

Return of the Mac

Here's a small system with bags of charisma and retro charm – but you'll have to pay big money for it, says **David Price**



► DETAILS

PRODUCT
McIntosh MXA70

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Integrated
audio system

WEIGHT
23.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
559 x 276 x 457mm

FEATURES

- Claimed power output: 50W per channel into 8ohms
- 4x digital inputs: optical; coaxial; USB; AES/EBU
- 2x analogue inputs: RCA and XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Jordan Acoustics Ltd

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WEBSITE
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The small system isn't a new idea. Indeed, those outside the rarefied climes of separates hi-fi would probably regard it as the norm. After all, do we really need yards of pressed steel casework, acres of cables and multiple power plugs? For that reason alone, since the late seventies when Aurex sold its first microsystem, many folks wanting decent quality sound from a system taking up only a small space have eschewed traditional hi-fi.

In the case of the new McIntosh, there's an extra dimension – if you pardon the pun. You see, it's a rather special brand. Those who are older will have known it for a good many decades, and know that traditionally the company makes very high quality – and seriously large – separates. Its amplifiers are a particular favourite of mine, not just because of the sound but also the retro styling, which has never really gone out of fashion.

In the MXA70, you see the latter in full effect. It looks like a McIntosh amplifier that's shrunk in the wash. The two power meters are pure affectation; in practice they're pretty useless because the ballistics of the needles

It has a smoothness and a refinement you wouldn't expect from a mini system

aren't fast enough to capture peaks. The reason they're fitted, of course, is that they are iconically McIntosh; it would be like a late fifties Chevrolet without fins, were it not thus equipped. So not only is the MXA70 a high quality mini system, it is a McIntosh too, and advertises its status from the moment you power it up and those meters start glowing bright blue back at you.

The problem is that it costs £5,995, not an inconsiderable sum. Who would pay such an amount for a product such as this? I suspect the company wants to sell to existing customers – who doubtless have a spare bedroom or four, plus a kitchen and triple garage to fill with sound. And there's also that new demographic, lifestyle consumers who want a lovely thing – that just happens to play music.

The MXA70 is a smallish, but not tiny one-box system that comprises a power amplifier, DAC, analogue preamplifier and a good-quality headphone amplifier that sports a new adaptation of McIntosh's Autoformer technology to give three headphone impedance ranges. Added to this, there's a Headphone Crossfeed Director (HXD) ►

feature to allow high-quality recordings to image like conventional speakers, the company says. Last but not least, there's a pair of very nice looking compact loudspeakers bundled, too.

The amplifier section is an old-school Class AB design using the company's ThermalTrak output transistors, said to have precise bias current control for ultra-low crossover distortion. It's claimed to deliver 50W into 8ohms, although the company says it isn't rated

A solid and conscientious product with oodles of high-end charm

for 4ohm operation. The DAC section uses the popular Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC chip, and offers coaxial, optical, AES/EBU and USB inputs; two line inputs are offered, one via RCA phones and the other via XLRs.

The supplied loudspeakers are made in the USA and are very well presented. A 20mm dome tweeter with dampening cloth surround, said to give high sensitivity and an extended response free of break-up modes, is fitted. At 2kHz this crosses over to a

100mm treated paper (with a rubber surround) bass unit, using a curvilinear cone profile. A fairly complex 14-element crossover is fitted, and sensibly includes a self-resettable fuse. McIntosh says second-order filters are used on both midrange/bass and tweeter for improved power handling and vertical dispersion.

The MXA70 is a beautiful thing to look at, with an excellent finish. From the mirrored lower chassis to the flawless satin black of the transformer casings, there's nothing not to like. The binding posts are good and chunky, and McIntosh supplies two runs of good spade-ended loudspeaker cable. The blue fluorescent front panel display matches the power meters perfectly and the control knobs resemble grown-up McIntosh products, although the action on the volume control is a bit sharp.

