



NETWORK AUDIO AMPLIFIER

Integrated amp with network audio. Rated at 200W/8ohm
Made by: D'Agostino LLC, Connecticut, USA
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.dagostinoinc.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £56,498

AUDIO FILE

D'Agostino MLife

Dan D'Agostino is tapping into the streaming zeitgeist with a UPnP network audio equipped integrated amplifier based on the brand's Momentum separates
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Yes, you did see above a price of £56k. Yes, this is an integrated amp. But the D'Agostino Momentum Lifestyle Amplifier, aka MLife, is part of a new wave of true high-end components, kick-started by Musical Fidelity's M1 CLiC [*HFN* Jun '11] and others. Unlike some budget, mass-market offerings these unequivocally will not let convenience and convergence get in the way of sonic purity. Such units are to the streaming/server revolution what the 1925 Leica 1 was to photography.

WELCOME TO TOMORROW

Am I exaggerating? Having heard the affordable stuff that has preceded units like the MLife, and found all of them wanting (but not wishing to court a lawsuit by naming mass-market brands with higher annual revenues than many small-to-medium countries), this product – spouse-friendly with silver or black option – revives whatever shreds of optimism I retain in the face of a digital onslaught.

Why it is so important is that it has been designed to deal with all your legacy hardware while preparing you for full integration with the world of Tidal, Spotify, Amazon Prime, or any other online provider you care to use. And while it's as purist as a high-end unit can be, the MLife is as modern as tomorrow.

In addition to press buttons on the fascia, along with the company's Breguet watch-inspired volume control and level meter, everything is handled by a slick iOS app [see boxout, facing page], while an Android version is slated to follow. Actions and sources are monitored via a 5in LCD screen on the fascia, the key to its suitability for wireless connection to your sources via your home's Wi-Fi as well as Bluetooth. (The LCD screen shows album, artist, genre and song title information from the sources' metadata.)

RIGHT: With its outboard ±70V PSU sited below, the MLife chassis houses a network audio/DAC solution from StreamUnlimited plus a dual-mono amplifier based on the integrated

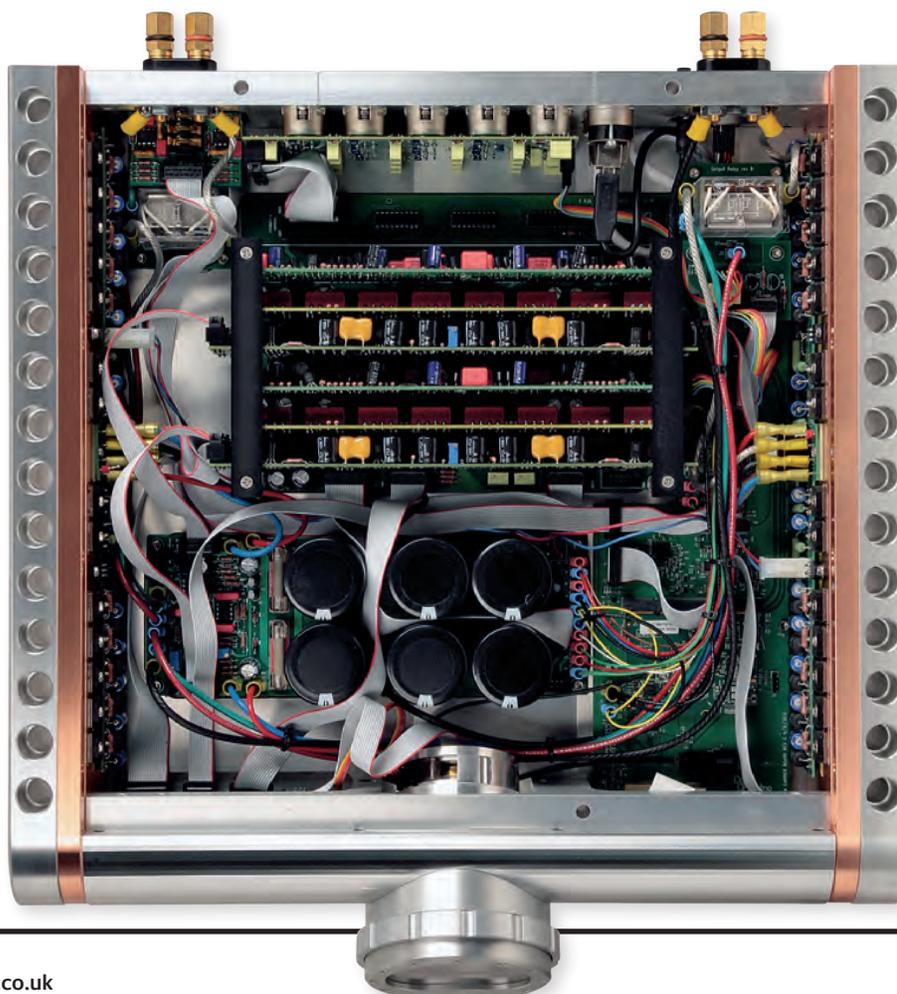
This machine deals with so much, thanks to its Toslink, USB, wired network and five balanced inputs, that a list – however boring – is the only way I can convey what you get for your money. So... the MLife obviously mates with Apple AirPlay, so one can seamlessly access music and Internet radio through iTunes, as well as streaming through iOS devices, as well as Windows computers running iTunes. And its aptX Bluetooth 4.0 provides an easy connection to whatever music you've either stored or care to stream via a smartphone, digital player, tablet or home computer.

