

Exposure XM CD/XM5

Despite its diminutive dimensions, this half-size CD player/integrated amp combination offers a grown-up sound along with facilities normally seen on full-width separates
 Review: **David Price** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Size matters – or does it? Most hi-fi manufacturers stick rigidly to the traditional ‘full width’ separates model, but not all. The former often maintain that the market simply isn’t ready for the latter, arguing that many key countries demand ‘proper size’ boxes. Yet over the years we’ve seen brands like Cyrus make high-quality, half-width hi-fi their stock in trade. So which is it to be? The answer, reckons Exposure, is to offer *both*.

As a result, the company has in its catalogue its 2010, 3010 and 5010 range [HFN Nov '18] with 440mm-wide fascias, but also a half-size 218mm XM series. This includes the £1200 XM CD player and the £1260 XM5 integrated amp you see here, both of which are available in a choice of black or titanium finishes. The former has just joined the range, while the latter has now been on sale for around two years. Internally, both are closely based on the full-width 2010S2 series, and this extends to the finish and feel of the XM range too, with one notable exception...

FROM THE TOP

The XM CD features a top-loading disc arrangement. On top of the machine is a ‘sled’ with runners to either side, which slides back to reveal the mechanism and a magnetic puck to lock the disc into position. It moves smoothly enough but feels ‘old school’, similar to the first generation Philips machines from way back when. Some – such as yours truly – love this arrangement, but others might find it a chore to use after a while.

The fascia below has a large central display that lights up red, with power and transport controls beneath it. The brushed alloy front, and matt case and bonnet, are sturdy for a product at this price, but the finish is not quite up to the lofty standards we once enjoyed with Japanese players.

RIGHT: The XM5 integrated includes a toroidal transformer and linear PSU [right and bottom] feeding a complementary bipolar power amp and DSD64-compliant USB digital input. Note also the motorised volume [top right]

Exposure’s chief designer Tony Brady says that the XM CD is, in effect, a 3010S2 CD transport with a simplified version of the 2010S2 CD’s DAC section. As such, inside can be found a Sony KSS213C CD drive mechanism alongside a PCM1716 96kHz/24-bit DAC from TI. This has ‘multi-level delta-sigma modulator’ architecture and an 8x oversampling digital filter. A precision digital clock is also fitted, with dedicated power supplies for the digital transport and analogue audio stages.

Double-sided printed circuit boards are used, with careful attention paid to minimising both mechanical resonance and electromagnetic interference. A decent sized toroidal transformer is employed – given the XM CD’s modest dimensions – with separate windings for digital and analogue stages, while to the rear are RCA analogue outputs, optical and coaxial digital outs. Unlike so many of its rivals, there’s no Ethernet or Wi-Fi functionality here, because this is a very traditional silver-disc spinner.

The XM5 integrated is, according to Brady, effectively a brand new power amp design equipped with a simplified version

of the 2010S2 integrated amp’s DAC and phono stage. Aside from the half-width case, it has a similar visual look to the full-sized 2010S2 amplifier.

CLASS ACT

Exposure hasn’t gone down the Class D route with the XM5, which one might have assumed given the amp’s compact dimensions. Instead you get a claimed 60W/8ohm via a Class AB amp based around Toshiba bipolar power transistors [see PM’s Lab Report, p75]. Brady makes the point that as fully discrete Class AB power amplification is the company’s speciality – it has been making and selling the things for decades – why would he change the formula now?

The XM5 uses a 200VA toroidal power transformer and this is bolted to the aluminium chassis [see inside shot, below]. The amp also packs a very capable moving-magnet phono section, and there’s a Wolfson DAC fitted that accommodates PCM audio through all of its inputs or DSD via USB. Connectivity includes the aforementioned MM, two RCA line inputs, including an AV bypass, two Toslink optical

‘It pulls you into the magic of whichever piece you play’



LEFT: Compact but fully-featured, the XM CD [top] saves space with a top-loading CD mechanism that leaves the large track/time display clear to read. The partnering amp [bottom] includes remote-controlled volume and stepwise (digital/analogue) input selection

at this price. Spin up Steely Dan’s ‘Black Cow’ [Aja; MCA Records 088 112 056-2] and the refined nature of the combo is immediately revealed. This is thanks to a subtly warm bass, smooth – almost silky – treble, and an even and open midband. The bass guitar work on this track instantly stood out; it was powerful and rich, really making its presence felt. You could hear how the bassline was crafted in such a way as to power the song along, where on another system it might sound largely irrelevant.

