

Musical Fidelity M8PRE/ M8700m

For its latest M8 series Musical Fidelity has produced an imposing preamp and monoblocks whose design is trickled down from the flagship Titan power amplifier
 Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

When Musical Fidelity designed its limited edition Titan power amp back in 2008, its aim was to make the best power amplifier in its almost-30-years history. An immensely powerful stereo beast, in a monstrously heavy chassis with separate power supply unit – a combined weight of 113kg, no less! – the Titan was rated at 1000W per channel into 8ohm and came with a price tag of £20,000.

Here at *HFN* we got our hands on a rare sample of the brute in May 2010 and our reviewer was simply blown away by it, figuratively speaking. He'd have bought it in a heartbeat were it not for the fact that he'd rather remain on speaking terms with his significant other half... and of course his bank manager.

Enter Musical Fidelity's latest ultra-high-power creation, the M8700m. Described by the Wembley-based company as 'a true heir to the Titan, delivering near-identical sound', it's a monoblock design that's considerably more bank-balance friendly at £8000 for a pair. As its nomenclature suggests, it is rated at 700W/8ohm, although this transpires to be conservative [see Lab Report, page 27]. It is part of a new M8 series of high-end components introduced this year, also including the preamplifier featured here.

These M8 components don't boast the elaborate, cost-no-object polished metalwork of the luxurious Titan: they come enclosed in more utilitarian cases with a finely-textured black finish. Nevertheless they are extremely sturdy with thick aluminium fascias, while the substantial heatsinks that flank each side of the power amps are smoothly-finished with no finger-catching sharp edges. MF's

founder Antony Michaelson might describe them as being all about high performance at sensible prices rather than 'male jewellery'. If so, he'd have a point.

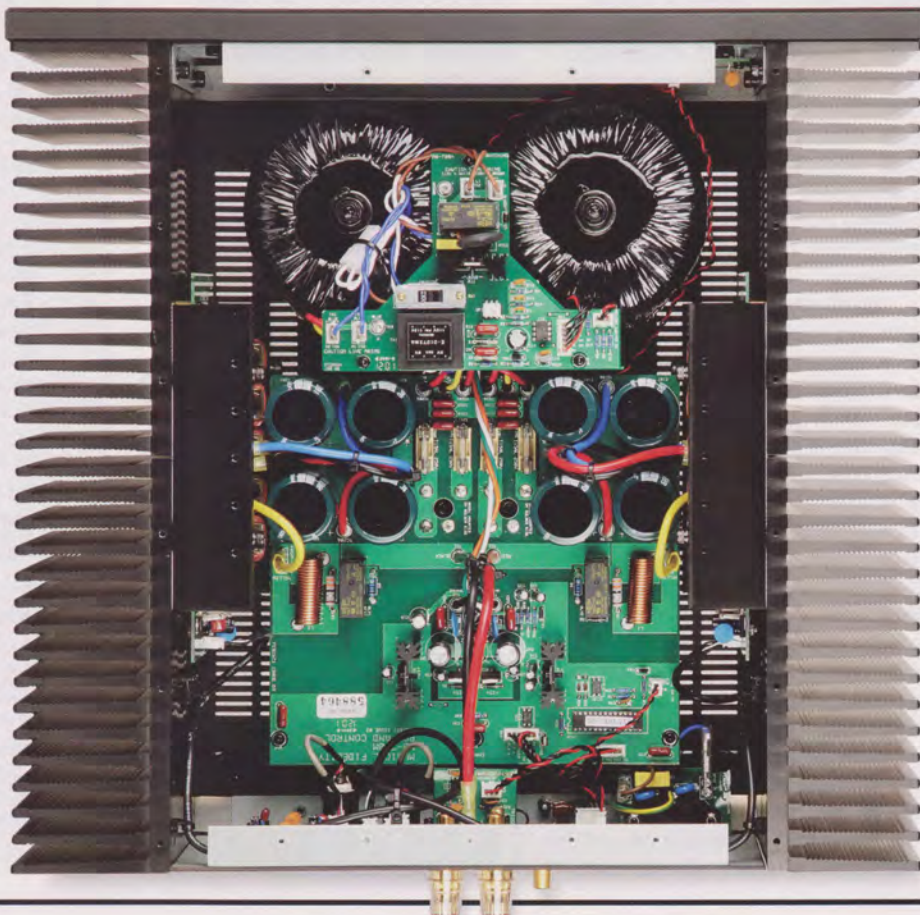
A NOD TO THE PAST

The M8PRE is a fully balanced Class A design, although single-ended outputs too are provided so that you could use it with power amplifiers that only have RCA inputs. Much of the preamplifier's 17kg mass is due to its heavy casework and substantial twin regulated power supplies, employing a 350VA toroidal transformer and regulation circuitry for each stage of

