

HiFi Magazine

# TRENDS

*Electronics & Design*

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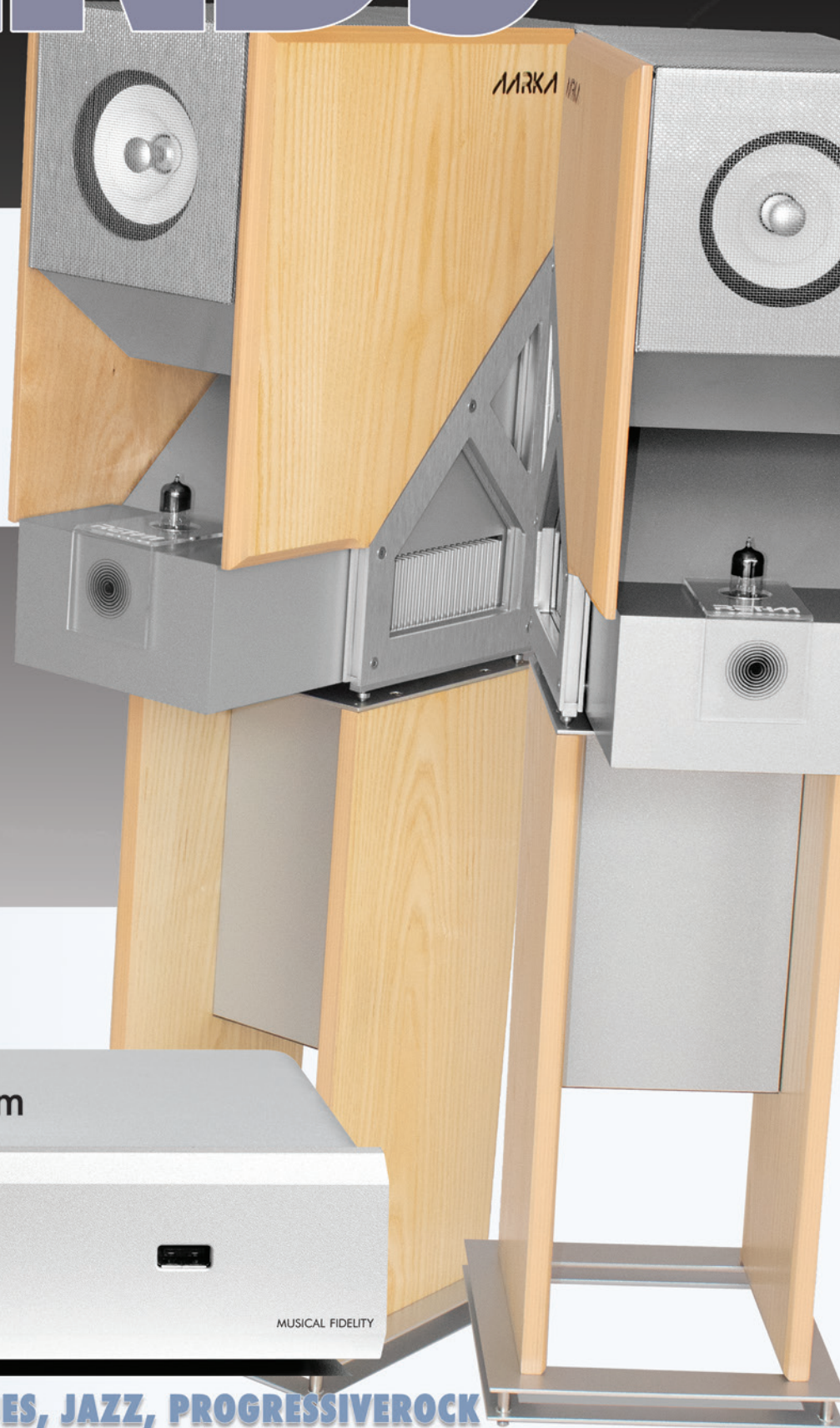
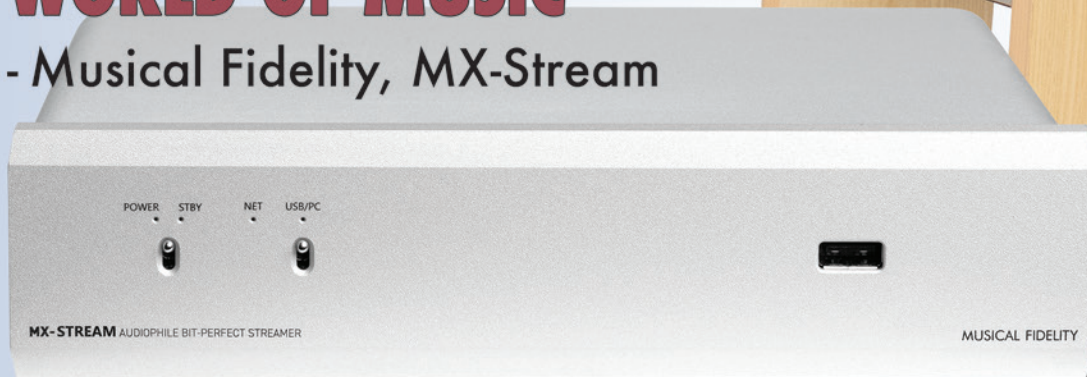
## SPICE MAKES TOUT NICE!

