

Musical Fidelity M6 Encore 225 music system

by Nicholas Ripley

Some products are a little hard to categorise. This one isn't. This is the one-box system Musical Fidelity head honcho Antony Michaelson wanted for his own use. It's not designed to fit a niche or a gap in the market, and it's not yet another range-filler; the M6 Encore 225 was developed so that Antony could have a streaming, playing, ripping, all-in-one for his home.

Antony figured that what he wants from a system is very likely what other people in his place want from a system. Normally, this would send alarm bells ringing, and visions of 'Designer's Folly' models that only make sense to the engineer who dreamed them up come to the fore. But, in fairness, Antony has form. He has a track record of making things that he would like for himself, that go on to be hugely successful when sold to the public. It's why classic Musical Fidelity designs like the A1 integrated amplifier happened; Antony wanted a small Class A integrated amplifier to make a great sound, and the world agreed. A more conservative boss would have made a more conservative product, one that was simultaneously more powerful and less capable of doubling up as a barbecue griddle, and it would have sold in conservative numbers. OK, so not all of Antony Michaelson's wish list has proved so popular, but his success rate is exemplary.

In designing this basically for the boss, Musical Fidelity has deliberately stayed away from making a ludicrous product, or one that is so complex that it would cost tens of thousands to build. The M6 Encore 225 has, at core, the amplifier of the M6si integrated amplifier and an M6si case (with a different front panel, of course), a slot-drive CD player that also rips to a built-in hard drive, and the lessons learned from the short-lived M1 CLIC streamer in the company's portfolio. It connects to practically everything audio or computer-based in the home and is ideally designed to be driven by the company's own app. There are two versions of the M6 Encore; the 225 integrated model tested here, and the M6 Encore Connect, which is designed to replace the source and preamplifier in an existing system. The two are functionally identical apart from the power amps, and it would be likely that the Encore

Connect sounds marginally better than the 225 because of the absence of power amps in the one box. As we didn't have both side-by-side, this remains speculation.

Both versions of the Encore are also designed to be fast. Navigating and accessing tracks through the app is blisteringly fast compared to most of its rivals, with no noticeable latency between Encore and iPad. Connection to other storage devices on the same network is quick, too, and the Encore allows both USB thumb-drives, and can charge its navigational iPad friend too.

This speed comes at a bit of a cost. The Encores have heard of Plug 'n' Play, but want no part of it. There is no 'automagically' to the Encore (good thing too as it's a terrible portmanteau word). However, that also means DLNA support doesn't exist, which is kind of odd for a network player like this. This also means set-up and configuration is painstaking and not for the network illiterate. And if you move house or change networks, you need to actively remove the previous network details before installing the new ones. I guess Antony is a one-house kind of guy.

Similarly, the process for storing your own music files or rips from the onboard disc player is not automated, and instead requires you dragging and dropping the files on the player's local webpage using Google Chrome. It's second nature once you get used to the process, and is reliable, robust, and fast, but runs counter to the normal automated process. It's a bit like manually editing metadata on each album to fit your own file-sorting system; it's probably the right way of doing things, but it's far from the easiest way.

This is getting the negatives out the way up front because the rest of the story is much more entertaining. The Encore has 1TB of onboard storage as standard (this can be upgraded, with twice the storage for an extra £80), and includes TIDAL integration and comes with a touchscreen (that in the photos supplied seems to have been replaced with some kind of postcard of London) and web integration that makes the product both quick to use and intuitive... after a while. The Encore 225 is very modal in operation. You touch one of the hard buttons to switch to a menu screen where what looks



world like touchscreen buttons are on display, which actually control with the dial and buttons. Again, this is logic all round: where most companies have taken hard drive away to an external box (possible a network drive) and are used to touchscreens, his thinking is to all the music under the one roof, and to rely on buttons. I can't help feeling that he's actually speaking to a generation of people who grew up with CD and are reluctant to change because streaming is 'more complicated'. It's easy for it-savvy people (as in, practically everyone under the age of 30), and a few of us the other side of that great divide) to see this viewpoint as that of a Luddite, but the fact remains that we do state this view with remarkable frequency and they largely ignore by the audio industry. Musical Fidelity is one of the rare exceptions, here. This also explains the use of the CD. It defaults to ripping standard on the Encore 225, because the path of least resistance holds. You don't want to have to press lots of buttons to do something you are probably going to want it automatically. Of course, you can play without ripping, the system is optimised toward that ripping solution. I'd like to say the Encore 225 sounds better as a ripper than a CD player, but that certainly seems to be the case.

The Antony-as-archetype approach also perhaps explains that 1TB hard disk, but this is somewhat harder to stomach. Where most products of its ilk today place the onboard operating system in EPROMs and remove the music to an external or network-attached hard drive of some description, the Encore 225 has both running on the same drive. Notionally at least, there is little to grumble about this, because laptops and computers have been doing this for years. However, discs crash and putting both OS and music on the same drive in a potentially 'always on' music system might mean one day you reach for your Encore 225 and it's taken out both player and your music collection. Backing up your music is possible of course, but a product designed for this degree of user-driven convenience doesn't imply a robust back-up system. Paranoia aside, this approach does have its advantages in speed of access and simplicity of installation. I suspect this is more about trends within the audio industry; products that have the same on-board approach to music are popular choices in the catalogues of Burmester and Naim Audio, so it keeps good company.

One of the great shames of the modern age is remote handsets are getting very good at precisely the time we replace them with iPads. Such is the case here!

