



# Antony Michaelson, Musical Fidelity

Musical Fidelity's outspoken founder and managing director, Antony Michaelson, recently visited Australia to launch a number of new products, and announce that we can expect even more new products from Musical Fidelity in the very near future. Reviews editor Edgar Kramer, took the opportunity to record the following interview...

**AHF:** *If I can start-off with the legacy of the past, what prompted the re-release of the updated thirty-year-old A1 products in light of your already strong current product line-up?*

**AM:** Well, I don't believe that my product line-up was that strong...

**AHF:** *You're very modest...*

**AM:** ...well, in terms of business ... there was obviously a strong demand for iconic Musical Fidelity products, and as much as I can, I try to listen to what my customers say. That's why the A1: there's a demand for that iconic product.

**AHF:** *Is that what prompted this unusual A1 'fine-tuning' service and in light of shipping costs is it being used by mainly the UK local market?*

**AM:** Yes, we only encourage customers from the UK because of freight costs and possible damage which is too difficult to deal

with. We're getting some overseas enquiries and that's quite interesting. It tells you something about our customers. We're getting enquiries from the US and all over Europe to fine tune and it tells you something about the buyers...

**AHF:** *That they're loyal?*

**AM:** Yes, that too, but also their passion for Musical Fidelity.

**AHF:** *Within the context of a global financial crisis, and consumers' increasingly 'green' mind-set, Musical Fidelity has released not only high-price statement products in the Titan and Primo but a power-hungry pure class-A amplifier in the AMS50. What's the company's expectation on the products' market acceptance?*

**AM:** Most people don't listen to their system for more than a few hours a day, a couple of hours or a little more, whatever it is. So the

actual amount of power consumed is not that huge. I also think that the type of person who will buy this product, I mean their passion is not an unproved hypothesis of global warming, it's their music. That's what their priority in life is and that's what my priority is too.

**AHF:** *How is Musical Fidelity handling the tough economic times in terms of marketing strategies?*

**AM:** We are surviving the storm... it's very difficult and in the last year we made our first ever loss, but that's one of those things. We've had very many good years and occasionally in business you have to make a loss. You have to decide whether you're a short-termist or a long-termist and I believe in the long term future, so I won't say I was happy to take the loss, but I took the loss like a man. During the last year we have changed our company pro-



file entirely and we're using this opportunity to reinvent Musical Fidelity.

**AHF:** Which, in a minute, will bring us to your new products, but just before that, can I ask what, in your opinion, apart from the small size of the local market, are the specific marketing challenges related to this country... if any?

**AM:** The mains power supply in Western Australia.

**AHF:** Is it still high?

**AM:** Yes, but it's both very high and very distorted so between the two it makes it extremely difficult.

**AHF:** Especially for Class-A amplifiers which may run even hotter...

**AM:** Any amplifier. It's the same problem.

**AHF:** So what are the design and technology differences between the previous statement kW and the Titan amplifier for example?

**AM:** Seven years of intensive R&D.

**AHF:** Tell us more...

**AM:** Well, as we go on, we learn more details. Actually 'details' is too big a word. Fine

nuances of what make circuits work, and why they do what they do and how they interact. And we're talking about—in engineering terms—microns. Very, very small differences have an affect and the further down the performance envelope you are, the more difficult it is to find these performance differences. That's one reason why the Titan took seven years to develop... because it's really hard to find out how to improve the kW.

Now, if I was to bring out the kW now, everybody would be gaga over it, the way they were to start with, because from any company, it would be an amazing product. To improve upon that is a very difficult task. Does the Titan invalidate the kW? No. If the Titan were night and day better than the kW, then everything I said about the kW would have been bullshit because it really, *really* was that good. It's just that the Titan is a more nuanced design with different priorities and a more subtle sound, but I'm not talking night and day. There were only 75 kW's and there are only going to be 40 Titans and that's it.

**AHF:** Have any of the lessons you learned with the Titan been applied to the AMS products or are they a totally different topology?

**AM:** Now this is interesting actually. The AMS circuit is the same as the Titan. That's something! But with fewer output transistors...

**AHF:** But the Titan is not a Class-A design...

**AM:** That's what is interesting. Here we have two almost polar opposites in design applications. With the Titan we developed an amazing circuit and we thought, what the heck. With the AMS50 we said, 'let's take the Titan circuit and see what happens.' It was like a duck to water, it worked absolutely brilliantly so that when you listen to the AMS50, it has many of the characteristics of the Titan. For example, the Titan is extremely fast on the transients, but more importantly on the other side of the transient, it's equally as fast and that's a characteristic of the AMS50 as well. But the AMS50's sound balance, being pure Class-A, is different to the Titan and





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what is so *arresting* in all this is that when you listen to a Titan and you measure a Titan, it's as near as makes no difference, perfect. It's completely convincing from a sonic point of view and incredibly fast and dynamic and does all those things... but when you measure it, it's verging on perfect. So then, with trepidation, if you're the owner of the company, having designed the AMS50, you go and put your Class-A on immediately after you've been messing-about with the Titan and you say, "oh my God, it's going to be sad" but it's not... it's also completely convincing.

