

Sexy MF

We asked Musical Fidelity for 'high end'. They sent 'entry level'. That's confidence...

This system was suggested to us by Musical Fidelity boss Antony Michaelson. I'd phoned him to chat about cars (something of a passion for Michaelson – delivery of his Maserati Quattroporte is imminent) and complain that it was high time some MF hardware featured in *Beautiful Systems*. I reminded him it was a high-end gig and that within reason (system ceiling £30K) he could fill his boots.

Michaelson's response wasn't what I was expecting. I was anticipating a proposed wheel-out of the weapons-grade kit for which Mr M has a well-known penchant. Something along the lines of the extraordinary kW500 – a £4,000, 500-watts-per-channel, Krell-killing super-predator of an integrated amp that looks as if it could blow over a JCB. Partnered with, say, the upcoming A5 CD player, dubbed by Michaelson "the best CD ever built", it might have had the makings of a contender for the one system you should hear before you die. Speakers? The world's your oyster with a front-end duo like that. The kW500 bows before no transducer this side of an Apogee Scintilla.

But, well, not quite. Michaelson's suggestion was this: X-Ray^{v3} CD player, X-150 integrated amp, Spondor S8e speakers – £3,593 the lot. He'd heard his latest X-series boxes with the big, floorstanding two-way Spondors and been knocked out by the purity and beauty of the music the combo made.

The point wasn't obscure. The qualification standard for entry to *Beautiful Systems* is, like origami for beginners, two-fold: beautiful design, beautiful sound – the foundation stones of 'high-end'. Michaelson was confident, based on the evidence of his own ears,

that the system would breeze the sonic requirement while the mix of the bijou X-series boxes' nuggety build and the sumptuous, understated finish of the elegant Spondors made the aesthetic issue a no-brainer. The only thing missing were zeros from the price tag.

NO APOLOGIES

But then Michaelson makes no apologies for giving the impression of being driven by the desire to puncture the conceits of exclusive 'high-end' practitioners who, he contends, operate an agenda of smoke and mirrors and hugely inflated prices. Indeed, Musical Fidelity's A1 amp all but created the 'affordable esoterica' class when it was launched in 1985.

Even so, I contended, we could push the boat out a little without diluting the 'affordable high-end' message. In fact, from a pure price standpoint, there was masses of leeway to do just that. Which is how we ended up with this month's all-British, bank-friendly *Beautiful System*. The X-Ray CD player and Spondor S8e speakers stay put but the X-150 integrated is replaced by the X-Pre^{v3} preamp and a pair of X-P200 stereo power amps bridged to work in mono which enables them to pump out a prodigious 250 watts apiece. So, what we have here is essentially Michaelson's original system with a more powerful engine: BMW 323i becomes M3 CSL.

The major talent nevertheless begins at source with the £899 X-Ray^{v3} CD player which Musical Fidelity describes, in typical fashion, as "one of the best CD players in the world regardless of price". It feels justified in the assertion because it believes the better a CD player measures, the better it is; its technical performance defines its sound quality. ▶

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Musical Fidelity X-Ray^{v3} CD player
£899

Everything a CD player should be: small, beautifully formed, exciting and unerringly musical.



Musical Fidelity X-Pre^{v3} preamplifier
£799

Never known to stick knobs and buttons where they're not wanted, MF has kept this bijou preamp clutter-free. That goes for the sound, too.



Musical Fidelity X-P200 power amps (x2)
£899 each

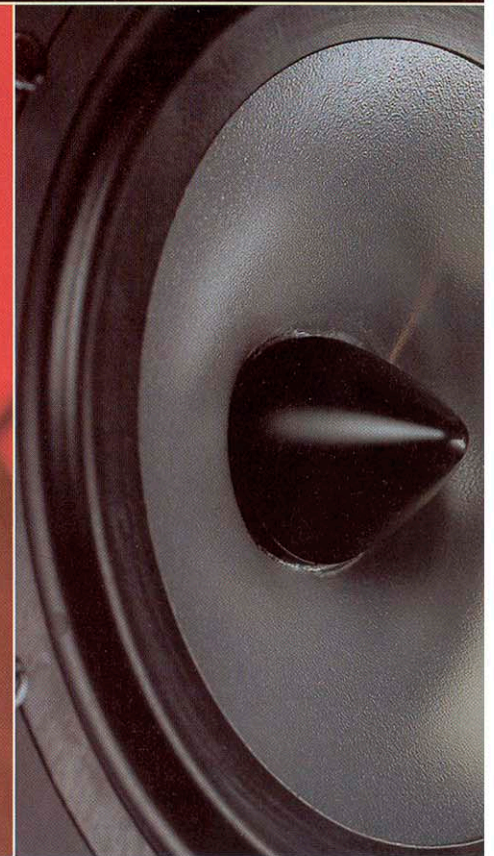
The natural partner for the X-Pre continues the neat, elegant theme but packs a big wallop all the same, especially in bridged form as here.



Spondor S8e loudspeaker
£1,895 per pair

The legendary BC1 reimaged for the modern music lover in sturdy, floorstanding form. Magical midrange lucidity married to deep, tuneful bass.





And the X-Ray is nothing if not a high achiever technically. The claims made for it include vanishingly low distortion, extremely low jitter, a low noise threshold and great linearity. Mind you, it should be good given the ingredients. Using the upsampling 24-bit Delta-Sigma DAC and dual-differential 8x oversampling chipset seen in all Musical Fidelity CD players, the aim has been to improve sound by keeping digital noise and other artefacts out of band, while low jitter and clock errors mean better harmonic accuracy and dynamic range.