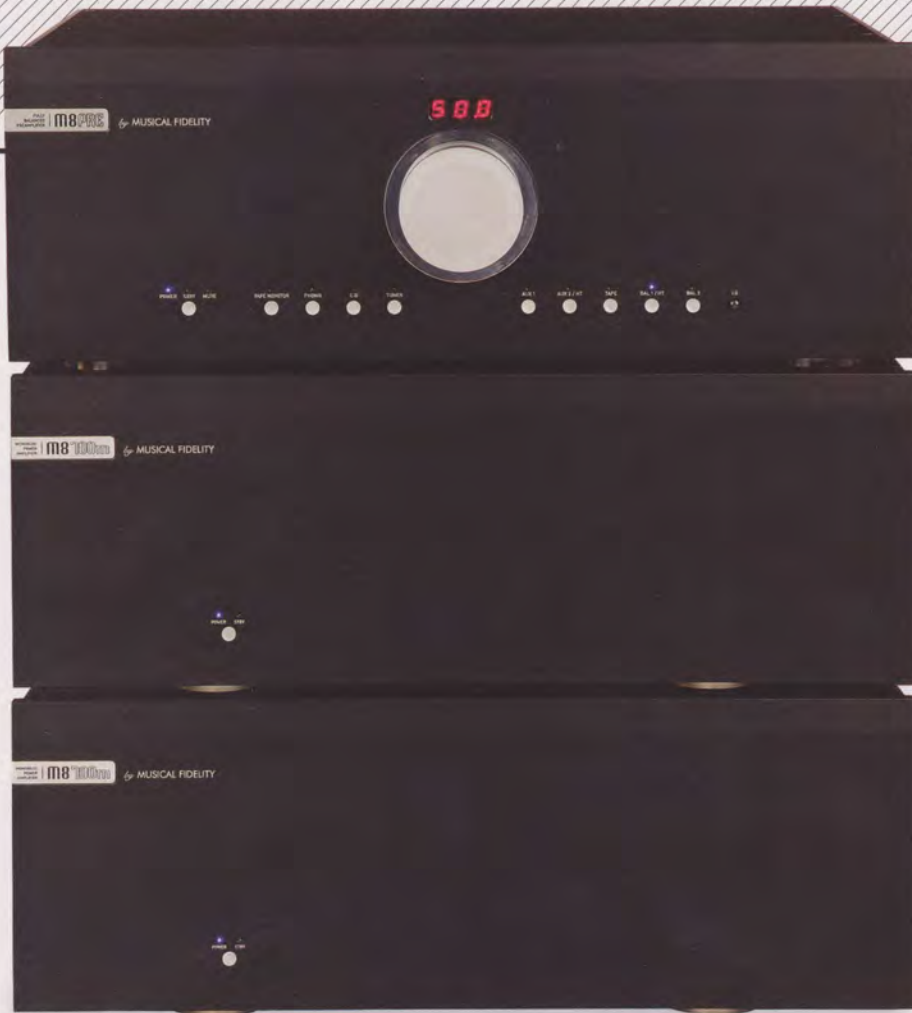
each channel. Extensive use is made of surface mount components to ensure very short signal paths.

There are seven line inputs, two balanced (XLR) and five single-ended (RCA). One of the balanced inputs and/or one of the single-ended inputs can be used as a unity gain pass-through (for linking to a surround decoder in a multichannel 'home theatre'), selected via slider switches adjacent to the appropriate input sockets on the rear panel.

With a nod to a bygone era a proper tape monitor loop is also provided to allow 'confidence monitoring'. I suppose *some*



RIGHT: Like the huge Titan amp on which it's based [*HFN* May '10], each mono M8700m is really two amplifiers configured in a balanced (bridged) mode to sustain very high voltages



LEFT: The lack of anything in our picture to reflect the sheer scale of these behemoths might suggest they're no bigger than MF's similar-looking M1PWRs. At 440x160x460mm (whd) each box, however, is absolutely huge

audio enthusiasts still use open-reel tape recorders or tasty three-head cassette decks for time-shifting radio broadcasts, but surely there can't be many of you left?

SUPER-QUIET PHONO STAGE

Last but not least, the M8PRE includes a high quality built-in MM/MC phono stage, something that will potentially save vinyl lovers several hundreds of pounds. I tried it with my Rock Reference/Excalibur arm deck fitted with an Ortofon Cadenza Blue moving-coil. The M8PRE's moving-coil stage is really excellent – and super-quiet – as you'd expect from the company whose very

first product was The Preamp, back in the days when we largely judged the quality of a preamplifier by the performance of its phono input.

