

# Radars

ESSENTIAL NEWS FROM TECH'S FRONTLINE

**T3**

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**MOST WANTED**

The Merlin 1 looks retro, but is digitally advanced. And it comes in lipstick red, which always makes us happy



{MUSICAL FIDELITY MERLIN 1}

## A MUSICAL LEGEND

*Cutting-edge tech meets old-school vinyl in  
Musical Fidelity's must-have record-spinning system*





## MOST WANTED

## → THERE'S NO STOPPING VINYL.

Record sales are at their highest since 1996, with 1.2 million of the polyvinyl chloride discs shifted last year. Like reading paperbacks, it's a decidedly analogue rebellion in a digital world. Enthusiasts cite the warm, organic sound of the medium and the large-format nature of its artwork as reasons to love it.

As a result, we're seeing high-quality record players enter the market. Top dog is Musical Fidelity's Merlin 1, a £1,300 all-in-one deck, amplifier and speaker system, which boasts retro looks and cutting-edge sound.

The most important component here is the turntable, dubbed the Round Table in keeping with the system's Arthurian nomenclature. Music Fidelity has carefully chosen the components to ensure that it's perfectly balanced around the pivot point of the main bearing, which means that the needle will stay in place even if the player's sitting on the world's most unstable bar stool.

Other top of the line tech packed into this disc spinner includes a high-quality,

## THE NEEDLE WILL STAY IN PLACE EVEN IF THE PLAYER'S SITTING ON THE WORLD'S MOST UNSTABLE BAR STOOL

low-resonance nine-inch pick-up arm with magnetic anti-skating, and steel tipped bearings housed in zirconium with rubber damping to keep its most delicate parts isolated. The spinning platter is made of medium density fibreboard, long admired for its acoustic separation properties.

Play a record and a lovely analogue signal flows into the amplifier. An in-built analogue-to-digital converter transforms this into a binary stream, which can flow into a computer so you can rip your vinyl to hard disk. And if you want to play media files stored elsewhere, Bluetooth aptX and a digital or analogue line input will do so with decent quality.

While you can connect your own active or passive speakers and sub to the system, you're better off using those supplied. These employ a multi-stepped front baffle to accentuate the sound, resulting in a wide sound stage that belies the speaker's relatively compact size.

The system ticks all our boxes – it can play the world's most long-lived recording format at a really high quality, but its cutting-edge features make it perfect for the digital home. **B**

FROM £1,300, MUSICALFIDELITY.COM, OUT NOW

## { DETAILS }

**1. COMPLETELY BAFFLED**

While most loudspeakers use a flat front baffle, the Merlin 1's speakers use a stepped one to deliver a wide soundscape that belies their small size.

**2. BLUE IN THE TOOTH**

Forget the crappy sound quality of your average Bluetooth system – Musical Fidelity employs Bluetooth aptX, which delivers a CD level of fidelity. It's backwards compatible with older Bluetooth devices, too.

**3. TURN THE TABLES**

To create the turntable Musical Fidelity has nabbed components from higher-end systems, such as a high carbon tool steel bearing and a low resonance nine-inch pick-up arm.

**4. AMPED UP**

The Merlin 1 includes a pair of amplifier modules – one for each speaker – which are separated into two monoblocs to prevent cross-chatter and distortion.

## { SPECS }

**POWER OUTPUT**  
50 watts per channel  
**INPUTS** Phono, USB, Bluetooth aptX, line in (digital or analog)  
**HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER**  
Integrated  
**CONFIGURABLE OUTPUTS**  
Digital or analog, fixed or variable  
**SPEAKER POWER HANDLING** 15-75W  
**ENCLOSURE TYPE**  
One-way reflex  
**IMPEDANCE** 4 Ohms







{SPEAK}

*You can't make me give it back, says Nick Odantzis*



Having had some hands-on time with the Merlin we can attest that it lives up to every bit of its hype, and never delivers a bum note. Jam an LP on it and you're instantly transported to musical paradise, with a crispness and definition we've only heard on much more expensive systems. Tunes played from a smartphone via Bluetooth sound just as good, and connecting a CD player results in some sweet sounds from a very 90s medium.

My only concern here is a lack of inputs. This is designed to play records first and foremost, which some might see

as a boon. But you're not going to be connecting this to your TV and then linking it to a DAB radio without a lot of fiddling with cables. That said, if you're the type who's going to spend £1,300 on a hi-fi you'll probably already have dedicated equipment for such things.

But by far the best thing here is how astonishingly compact it is. I love the minimalist approach of having the amplifier and turntable as separate units, while the speakers can be mounted vertically or horizontally, depending on how much you want to show them off. I will miss this, if I send it back...



{FOCUS}

**Other turntables bridging the analogue-digital chasm**



**FLEXSON VINYLPLAY**

Flexson's £300 VinylPlay includes an analogue-to-digital converter and phono pre-amp, so you can connect it to your home audio set-up and enjoy records as they were meant to sound. A unique feature is Sonos compatibility, so you can listen to your records in the bath without getting them wet.



**TEAC TN-300**

At 4.8kg this is a weighty turntable, but the weight keeps it more stable, while an Audio Technica AT-95E cartridge picks up all but the faintest details of your music. It can be connected to your hi-fi with or without a pre-amp, or a USB-out allows you to copy tracks to your computer at CD quality.