity is one of the pioneers of the standalone DAC, and its M6x is its latest invention. **Mark Craven** ponders the styling before falling in love with the sound

CHANCES ARE, YOU use your home system to play music – maybe just casually, but maybe with a critical ear. If it's a case of the latter, you might have wondered whether your current AV hardware is doing full justice to your collection. After all, there's an entire market out there of two-channel-specific products, often with price tags that make an 11-channel AVR look affordable.

Musical Fidelity's M6x isn't in fact part of the cost-no-object hi-fi brigade. Certainly, at £2,099, it's not inexpensive, but other standalone DACs are available that will eat it for breakfast. Indeed, viewed in light of its performance and feature set, the pricing seems perfectly reasonable.

Wired world

Okay, the spec sheet is perhaps missing something you might expect. The M6x is not a networked DAC, meaning it has no truck with music stored on a NAS device, or streamed from a smartphone. There's no Bluetooth either, before you ask.

The reason for this is that company boss Heinz Lichtenegger (also the founder of turntable brand Pro-Ject) believes network and Bluetooth modules are best kept as far away from audio circuitry as possible – in Musical Fidelity's newly launched MX-Stream, to be exact.

This does mean that the M6x appears outgunned by other rivals, including some more affordable models like Cambridge Audio's CXN v2 or Bluesound's Node (which even comes with an HDMI eARC connection to accommodate TV audio). Yet Musical Fidelity's device

counters with some tricks of its own, predominantly on the inside.

An upgrade on the brand's previous M6, M6s and M6sr DACs, this new model features an improved digital/analogue conversion stage, this time a dual-DAC design employing ES9038Q2M chips. This brings 32-bit/768kHz PCM handling to the table, plus DSD to DSD512, and MQA (good news for Tidal users).

These are joined by a custom 'Super Silent' toroidal transformer, itself fed by what Musical Fidelity describes as an 'industrial grade' socket with electromagnetic interference (EMI) shielding. The promise here is that the DAC's internal analogue and digital pathways will be free from deleterious noise. Additional niceties include a 16-core X MOS processor and Altera 'CPLD', which transpires to stand for complex programmable logic device. In other words, this machine has considerable brains.

How might you make use of it though? For CD playback, or connection to a network audio player, there are optical and coaxial digital audio inputs, in addition to an AES/EBU socket that will get a nod of approval from pro-audio nerds. For playback from a computer, be it locally stored music or via a streaming service, there's a USB-B connection.

This DAC has a somewhat old-school look, mainly because there's no LCD display (there was on the previous generation, but it's been jettisoned so as not to distract you when you're kicking back with your music). It has a full-width chassis, too, making it more suited to a kit rack than a desktop. The bevelled, milled aluminium front panel looks classy and feels robust.

There's a bundled remote for sofa-based operation, but functions (source, filter selection, volume if the DAC is being used to feed a power amp or active speakers) can also be governed from the M6x's fascia.

This is a bit of an eye-opener at first, as it carries myriad status lights to keep you abreast of proceedings, including incoming PCM sample rate from 44.1kHz-768kHz, DSD flavour, and whether your MQA track is 'Studio' quality or not. The LEDs themselves are a bit tiny, but it didn't take me long to familiarise myself with the layout.

Return of the Mac

For this audition, I fed the M6x into an Arcam AVR850 via its RCA output (there's a balanced XLR connection for compatible gear) and connected via USB-B to a Macbook running the Tidal desktop app, also roping in my Oppo disc-spinner for CDs. The DAC's sound performance soon left me in no doubt of Musical Fidelity's skilful engineering.

To put it simply, the M6x rocks – even with the sort of tracks you might expect 'audiophile' hardware to give short shrift. Playing Tidal Master files of Judas Priest's *British Steel* was almost revelatory, as the DAC did a lift and separate job on what I'd once considered to be quite a rough and ready mix, without blunting the aggressive feeling of the music. Track *Metal Gods* pounded from my speakers with crunchy guitars, but sounded detailed and brilliantly imaged too.

With more intimate and better-recorded music, the M6x only seemed to grow in talent. Demo fave *Brasilico*, from the *Meet Me in London* collab album between acoustic guitarist Antonio Forcione and singer Sabine Sciubba (192kHz/24-bit FLAC), was given white-glove treatment. Forcione's playing had delicious leading edges and a plump bottom end, while soft-struck percussion sat back of the soundstage. Sciubba's vocals sounded full and lush. It's a simplistic piece, but the M6x served it up with air, subtlety and precision.

SPECIFICATIONS

DAC STAGE: 2 x ESS Sabre ES9038Q2M chips in dual-differential configuration
CONNECTIONS: 1 x coaxial (24-bit/192kHz); 2 x optical (24-bit/192kHz); 1 x AES/EBU (24-bit/192kHz); 1 x USB-B (32-bit/768kHz, DSD512); line-level unbalanced RCA output; line-level balanced XLR output; 6.35mm headphone jack **DIMENSIONS:** 440(w) x 100(h) x 390(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 6.9kg

FEATURES: MQA compatibility on all inputs; eight user selectable DAC filters (incl. non-oversampling mode); fixed/variable output selection (latter for power amp/active speaker connection); status LEDs for PCM sample rate, DSD, MQA and filter choice; Super Silent power transformer; class AB headphone amp

TESTED WITH



MEET ME IN LONDON: Originally released in 1998 as a CD by Naim Label (subsidiary of the hi-fi hardware brand), and then as a 24-bit/192kHz remaster/remix download in 2012, this nine-track 'contemporary jazz' album is not only demo fodder, it's also a fun listen – Antoine Forcione's slick guitar playing in particular.

I even spun some 24-bit/352.8kHz Bach, mostly to see the sample rate LED light up, but it's worth noting that you don't need to give the M6x a diet of hi-res music for it to justify its existence. CD-quality tracks sounded significantly more organised and involving through this DAC than I'm used to, whatever the genre or recording provenance.

There are numerous different DAC filter modes to experiment with here, which fiddle with treble roll-off characteristics. You can dutifully run through them all, listening out for differences, but don't expect to hear anything groundbreaking – even Musical Fidelity suggests you should stick to the DAC's default settings when you first use it. The exception is the eighth filter, which is a non-oversampling mode, and this certainly brought a noticeably richer, but also softer presentation. This can't be used with MQA files, though, so wouldn't be my default choice.

Excellent addition

With a sound that's detailed, evocative and wonderfully balanced, Musical Fidelity's newest outboard DAC is something of a charmer. As an AV system add-on it's kinda pricey, but the best things in life often are. If you're not bothered about running a lead from your computer to your rig, this has to be auditioned ■

HCC VERDICT



Musical Fidelity M6x

→ £2,099 → www.musicalfidelity.com

WE SAY: This standalone DAC offers superior file compatibility, reassuring build quality and a sound performance that will have you digging out old musical favourites. Highly recommended.



AV INFO

PRODUCT: USB-B DAC with MQA/DSD support and balanced output

POSITION: M6 Series is upper-middle of Musical Fidelity stable, below M8 and Nu-Vista lines

PEERS: Chord Hugo 2; PS Audio Stellar Gain Cell