Then the MLife can stream directly from Tidal (with Spotify, Deezer and Sirius XM to follow), access vTuner Internet radio and it is compatible with UPnP for streaming from

networked servers and computers. You can plug in music stored on USB drives and sticks. In addition to USB, there are optical and coaxial digital inputs that feed the on-board 192kHz/24-bit DAC, supporting DSD, WAV, FLAC and PCM (up to 192kHz), AAC, AIFF, MP3, Ogg Vorbis and WMA.

INTUITIVELY GRASPED

Hosting your legacy sources are balanced XLR analogue inputs which accept phono preamps, CD players, FM tuners, tape decks or other analogue devices. They're labelled Phono, DAC, Dock, Server and Theater, which bypasses the MLife's volume control as it's a pass-through input for integrating this into a multichannel AV set-up. A look at the back [see p41] reveals these rows of



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XLR sockets flanked by the digital inputs, stout speaker binding posts, RS232 input, headphone socket, Ethernet socket and DC-in. This is via a short but substantial umbilical cable from the external power supply, which is housed in a base upon which the main unit rests on pointed feet.

Inside is a descendant of the Momentum Integrated's [HFN Dec '14] power amp section, rated at 200W [see PM's lab report, p41], while the control section is a complete streaming/DAC solution sourced from StreamUnlimited, the very first version of which was used in MF's M1 CLiC.

Because of the clean design of the app and the lucidity of the layout, this unit – despite its complexity – is almost intuitive to use in practice. And because my listening room is imperviousness to wireless

signals – phone or otherwise – I had an Ethernet feed from a TP-Link repeater from my BT hub, so I could access my iMac, which is in another room, as well as the internet. Note that

there's no Wi-Fi receiver built into the unit. I also used USB sources, Bluetooth and iPad, for both the app and the music stored on it. Tried, too, was Amazon Prime, though it's not a high-res source, but it worked perfectly.

FORCEFUL AUTHORITY

While many enthusiasts seem to be reverting to streaming solutions in place of their CD player or DAC, the sort of user who drops £56k on an 'integrated amp' is unlikely to be a newbie without previous form. So I'm not making the seemingly obvious assumption that the MLife will

'This is an apex powerhouse that will serve the vast majority of users'

MOMENTUM APP

It's essential that you know I didn't have to embark on a voyage of discovery – and neither should you. The importers, Absolute Sounds, set up the system as I watched, and I must admit it was less painful than I imagined. I had pre-installed the app on both an iPhone 6 and an iPad mini, preferring the latter for the size, and the unit comes with an iPod Touch, pre-loaded with the app, but you could also use the handier, larger iPad if you so desire. Everything you need to operate and navigate is a touch away. The source page addresses every input, while a touch-rotary volume control, looking exactly like the one on the front panel, dominates the lower section of the screen. Also found here are standby, mute and headphone buttons. As for the 'Settings' screen, this includes niceties like polarity inversion, +6dB extra gain, 'Dark Mode' to adjust panel illumination and balance control. If this is the future of remote control design, then bring it on.