**AHF:** Is that brute force bass control there despite the power output of the AMS50 being so much lower?

**AM:** I don't want to get this wrong... yes, it is! It's very disturbing because it shouldn't be. I don't profess to know what's going on here and I had to do an awful lot of research and spent some time on this to find out what the hell is going on. Because on the face of it the Titan is in a league of its own in amplifiers; it measures incredibly—and the review

in *Stereophile* confirmed all those measurements, so it's not just me saying that. The AMS50 measures very similarly, except with less power, but what is fascinating is the difference in sound quality and the fact that both implementations of that circuit—the very high-powered one and the low-powered one—are completely convincing.

**AHF:** Is Musical Fidelity researching any Class-D technologies?

**AM:** I think they are all absolutely diabolically bad.

**AHF:** Surely not all?

**AM:** All of them.

**AHF:** Can you elaborate?

**AM:** The point is that Class-D amplifiers, in terms of review, depend on the prejudices and narrow-mindedness of the reviewer—and here I mean the technical reviews. If you measure them using digital test equipment you can't actually see what they're doing. However if you measure them using analog test equipment, so you can see what they're doing wideband, it is shocking.

**AHF:** What about those reviewers that have had positive experiences based purely on listening, and made no measurements?

**AM:** My belief is that before you worry about what something sounds like, you worry about how it measures. I do not buy into rampant uncontrolled subjectivism. I do not accept that. Things have to be technologically proper before you start worrying about their sound quality because the whole thing is so fraught with difficulty. It may be that a technically fraught amplifier happens to suit somebody's room or somebody's speakers and it may sound great, but on anything else it will sound lousy. I think that is a shocking disservice to the reader.

**AHF:** Do you see any future in Class-D technology?

**AM:** There are designs coming along that look promising.

**AHF:** Is Musical Fidelity looking into some of those designs?

**AM:** Do we walk along with blinkers on our eyes and bungs in our ears? No we don't,





we're interested in looking at the future.

**AHF:** In order to complement the new amplification products, is Musical Fidelity planning to re-enter the speaker manufacturing business?

**AM:** The politics make it too difficult. And also, given the economic times, I think you're better advised to concentrate on what you're doing and make sure you do it as near to perfection as you can manage.

**AHF:** Are any of the technologies—for example in the digital products—outsourced to specialist companies, or is the design done in-house?

**AM:** All done in-house. Everything.

**AHF:** Do you prefer to specialise in one design area and leave others to your other design engineers or are you across everything?

**AM:** My strengths, if I have any, are that I really understand a wide range of audio topics. So therefore, when I'm talking to my design guys, A, I understand what they're say-

ing and B, I can make suggestions as to what directions to go because the depth and breath of my knowledge means I can often come up with things they may not know about. So that's how I view my role.

**AHF:** Is Musical Fidelity looking at computer-based playback systems?

**AM:** No.

**AHF:** The budget V-DAC has a USB input. Are you looking at including that feature in upper range models and do you see that as a permanent standard feature?

**AM:** Firstly, are we making upper-range DACs? The answer is no. My idea is that a DAC should be in a price range of, say, between \$400 and \$1000 Australian dollars.

**AHF:** In light of the high quality metalwork coming out of China, are the massively-built chassis of some of the Musical Fidelity products built there in order to keep costs down?

**AM:** No. The M6 Series is built in Taiwan. We find that there is less likelihood of pirate copies and manufacturing inconsistencies in Taiwan. Some people that build in China get into deep water with production standards varying dramatically. The AMS is built in Europe.

**AHF:** Are you of the school that thinks the iPod is evil and offers compressed mediocre sound-

quality to a whole generation of young listeners, or do you think that it's the saviour of music because it has made it far more accessible? How do you weigh the two against each other?

**AM:** I think that people who use compressed stuff are brain dead. You can do digital on an iPod using .wav files that aren't compressed; it's a question of consumer choice, that's one side of it.

**AHF:** But what about storage capacity?

**AM:** Well, I have a 120 GB iPod, with something like 130 CDs on it stored uncompressed and I have used-up only half of its capacity. That's enormous capacity. I'm talking about classical music almost entirely. So I don't buy that. Anybody who's interested in quality can get it from an iPod.

**AHF:** Do you still play the clarinet and if so, do you use clarinet recordings to evaluate products' sonic accuracy?

**AM:** I gave up the clarinet seven years ago after making my last recording and haven't played it since. I've since taken up the piano which is a humbling and humiliating experience at my advanced age because it's very, very slow to make any progress. When you're at my age it's a chastening experience to realise how much your mental capacity has diminished.

**AHF:** What does Antony Michaelson hope for the future of high quality audio reproduction?

**AM:** That everyone shares my passion.

—Edgar Kramer