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## A WINDOW INTO A WORLD OF MUSIC

- Musical Fidelity, MX-Stream



Rhythm & Music: **CLASSIC, BLUES, JAZZ, PROGRESSIVEROCK**

## MUSICAL FIDELITY MX-STREAM NETWORK PLAYER



# A WINDOW INTO A WORLD OF MUSIC

BY JEAN-DENIS DOYLE

If there's one subject that polarizes the opinions of audiophiles, it's digital network audio. For a long time, discussions about cables sparked many debates on social media. Nowadays, topics related to digital network audio take center stage in the contentious audiophile argumentation. And it's easy to understand why. There are so many ways, devices, and technologies for accessing data from network music providers that it's challenging for an audiophile to navigate. For this review, I present to you the *MX-Stream* from **Musical Fidelity**. I'm well aware that the arrival of this new device won't simplify the debate in any way. However, it's a different and relevant device, aimed at a somewhat niche audience. At a reasonable price, it does things its own way and does them very well. It's up to you, as you read on, to decide if the **Musical Fidelity** *MX-Stream* will tempt you.

**M**usical Fidelity is a high-fidelity product manufacturer based in England. The company was founded in 1982 by clarinetist **Anthony Michaelson**. It became known for its warm and highly musical sound signature. This choice, boldly made by **Anthony Michaelson**, didn't necessarily receive unanimous praise from the specialized press at the time. However,

the sales success and customer loyalty of **Musical Fidelity** affirmed the correctness of his choices. Their most iconic product was undoubtedly the *A1* integrated amplifier. This legendary small amplifier operated in pure Class A, was affordable, incredibly musical, and brought joy to many audiophiles worldwide.

In 2018, **Anthony Michaelson** retired from **Musical Fidelity**, having earned a well-deserved break. Since then, the company



was sold to **Heinz Lichtenegger**. Through his company, **Audio Tuning**, which also owns **Pro-Jeck**, he took up the torch and continues the excellent work started by his predecessor. Nowadays, **Musical Fidelity** manufactures several product lines, catering to various budgets. Many new products have recently been introduced, including two acoustic loudspeaker models based on classic **BBC** designs and a reissue of the famous **A1** integrated amplifier. We are eagerly looking forward to reviewing that one! The device we're interested in here, the **MX-Stream**, belongs to the **MX** series, which is the most affordable lineup at **Musical Fidelity**. Let's now see what sets it apart from a technical perspective.

#### Technical Description

The **Musical Fidelity MX-Stream** is a device that bridges the gap between the digital sources you use and your audio system. These sources can be located on a local hard drive, a laptop connected via **USB**, or online music sites like **Tidal** or **Qobuz**. The **MX-Stream** allows you to route their digital data to your audio system while ensuring a minimal introduction of temporal errors (jitter). In fact, **Musical Fidelity** has labeled it a *Bit Perfect Streamer*. To achieve this, **Musical Fidelity** first and foremost

focused on improving the power supply of the **MX-Stream**. If you take a closer look, a significant portion of the device's chassis is dedicated to the electrical power supply of its circuits. Particular attention has been paid to voltage stabilization in various sections of the device.

**Musical Fidelity** engineers have placed great emphasis on the stability of the **MX-Stream's** internal clocks. The initial stages use an advanced multi-stage re-synchronization circuit. This circuit also cleans the digital signal to ensure its integrity and quality. Even the internal microcomputer has an audio-optimized clock. **Musical Fidelity** claims that this level of attention is well above the norm for a network player. The efforts of the **Musical Fidelity** team have produced excellent results, with the **MX-Stream** demonstrating clock stability at an output level of approximately plus or minus twelve picoseconds. This is a figure that a non-audio-dedicated computer would struggle to achieve. The internal microcomputer is based on a *Raspberry Pi CM3* board. Since it's an open-architecture microcomputer, **Musical Fidelity** promises that it will still be possible to update and optimize the **MX-Stream** even in the coming years. The **Musical Fidelity MX-Stream** has two **USB-A** format inputs and another in

**USB-B** format. The latter is intended for a computer and incorporates a circuit called *Detox* to prevent any form of contamination from it. Another **USB-A** port is located at the front and is designed for easy use with a **USB** stick or portable hard drive. An **RJ45** input is also present and allows the **MX-Stream** to connect to the world.

