

hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

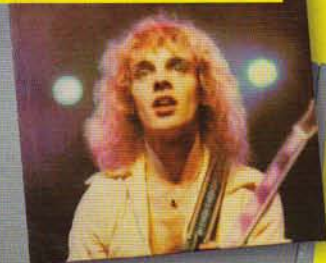
& Record Review

CHIC MUSIC

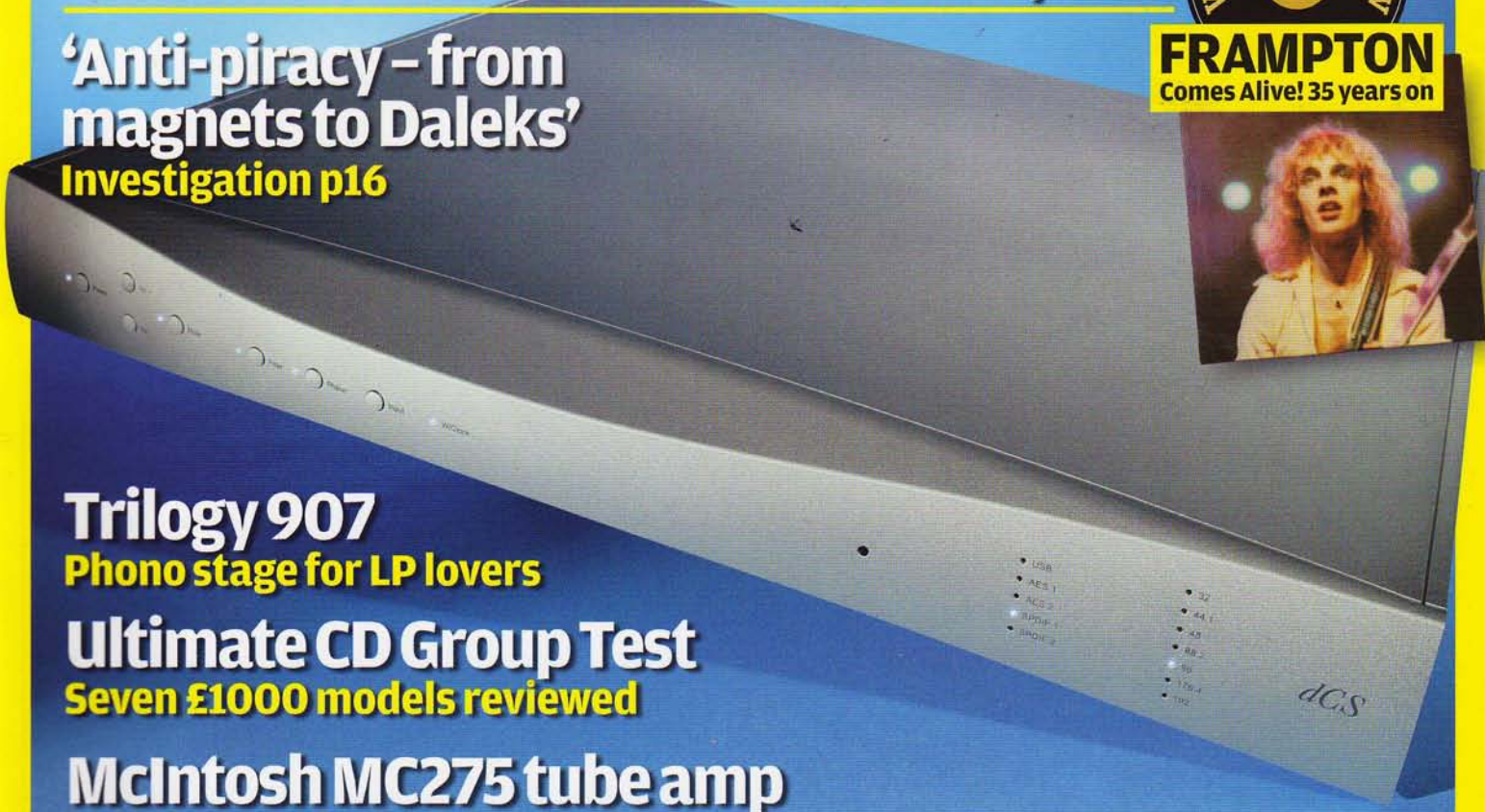
Exclusive - first test of the dCS Debussy DAC



