



Radio gaga

Thirty years ago, owning a tuner was considered essential. Now it might be again, says *Jimmy Hughes*, thanks to Magnum Dynalab's MD 801...

Magnum Dynalab's MD 801 Internet Media Tuner is a versatile box of tricks that offers a broad range of functions. First and foremost it's an Internet radio tuner with access to over 15,000 radio stations worldwide. For those interested in radio as a medium, this is a fantastic way to explore the globe.

As if this wasn't enough, the MD 801 also incorporates a conventional FM tuner with RDS, plus DAB Digital Radio. The latter works in MP2 format, sampling at 48kHz, and is ambitiously claimed to offer 'near-CD quality' sound. Last but not least, the unit is also a music player, compatible with a wide range of digital files including AAC+, Real, MP3, and WMA, via USB or network-stored files. An adaptor is

needed to access iTunes. Of course, these are interesting, but it's the MD 801's abilities as an Internet radio tuner that will be of primary interest. The sheer choice of stations available is mind-boggling, but there's another big advantage; clean interference-free reception...

Frontier Silicon provides the digital tuner front-end, and Wolfson the DAC. The user-interface is via a touchscreen, and this makes access to the various options fast and straightforward. A remote handset is included in the package. Build quality is rugged, and the unit feels solid and well-made. The casework is part steel, part alloy, with a 6mm thick brushed aluminium front panel. There are no controls as such, everything being done via the central touchscreen or remote handset.

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Magnum Dynalab MD 801
ORIGIN:
Canada
TYPE:
Internet-connected DAB/FM tuner
DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
795x204x500mm
WEIGHT:
3.1kg
FEATURES:
• radio formats supported: FM, DAB, DAB+, Internet radio, Internet streaming
• formats supported: Real Audio, AAC+, MP3, WMA and FLAC
• frequency response ($\pm 1\text{dB}$): 15Hz-17kHz (claimed)
DISTRIBUTOR:
Audiofreaks
TELEPHONE:
020 8948 4153
WEBSITE:
audiofreaks.co.uk

The rear of the unit carries a set of unbalanced analogue outputs; coaxial and optical digital inputs; a socket for the antenna; plus an Ethernet cable socket and a front-mounted USB. There is no rear-mounted USB, unfortunately. This limits the MD 801 as a digital hub, and means you can't access things like Spotify or Rhapsody with the unit as it stands. As a result, it's perhaps best to think of the MD 801 as a versatile radio that also includes some streaming options.

Speaking personally, I've never been a radio fan. Why? First off, *living on the ground floor as I do*, surrounded by tall buildings, my reception is poor. Signal strength is weak, and multipath interference a big problem. There's another more fundamental objection to radio, though. I prefer to select what I listen to, and choose when to listen. However, an Internet tuner like the MD 801 deals with both these issues. With radio being streamed over the Internet, there's no problem with poor reception. Podcasts let you listen to programmes at times that suit you. And (for a while) you can listen again and again, if need be.

Sound quality

Having recently encountered Internet radio in Musical Fidelity's M1 CLiC digital preamp, I've become something of a fan. I find myself using it quite a bit. Sonically, the MD 801's Internet

HOW IT COMPARES

IN ESSENCE the MD 801 is a source component; a digital/analogue tuner that gives you access to Internet Radio and DAB, as well as FM. In addition, you can use it as a digital music streamer – albeit with certain limitations. It's not really a digital hub. A product like Musical Fidelity's M1 CLiC is basically an analogue and digital preamp/digital hub that includes Internet radio.

If you only intend to sample a limited number of IR stations, and have no interest in DAB or FM, a product like the CLiC may well be your best choice. But the MD 801 is clearly more specialised, and better for those really into radio.

