

Power Tower

**Adam Smith experiences
Exposure's mighty flagship
MCX system...**



"it was as if the MCX had dragged an invisible subwoofer in to the room..."

Anticipation can be a wonderful thing. It is said that "everything comes to those who wait" and the excitement that builds up prior to an event that we are looking forward to can be highly satisfying. The problem comes if the event fails to materialise resulting in disappointment. In case you're now wondering what all this has to do with Exposure, allow me to enlighten you – taking an item from first show to production is not a speedy process, but the MCX system here was actually unveiled at the Bristol Sound and Vision Show 2007; hence my anticipation has been building for almost eighteen months. Still, the arrival of a huge and heavy pallet at World Towers finally heralded the readiness of the MCX system and, as my anticipation had reached fever pitch and was in danger of plummeting into an Eeyore-esque sense of 'it's never going to arrive', I was immensely relieved.

Exposure itself has a lengthy history stretching back to 1974, and keen students of eighties hi-fi like myself know them well for their amplifiers which, at that time, came in cute black boxes with that typical slight cottage-industry look. Underneath though, were excellent amplifiers that were highly rated both at the time and still today, as reflected by their continuing high demand and healthy second hand values. Although the original amps were up into Naim Audio territory, this is Exposure's first foray into the 'ultra high-end' arena, with the complete MCX system lightening your wallet to the tune of £15,000.

At the top of a stack of separate components designed to fit together sits the CD player. This is a top-loading item with a delightfully solid sliding lid and weighty CD puck; it incorporates some fine technology. Internally, the player uses 4 separate DAC boards with PCM1704 multi-bit DACs, and each board has separate regulated power supplies for the DAC and audio circuits. These PSUs

are fed from a large toroidal power transformer with separate windings for the mechanism, display, DAC and audio outputs. The analogue outputs are available in balanced and unbalanced form and the unit has optical and coaxial digital outputs, the latter through both BNC and phono sockets.

The unit can also act as a DAC and digital switching centre, with AES balanced, USB, coaxial phono, coaxial BNC (x2) and optical (x2) inputs. The brochure and website also make mention of FM and DAB radio, and our sample had an empty hole on the rear marked 'antenna' so this would appear to be an upcoming option, although pricing and availability are as yet unconfirmed. The player measures 104x490x414mm (HxWxD) and weighs an impressive 20kg.

Going down, we find the MCX preamplifier, which is identical in size and weight to the CD player. This is also a comprehensively specced item, utilising dual mono construction and featuring seven inputs, with a switchable x1 gain A/V option. The CD input is through balanced XLRs, as is one of the auxiliaries, but this latter item can also be changed for an MM or MC phono stage with either XLR or phono input sockets, for £300 extra. The remaining inputs are unbalanced line level items. Three sets of outputs are fitted, one unbalanced, two balanced, so if the huge power output of one pair of MCX monoblocks isn't enough, you can always tri-amp!

Input switching and volume operation are via high quality reed relays, but the volume control is a bit odd. Firstly, it operates over a peculiar range of -53 to +18 on the display, and -53 is not a full mute either - this is only achieved by pressing the mute button. Also, the volume operates swiftly and precisely through the remote control, but is tortuously slow when the front panel rotary control is used, requiring a ridiculous amount of twiddling for an appreciable difference in level.

Finally, lurking at the bottom of the stack are the two MCX monoblocks. With a rated power output of 300W into 8 Ohms and 600W into 4 Ohms [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE], these are as big in nature as they are in stature. Their height is 238mm and they weigh no less than 35kg each so it's best to decide on a position for them and then leave them there! Each amp uses a vast 1,400VA mains transformer with separate windings for the power circuits and the low level signals, and have two outputs for loudspeaker bi-wiring. Both balanced

and unbalanced inputs are provided.

Additionally, each component features RJ45 input and output sockets for system synchronisation, and the amplifiers also have 12V trigger sockets for control from an external A/V integration system. Finally, the MCX system comes with a remote handset with solid buttons for control of all items. These buttons are not grouped together by component or function, and are all the same in appearance, so it takes a little acclimatisation to remember where the important ones are. However, as the handset is a wonderfully solid lump of cast metal that's ideal for assailing burglars (*Hi-Fi World* does not, of course, condone this), I am prepared to forgive it virtually anything...