ABOVE: Already iconic, the outer ring of the watchface dial adjusts volume and balance (via the app) while inputs are switched by illuminated buttons (and the app, again)

only be used in a streaming context. So while I tried over a half-dozen sources from smartphones to digital players to tablets to computers, the only way I would make definitive judgements *solely* about sound quality required the use of pure, standalone sources which I knew intimately.

As much as I appreciate the efforts of Tidal, Spotify, *et al*, I have no confidence in 'knowing' their inherent sound characteristics or any other qualities that – ultimately – determine how they sound. My Astell & Kern, Pioneer and Pono players are filled with music that ranges from plain vanilla MP3 to 192kHz/24-bit, so such chaos is no way to form an opinion. Equally, the sound of high-res digital sources via Wi-Fi or USB does not 'speak' to me with the authority of a hard-wired, prime source.

Thus, all of my remarks about the sound quality – not the functionality of the unit nor its handling of diverse inputs, which was flawless – refer to CDs or SACDs played through my legacy Marantz DV8300, with Crystal interconnects and phono-to-XLR adapters. Speakers were BBC LS3/5As and floorstanding Wilson Alexias [HFN Mar '13], wired with YTER cabling.

I didn't feel as if I 'knew' how the MLife actually sounded, irrespective of source, until I played some of the overly-familiar, 'usual suspects'. These included The Cars' *Heartbeat City* [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD2163] and Aretha Franklin's ↻



ABOVE: Fed via a short umbilical from its outboard DC PSU/isolation platform, the MLife offers five balanced inputs plus USB, Toslink and networked digital audio (via an external router). Pairs of speaker binding posts and a headphone out are included

Yeah!!! [Columbia Legacy CD 88985346642].

Why was I not surprised by what I heard? The MLife is pure Momentum, though not quite the beast as found in the stereo power amp [HFN Aug '12] or the monos [HFN Oct '16]. Don't think that means anything to do with a lack of grunt: this is an apex powerhouse and it will serve the vast majority of users, unless saddled with speakers of daft, low sensitivity.

HALLMARK BASS

Consistent throughout the time I spent with it, from source to source, was what ought to be called 'D'Agostino Bass' because of its sheer forcefulness and control – even evident through the LS3/5As. D'Agostino's designs always exhibit lower registers that will frighten listeners who, for example, have only heard 300B-powered SETs.

While that may not be necessary when listening to Aretha's pre-Atlantic releases, when she was being groomed as the next Sarah Vaughan, it does mean that everything enjoys a foundation with absolute command and precision. In effect, it allows you to relax rather than tense up as if given a hit of caffeine, because it frees you from wondering if the lower registers are realistic. The downside? Acoustic bass can sound drier than through an all-tube set-up, but it's a matter of personal taste.

What matters more, to me, is voice, and Aretha came through with clarity and warmth. The portrayal was a delicious balance of authenticity and naturalness, the sound of a real voice in the room, with an absence of sibilance or hyper-detail. If anything, it caused me confusion as an Aretha fanatic,

because I adore her primarily as the Queen of Soul.

Listening to her Columbia sessions through the MLife only emphasised how underappreciated she was (and is) as an interpreter of standards, blues and even schmaltz like 'More' or folk drivel such as 'If I Had A Hammer'. (This woman could scat sing the theme to *The Muppets* and it would be transcendent.)

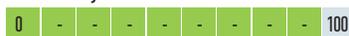
With the studio craft of The Cars, who elevated the 'art' in 'artifice', the precision came into play with greater need than with Aretha's 52-year-old sessions. Transient attack, snap, speed – all of the hallmarks of The Cars' sound were respected, preserved and reproduced with the authority of the 'conventional' Momentum components.