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It's that iDevice application that makes the biggest difference, though. And it's here where Musical Fidelity's approach makes a lot of sense. The MF app is not without its occasional quirk (few apps are bug free, even those made by huge corporations like Amazon have their idiosyncrasies), but what it has in its favour is speed the likes of which you don't commonly attribute to tablets. It's the lack of latency that hooks you; navigate your music, or swipe through internet radio stations, and almost as soon as you commit and press the button, the Encore responds. This is like using a conventional infra-red remote handset and pressing 'play' on a cued-up CD, and if you've ever used an app-based approach to getting music out of your audio system, you'll know that it is almost completely, but not quite, the opposite to that sort of quick. Some systems – admittedly from a few years ago – were so glacial in approach, you end up mashing soft buttons on the iPad, which then invariably leads to a variety of commands all being actioned at once. Before your system plays its approved track, it's run off and played, paused, played again, jumped forward three tracks, tuned to a radio station, then another, and uploaded another track. Leaving you bewildered and annoyed. The Musical Fidelity app and Encore combine to never do that, and the sense of relief that instantaneous response brings is really important and should not be underestimated. Button mashing is not a thing of the past, but it is severely curtailed here.

The lack of latency even extends to network storage, although this is inherently laggy and the Musical Fidelity makes the best of a bad job. I used a Naim UnitiServe to feed the Encore 225 through my network and the player was about as responsive as it gets, even challenging Naim's own products in context. That is a remarkably good result. It also proved flexible enough to accommodate Naim's somewhat 'distinctive' file structure and architecture without problems.

As the rear panel (above) shows, the Encore 225 also sports three analogue and digital inputs and two sets of analogue outputs, one of which works well as a home cinema throughput (although there isn't provision for 'dimming' the volume control). These worked extremely well when used with a good quality CD source and the output of the Naim SuperUniti (although why you would add a CD player and a streamer to a device with both CD player and streamer is beyond me), and suggests the amplifier stage is, at the heart of the system, what generates much of the ultimate performance of the Encore 225. And a lot of that amplifier performance is about complete control over the loudspeakers. There is a distinct MF-signature to the sound that has been present for years, and is retained here. That's not the small, rich, and fast sound of something like the classic A1; it's that warmth with the big, beefy, full-throated bass sound of something like the A300. Perhaps more recently, you could put the M6i and now the M6si in the same ball-park.



This makes the sound of the Encore 225 very versatile – extremely muscular. It has that lively (and, to many people, a bit) extended, honest top-end with MF's characteristically rous midrange, and a bass that is made for a bass – be it orchestral, jazz, or rock. It's an everyman amplifier, a man was built like a small tank and was capable of being practically any kind of music he liked. Naturally, the dynamic range is outstanding, off-the-top good, as if it were a hefty pre-power design instead of an all-in-one player. This is met by an excellent soundstage; it's not the most mellifluous and widest soundstage you'll hear, but possessed of great depth and with some of the most solid, 'you are there' sounds within that image. It's a real, visceral sense of musicians standing in a three-dimensional space, albeit one that's more like a long corridor or a wide auditorium. This is in no small part exaggeration, but the Encore 225 does have stage width, it's just that if you expect huge vistas of soundscape, the Musical Fidelity Encore is more about widescreen than Cinemascope. Coherence is good, too. The emphasis on the bass stays on the right side of being overt, but on a larger two-way system, the integration between top and bottom can become noticeably better than usual. This tends to make itself felt most in string quartets, lieder, and solo piano, where the need for an instrument to retain its cohesiveness across several registers is key. This is virtually a 1% problem, in that 99% of people listening to 99% of music on 99% of loudspeakers will simply hear an amplifier that hangs together stiffly and is possessed of a deep, rumbling, powerful bass line. In fact, on many speakers, that ability to define a clear bass line will help make big speakers out of little speakers, a Musical Fidelity trait. There's something analogous to generosity of spirit in the way through the sound of the Encore 225 that applies regardless of what input you use, and regardless of the quality of the music played on that input. It just makes that music sound better, like it's got an enjoyment filter.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Streaming, all-in-one ripping CD player/amplifier
Analogue inputs: 3 x Line Level RCA 300mV nominal 2V typical up to 7V rms

Digital inputs: 2 x optical S/PDIF 24 bit inputs up to 192kHz, 2 x coax S/PDIF 24 bit inputs up to 192kHz, 1 x USB 3.0 type 'A' connector, 1 x USB 3.0 type 'B' connector (for future expansion), 3 x USB2.0 type 'A' connector (1 front, 2 rear), 10/100/1000 Base-T Ethernet connector

Outputs: 1 x line level fixed 2.0V @ 0dBFS (300mV rms nominal, >6V rms max), 1 x line level preamp variable outputs (>6V rms max) (Preamp gain, line input to preamp outputs is 4.5x (13dB) at maximum volume), Headphone output suitable for headphones impedance 8 ohms to ∞. (Headphone output features independent volume setting)

Digital precision: 1 x optical S/PDIF 24-bit output up to 192kHz, 1 x coax S/PDIF 24-bit output up to 192kHz

Speaker outputs: 1 pair 4mm banana plugs per channel

Power output: 225 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms

THD (+ noise): <0.007 % typical 20Hz–20 kHz

Signal to Noise Ratio: >107dB 'A' - weighted

Frequency Response: +0, -0.1dB, 10Hz to 20 kHz

Internal storage: 2.5" 1 TB SATA II hard disk (included) or SSD (future upgradeable)

Dimensions WxHxD: 44 x 12.5 x 40cm

Weight: 23 kg

Price: £4,399

Manufactured by: Musical Fidelity
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This is a precision instrument, one that combines power and subtlety in equal measure. OK, so the Musical Fidelity Encore 225 has its operational quirks, but many of them ultimately turn out to be more to do with the way people (specifically Antony Michaelson) operate audio equipment. If you are migrating to audio from the iPhone place, this is probably not for you, but if you want a one box place to take on what happens after CD in high quality, look no further! ➤