



One is fun

The Encore 225 has been designed to offer the convenience of streaming without the complexity. **Ed Selley** goes back to basics

In the deluge of extremely flexible and innovative network devices that turn up for review, it is easy to lose sight of the large number of audio enthusiasts still using physical media looking at this breathtakingly sophisticated armada of gear and thinking: "I've no idea what to do with that". For all the oft-repeated mantras about network audio being simpler than ever, it can still be intimidating to get up and running. Into this gap steps Musical Fidelity's Encore 225.

The Encore takes a rather different approach to the business of streaming material and accessing streaming content. There's an Ethernet port allowing access to a network that can be controlled via an app to access the world of streamed content – in this case Tidal and TuneIn internet radio. So far, so normal, but after this things work in a slightly different way.

What that Ethernet connection won't do is directly access stored content on a NAS or similar device. Musical Fidelity has instead fitted the Encore 225 with a 1TB internal hard drive (accessible via the back panel from a clearly marked drawer, allowing for future expansion), which you add playback content to. This can be done in two ways. Pop a CD into the slot-loading mechanism on the front and it will look up the content and rip it to the internal drive. Should you want to simply play the CD, you can do this too via a function in the menu. If you already have content that you've ripped, tagged and stored as music files elsewhere, you can add it to the hard drive by dragging and dropping. The Encore 225 will add the content and then check the metadata so that it reads it the same way as any other existing music that's on the hard drive.

DETAILS
PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity Encore 225
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
One-box music system
WEIGHT
23kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 125 x 400mm
FEATURES
 • Quoted power output: 2x 225W (8ohm)
 • 1TB HDD drive expandable to 2TB
 • Digital inputs: 2x optical; 2x coaxial
 • Analogue inputs: 2x RCA; MM phono stage
DISTRIBUTOR
Musical Fidelity
TELEPHONE
0208 9002866
WEBSITE
musicalfidelity.com

This is entirely straightforward to do and the software proves itself to be stable and reliable during testing, but I do think it is a little limited. If you already have a music library stored elsewhere, you'll need to add files to the Encore's drive before you can listen to it. This is done via a drag-and-drop process using Google's Chrome web browser, and is simple enough but frustratingly time consuming. The decision not to fit a wireless connection is also puzzling. It means that the Encore will need to be in tethering distance of your router to deliver the best results, although Musical Fidelity claims that having the content on the unit improves the latency of its performance.

Happily, the rest of the specification is very encouraging. There are three analogue inputs, four digital inputs (two coaxial, two optical), preamp and line outputs as well as a selection of USB connections for charging and reading content off of sticks and thumb drives (but not, at the time of writing, decoding incoming USB digital). One notable omission from the spec is Bluetooth, which although not yet within the realms of hi-fi acceptability is an integral part of the specification on many rivals.

These inputs are backed up by the amplification from the M6Si (HFC 400) integrated amplifier, which means that you have 225W at your

disposal – a figure that comfortably eclipses most all-in-one rivals. In use, there is no shortage of power, but the volume gearing is a little odd in that the unit only really gets into its stride at about 60 percent volume or greater. Once past this point, however, the volume level grows swiftly and in a usefully linear way and it is hard to imagine any owners running out of power.

This functionality is built into a single large but elegant chassis that features prominent heatsinks to keep everything under the hood cool. Importantly for a device that contains a hard drive and supporting hardware, there is no audible

Classic Musical Fidelity elegance

CONNECTIONS



- 1 2x USB ports
- 2 Speaker binding posts (left)
- 3 Pre output
- 4 Coaxial & optical digital inputs
- 5 Expandable HDD

mechanical noise from the chassis and no sign of cooling fans or other noisy paraphernalia from a computer. The front panel mounts a full-colour display that you can use to navigate the menu system and bring up artist and album information. The menus are logical and easy to navigate using the left-hand rotary control and forward and back buttons – or indeed via the remote control or the app. The display is clear and easy to read and the Encore feels solid and well assembled. The remote handset works well and the downloadable control app is also fairly well thought out. Housekeeping can be a bit hit and miss and logging into Tidal, for example, is probably best done using your computer.

Sound quality

Whatever reservations I have about how the Encore 225 accesses content needs to be balanced against the sparkling sonic performance that it offers. Connected to a pair of Neat Momentum 4i floorstanders, it demonstrates an effortlessness and level of control that's not often associated with single-box devices. With the 16/44.1 download of Public Service Broadcasting's *The Race For Space*, the Encore 225 is superbly entertaining. The slow building *The Other Side* is involving and spacious, but underpinned by real low-end authority. When the climax of the track comes in, there is the sense of there being plenty of power in reserve to handle anything the recording is likely to throw at it.

Some tests with hi-res material are even more impressive. The 24/96 download of Craig Armstrong's *It's Nearly Tomorrow* has a fluidity and smoothness to it that is entirely free from anything you might attribute to a digital recording. Brett Anderson's vocals in *Crash* have all the weight, texture and outright realism that

gives the track its emotional content. There is a vast and unfettered sense of space to the presentation as well with the soundstage extending beyond the loudspeakers and having an unusual sense of front-to-back depth to it.