Which leads to this conclusion: If you are itching to join the world of streaming and servers and cannot even entertain forsaking your audiophile standards for sonic worth, the MLife will hold your hand through the transition. I haven't felt this sort of transformation since I gave up my PC for a Mac. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

One needs to ignore ingrained audio habits in order to grok this machine. It is the perfect, pioneering bridge between true high-end audio and convergence devices that deliver features but poor sound. You still get to play hi-fi nut thanks to its line inputs, while addressing digital sources, high-res streaming and servers with full integration and no compromises. Say 'Hello' to the brave new world.

Sound Quality: 88%



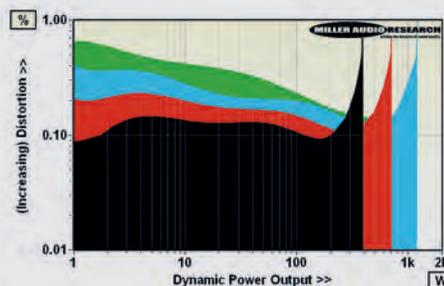
LAB REPORT

D'AGOSTINO MLIFE

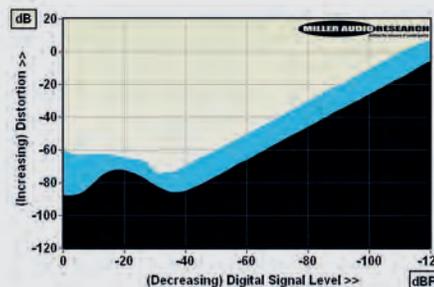
In practice, the MLife's analogue amp section is decidedly *not* a carbon copy of the Momentum Integrated [HFN Dec '14] or, indeed, the Momentum Stereo power amp [HFN Aug '12]. All three amps are rated at 200W/8ohm and 400W/4ohm but they achieve 215W/295W (Integrated), 245W/390W (Stereo) and 255W/365W (MLife) – so the newcomer *looks* more powerful. Under dynamic (music-like) conditions however, it's the Integrated that takes the lead with momentary outputs of 345W, 635W, 1.07kW and 1.62kW into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, while the MLife offers 410W, 715W and 1.21kW into 8, 4 and 2ohm, [see Graph 1] but is current-limited to 699W/1ohm.

Distortion, too, is noticeably 'richer' in harmonics than the Integrated with a consistent 0.10-0.12% through bass and midrange over its rated 200W range, increasing to ~1.3% at 20kHz. By contrast the Integrated registered 0.01-0.15% over the same 200W, increasing from 0.03% to 0.14% between 1-20kHz at 10W. The (analogue) frequency response remains flat from 1Hz to -0.2dB/20kHz and -4.1dB/100kHz while noise is low and the A-wtd S/N ratio an impressive 93.9dB (re. 0dBW).

The response via its USB, S/PDIF and network inputs is further tailored according to sample rate (-2.3dB/45kHz with 96kHz media, for example) while the inherent distortion is far lower, and swamped by the power amp stage, at 0.003-0.08% (20Hz-20kHz at 0dBfs). Measured via the headphone out, the StreamUnlimited DAC platform offers an A-wtd S/N of 106.6dB and linearity good to ±0.5dB over a 100dB dynamic range, but jitter (and data-induced jitter at that) is a little high at 895psec and 1400psec (48kHz and 96kHz, respectively). The digital filter is a conventional FIR type. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Excellent load tolerance



ABOVE: Distortion vs. digital input over a 120dB range via line (headphone) output (1kHz, black; 20kHz, blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	255W / 365W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	410W / 715W / 1.21kW / 699W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.36-0.38ohm/10ohm (headph)
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.25dB/-4.1dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz)	895psec / 1400psec
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/0dBfs)	91.1dB (Analogue) / 106.6dB (Dig)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz; 10W/0dBfs)	0.052-1.2% / 0.0025-0.08%
Power consumption (Idle/Max. o/p)	134W / 880W (43W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight (total)	457x109/102x406mm / 54.4kg