There was definitely some overhang, however. The XM CD/XM5 seemed to catch the transient attack of struck bass guitar strings very well, yet the notes hung around just a little longer than they might have. This wasn’t an unpleasant effect as sometimes a little bulbousness at the bottom can pad things out very pleasantly, but it’s something to remember when matching this duo with loudspeakers.

DON'T LOOK BACK

As for the midband, this is essentially smooth, open and detailed, inviting the listener to peer right into a recording. It’s certainly not a forensically detailed presentation though, instruments at the rear of the soundstage having a slightly opaque feel. It’s perhaps best described as giving impressive vision in the short and middle distance, while lacking some definition further beyond. Yet this pairing hides its tracks well and you’re not conscious of this until you put it up against considerably more expensive electronics.

UB40’s ‘King’ [Signing Off; Graduate Records GRAD CD 2] was a great example of this. There was a wealth of detail upfront, with a lively rendition of snare rim-shots and the rhythm guitar playing off beat. All the lead instruments, such as the heavily processed electric organ, were separated out very clearly and there was good timbre to lead vocals and harmonics, with everything delivered with evenness

and two BNC digital inputs, plus a USB-B port. There’s also a handy line-level output giving an upgrade route should the owner wish to use the XM5 as a preamp with the company’s matching XM9 monoblocks. Overall the amplifier is a pleasure to use, though rather than having to scroll through the inputs I’d have preferred buttons that directly corresponded to them.

COMING CLEAN

The Exposure XM CD/XM5 duo is an essay in what’s possible in terms of sound quality for under £2500. I can think of very few

CD player/DAC/integrated amp combos that do better at the price. It has a gentle, easy charm that makes whatever type of music you play a pleasure to hear. Yes, in absolute terms, it has its limitations, but few could argue with the subtle, polished and involving sound that your money buys.

Those who have heard Exposure’s mid-price separates will instantly recognise the XM CD/XM5’s ‘family sound’. That means an amp that sounds clean, but slightly tonally warm, allied to a smooth, crisp-sounding CD player. Together it’s a presentation that ticks all the boxes

EARLY EXPOSURE

Founded in 1974 by John Farlowe, the Exposure brand was heralded to make ‘real world hi-fi at real world prices’, combining minimalist exteriors with ‘all the complexity on the inside’. This was not Farlowe’s first foray into audio electronics, having cut his teeth with guitar tube amp legends HiWatt after leaving university at the end of the ‘60s, followed by a stint building studio gear and sound systems for the likes of Pink Floyd. Farlowe’s consumer brand was launched with the Exposure I speaker, followed by the II [HFN Jul ’77]. The first amps were the III and IV – a solid-state pre/power combination [HFN Oct ’78] that stood toe-to-toe with competing black boxes from Naim Audio in Salisbury.

By the mid-’80s, the X integrated amp brought new interest, followed by the XV [HFN May ’95], XX and XXV derivatives. The company was rather late to the digital party when it finally launched its first CD player [HFN Mar ’99] but this was followed by a series of models including the 2010 CD [HFN Jun ’02] and premium XXII CD player [HFN Nov ’03]. Early products were designed by Farlowe, and later by his successor Tony Brady from 2000. Although describing itself as ‘a British company...’, with its design and manufacturing base still based in Lancing, West Sussex, Exposure Electronics was sold to a Malaysian firm nearly 20 years ago. PM

EXPOSURE XM CD/XM5



ABOVE: CD player [top] has fixed line (RCA) and digital (optical/BNC) outputs, but no digital ins. The amp [bottom] has two line inputs and MM phono plus USB-B and pairs of BNC/optical digital ins. Preamp out (RCA) is joined by 4mm speaker plug sockets

and clarity. I loved the reedy sound of the saxophone playing too. Yet there was never any undue forwardness, or any sense that the upper midband was too brightly lit. Up top, the ride cymbals had a subtly sweet sound that combined with a satisfyingly metallic zing.

GOLD RUSH

Soundstaging is generous, though up to a point. So this isn't the most expansive-sounding system in terms of lateral scale, and it doesn't have a cavernous feel from front to back. Yet within its constraints, both vocals and instruments were located with confidence.

For example, feeding the XM5's DAC directly with a hi-res DVD-Audio of Rush's 'Red Barchetta' [Moving Pictures; Mercury B0015272-00] via a Sony Blu-ray player was a joy. Instruments were clearly positioned and while the lead guitar dominated the proceedings, Geddy Lee's vocals were still firmly projected stage front. Drums, bass guitar and the distinctive sound of the

Oberheim synthesiser all cut through too, locked solidly in their own particular place in space. Yet what impressed me most about the XM CD/XM5 combination was the way it conveyed the natural flow of music, ensuring it always sounded involving and expressive, immersing the listener in the magic of whichever piece it was asked to play.