An initial listen might leave you thinking that the presentation is a little on the soft side, but stick with it and you begin to realise that while the upper registers are completely free from harshness or aggression, there's nothing missing or artificially rolled off. Even 'ordinary' 16/44.1 material has a refinement and

It will comfortably front a considerable system and have few problems doing so

smoothness to it that is somewhat unusual and this only improves as the sample rate increases. This refinement makes the Encore 225 supremely easy to listen to and a highly flexible partner across multiple musical genres.

The caveat to all of this is that if you really do want something to be delivered with a slightly ballistic edge, the Musical Fidelity can seem a little too polite for its own good. *Pistol Of Fire* by Kings of Leon should be a frenetic two-minute thrash with big crunchy guitar riffs and staccato vocals. Here it feels just a little too 'nice', as if this is the version that the band did for daytime television. The actual timing and rhythmic agility is commendably good, but it never quite has the sense of attack and bite that really quick and energetic material requires to sound at its very best. On the plus side, it does mean that even some very rough and ready recordings are entirely listenable and I can't see anything but the most

Q&A

Anthony Michaelson
Founder, Musical Fidelity



ES: What prompted the decision for Musical Fidelity to return to the all-in-one system market?

AM: All our products are effectively designed in consultation with our customers and our retailers. Plus, also from my personal observations of how people have changed the ways in which they consume and enjoy their music.

In the case of the Encore 225 we were asked to create a superb sounding but easy to live with solution that answered both the continued move away from physical media and the increasing demand for 'connected' products.

The fitment of an internal hard drive is relatively unusual, what is the thinking behind it?

There were a number of reasons. First was outright sound quality. The Encore 225 is independent of the quality of the network connection or the quality of other third-party equipment on the network.

Second was speed, and with the Encore 225 everything is available instantly, whether finding and playing music or for moving between sources. There are no silent pauses. Thirdly, we consulted with our customers and they wanted Musical Fidelity to build a solution, they didn't want to try and cobble together their own. We provide total quality control.

A number of features have recently been added to the Encore 225, are any more planned?

We have designed the Encore 225 to include a very large system memory and very fast processor so it is very easy for us to offer the potential of continuous upgrades to ensure that the product is never out of date. That extends to new features where we'll continue to respond to customer demand.



Onscreen menu navigation is handled by the left-hand dial

wildly unsuitable loudspeakers pairing badly with it.

The considerable choice of inputs offers the same levels of performance as material played off the hard drive. The Encore 225 comfortably serves as the amplification for the bulk of the testing on the VPI Prime Scout (see p16) and a very fine job it does too. Some tests with the Musica MPL (HFC 421) via its analogue and digital outputs suggest the Encore will give you a very faithful representation of what the device in question is capable of. Supporting as many inputs as it does, it will comfortably front a considerable system and have few problems with any of it.

Some quick tests of the internet radio and Tidal functionality are also

Even some very rough and ready recordings are entirely listenable

largely positive. The performance of albums streamed via the service compared with the same material stored on the hard drive is largely imperceptible and the considerable refinement that the Encore possesses is helpful at keeping even quite heavily compressed internet radio material listenable. Compared with something like the Simaudio Moon Neo ACE (HFC 420) (see How It Compares), the control interface can feel a little lacking in slickness, but it proves to be stable and easy to use throughout the review process. In a welcome piece of additional functionality, although the headphone socket can't match the spellbinding performance of some of the company's dedicated headphone

amplifiers, it is more than up to the job for some late-night listening from time to time. The noise floor is low and has the same easy flowing performance as with its loudspeaker outputs, as well as a decent level of power on tap.

Conclusion

Summing up the Encore 225 is tricky because I am some way down the streaming rabbit hole already so have to accept that certain things I take for granted are not applicable here. I cannot just point the device at my music library and access it – but Musical Fidelity is working on the principle you don't have one of those in place. I like to check the accuracy of my rips before I add them to the library, but also accept that the Encore's ripping and tagging system is hassle free and appears entirely effective. Where I might see limitations, many people will see a very clever and fuss-free device. The Encore 225 might be a slightly specialist proposition, but the convenience it offers combined with excellent audio performance is likely to win it many friends



One of the more interesting rivals is the fractionally cheaper Moon Neo ACE (HFC 420). The Encore 225 has vastly more power, inputs and the option to store its own content to which the ACE can only really respond with a phono stage and Bluetooth. In flexibility terms, the ability of the ACE to access a network library is a big bonus. The big power output of the Encore means it has far better control over insensitive speakers and is more forgiving of poorer recordings. The ACE hits back with a faster and more intense performance. As it is, the ACE narrowly ends up looking the more future-proof option.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Superb sound across all inputs; great functionality and excellent build
DISLIKE: Clunky app; does its best work at higher volume levels
WE SAY: A seriously accomplished all-in-one that should be on everyone's shortlist

OVERALL