The large volume knob controls a laser-trimmed electronic attenuator. There's no hysteresis when you spin it, rather each 'click' as you rotate the knob increases the gain in 0.5dB increments – indicated in the small display panel above it. A system remote handset is provided

'Rickie Lee's live vocal had me peeling myself off the back wall'

that includes a mute button (there's no mute switch on the fascia), and direct input switching; it also controls an MF CD player.

Virtually identical in size to the M8PRE, each fully balanced M8700m monoblock in fact comprises two power amplifiers in a bridged design to sustain high voltages. Consequently both red and black terminals are 'hot' and must never be connected to grounded speakers (like electrostatics, the high-level inputs of powered subwoofers or some Tannoys) or else it'll give you a mighty fright as your house plunges into darkness and you wave goodbye to a substantial financial investment...

Again, a single-ended (RCA) input is provided alongside the balanced input so that the M8700m can be used with any preamp source. Two sets of identical speaker binding posts are provided for easy bi-wiring. As you might expect given their powerful specification, they are heavy: each monoblock weighs 30kg.

SAFETY BELTS ON

Oh my... if you crave a little muscle you'll have little trouble filling a barn of a room with high SPLs with this pre/power combo, even if using the least sensitive loudspeakers you could imagine. Needless to say with my Sir Galahad speakers – sensitive enough to rattle the rafters when

fed a mere handful of watts – I could barely turn the preamp past 'go'.

It was obvious from the opening bars of the first selection I played that finding fault with the M8PRE/M8700m pairing would require extreme nit-picking. I was listening to Harald Kloser's score to the feature film *The Day After Tomorrow* [Varèse Sarabande 302 066 572 2], its achingly beautiful main theme containing thunderous low-end grumbles. Where the subsonic effects can blur the image and harden the sound of the orchestral score, the MF's reproduction was grain-free and three-dimensional, without a hint of stridency, dryness or coloration.

Many lovers of low-powered SETs and the like harbour an impression that 'muscle amps' choke the music. While admiring the ease with which high-power amps grip a speaker's woofers, and deliver

MICHAELSON'S MONSTERS

While hi-fi history books will never fail to mention Musical Fidelity's groundbreaking A1 integrated amplifier – a low-powered, hot-running Class A model that epitomised the term 'budget esoterica' when it was introduced in 1984 – MF's ebullient proprietor Antony Michaelson has forever harboured a passion for high-powered behemoths. His 2x185W MOSFET-powered A370 power amp of the mid-1980s was no slouch, while the even bigger A470 that followed it laid claim to being one of the world's first solid-state amplifiers to feature a choke-regulated power supply. Says Antony: 'I enjoy listening to a lot of recordings of solo piano and voice that are terribly revealing of amplifier performance. The piano, of course, is a percussion instrument – and it shows up mercilessly any shortcomings in amplifiers and loudspeakers. Having an amplifier with enormous power delivery capability isn't about bringing the ceiling down, it's to minimise overhang, avoid an artificially bloated sound and ensure there's no delay in the speed and attack of transients.'

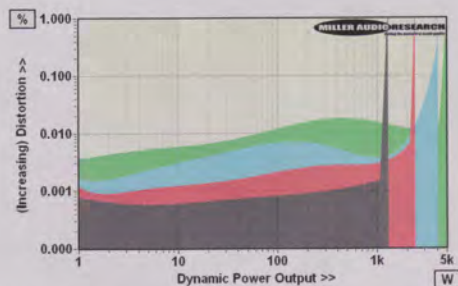
LAB REPORT

MUSICAL FIDELITY M8PRE/M8700m

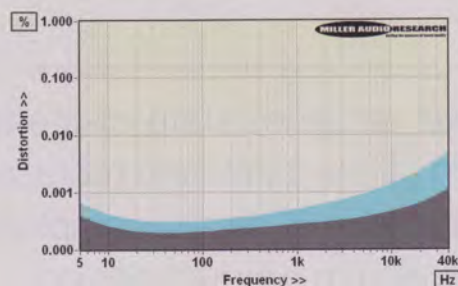
This is not the most powerful amplifier I've tested – that honour goes to MF's own Tri-Vista kW which achieved 1kW/2kW into 8/4ohm loads and 6.5kW under dynamic conditions into loads as low as 0.6ohm [HFN Aug '03]. The MF Titan matched the kW for continuous output into 8/4ohm loads but could not muster its stupendous 104A maximum current delivery [HFN May '10]. The M8700m reviewed here can trace its legacy to the Titan and kW before it, though it's both less 'extreme' and less costly with it. Nevertheless, by besting its conservative 700W rating with 925W/8ohm and 1.34kW/4ohm, the M8700m will still knock any recalcitrant loudspeaker into next week [see Graph 1, below]. With a maximum, clean current delivery of 72A into 1ohm (5.15kW) it has come two or three decades too late for low impedance full-range ribbons like the Apogee Scintilla!