You can, for example, create and organise a list of favourite stations via an Internet radio portal. This allows you to have a full list of stations on a single page, rather than having to search each time. Neat, just like its build, finish and sound quality!

radio sounds pretty good. There's something about the sound that's different – a relaxed flowing quality that is very likeable. Even when a CD is being broadcast, this 'relaxed' quality is still there. Okay, it isn't quite as good as conventional FM, and wasn't a match for the MD 801's fine FM tuner – which is admittedly a touch less capable in sonic terms than Magnum Dynalab's dedicated specialist FM tuners. But it was always listenable, and very enjoyable once the ear adjusted.

Tonally, Internet radio seems to sound a tad more forward in the upper midband, and also perhaps a touch closed-in. On the credit side, this can make things seem slightly clearer and more immediate. Speech is slightly sharper and more articulate on IR, though FM is less coloured.

FM typically delivers greater depth and space compared to streamed radio. The latter seems 'flatter' dynamically, with less tonal richness and sparkle, though the MD 801's Internet radio does depth and space better than usual. But while FM definitely wins out over IR, this is only part of the story. Listening to Internet radio, I always felt the sound communicated musically, even if there was a degree of dynamic compression and a lack of frequency extremes.

Sampling a selection of Radio 3's *Building a Library* Podcasts proved a fascinating experience. In these programmes, a reviewer compares various recordings of a piece of music in order to choose the best version. Hearing several performances of a piece of music compared, it was always easy to hear clear differences in both playing and sound quality.

In the survey of Dvorak's 8th symphony for example, one of the versions excepted was a late 1950s mono recording of Sir Thomas Beecham conducting – a live

performance taped by the BBC in London's Festival Hall. Alas, the live sound is mediocre – tonally coarse and lacking in warmth and refinement, with some tape hiss. It's not good even by late 1950s standards, let alone today. But, listening to the podcast via the MD 801, this hardly seemed to matter. You could make sense of Beecham's spur-of-the-moment exaggerations, and the limitations of the sound did not affect one's enjoyment.

However, when I listened to the CD, I felt more aware of technical limitations in the recorded sound, and this limited my enjoyment of the performance. Somehow, Internet radio via the Magnum Dynalab seemed to make absolute sound quality less of an issue. Indeed, one of the Dvorak 8s played – a version

The MD 801 exploits the best of modern radio broadcasting technology...

conducted by the legendary Vaclav Talich – was recorded in the 1930s. Yet in terms of letting you enjoy the music and performance, the vintage sound (taken from 78s) seemed perfectly okay – clear, detailed, and open.

I mention this because it touches on something about good Internet radio reproduction that I kept noticing. While it might not be the ultimate in hi-fi, it delivers the musical gist surprisingly well via this black box. Listening to any number of *Building a Library* Podcasts, the musical differences always came over clearly.

I briefly tried DAB, but alas wasn't able to get an especially strong or clean signal [who is? Ed.]. FM reception varied too, as the weather

changed. The Magnum Dynalab works well in the analogue domain, but don't expect it to replace your purpose-built high end analogue tuner – instead, think of it as a complement to it.

Conclusion

What's so impressive about this box of tricks is its all round ability – it's an easy access point to top quality streamed music. In doing this, it liberates you from all the *pfuffing* around with poor signal reception, which is a make-or-break issue for some of us, serious enough to spoil our enjoyment of the medium!

The Magnum Dynalab MD801 was for me a godsend, since it always gave a good clean signal with low background noise. While in absolute terms, sound quality wasn't as *quite* good as FM via a top tuner, it was always far more than acceptable; I always found it enjoyable to listen to.

This clever little black box exploits the strengths and benefits of modern broadcasting technology, giving you access to a vast number of radio stations in an elegant way. For this alone it's worth the asking price. A classy and slightly quirky product then, well worth investigating. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Highly pleasing, musical sound; versatility

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: No rear USB input; not compatible with iTunes or Spotify...

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Fine, flexible radio package that's cleverly conceived, well made and skilfully voiced

FEATURES



OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 optical digital output
- 2 aerial input
- 3 RCA line output
- 4 coaxial digital output
- 5 Ethernet input