The **Musical Fidelity MX-Stream** can record digital music in its internal 16 Gb memory. Although this memory has limited capacity, it can still store a few albums for portable use when a network connection is unavailable. The **MX-Stream** has only one **USB-A** format output, optimized for audio, capable of transmitting signals in **DSD** up to the **DSD256** standard, as well as **PCM** signals up to 32 bits at 352.8 kHz. An **HDMI** video output allows you to connect a screen or television to display what's happening inside the **MX-Stream**. The device comes with a **Wi-Fi** antenna. The **MX-Stream** is powered by a small external 18-volt power supply, which is necessary for its operation.

#### Setup and Start-Up

Like all network players, the **Musical Fidelity MX-Stream** requires an app to operate. This app is also called **MX-Stream** and can be found in the app store on your tablet or smartphone. The operating

## MUSICAL FIDELITY MX-STREAM NETWORK PLAYER

firmware chosen by **Musical Fidelity** is *Volumio*. This firmware offers several adjustments that audiophiles will appreciate, allowing them to optimize the *MX-Stream*'s settings according to the needs of their audio system. However, it falls short in terms of user-friendliness and presentation when compared to an app like *BlueOS* offered by **BlueSound**. This leads me to believe that the *MX-Stream* is probably better suited for a technologically savvy audiophile audience rather than the average consumer. It's also worth noting that the *MX-Stream* has only a single *USB* output. Therefore, your converter must have a high-quality *USB* input, which is not always the case.

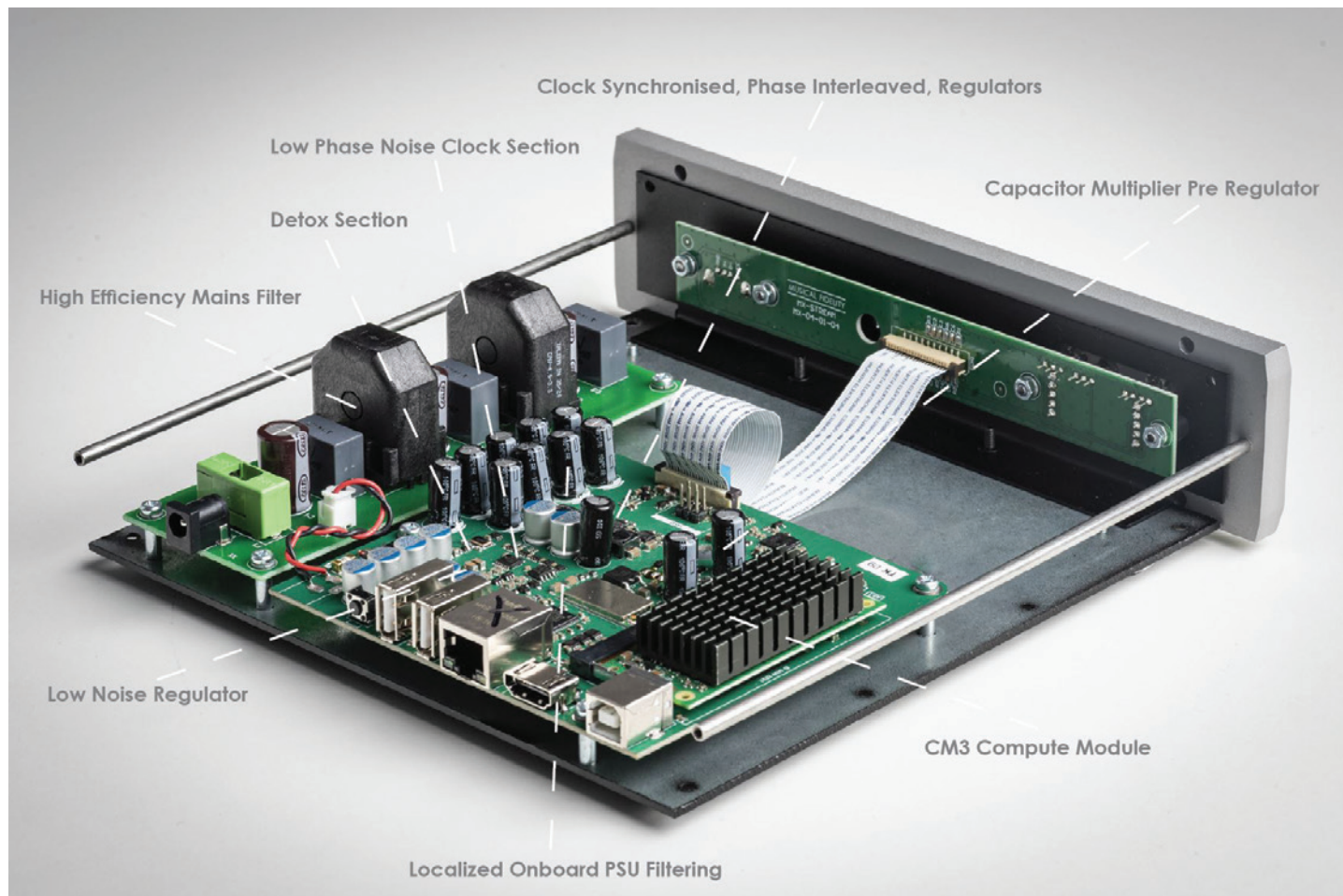
The *MX-Stream* also allows for connection via the **Apple AirPlay** protocol through the *Shareport* function. I conducted this review primarily using its natural companion, the *MX-DAC* from **Musical Fidelity**. The results exceeded my expectations, considering the price of both devices. The *MX-Stream* is of sufficient quality to feed a high-level converter like the *M6x DAC* from **Musical Fidelity**. There's no doubt that this pair should deliver absolutely stunning results.

