stereophile
Electronically Reprinted from November 2002

Sam's Space

Sam Tellig

Larry Fish called the other day. You've met Larry here before—he's vice president of product planning for McIntosh Laboratory.

I like to give Larry a hard time—especially about tubes. Larry used to head up McIntosh's engineering department, and he's very much a measurement man.

"I have a product you might want to review," said Larry. "It's our first CD changer in five years."

"Gee, Larry, is it tubed?"

"No, it's not. But you might like it anyway. It matches your McIntosh C2200 preamp and MC2102 power amp." Both of those products *are* tubed. Larry went on to say that the new McIntosh MCD205 CD changer doesn't sacrifice performance for convenience.

A few days later, on his way to visit family members nearby, Larry brought it by. We put it into my main system, with the aforementioned Mac tubed separates and my reference Quad ESL-988 speakers.

Larry clutched two pairs of thin wires terminated by miniplugs. "These are for the Power Control. I think I remembered the lengths you need." He ran one wire between the C2200 preamp and the MC2102 power amp, and another wire between the C2200 pre and the MCD205 changer.

"Watch this," he declared, and turned on the preamp.

A trigger in the preamp turned on the other two pieces.

"That's great," I said. "Now I don't have to walk across the room to turn on the power amp." Just what I need. Less exercise. [*See Sam's photo in September, p.35.—Ed.*]

My friend Marc explained the attractions of a CD changer: "I can load several discs and have music for an entire evening. I don't have to get up during a meal. I can play a long symphony or an opera straight through."

Marc's five-year-old changer worked okay but didn't sound so hot. So he bought an outboard digital processor, running a TosLink optical digital cable from his changer to a Monarchy Audio 24-bit/96kHz DIP, and then an AES/EBU digital cable to an MSB Link DAC III processor with upsampling. That goes straight into his Boulder amplifier, which has level controls. No preamp. Like me, Marc is a big fan of electrostatics. He owns a pair of MartinLogan Ascents. Starting with an ordinary changer, he has achieved great sound.

I told Marc I'd just received the McIntosh changer.

"You won't want to give it up," Marc predicted.

The MCD205 has immediate appeal to McIntosh fans. It sports the familiar glass faceplate, while the blue alphanumeric fluorescent display matches the displays on other Mac gear.

The McIntosh MCD205 CD changer, coming and going.

The MCD205 offers balanced and unbalanced analog outputs, optical (TosLink) and coaxial digital outs. Solidly built, the unit weighs 21 lbs. I tried to guess the price.

"$3995?"

"No," said Larry. "$2495."

Of course, you can buy a CD changer for far less. I've seen some for as low as $99.95. But flimsy build quality is not what McIntosh customers want. They build custom cabinets or inwall shelves for their gear. They don't sell the stuff; they keep it.

The chief design engineer for the MCD205 was Ted Saito, and there's a story here. Ted was born in Japan. As a youth, he lusted after McIntosh gear. ("*Tube* Mac gear, I'll bet," I needled Larry.) He went to work, in Oneonta, New York, for a subsidiary of a Japanese company that made depth-sounders. He subsequently married an American woman and decided to stay in the US. On discovering that McIntosh Laboratory was located nearby, he "knocked on the door," as it were, in Binghamton, New York, and was hired.

Ted has worked at McIntosh for 18 years, which makes him a relative newcomer. He worked for more than a year on the MCD205, more or less orchestrating the whole product—software, circuit design, PCB board layout.

The heart of the MCD205 is a Music Bank transport made by Nakamichi, something you won't find in any $99.95 Circuit City CD changer special.

"Our friends at IBM put us on to it," Larry told me. "They use it for data storage. The mechanism is robust and reliable."

You insert up to five discs, one at a time, into a slot, and the MCD205 deposits them in the Music Bank. There's no flimsy tray, no drawer, no carousel, no loud grinding of gears. Loading is fast, and so is ejection.

According to Ted, the MCD205 uses a CS4396 stereo DAC from Cirrus Logic. It's a multibit, as opposed to a single-bit, IC. "The [multibit] architecture improves most of the audio specs," Ted told me.

I asked Ted about upsampling—the so-called (by me) Magic Bullet.

"There's a lot of confusion between oversampling and upsampling," Ted said. "I think they're the same, and a few companies are using the word 'upsampling' instead." (John Atkinson has said much the same thing. Perhaps he'd like to insert a footnote now.[1]) I can't argue, not being an engineer.

I *have* heard great sound from upsampling DACs and CD players. And there's one difference: the upsampling process adds eight bits of random dither to bring the CD's word length up to 24 bits. Whether dither is desirable is open to question, however. Dither, by definition, is noise.

I wasn't going to get all a-dither. What matters is not upsampling or oversampling, or multibit *vs* single-bit. What's important is how well a chosen technology is implemented and how the resulting product sounds. I found the MCD205 to be a stellar performer in every respect. I was surprised. It took me a while to get over my prejudice about changers. Most are mere appliances. Well, the MCD205 is a true high-end hi-fi product, not an appliance.

I appreciated the speed and steadiness with which the changer ingested and ejected discs. The MCD205 was quick and easy to use, even if I wanted to play just one disc. Operation was user-friendly, for the most part—meaning I

didn't have to refer to the instruction manual.