Sound quality

Starting with the standard analogue input and MXA70 sounds lots of fun. It has a clean, fast and direct sound, but is decently sophisticated too; indeed it reminds me of a full-size Macintosh amp. It's certainly not a soft and fluffy

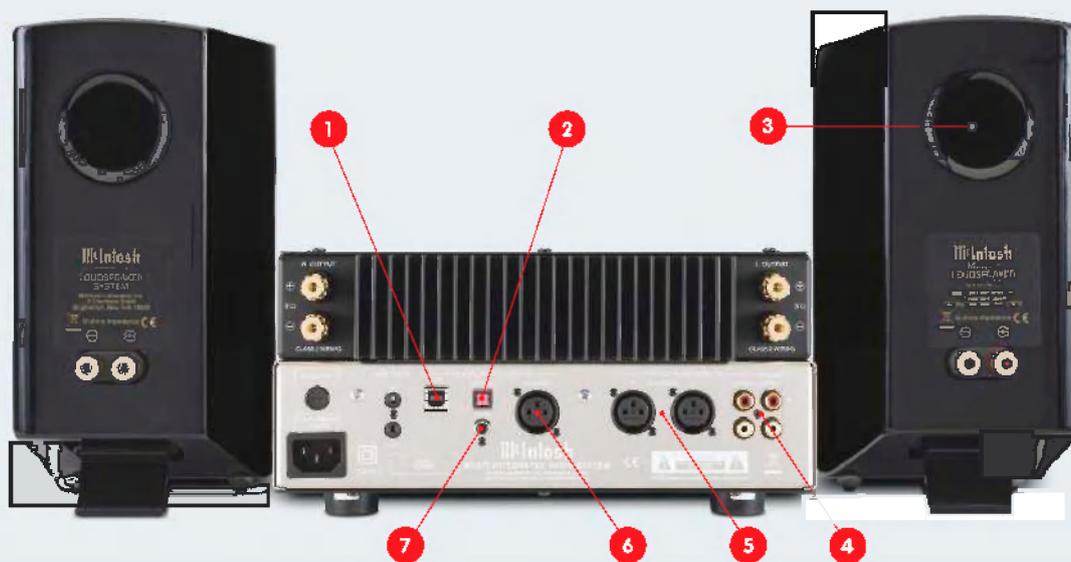


It's hard to compare the McIntosh MXA70, because there's nothing on sale quite like it. Prospective purchasers might look to something like Naim's SuperUniti with stablemate Focal Electra II 1008 Be standmount speakers (£3,045). It isn't quite as compact, has a wider feature set including uPhP streaming, more power and more upgradability. The sound is considerably better too, with a more open and dynamic character and lots more detail. It sounds more musical, more three dimensional and as good as any other grown-up hi-fi around at this price. That said, it isn't the wonderfully easy 'plug and play' design that the McIntosh is.

delivery; there's no artificial added warmth but it has a smoothness and a refinement that you wouldn't expect from a mini system. 4hero's *Give In* via the unbalanced analogue input really communicates the urgency and the intensity of the music.

The loudspeakers are optimised for tabletop or bookshelf use, and benefit from being pushed closer to a rear wall than is normal, and slightly toed-in. Thus positioned they made a nice noise, but you'd never accuse them of having an overly powerful or extended bass. This is simply because of the physics involved; they're small and simply cannot reach down to the bottom octaves. Again, given the fact that it's a small system, this could even be seen as a plus point, as they're not likely to set off room resonances.

Feed the unit with a good CD transport via its coaxial in, and the sound tightens up further, and fills out a little spatially. It's a pretty wide presentation, and suddenly acquires even more thrust, at the expense of a little warmth. The McIntosh has a lot of get-up-and-go and this is even more apparent when you dispense with the analogue input. Supertramp's classic *Breakfast in America* album is a little forward on CD, but the Macintosh remains smooth and enjoyable with no



- 1 USB type B input
- 2 Digital optical input
- 3 Rear-facing bass ports
- 4 Analogue RCA audio inputs
- 5 Analogue XLR audio inputs
- 6 Digital AES/EBU input
- 7 Digital coaxial input