This is no brute-force bruiser, however. Distortion is incredibly low at 0.0003% through bass and midrange at 10W/8ohm, increasing to just 0.002% at 20kHz [Graph 2, below] and 0.00075%/100W and 0.0014% at its rated 700W. Noise is fabulously low, yielding an A-wtd S/N ratio of 95dB (re. 0dBW); the response flat to -0.1dB/20kHz and -2.0dB/100kHz. The DC offset was rather high, however, at -90mV.

The M8PRE offers a similarly wide 93dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV) and flat response but midband distortion is lower still at ~0.00009% [right channel; 0.00013% left channel, black trace Graph 2]. Maximum (balanced) output is a heady 17V. Readers can view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for Musical Fidelity's M8PRE preamp and M8700m power amp by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion up to 1% into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



ABOVE: Distortion vs. extended frequency, preamp (0dBV, black) and power amp (10W/8ohm, blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	925W / 1340W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	1297W / 2420W / 4100W / 5150W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.031-0.12ohm (47-62ohm, pre)
Freq resp. (20Hz-100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0dB to -1.2dB/-0.1dB to -2.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/700W)	88mV / 2370mV (balanced in)
A-wtd S/N ratio (pre/power)	92.8dB / 95.1dB (re. 0dBV/0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	0.00009-0.0006%/0.0003-0.0023%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	121W/1.32kW (preamp, 17W)
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	440x162x400/440x160x460mm



ABOVE: The pre and power are ideally connected via balanced XLRs – the M8700m even has a daisy-chained XLR output. In addition to two XLR ins, the M8PRE offers MM/MC phono, four line ins (inc. HT loop-through) and a tape in/rec out

tautly controlled bass, they often complain that they sound 'sat on', dry, colourless. But I perceived no evidence of the music being strangled with this M8 combo. The sound was fast, explicit, open and sweet in equal measures.

Nothing was veiled or obscured; voices, in particular, popped out of the sonic fabric in a manner that sounded natural, unforced, and alive – razor sharp and vivid yet without a hint of edge or bite. And the bottom end was immensely powerful and full-bodied, tightly controlled and explicit but not so super-taut that it sounded over-damped and artificial.

EPIC TEST TRACKS

Having so much luxurious amplifier power on tap cried out for playing epic, grandiose productions. Remaining in a movie soundtrack mood I turned to Vangelis' stirring score to Ridley Scott's epic tale of Christopher Columbus, *1492 – Conquest Of Paradise* from 1992 [Warner/East West 4509-91014-2]. Again, nothing was obvious or overdone, but fine details such as the delicate touch of fingers on the Spanish guitar strings, the gossamer-smooth sibilants, the ethereal and breathy quality of the English Chamber Choir's chanting chorus lines during various sections of the score, left no doubt as to the amplifier combo's transparency.

I couldn't have hoped for a cleaner, more subtly shaded performance – delivered with supreme control at the frequency extremes. The vice-like grip and speed of the bass, clean coherence through the midband and clean,

explicit treble was fabulous. It made my resident Levinson No.383 seem bloated and slow when auditioned in quick succession.

The combo made easy work of Rickie Lee Jones's *Girl At Her Volcano* [Warner import, WPCP-3710], an early digital recording that was always something of a tracking challenge on its original 10in vinyl release. The MF's detailed and refined midband and treble was tied to a punchy bottom end and stunning dynamic range. 'Under The Boardwalk' was clearly etched with an open and airy quality despite the recording's relatively dry character.

And, of course, I came nowhere near to stressing the potential of the combo's power capability. With Rickie Lee's live rendition of 'My Funny Valentine', where her soaring vocal had me peeling myself off the listening room's back wall, after its conclusion, the M8 combo showed no hint of stress whatsoever. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

This enormously powerful pre/power combo sounds extremely refined, tracking dynamic swings in recordings with consummate ease. Given the eye-watering cost of today's ultra-high-end amplifiers – and the fact that a pair of M8700m monoblocks undercuts the price of Musical Fidelity's flagship Titan power amplifier by a not inconsiderable £8k – these M8 components can be considered a relative 'bargain'.

Sound Quality: 88%

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