But programming is for the intrepid—as it is, perhaps, with any CD changer. The MCD205's well-written manual devotes nearly three pages to programming the player. According to the manual, you can program and store up to 50 different "Program Steps." A Program Step can be a single track or an entire disc. First, though, you have to make sure that each disc's table of contents (ToC) is stored in memory…

Thanks, but no thanks. I simply loaded my classical discs and played them in sequence.

For popular music of the 1920s and '30s, I took a different tack, and this one *was* easy. I loaded discs by Bing Crosby, Ukulele Ike, Kate Smith, Al Bowlly, and the Boswell Systers and hit Random Play. The Mac mixed them up, hopscotching among the five discs at random, and surprisingly quickly. There was little mechanical noise. It was like having an automatic disc jockey. Marc marveled.

Since the Cirrus Logic DAC in the MCD205 outputs a fully balanced signal, Larry suggested balanced interconnects between the changer and preamp. He supplied a 1m pair of Tributaries Silver Series SCA2200. This interconnect looks like a million bucks but retails for a reasonable $200.

"You mean McIntosh hears differences among interconnects?" I inquired.

Larry smiled.

"Do *you* have a favorite interconnect?"

I love to tease Larry—he's so loath to admit anything subjective. And he made it clear that McIntosh does not endorse any particular brand of interconnect or speaker cable.

"Thanks for the wire," I said. "Now I'll have to come up with some adjectives to describe this interconnect."

He groaned.

"Let's see. 'Open'? 'Transparent'? How about 'coherent'?"

The conversation went nowhere, but the Tributaries cable turned out to be all of those things, providing performance without the hype. Substituting a generic balanced interconnect furnished by another manufacturer, I noted a slight loss in overall sound quality.

I used a 6m balanced run of Kimber Silver Streak—another favorite—between my C2200 preamp and MC2102 power. While neither is a fully balanced design, running a balanced interconnect can quiet things—especially with such a long length. It's not only obvious noise, like humming or buzzing. "Quiet" can mean a lack of grunge or electronic haze. Sometimes the difference is subtle, sometimes not.

I let the MCD205 cook for at least 100 hours before I sat down to some serious listening.

The sound was most impressive. The MCD205 conveyed a sense of authority. It was unflappable—like Larry Fish! The sound never compressed or collapsed, even on loud orchestral passages. I thought that small-scale dynamics (so-called "microdynamics") were well-rendered, too, thanks to excellent low-level resolution. The sound was full-bodied, never thin, irritating, or edgy (unless the recording was really rotten). For sure, the MCD205 never exacerbated poor recorded sound quality. Quite the opposite. A number of discs I had admired as performances but not as recordings became more listenable with the MCD205—smoother, more extended, less objectionable.

What's important is how well a chosen technology is implemented and how the resulting product sounds.

I heard excellent bass extension, definition, and speed. And yes, the midrange and treble were nicely handled, too—the top was smoothly and sweetly extended.

Perhaps upsampling is *not* the cat's whiskers, after all. Maybe oversampling serves just as well, or better. Maybe Ted Saito is right. I trust Ted and the other engineers at McIntosh. They don't rush things, and they don't adopt everything new that comes down the pike just for the sake (perhaps) of marketing hype. Still, I was curious.

I decided to try upsampling. The MCD205 has optical and coaxial digital outputs, so I tried the Musical Fidelity A3^{24} DAC with upsampling. I used a coaxial cable and set the Musical Fidelity at 96kHz. I ran both into my McIntosh C2200 preamp: the MCD205 with its onboard DAC *vs* the MCD205 as transport for the A3^{24} DAC. I was able to switch from one to the other by using the McIntosh master remote. (I could have used the C2200's trimpot feature, but the two sources were at equal levels. The C2200's power-level meters *can* be useful.)

I expected to hear the same dynamics and authority with the Musical Fidelity DAC as with the MCD205 on its own, and I did. I also expected to hear "benefits" from upsampling—a little more low-level resolution, perhaps, combined with a touch more ambience and air. A little more extension and delicacy in the treble, maybe.

What I actually heard surprised me.

I heard no differences at all between the Musical Fidelity DAC and the MCD205 left to its own devices, as it were. This is not to say that the A3^{24} isn't an excellent DAC—it surely is—or that I take back the good things I've said about upsampling players. But on its own, the MCD205 performed equally as well as the MCD205/A3^{24} combination. I found it impossible to tell which was which.

The McIntosh MCD205 screams "Keep me!"

I did note a difference when I substituted the Musical Fidelity NuVista 3D CD player for the Mac MCD205 changer. With a good piano recording, the instrument sounded more immediate, more there. I heard more of the attack and natural decay of each note. Who knows? If McIntosh had "tubed" the analog output stage of the MCD205, perhaps they might have achieved a similar sound. At any rate, the NuVista 3D is no longer available, retailed for $4995 when it was, and doesn't offer the convenience of a changer.

And so the McIntosh MCD205 screams "Keep me!" At $2500, the sound is hard to beat, the convenience is fabulous, and the build quality looks outstanding. At last—a changer that looks…well, made to last. ⊠

1 Okay. See my December 2000 "As We See It," available online at www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?344. **–JA**

Contacts

McIntosh Laboratory Inc., 2 Chambers Street, Binghamton, NY 13903. Tel: (607) 723-3515. Fax: (607) 723-1917. Web: www.mcintoshlabs.com.