SOUND QUALITY

Big boxes, big weight, big price tag - but does this mean big sound? Now, I am never immune to the charms

of a low-powered valve amplifier but somehow, when I find myself sat in front of a really good solid state amplifier with a serious power output, then everything in the world seems right. Connected up to our reference Spondor S8e loudspeakers, it was as if the MCX system had dragged an invisible subwoofer into the room, as these not unduly large transducers suddenly sounded around eight feet tall and appeared to have grown several extra bass drivers.

The amplification side of the MCX system has that rare ability to make everything absolutely effortless, and turn any music you care to feed into it into an awe-inspiring experience. As mentioned, the MCX pre/power's bass is truly stunning, but is never a thunderous boom or a soggy wallow. And, if the recording itself has precious little bass, then that's exactly what you hear. Everything at the low end is taut, focused and blessed with an impression of fluent power and control. The Exposures are happy to play softly, with eye-opening amounts of low level detail but, equally as you crank up that volume control, you get the sense that you'll be collecting what's left of your loudspeakers from the back of the garden, without the MCXs even breaking into a sweat.

Even better was the fact that the Exposure combo did not suffer the



most common ailment of powerful, dynamic amplifiers; that of a hard or mechanical top end. The MCX's treble was an utter delight, being clean and expertly detailed, but without any hint of harshness or spit. If the recording was a little edgy, the system told me so, but without ever making the result unpleasant - a feat that only the very best setups can manage. Equally all that power meant no shoutiness or compression as the

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volume increased, just a steady but relentless increase in sonic intensity.

Feeling obliged to fully examine the range of the MCX's abilities, I first popped Propellerheads' 'Take California' into the CD player. This is a pounding slice of dance music and the Exposures loved it. Once again, the bass line was capable of loosening teeth, but was spry and beautifully controlled, and the horrific mess of lyrics contained in the track's samples were easily distinguishable. Moving to the other end of the spectrum however, 'Spanish Harlem' from Rebecca Pidgeon's 'The Raven' is a superbly recorded track at the best of times, but through the Exposures it simply stepped free of the boundaries of the recording and left the result laid out in the listening room with an almost alarming scale. Rebecca's voice was vivid and positively swept aside the listening room to pull me right into the studio, the backing double bass seemed to be within inches of my right ear and, when the hand-held shaker started up later in the track, I nearly stood up to check I hadn't dropped something.

If the MCX amplification





is responsible for the sheer impact and precision of the performance, then it would appear that the CD player is responsible for these atmospherics, offering a spatiality and scale that the little silver disc simply rarely exhibits. Swapping to our, admittedly cheaper, Yamaha CD-S2000, the results were still superb, but everything slipped off back into the loudspeakers somewhat. The Yam is no mean performer in this respect, so to hear it so outclassed by the Exposure shows that this is one exceptionally capable CD spinner. Being ultra-critical, the player can be slightly forward (but not hard) at times,

although not unduly so (most likely as a result of its slightly higher than normal distortion figures). Fortunately, if anything this seems to add to the atmospherics, rather than ruining them.

Ultimately, I would go as far as to say that the only significant step up from it I have heard to date is provided by the Naim CD555 - £12,000 dearer!

Even more encouraging was that the MCX system did not care what I threw at it. It pulled the heart out of bad recordings, making them listenable but without masking the essential defects, and took everything, from heavy metal to the softest classical in its stride. Lightly bowed orchestral strings whispered around the room; rich, natural and brimming with spatial timbre, whilst enthusiastic rock guitars scythed out of the loudspeakers with fury and power.

CONCLUSION

The MCX system is an important product for Exposure and needed to be nothing less than stunning in order to succeed - particularly as it was first unveiled so long ago. I cannot help but wonder how many of those people who heard it, loved it and were willing to spend £15,000 on it eighteen months ago might have become fed up with the wait and spent their money elsewhere...

Well, it's their loss, because the MCX is truly one of the finest complete systems I have ever had the pleasure of auditioning. The CD player is the sort of unit that shows even the most fanatical vinyl nut like myself that the little silver disc can deliver the goods, and the amplifiers can drive absolutely anything with ease and the sort of grace and pace that usually accompanies the word 'Bentley'.

They say that patience is a virtue and, in this case, my anticipation has been totally justified; this could well be the last hi-fi system you ever need to buy.

HI-FI WORLD

VERDICT

A landmark product from Exposure, the MCX is one of the finest one-make systems available at any price.

