



McIntosh MA6900 amplifier

Let's do the time-warp again: retro styling and a classic sound

PRICE	£3990
SUPPLIER	Absolute Sounds
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Never let it

be said that variety is in short supply amongst hi-fi designers. In contrast to nearly every other model in my continuing series of integrated amp reviews, the McIntosh MA6900 stands out like an off-roader amongst grocery carts. Indeed, two specifications make it immediately apparent that the McIntosh arrived from a completely different direction than (especially) the slim-line Krell and Pink Triangle or the diminutive Red Rose Rosette: this device measures a massive 445 x 180 x 460mm (whd) including connectors and weighs a serious 18kg.

Because McIntosh is as much a tradition as it is a hi-fi manufacturer, and because its current owners haven't dumped all over its legacy as has happened with other luxury products (I can name car and watch companies which have been whored to death), there is no identity crisis. The MA6900 unashamedly reeks of retro, of Mac-ism, with its real glass front panel, its gilded knobs, its massive 'Peak Responding Output Meters' — blue-lit analogue dials being as important to McIntosh as the round cream-coloured modulometers are to Nagra. Mac's meters are calibrated in 'watts output', and they

'respond 95% full scale to a single cycle tone burst at 2kHz — almost 10 times faster than a professional VU meter.' They look so cool when the room is dimly lit that you're forgiven for turning-off the lights just to bask in their glow.

It's genuine time-warp stuff, despite the modernism imparted by its suitability for custom installation and home theatre integration. There's a shopping list here that is true to the Binghampton Creed, just as Jaguars (X-type aside) should boast wood and leather interiors: a stainless steel chassis; the massive, proprietary 'Output Autoformers' which provide amplifier matching for 2, 4 and 8 ohm speaker loads; controls — fashion be damned! — for loudness compensation, mono selection and five-band equalization via rotaries operating at 30, 150, 500, 1500 and 10k Hz, +/-12dB, the design being an 'Exclusive McIntosh Equalizer Circuit'.

McIntosh is the antithesis of the still-current-after-25-years School of Minimalism. No doubt due to its primary audience consisting of wealthy professionals, McIntosh doesn't believe its clientele should suffer any inconvenience. Thus, the MA6900 boasts full remote control over six program sources (Phono/Aux, CD1, CD2, Tuner, Tape, and Video, including one XLR balanced input marked CD), with all functions operated by 'Logic Driven Electro Magnetic

Switching' for reliability and low distortion.

This integrated, by the way, boasts so many layers of protection that one cannot imagine any circumstances under which it would take out your speakers or your home: thermal sensors to turn-off the output when improper loading or ventilation causes overheating; turn-on delay to prevent thumps; a 'Power Guard' circuit — a waveform comparator which monitors the wave shape of the amplifier input and output signals — to prevent clipping while protecting speakers from damage; an electronically-regulated power supply to maintain stable operation 'even during "Brown Outs" or low line voltage'; direct-current speaker protection which shorts the MA6900 to ground if for any reason a DC voltage appears at the amplifier output; a Sentry Monitor to sense the dynamic operating time, voltage and current of the amplifier output stage to confine it to non-destructive limits and more. Paranoia? Sure — but so-o-o reassuring. Especially if you've ever seen flames from your system. As I have.

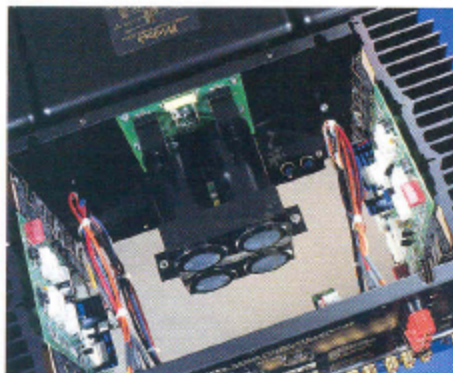
Although the front panel is crammed with lights, meters, buttons and rotaries, there's a sense of sanity about it because the design is symmetrical and wholly functional. The meters occupy the upper half, flanking the Power Guard tell-tales. Below are two large rotaries for balance and volume, on either side of the five equalizer controls. Below this, from left to right,

are the IR sensor, a row of six buttons for source selection, a headphone socket, six more buttons for mono, output selection, mute, loudness and standby, and lastly the primary power on/off. McIntosh recommends leaving the unit in standby when not in use; warm-up takes a good hour by my aural reckoning.

Your eyes will pop out when you see the back, wondering if someone slipped in an A/V receiver when you weren't looking. The upper section contains two vertical rows of multi-way binding posts for 2/4/8 ohm speaker selection; XLRs for the balanced CD input sits in-between. Across the bottom is the IEC mains input, followed by a dozen small sockets and a large screw terminal for controlling an external video switcher (offering five more A/V inputs), powering up other components, mating the unit to a keypad for a second room, and other functions related to custom installations. The remaining sockets are conventional, gold-plated phono for all sources and tape in/out, pre/main separation, and a tiny toggle to choose set the phono/aux to either (m-m) phono or line level; there's also an earth post for a turntable. The remote performs all major functions, as well as controlling other McIntosh components.