TRICKLE-DOWN TECH

A sophisticated PSU allows independent circuits (such as the logic mechanism and the DAC) to operate in ideal conditions – a significant reason why the X-Ray sounds so good, according to MF. Contrastingly, stark minimalism is the key to the X-Ray's good looks. As with the X-Pre and X-P200s, the reassuringly solid (if a little sharp-edged), half-width extruded black casing is hidden, front on, by a slightly oversized chamfered aluminium fascia. In the CD player's case, this carries just six buttons, a double-deck LCD display, the silky-smooth drawer mechanism of the Philips transport and four hex-head bolts (a signature feature of all MF kit these days since it made its debut on the original, cylindrical X-series products back in 1995).

Musical Fidelity is also a great believer in trickling down technology from its costlier products and the X-Pre^{v3} is a benefactor here. It is said to have a similar circuit to the original Nu-Vista valve preamp but implemented with solid state. Thus, many of the Nu-Vista's traits are passed on: the generous overload margins, low distortion, low noise and wide bandwidth. It even incorporates a high-quality phono stage. MF calls the X-Pre^{v3} a true high-end product, period, and is happy to take on rivals at twice or three times the price. Like the X-ray it's a simple one, too. The front panel is home to just a volume knob, three buttons and four tiny blue LEDs denoting which of the four inputs has been selected. Fancy it isn't.

The matching X-P200 power amp isn't exactly short of minerals in its usual stereo configuration, delivering a stiff 120 watts a side. But bridged for monoblock duties (simply press a button on the front panel) it more than doubles its output to 250 watts with enough current to jump start Frankenstein's monster. This isn't mindless power either, claims Michaelson, but "true high-end performance at a fair price". The claimed benefits of going mono aren't subtle and include significantly improved resolution and dynamic range – advantages the not-so-slender Spendor's should have no trouble conveying.

Spendor's name will forever be associated with its first speaker, the BC1. Still held by some to set the standard for midrange accuracy some 30 years on, the BC1 toted a then revolutionary eight-inch bass/mid driver with a plastic cone and natural rubber surround. Like the BC1 (a large standmount), the bulky, floorstanding S8e also has a plastic-coned eight-inch bass-mid driver – as with the 27mm coated fabric dome tweeter, of much more modern design – and adheres to the simple two-way principle. The difference is that the higher-performing drivers are mounted in a much larger and sturdier box with reflex loading via a rear-firing letterbox vent at the base of the enclosure. Let's call it a BC1 with balls.

AGILE AND MUSCULAR

So... what to expect. BC1 neutrality and lucidity allied to Godzilla grunt? Interesting mix but, straight off, it doesn't really sound like that at all. Try fresh, incisive and almost dazzlingly clear. Rhythmically lucid and surefooted, too, with oodles of inner detail. Bass is solid, well-shaped, nimble and quite dry in character but amazingly strong and deep when the music dictates.

The result is gracefully balanced. At modest listening levels, the big Spendor's enjoy a sense of harmonic richness and effortless bass extension that makes





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them truly unflagging to listen to for long periods. Slap on some after-dark jazz – say Joe Sample’s *Ashes To Ashes* – and the system relaxes beautifully, sounding expansive, airy and tactile.

With all that monoblock juice on tap though, it can also hurtle through the attention barrier. Rock played at high levels had tremendous drive and impetus. Driven by the X-P200s, the S8es have the great gift of sounding simultaneously agile and muscular. High energy cuts – Lostprophets’ *Last Summer*, for example – are underpinned by that deep, powerful and ever tuneful bass. The sonic picture this system paints is pristine and finely resolved, clean at high volumes and controlled at the frequency extremes.

Be in no doubt, serious firepower lives here. But this combo is also capable of a superbly well structured presentation, both rhythmically and spatially. It homes in on fine detail with laser precision but masterfully keeps it in a musical context. The Spondors definitely play their part, too. Integration, timing and coherent handling of detail are so good, they soon

become transparent in the best sense of the word. Unstrained volume and convincing dynamics are specialties, too.

This system’s ability to present music in a positive, involving way is immensely engaging and likeable, whatever the genre, but arguably it works best with classical music. Grieg was handled with huge generosity yet great finesse and an almost palpable sense of ‘performance’. String tone possessed a particularly natural and unforced quality, as well as convincing body and texture.

A fine showing from the coated fabric dome tweeter undoubtedly contributes here, blending with rare deftness the usually conflicting interests of precise definition and tonal smoothness. In this sense, the speakers sound very classy and controlled, even with brightly recorded material (i.e. just about any commercial CD from the late 1980s). Indeed, this system is particularly skilled at balancing difficult elements with great assurance, drawing the colour and emotion out of lacklustre recordings but sounding impressively explicit and analytical at the same time. No better

example was to be found than on an old Eric Marienthal jazz-funk cut from 1989. Somewhat chrome-plated on some systems, this, but not here. The voices in the female backing choir were clear and beautifully separated but nicely rounded, and there was no artificial harshness or edge to Marienthal’s soaring alto sax.

And it’s all underpinned by that terrific bass weight and extension. What’s unusual is that the bass is also so taut, articulate and well timed. Dig out some relentlessly pulsating Prince (just about any track from his latest outing, *Musicology*) and the chugging, steamroller bottom end is clearly all there – both physically and temporally. No missing half octaves from Fernando Saunders’ ‘let’s-see-how-low-it-can-go’ bass on jazz harpist Deborah Henson-Conant’s odd (but entertaining) early 1990s CD, either. And note the breathtaking speed and attack of DH-C’s fingerwork on the plucked harp strings.

Hear this set-up and you’re likely to want it. Pity we don’t have bank managers anymore. They’d have approved. **HFC**

David Vivian

