

McIntosh MTI100 Integrated turntable

by Simon Lucas



Not all audiophile satisfaction is delivered aurally. Protest all you like that sound quality is the be-all and end-all, we all know there can be more to sonic gratification beyond straightforward sound quality.

Take, just as a for-instance, a softly glowing green light. Or a big, bold brand

logo in a none-more-heavy-metal gothic typeface. Neither of these things are going to directly enrich your audio experience – but let's not pretend they have nothing to contribute to your overall listening enjoyment.

For over 70 years McIntosh has been delivering some of the most forthright and fulfilling experiences available anywhere in the world of hi-fi. It's been mostly doing so thanks to a sort of rigorous, wide-screen, 'iron fist/velvet glove' sonic characteristic that's routinely able to make a listener's hair stand on end. But it's also developed an unmistakable aesthetic that's undeniably contributed to the overall experience of McIntosh ownership, beyond the sound it produces. ▶

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▶ Not too many hi-fi products can provoke longing in prospective customers before they’re even making a noise. But McIntosh’s line-up is full of them. And with the MT1100, the studied McIntosh come-on is as strong as it’s ever been.

By the standards of a company that’s no stranger to delivering stereo amplification in three hefty boxes, the MT1100 is a remarkably flexible and self-contained device. Described by McIntosh as an ‘integrated turntable’, it’s a record player, an integrated amplifier and wireless receiver – all in an enclosure that will only occupy one shelf of your kit-rack.

Yes, it looks like a turntable with a basement. But check out that oversized logo, check out those lighting accents. Look at that pair of valves. You’re halfway to wanting one, aren’t you? And that’s only from seeing a picture.

Nothing about the MT1100’s feature-set is likely to dampen your ardour, either. As far as the turntable element goes, a 3kg aluminium platter is belt-driven by a permanent magnet AC synchronous motor. The speed-change

between 33.3 and 45rpm is a manual exercise. The straight, machined aluminium tonearm is pre-fitted with a couple of hundred quid’s-worth of Sumiko Olympia moving magnet cartridge. The whole assembly is mounted on a 10mm-thick pane of glass.

Beneath the glass, inside the substantial metal casework, there’s Class D amplification to the tune of 50 watts per channel (into an 8 ohms load). It’s prefaced by a main preamplifier section that’s driven by the two 12XA7 vacuum tubes. This pair of caged valves also provide the majority of the visual drama on the plinth of the MT1100 itself. A dedicated phono preamp inside a shielded box completes the amplification story.

On the back of the unit there is a single pair of speaker binding posts. So, if you own a pair of speakers and a vinyl record, the MT1100 is ready to go. But because this is a self-contained system, the rear panel also features a Toslink digital optical input, RCA digital optical socket and single pair of line-level stereo RCA analogue inputs. In terms of outputs, there’s a single pre- for a subwoofer, and two pairs of RCAs arranged in a bridged in/out fashion in case you’re overcome by the desire for a power amplifier.

There’s also space for a stubby Bluetooth aerial and the McIntosh is packing an eccentric (but effective) Bluetooth 4.2 via Sierra BC127 module specification, which puts aptX HD capability on the menu. All incoming digital information is dealt with by a Cirrus Logic DAC with a native 24bit/192kHz resolution. It’s a proven device, not exactly at the cutting edge of digital audio management but as reassuring as shopping at John Lewis.

The front of the unit is dominated by the brand logo, of course, but McIntosh has also managed to squeeze in a 6.3mm headphone output socket. ▶



- ▶ Cans are powered by the company's 'High Drive' headphone amp, which is intended to give the widest possible compatibility with (wired) headphones.

Given that it is (to a large extent) a record player, there's a lot of manual operation involved in the MT1100. It's supplied with a modest and nondescript remote control (that needs a proper line-of-sight to the IR sensor just above the headphone socket if it's going to be of any use), and while it's hardly the most luxurious item in the world it does, at least, feature only as many buttons as is necessary.

While virtually everything else about the product seems to have a sort of bank-vault solidity about it, that doesn't wholly extend to the two rotary/push controls at the bottom

left of the top-plate. As they control volume, input selection and wireless pairing, an owner will be in contact with them fairly regularly and the accuracy or alacrity of the way in which they both function and feel is crucial. That being said, the functionality is excellent and the feel is entirely consistent with the 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air-esque looks of the McIntosh MT1100. So 1950s in fact, you have to actively try not to play Buddy Holly tracks at first.