I'd like to make a clarification now. Some *DIY* audiophiles might be tempted to claim that the *MX-Stream* is nothing more than a *Raspberry Pi* in a fancy box and that they could easily build a similar one at home. Not so fast! The *MX-Stream* is much

more than that in terms of engineering. I highly doubt that *DIY* enthusiasts can achieve results comparable to what the *MX-Stream* can deliver. In reality, the **Musical Fidelity** *MX-Stream* should be seen as the ultimate network player based on a *Raspberry Pi*, designed by a genuine and serious audio manufacturer with a strong engineering team.

### As Smooth as Crystal Clear Water

I admit I was completely surprised by the audio quality of this small network player. The music it served was incredibly smooth, with a very clear and unburdened quality. It allows you to peer deep into the mix of recordings with apparent ease. With **Pat Metheny** and **Charlie Haden**'s album, *Beyond the Missouri Sky*, the music flows in a relaxing manner, allowing a multitude of micro-details to find their place in the sonic landscape. This fluid and transparent sound doesn't demand any effort from the listener. That's precisely what you want when listening to digital music. This small network player adds a silky and luxurious quality to the listening experience and is worthy of a network player with a much higher price tag. **Pat Metheny**'s guitar is incisive and well-defined, engaging in a coherent dialogue with **Charlie Haden**'s double bass, and the album's 65 minutes pass by without you even realizing it.





### A Beautiful Tonality

The tonal accuracy of the *MX-Stream* is just as impressive as its fluidity. The bass is perfectly full without being overwhelming. The cymbals have just the right amount of brightness without becoming fatiguing. **Shelby Lynne's** vocals are delightful to listen to, with impeccable articulation. There's no hint of sibilance to mar the performance. Her voice is rich and realistic. The presence of the singer's voice, especially on the track *I Only Want To Be With You*, is outstanding. The music is exquisite, and the *MX-Stream* from **Musical Fidelity** allows it the space it needs for better appreciation. In short, to perfectly describe the **Musical Fidelity's** sound, it offers abundant beauty.

### A Word About Its Companion

I conducted most of my listening tests with its companion, the **Musical Fidelity MX-DAC**. Although this device has been on

the market for a while, it complements the *MX-Stream* so well that I couldn't overlook it. The synergy between the two devices is absolutely perfect. Together, they form a formidable pair with astonishing performance considering the asking price. In fact, for around \$2,500, this combination is simply unbeatable in terms of musicality. The range of musical qualities it offers is quite impressive.

### Conclusion

Here we have a remarkable network player whose sound qualities in terms of fluidity, timbre, and timing deliver top-tier musicality. Extremely transparent, it's like an open window to music. It's more suitable for a technologically savvy and informed clientele who can fully appreciate its performance. And please note that under optimal conditions, especially when paired with its companion, the *MX-DAC*, the **Musical Fidelity MX-Stream** is a true

champion capable of delivering the best. Manufactured with care in Europe, its price is reasonable, and it truly deserves the time it takes to listen to it.

### GENERAL INFORMATION

Musical Fidelity MX-Stream

Price: \$1,099

Warranty: 5 years for electronic and server parts and labor; 2 years for mechanical section; 1 year for the remote control

Distributor: Focal Naim Canada,  
Phone: 1 866.271.5689,  
<https://www.focalnaimamerica.com/>

### Mediagraphy:

Pat Metheney & Charlie Haden,  
Beyond the Missouri Sky, ECM, Qobuz file.

Shelby Lynne, Just a Little Lovin',  
Lost Highway, Qobuz file.