EXPOSURE MCX SYSTEM

CD PLAYER	£3,599
PRE-AMP	£3,599
POWER AMPS (PAIR)	£7,799
Exposure	
+44(0)1273 423877	
www.exposurehifi.com	

FOR

- stunning atmospherics
- staggering bass
- even-handed musicality
- effortless power
- build and styling

AGAINST

- odd volume control

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Exposure MCX CD player has a perfectly flat frequency response from 2Hz to 21.1kHz, so should offer a well balanced and even nature without any artificial brightness or smoothness added.

Distortion-wise it is a bit of a mixed bag, turning in some fine figures for the higher 0dB and -6dB signals, but worsening with reducing test signal level. At -60dB the player returned a result of 0.6%, whereas around 0.2% is a more common result for a high performance player. This has the effect of reducing dynamic range which, at 105dB, is a good enough result, but a little off the best players which can better 110dB. Channel separation was fine at 86dB and noise levels were low, at -102dB

The unbalanced phono sockets gave an output figure of 2.1V, in line with standard CD specifications, and the balanced XLRs doubled this to 4.2V. Jitter from the digital output showed a result of 90pS in program related terms, with random jitter hovering around 6pS - a very good result.

The MCX preamplifier offers a fine, consistent performance across all inputs. Frequency response is wide from 1Hz to 50kHz and distortion low right up to full output. The gain figure on offer is fairly conventional at x3.6 across the unbalanced inputs and outputs, but this does double if the balanced outputs are used. Equally, output overload occurred at 10V through the phono outputs and 20V through the balanced XLRs, so the preamplifier can swing plenty of voltage and should work well with pretty much any power amplifier, as well as the matching MCX items. Channel separation was good at 88dB and noise was impressively low at -103dB, so the MCX preamp should turn in a well balanced and capable performance, as the test results suggest a well designed unit.

The monoblock power amps offer a hefty power output of 338W into 8 Ohms, rising to 676W into 4 Ohms, so they are certainly not short of grunt. Combined with a damping factor

of 103, there is unlikely to be any loudspeaker that these items will not drive and control well, without even breaking into much of a sweat. Distortion figures were equally impressive across the board, peaking at a low maximum of 0.06% for full output at 10kHz.

All in all the whole MCX system measures very well indeed, although the CD player does have a small amount of room for improvement in distortion terms. That said though, the system as a whole should turn in a highly impressive and dynamic performance. AS

CD PLAYER

Frequency response (-1dB) 2Hz - 21.1kHz

Distortion

0dB	0.001%
-6dB	0.002%
-60dB	0.6%
-80dB	4.5%

Separation (1kHz)

Noise (IEC A)	-102dB
Dynamic range	105dB
Output (Unbal/Bal)	2.1/4.2V

PREAMPLIFIER

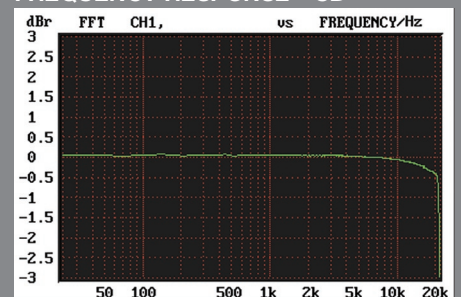
CD/tuner/aux.

Frequency response	1Hz - 50kHz
Separation	88dB
Noise	-103dB
Distortion	0.002%
Gain (Unbal/Bal)	x3.6/x7.2
Input Overload	> 6V
Output Overload (Unbal/Bal)	10V/20V

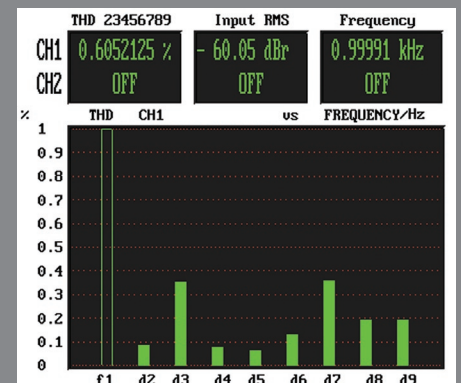
POWER AMPLIFIER

Power	338 Watts
Frequency response	1Hz - 54kHz
Noise	-122dB
Distortion	0.002%
Sensitivity	2.4V
Damping Factor	103

FREQUENCY RESPONSE - CD



DISTORTION - CD



DISTORTION - POWER AMPLIFIER