FRAMPTON
Comes Alive! 35 years on



'Anti-piracy - from magnets to Daleks'
Investigation p16



Trilogi 907

Phono stage for LP lovers

Ultimate CD Group Test

Seven £1000 models reviewed

McIntosh MC275 tube amp

The history of an Audio Milestone



EAT Forte S turntable

Big and beautiful vinyl LP spinner



Pass Labs INT-30A

The world's beefiest '30W amp'



• PLUS 13 pages of music features • VINYL RE-RELEASE Ramones *Live In NYC 1978* on 180g LP
• HI-FI @ HOME Triodes and Quad ESL57s • SHOW BLOG Ken Kessler at Milan TOP Audio '10
• VINTAGE Goodmans Maxamp 30 on test • READERS' CLASSIFIEDS Hi-fi bargains galore

UK £4.00 US \$9.99 Aus \$9.95



Micromega FM-10 (£698)

Thanks to a government rethink, it's safe to buy an FM tuner again, and here's one that's dashingly slim, neat and easy to use. So how well does it perform?

Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**



Back in March 2010, when we tested Micromega's slimline CD-30 player and IA-180 integrated amp, you'd probably have thought we would be wasting space had we also reviewed the French brand's matching FM tuner. At that time it seemed that the British Government was determined to end national FM broadcasting in 2015; but with the Coalition came, not so much a U-turn, more a realistic and timely reappraisal. It was acknowledged that it might take much longer before the criteria for switching off FM – DAB coverage to match that of FM, and a majority of listeners *already* using DAB – could be met [see News, *HFN* Oct '10].

This reprieve for FM was greeted with sighs of joy and relief from radio

'The Micromega was rather laidback, even diffident'

listeners all around the country. Except, perhaps, from those already lured by the Radio Amnesty 'scrappage' scheme into trading-in a perfectly good FM radio in exchange for a small discount on a new DAB one. Assuming you aren't one of that unfortunate few, you might now be ready to consider buying a new FM tuner. And why not one from France: as yet untroubled by any serious move towards switching-off FM?

SOMETHING OF A PEDIGREE

Micromega's FM-10 is descended from the Micromega Tuner launched in 1995, which designer Daniel Schar says was 'really special', and used an A/D and D/A converter to remove the 19kHz pilot tone and 38kHz carrier. Lacking this feature, but otherwise generally similar, was the later Minium

ABOVE: A readable display, simple controls and user-friendly tuning knob make this FM-only tuner easy and pleasant to use

FM; and the FM-10 is the smarter, slicker successor to that model.

For manual tuning, the central rotary knob will reel pleasantly across the FM band from 87.5MHz to 108MHz in about three turns, with a light click felt for each 0.5MHz step. The large and sensibly-readable display then shows 'FM' and the frequency, with a symbol in between indicating stereo.

A press on the leftmost of the six buttons will select preset tuning instead, the tuning knob now scrolling through the 50 preset memory positions, while the display shows the preset number (from 'P01' to 'P50') instead of 'FM'.

Or you can search the FM band for stations automatically, by pressing the Scanning button. Having found a wanted station, you can turn the tuning knob to choose a preset number, from 1 to 50, then press Memory to store it as a preset.

Pressing the next button selects Mono, confirmed by the deletion of the stereo symbol from the display.

After this comes Mode, which allows you to choose a lowered sensitivity for Cable reception, or to turn RDS on and off. One press will bring up, for example, the word 'Antenna' for two seconds, during which time a press on the adjacent Standby button will change the setting to 'Cable'. A double press displays the signal strength, as 'Level 7' or 'Level 9', etc.