If you accept that the McIntosh experience is to audio what Leica cameras are to (film) photography, the performance is almost secondary because you assume it will be stellar. The reason you 'buy into' McIntosh is because you want to be part of that culture, of unparalleled back-up, Mercedes-like reliability, faultless build-quality, timeless styling, small 'c' conservatism. But all of that is worth nothing if it doesn't deliver sound quality approaching the best. Fortunately, after a dark era when the company seemed to go out of its way to aggravate subjective listeners, the company returned to performance-related matters and has not had to apologise for anything for nearly a decade. The MA6900 will, then, confound those who refuse to accept that something so sensibly, intelligently designed and manufactured, and can hold its own against self-immolating, ugly, over-priced but politically-correct garbage from the cottage industry.

In direct contrast to Pink Triangle's Integral, which offered a wide but shallow sound stage, the McIntosh offers a blissfully deep soundstage but one which barely extends beyond the speakers. I used the Mac with Wilson WATT Puppy System 6s, Wharfedale Diamond 8.1s and Apogee Scintilla speakers, and the effect varied not one bit. When you consider that this amplifier is sized like a monster stand-alone power amp rather than a convenience-and-compactness-to-the-fore integrated, this aspect does make it sound 'small'. I say that only because the consensus seems to suggest that stage width is more important to most listeners



As with valve amplifiers, the MA6900 uses output transformers for impedance matching

than stage depth (which explains how certain fifth-rate British amplifiers have managed to survive for so long). It's not that the Mac is a poor stereo performer — the stage depth will dazzle you — but it does confuse listeners who have grown used to sound way beyond the speakers' edges. Yes, it can be remedied in part by repositioning your loudspeakers, but at the expense of stage depth. Then again, you have a lot of the latter which you can sacrifice.

Like the Gryphon, the MA6900 was easy to listen to due to its delicacy and refinement, while at the same time offering seemingly limitless power and an ability to behave like a wild animal when required. But I noticed a curious phenomenon, one which will amuse reviewer Jimmy Hughes, who — I believe — was one of the first to postulate that every piece of music has an optimum playback level.

This, of course, is logical: if you were sitting at a specific position at a given concert, there would be a 'true' sound level. Whatever, it was a rare observation of Jimmy's with which I actually agreed. The McIntosh made this concept an even more vivid concern, and setting the volume reminded me of focusing a manual camera. It provided a narrow band where the level was nigh on perfect. A dB or two either way and it lost precision, grew a shade shouty, or became nasal. And rather than seem a hindrance, this quality merely reinforced the notion that the McIntosh was a true high performance device.

The MA6900 was so convincing with vocals that I found myself gravitating toward unplugged performances, lean country or folk recordings, gospel and a capella. The sheer power allowed the Mac to deliver the goods with ease when it came to orchestral, heavy metal, bass-heavy dance mixes and the like, but there was an eerie sensation that the actual amplifier seemed to be enjoying itself when I fed it the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, Dolly Parton's or Alison Krauss' bluegrass ventures, or Sarah Vaughan on Classic vinyl.

The McIntosh MA6900 emulates the Krell for sheer grunt, the Gryphon for finish and finesse and the Pink for user-friendliness and build

quality. Conversely, it adds its own characteristics of retro appeal, limitless flexibility, and a distinctive but always pleasing sound. But it has one other trait that will make the bile rise amongst the more left-wing readers.

Sorry, but at £3990, I have to declare the Mac a bargain. It offers incomparable perceived value, a reputation for dependability and factory support second to none in the entire audio industry, and an ability to impart the same sort of user confidence which will prevent me from buying the Alfa Romeo I covet in favour of something from the Fatherland. Maybe it's the easy option if you're looking for a huge integrated amp at this price point, while your audiophile tendency is screaming 'No!', just as some photographers are still resisting digital cameras because of similar prejudices. Forget that, please: listen to your brain this time, and I promise you that your heart will not complain. This amp is a dream. **WORDS: KEN KESSLER**

TECHNOLOGY

The MA6900 is clearly aimed at the power user, delivering 200 W/ch with both channels operating, into a load impedance of 2, 4, or 8 ohms. THD is vanishingly low at 0.005% maximum with both channels operating from 250 milliwatts to 200 watts each into 2, 4, and 8 ohm speaker loads, while IM distortion is stated as 0.005% maximum if instantaneous peak power output is 400 watts or less per channel with both channels operating for any combination of frequencies from 20Hz to 20,000Hz. Frequency response is +0, -0.5dB from 20Hz to 20,000Hz and s/n ratio a ghostly 110dB below rated output, with the phono stage measured as 90dB below 10mV input.

KEY FEATURES

- Expansive stage depth
- Full remote control, compatible with other McIntosh components
- Boasts a high degree of protection