



McIntosh

MX 122 A/V Processor MC 205 Multichannel amplifier

EDDIE DUFOUR

Prior to reviewing these two McIntosh components, I decided to join a gym. That decision turned out to be a smart move, as installing these heavyweights became a lot easier. It was a pleasure to renew contact with this emblematic brand. It felt like reconnecting with an old faithful friend who has always kept the same philosophy and values. It's been more than twelve years since I've used **McIntosh** devices on a daily basis, so I couldn't pass up the chance to have these two components for a few weeks. Before getting to the evaluation though, a brief overview of this prestigious brand's history is in order.

THE 1940s

Frank McIntosh founds the company that bears his name at Silver Spring, Maryland, USA, in 1949, with Gordon Gow.

THE 1950s

The first device to market was the AE1 preamplifier in 1950. In 1951, Sidney Corderman joined the team as head of research, engineering and development. This was followed by the C8 preamp and the MC30 and MC60 amplifiers in 1954, which enabled the company to grow and, in 1956, to establish itself in Binghamton, New York, USA, where it is still located today and expanding. In 1957, McIntosh offered its first AM / FM tuner, establishing them as a leader in radio receiver design.

THE 1960s

McIntosh introduces its signature glass faceplate with soft backlighting and back writing. This has the advantage of preventing letter erasure over time. During these years the company produces the MC225, MC240 and MC 275 tubed stereo amplifiers. The famous McIntosh performance clinics also appear at all the brand's dealers. In 1969, Woodstock's memorable concert was powered by McIntosh amplifiers.

THE 1970s

Loudspeakers are added to the range of products offered as well as new amplifiers, preamplifiers and the formidable MR78 tuner that redefined the standards of the time for FM tuners. Another highlight was in 1974 when The Grateful Dead performed in San Francisco, using McIntosh amplifiers for a total of more than 28,800 watts of sound. In 1977, Frank McIntosh retired from the company with Gordon Gow succeeding him.

THE 1980s

With new challenges and new products, McIntosh attracts a new generation of customers. New loudspeakers are introduced, such as the XRT-20 using the "Line Array" technology which provides controlled and uniform sound dispersion. In addition, the advent of the compact disc allows **McIntosh** to stand out as a world leader in this field.

THE 1990s

McIntosh extends its product offerings to the automotive sector (BMW), with the same visual and sonic signature that made it so popular. Home cinema is no exception and McIntosh offers the first complete THX-certified system: An A/V processor, six-channel amplifier, front, centre, rear and subwoofer. For the company's 50th anniversary, Sidney Corderman, one of McIntosh's first engineers, returns to service for a limited production of a tube amplifier, the MC2000, which became an immediate success.

THE 2000s

The new millennium sees McIntosh offering products specifically designed for Harley-Davidson, the Ford GT and the Subaru brand. In 2005, **McIntosh** presents its musical reference system in several exhibitions including the CES in Las Vegas. In 2007, McIntosh brings to market its first turntable with, like all products of the brand, a glass front equipped with a large blue-illuminated screen indicating platter rotation speed. In 2009, McIntosh introduces its first mini system, to celebrate the company's 60th anniversary.

THE 2010s

New technologies are emerging, such as the applications for Android and IOS devices, as well as a wide range of networked products, including Bluetooth and AirPlay. In 2012, McIntosh is inducted into the Hall of Fame of the "Made in USA Foundation". McIntosh continues its contribution to the global development of high-end audio.

TODAY

McIntosh has a very well-stocked catalogue of products at different levels that all offer the same experience and the brand's signature timeless look.

Let's get to the heart of the matter, reviewing the **MX122** preamplifier and surround-sound processor, and the **MC205** five-channel amplifier. The preamplifier weighs in at 14kg unboxed and 25kg in its packaging, while the amplifier is a hefty 44.5kg unboxed (51.8kg packaged). The packaging boxes are huge, as befits the level of protection that McIntosh ensures for all its electronic components. Unless your name is Hugo Girard (a Québécois who won the world strongman competition in 2002), you'd better ask a friend to help handle them. The best idea is to have them delivered, connected and calibrated by your dealer.