65 YEARS OF SOUND

McIntosh is one of the United States' most respected hi-fi brands, and has excellent provenance by any standards. Frank McIntosh founded it in 1949, in Silver Spring, Maryland, and now builds its products at the Binghamton, NY factory where the company has been since 1956. It is, and always has been, an amplifier specialist – from the original 'Unity Coupled Circuit' design and the company's first AE1 preamp in 1950 to its debut power amplifier in 1954, the MC60 (which

originated the company's trademark chromium chassis, as seen on the MXA70) – and has always made interesting products. It has never stayed out of the limelight, from its involvement with the Woodstock festival in 1968 where it supplied the amplification, to the Grateful Dead 'Wall of Sound' gig in 1974 where 28kW of power was served up, it has had a close involvement with the pro world. It has been responsible for a range of innovative loudspeakers, and some

superb tuners, too. Later in the eighties and nineties, it moved into offering superb bespoke car audio systems, and even an aftermarket one for Harley Davidson motorcycles. In 2005, the Reference System reminded people that its heart was in high-end separates hi-fi, offering a breathtaking sound from an admittedly rather large stack system. Recently, it has gone the other way with a range of high-quality, compact one-box systems of which the MXA70 is the flagship.



shrillness or glare. It gives a bright, bracing sound, but one that never descends into fatigue-inducing hardness. Indeed, it really manages to capture the poignancy of the song, tracking the dynamics well and doing really well with the rhythms.

Room to breathe

Via USB, Air's *All I Need* is sweet and spacious, the unit never proving boring but certainly not overly hard either. The fulsome bass guitar is carried well, giving a bouncy and sumptuous feel, and you can really hear the instrument starting and stopping in the mix. The drive it gives to the song keeps things in the groove, while the midband carries the vocals with sensitivity and sophistication. It images well and pushes things wide stage left and right, although it doesn't drop things back quite as far as it should. Overall, it functions very capably being driven with a computer as a transport.

The main problem here is the speakers; they're good but they're not as special as the main unit, by a fair way. Which is why the company has made serious provision for headphones, that and the fact those living in space-limited places may rely on them. Via Philips Fidelio X1s, it's a satisfying sounding product giving one great insight into the music. What it can't do is give the clarity, power, precision and grip of a full-sized system costing a similar amount of money; still the McIntosh covers its tracks well and is never less than a pleasing partner to play music on.

Conclusion

The McIntosh MXA70 is a lovely system alright, one that's very hard to dislike. Any concerns that the company has done a cynical 'cash-in job' to leverage its brand should be abandoned here; the unit is a solid and conscientious product with oodles of high-end charm. Still, it is not going to get you replacing your main system, I suspect. It's a fine small system, but isn't wondrous in any sonic sense. Indeed its problem is that there are several very good, and substantially cheaper one-box systems on sale that match or even better it for sonics. That's why, if you want style and/or the kudos of the brand, you should seriously consider this dinky diamond, but don't expect it to give the ultimate sound-per-pound, because it doesn't. Part of what you're paying for is the cachet of owning a real genuine McIntosh product, and for many that will suffice ●

The blue front panel display matches the iconic meters perfectly

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

<p>SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★</p> <p>VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★</p> <p>BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★</p> <p>FEATURES ★★★★★</p> <p>OVERALL ★★★★★</p>	<p>LIKE: Lovely styling; great build; fun sound</p> <p>DISLIKE: Lacks scale and insight; expensive</p> <p>WESAY: Charming, characterful one-box system, but it will cost you!</p>
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Q&A

Charlie Randall
McIntosh President



DP: Why have you produced a one-box audio system? Isn't McIntosh a separates brand?

CR: Yes, we are a high-end separates brand, but we are not just that. We've been offering complete audio systems like the MXA70 for five years now. That's because we saw the need for a smaller, self-contained systems that still produced high-end sound for people who may not have the space for a larger separates system. Regardless the size of a McIntosh model, the same level of audio engineering, quality control and hand craftsmanship goes into it so that resulting sound performance will always be to McIntosh's standards.

What is special about the headphone stage?

Well, it can deliver 1W minimum into any headphone impedance from 8 to 600ohms. This is made possible by the unique McIntosh Autoformer, which matches the amplifier to the wide range of headphone impedances in three ranges. The Autoformer also optimises the signal to noise ratio for each impedance range.

How would you describe the sound of the MXA70?

It is very clean, accurate and full; it has a wide panoramic with depth of sound stage imaging. The loudspeaker enclosure aids with this. The enclosure is cast aluminium with a high gloss black finish and includes a bottom device for setting the speaker at either a 10° upward angle or straight firing. The enclosure's rear port enhances the bass response.