Get some appropriate speakers attached, though – this test was almost entirely conducted using Acoustic Energy's AE1 mkIII SE standmounters – and the MT1100 sounds so articulate, so candid, that nit-picking about the weight and tactility of a couple of controls seems churlish-going-on-irrelevant.

As a turntable, the McIntosh manages to deliver on almost everything vinyl enthusiasts prize about the format. A heavy pressing of Thom Yorke's *Anima* [XL] has all of the low-end presence and solidity you could hope for, but still manages to describe precise, straight edges to the attack and decay of the muscle-bound bass synth sounds. Jabbing, chirping electronic pulses in the midrange track Yorke's treated vocals in precise, unwavering orbits, while the surging treble rushes in and out of the mix cleanly. The weight and momentum of the sound is predictable, but the speed and crispness is perhaps less so.

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At its heart this is a recording that makes as much use of absence as it does presence and the MT1100 serves up this sparseness in really convincing fashion. The wide-open spaces, the cavernous gaps between instrumental strands, serve to illustrate the McIntosh's ability to create a big, convincing soundstage and to lock each sound on there with absolute certainty.

Switching to an entirely different flavour and temperature with Tubby Hayes Quartet's *Grits, Beans and Greens: The Lost Fontana*

Studio Sessions 1969 [Fontana] allows the McIntosh to demonstrate its facility with texture as well as tone. The scandalously indulgent bass-walks, the instinctive flow of Hayes' tenor sax and the meticulous percussive washes are all loaded with detailed information and as a result, the music sounds freshly laundered. Forging over this amount of detail without sounding in any way prissy or analytical is no easy task, regardless of how much McIntosh is charging. The mastery of low-level harmonic dynamics on display here is considerable.

The story is similarly agreeable from other sources, too. Whether it's a TIDAL Masters stream of Lana Del Rey's *Ultraviolence* [Interscope] via Bluetooth or a CD copy of Funkadelic's *Free Your Mind... And Your Ass Will Follow* [Westbound] via the digital optical input, the MT1100 draws a big, vivid ▶

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▶ picture with the same low-end speed and extension. Detail levels are sky-high, and vocalists are given the elbow-room to properly express themselves. The even-handedness of the journey from the bottom of the frequency range to the top is gratifying, while the unity and togetherness of collective performances (whether it's the Tubby Hayes band or Funkadelic) contributes to timing so instinctive it's almost matter-of-fact.

At 8 ohms impedance and 87.5dB sensitivity, the Acoustic Energy loudspeakers present an unremarkable load. Yet it's only where broad-strokes, loud-quiet-loud dynamics are concerned that the MT1100 is anything less than thoroughly convincing. It's not bereft of dynamic headroom, of course, but putting meaningful distance between the softer, more contemplative moments in a recording and the 'final chorus before the outro' climaxes is not the McIntosh's forte. On paper, 50 watts per channel ought to be enough to give a crescendo the intensity it deserves; but somehow the MT1100 doesn't seem to breathe quite deeply enough. Oh, it'll go plenty loud enough if that's how you like it, but that means even the quiet bits will be pretty loud too.

In every other respect, though, the McIntosh is a thoroughly satisfying, periodically thrilling listen. Seven grand spent elsewhere will buy you similar functionality and similarly enjoyable performance, naturally; but not from one box. And certainly not from one box with a unique look that's basically shorthand for 'enlightened, serious and judicious'. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated turntable system with phonostage, DAC and hybrid two-channel amplifier

Analogue inputs: one unbalanced line-level (via RCA jacks)

Digital inputs: one coaxial, one optical

Bluetooth: A2DP, AVRCP, SBC, HD

Phonostage: Built-in Moving magnet

Analogue outputs: one unbalanced line-level (via RCA jacks)

Supported sample rates: 16Bit, 24Bit–32kHz to 192kHz

Power output: 50wpc @ 8 Ohms

Headphone loads: 100–600 Ohms

Bandwidth: 20Hz–20kHz

Distortion: THD < +/- 0.5%

Signal-to-noise ratio: 93dB

Distortion: 0.2% from 20Hz to 20kHz

Signal-to-noise ratio: 75dB

Turntable section

Rotational speeds: 33.3, 45 rpm

Drive mechanism: Belt driven via AC motor

Platter type: aluminium, 3.18kg

Tonearm

Type: damped machined aluminium, lateral bearing

Tonearm Length: 9"

Phono Cartridge

Type: moving magnet

Stylus/cantilever: elliptical/aluminium

Tracking Force: 2.0g

Load: 47kOhms

Dimensions (HxWxD):

172 × 489 × 356mm

Weight: 15.2kg

Price: £7,500

Manufacturer: McIntosh Labs

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