After picking up the components, I headed home, making sure that I had help to bring them into my basement listening room. My physique is far from that of Hugo Girard and even several years of gym training wouldn't get me close. For me, part of the experience of discovering new components, especially of this calibre, is the pleasure of unpacking them from a factory sealed box. McIntosh uses a box-in-box approach to provide excellent protection. It is virtually impossible to damage them during transit. In addition, the MC205 amplifier is securely attached to a wooden base, providing extra protection along with the internal foam padding.

A LITTLE BIT OF BLUES

Once the MX122 processor replaced my personal A/V receiver, I connected all the sources I normally use: a Blu-ray player, an Illico decoder, a PS3 game console, a turntable and of course the HDMI output to my Epson projector and the audio output to my subwoofer amplifier. For the MC205 amplifier, I used XLR balanced cables for each of the five channels and a 1/8" cable for power-on sync with the processor. Eager to start listening, I remind myself that some break-in would not hurt, because the appliances are new. I select the input for my Illico decoder, then choose the Stingray Blues station to start the fun.

Connectivity

While the background music warms up the components, here is a description of the possible connections with the **MX122**. For video, there are seven HDMI inputs and two outputs for using a projector and a TV simultaneously or alternately. One can also connect another TV in an adjacent room if so desired. Three component video inputs and two outputs are available as well as four composite inputs with two outputs. For audio connections, there are two coaxial and two optical digital inputs, a balanced audio input, six analogue audio inputs, one input for an AM/FM tuner, a phono input for a moving magnet cartridge, and a 7.1 channel input. For audio outputs, the MX122 has balanced (XLR) and (RCA) single-ended outputs in addition to two supplemental audio zones. To control the device, an RS-232 input allows connection to a home automation system and an infrared input for control from a universal remote control with IR repeater. There are also two Trigger outputs for synchronising amplifier start-up with the MX122 and a data output for controlling a McIntosh tuner or digital player. Finally, the MX122 connects to the Internet by cable or by two Wi-Fi antennas. A removable power cable completes the package.

The **MC205** amplifier is equipped with five single-ended inputs (RCA) or five balanced (XLR) jacks. To synchronise power-up with the MX122, there are two control inputs. An impedance selector for 4-ohm or 8-ohm speakers is located on the back of the amplifier. A heavy-gauge power cord is supplied with the amplifier, but as with the MX122, you can add a higher calibre cord, if you are so inclined.

A TIMELESS LOOK

The design and appearance of the MX122 are in the purest McIntosh tradition. The black glass facade, the chrome edges and controls identified in pale green provide a most alluring effect. Inputs and outputs are formatted in yellow, while the logo and model number show in bright green, with the fluorescent display indicating source, surround mode and gain (listening volume). All touch keys are black, with the source selector and volume control in glossy black with a chrome surround.

A **McIntosh** amplifier without a blue display screen would not be worthy of the name. The MC205 has one for each of the three front channels. It is an absolute necessity for any aficionado of the brand to have these displays on the front of the components.



CONTROL

In addition to the backlit remote control, all functions of the MX122 are accessible via the front panel. Access to the configuration menu is straightforward, as is navigation, for choosing the surround mode, activating the different zones or choosing the listening source, which can be different from that playing in the main listening room, and not forgetting start-up of the main room and its volume control.

For the amplifier, a switch allows the unit to be switched on or left in trip mode from the MX122. Another switch turns off the blue display lighting, but to me, that defeats one of the most attractive features of the device.

A small note. Even though the remote control is backlit, not all keys have writing that is legible in the dark. A small auxiliary lamp comes in handy when it is necessary see all functions available via the remote control. Apart from that, the remote is a pleasure to use.

APPRECIATION

I spent many hours listening to this ensemble with all the sources I have at my disposal: Airplay music from my iPhone, many vinyl records, radio, several DVD and Blu-Ray discs, some video games and many television programs. I can tell you that I have never appreciated the sound quality of my Klipsch THX speakers as much as I did with the **McIntosh** duo in place. In fact, I was very dispirited to have to return these components. In addition to having a look that pleases me enormously, the excellent performance in terms of both image and sound fully met my expectations for devices of this level.