So it was that Vivaldi's La Cetra, Op.9 [Holland Baroque Society/Rachel Podger; Channel Classics CCS SA 33412] proved most enjoyable. The music ebbed and flowed in a spirited manner, despite this combination not having the dizzying transient speed of some pricier systems. It told the listener all about the expressive playing of the first violin, and the gutsy, almost dramatic cello playing behind it. This system proved well able to impart the subtle dynamic accents that can make music such fun. ☺



LEFT: One remote to rule them all... the HS3 handset has input select, mute and volume (amp) plus track access, repeat and eject (CD)

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

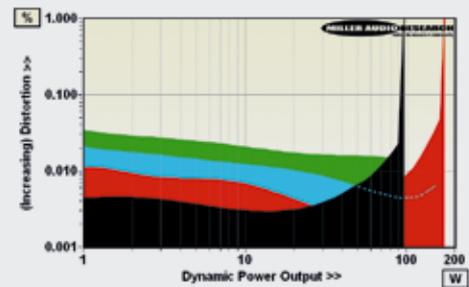
Exposure's XM CD/XM5 duo is the mouse that roared. It has a charming sound that's articulate and engaging, while never descending into harshness. This likeable personality extends to its design, which is compact yet clever and provides plenty of facilities. Despite its diminutive dimensions, there's no sense of this combination playing second fiddle to any full-sized separates system costing a similar price.

Sound Quality: 84%

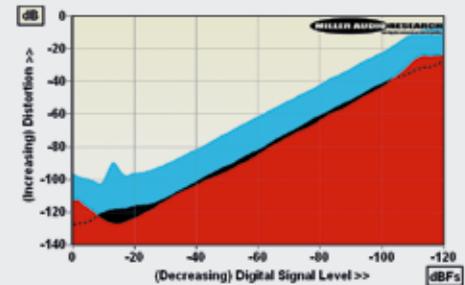


Conservatively rated at 60W/8ohm, Exposure's XM5 amplifier achieves closer to 2x75W/8ohm and 2x115W/4ohm, increasing still further to 98W/8ohm and 174W/4ohm under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. Power is limited by electronic protection to 160W and 86W into 2/1ohm loads, so you'll still get the biggest blast from 6-8ohm nominal loudspeakers with the XM5. Otherwise its low output impedance delivers a consistent -0.13 to -1.0dB response (20Hz-20kHz, down to -13.4dB/100kHz) almost regardless of load impedance while the A-wtd S/N is 'average' for the breed at 87dB (re. 0dBW). If you use the XM5 as a DAC/amp then it reaches out to -0.7dB/20kHz but falls more rapidly to -3dB/36kHz and -10dB/47kHz (192kHz media). Digital jitter is a low 75psec - and this is principally PSU-related - while distortion mirrors that of the analogue amp, increasing from typically 0.002% through bass and midrange to 0.10% at 20kHz (re. 0dBfs).

The partnering XM CD player offers a modest 99dB A-wtd S/N from a maximum 2.2V output, while the 97ohm source impedance (rising to 295ohm/20Hz) shows the effect of the cap-coupled output. The response is necessarily limited, although at -0.2dB/20kHz is 'flatter' in the audioband than the XM5 amplifier. Jitter follows the same pattern as that observed with the XM5's DAC but the trend of low bass/mid distortion (0.001% at 0dBfs) increasing at HF (0.02%/20kHz) is milder through the XM CD [black and blue infills, Graph 2]. The linear-phase digital filter option of TI's PCM1716 DAC is used here so there's some limited pre/post ringing on impulses, traded for a useful (but not extreme) 79dB suppression of digital alias distortions. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 9.3A



ABOVE: THD vs. digital level over a 120dB range at 1kHz (XM5 DAC, red; CD, black) and 20kHz (CD, blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	75W / 115W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	98W / 174W / 160W / 86W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, Amp/CD)	0.011-0.021ohm / 98-295ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.13 to -1.0dB/-13.4dB (Amp)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, CD/Amp)	0.0010-0.018%/0.0019-0.085%
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/Amp)	99.3dB (0dBfs) / 86.9dB (0dBW)
Digital jitter (CD / LPCM, amp)	160psec / 75psec
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	14W / 212W (9W, CD)
Dimensions (WHD) / Total weight	218x94(89)x348(363)mm / 9kg