Note that to obtain best results, it is important to adjust the parameters either manually or with the microphone provided for this purpose. Although the calibration with the microphone and the tripod worked smoothly, I would have appreciated a better microphone for a device of this price. That does not detract, however, from the excellent results I experienced.

The higher the quality of the devices, the more important it is to calibrate them, as the

performance potential increases exponentially. There are also several other parameters that need to be adjusted and the MX122 provides for their full optimisation. Moreover, the graphical interface of the on-screen menu is quite easy to navigate, being similar to what we find among other brands such as Denon or Marantz.

IN DVD AND BLU-RAY MODE

That said, listening to DVD or Blu-Ray movies proved to be a very impressive experience, with an excellent level of sound resolution, a wide and deep sound stage when required (panoramic scenes or intergalactic space scenes) and an intimate stage when the action takes place in more confined spaces. In the first *Star Trek* of the new J.J. Abrams generation, the amplifier never showed signs of fatigue and it never ran out of steam. From the faintest breath to the

most imposing explosion, this duo delivered the goods. This ensemble very effectively steps out of the way, leaving nothing but the soundtrack, no matter its content. I also listened to many television programs, including the Canadiens and Rangers hockey series, and despite the immense quality of these machines, that did not prevent our team from

being eliminated! With devices of this level, everything else must be of equivalent quality to get the full potential out of the system. Without a doubt, products of this calibre must be used with the best sound source possible and the best speakers possible. The acoustic treatment of the room is just as important.

In audio mode

In pure audio listening mode, this duo looks simply stunning. For the same price, a separate McIntosh preamp / amp package would be better, but the result would not be as interesting when watching movies. Listening to several of my vinyl records was a very pleasant experience with a rich and full sound, never aggressive, yet accompanied by excellent sound dynamics. As proof, one of my favourite albums, *A Sailboat In The Moonlight* with Ruby Braff and Scott Hamilton on the Concord Jazz label, seduced me once again through this McIntosh ensemble. Traversing my music collection on an iPhone via Air Play was also a very pleasant listening experience, despite the level of compression inherent in the MP3 format.

Technical aspects

LISTENING TO DVD OR BLU-RAY MOVIES PROVED TO BE A VERY IMPRESSIVE EXPERIENCE, WITH AN EXCELLENT LEVEL OF SOUND RESOLUTION

I know that for some readers, technical specifications mean little, but for those who like me have training in the matter, here are some interesting specifications.

The **MX122** has a distortion level of 0.005%. The unit is compatible with HDMI 2.0, HDCP 2.2, HDR, 3D and Rec.2020 standards. It uses 24bit / 96kHz digital processors and 4K oversampling for lower resolution digital and analogue sources. Each channel has a nine-band frequency equalizer while being compatible with Dolby Atmos, True HD, Digital Plus, DTS: X/HD Master. Stated simply, the MX122 decodes everything that is available, also offering surround modes for stereo audio.

The **MC205** amplifier is a mastodon, weighing over 44 kg with 200 watts per channel, under 4 or 8 ohms, all channels used at the same time with a distortion level of 0.005%, which contrasts with the low-end receivers which with a single channel show distortion levels of nearly 1%, which is 200 times higher than the McIntosh. It has a damping factor of 140, which is not the highest but sufficient to control the loudspeakers. And, if the power exceeds the amplifier's maximum capacities, a

"Power Guard" protection system cuts in to limit output and maintain power in a safe range.

IN SUMMARY

It was a great pleasure to reconnect with these **McIntosh** products. The company has stayed the course, offering components in the purest tradition of what made them famous. The unbeatable quality of construction, the timeless look, the very high level of performance and a network of dealers who know their products very well make this brand a reference and a must for anyone looking for a quality product that will never go out of style.

If you're looking for a high-quality amplifier/preamp/processor at all levels that's versatile and compatible with the latest audio-video technology, I can enthusiastically recommend this McIntosh duo.

We like: These are McIntosh components!

We would like to see: A better-quality calibration microphone, a remote control with more legible lettering.

Thanks to McIntosh and Audioshop, rue de la Montagne in Montreal, for the loan of the devices.



A\V MX122 processor: \$7,000
 MC205 Multichannel Amplifier: \$7,000
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