A BRAND NEW CHAMPION

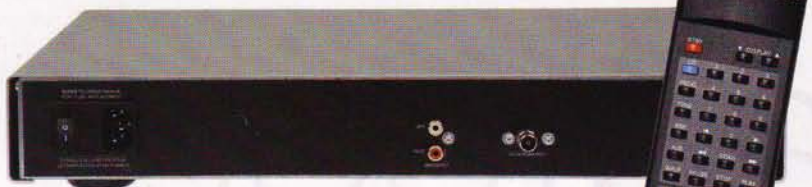
Micromega was founded in 1987, and by the early 1990s had built a reputation for its musical-sounding CD players. Later, though, the company's reliance on a single supplier proved its undoing, when there was a major reliability problem with the transport mechanism used in its players. It turned out that the factory was lubricating the moving parts with the wrong grease, which would congeal and stop the mechanism working after a few months. Dealing with this service problem put an impossible financial burden on the small company, and it eventually succumbed. But at the start of 2007 the Micromega brand re-emerged, seemingly stronger than ever. There was an enthusiastic new owner, the champion motorcycle racer Didier Hamdi, while Micromega's former chief Daniel Schar was happily still in charge of research and development.

MICROMEGA FM-10 (£698)

Right at the outset, I am bound to say that if you live in a poor reception area or are relying on a T-wire indoor aerial then the FM-10 is unlikely to give of its best. I tested two samples by way of confirmation and if these are illustrative of the design then it appears the FM-10 requires a full 42dBµV to fully break out of muting, making it about 10x less sensitive than the 'typical' modern FM tuner. Our second sample had a more gradual muting characteristic and offered a useable S/N ratio at lower RF levels (~36dB for 25dBµV). Supplied a decent signal in the order of 1mV (60dBµV), this tuner offers very low levels of harmonic distortion, typically <0.2% across the entire audio range [see Graph 2, below] with a perfectly acceptable 65dB suppression of the 19kHz pilot tone.

The pilot notch is evident from the FM-10's frequency response [see Graph 1, below] which falls gently away above 1kHz to reach -1.7dB/10kHz before dropping rapidly at 17kHz and above. In the days of cassette recording it was vital to prevent the ingress of pilot and subcarrier tones which might otherwise interact with the tape bias signal. Used purely as a source of off-air music, modern tuners do not require such aggressive filtering and typically sound better as a result. At full modulation, the FM-10 offers a usefully high 1.3V output (about 3.7dB below that of the average CD player) from a 465ohm source impedance. Finally, a word about power consumption which is low at 6W but absolutely no lower in 'standby' mode which appears to do little more than mute the display.

Readers may view a QC Suite test report for the Micromega FM-10 stereo tuner by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: Rear panel has only the usual 75ohm aerial input and phono outputs plus power socket and switch. The many-buttoned remote will control a complete Micromega system

Pressing Mode three times will reveal 'RDS On' or 'RDS Off', and again the setting is toggled by quickly pressing Standby. With RDS On, the 'FM' and frequency indication disappear from the display after a few seconds, to be replaced by the RDS station name, if available. This is an elegant solution, but there might be moments when you'd wish you could see both at once.

All controls are duplicated on Micromega's alarmingly multi-buttoned system-remote handset, which of course can also control other Micromega components.

SURE-FOOTED

I tried the FM-10 in several systems, using it both with the simple indoor aerial supplied and with a decent outdoor aerial. With the former, in my Surrey location, it was immediately obvious that the Micromega was less sensitive than any of the other tuners I'd tried recently. It would sound noisy on stations that were subjectively noise-free on other models.

But given enough signal, via the outdoor aerial, the Micromega sounded fine. It was certainly a pleasant sound, with good levels of detail and quite good imaging.

It's hard to make direct comparisons of tuner models because the broadcast content is ever-changing. However, BBC Radio 3 live broadcasts provide a high-quality source and, at least with chamber music, the musical content is also usually consistent enough over time to allow fair switched comparisons between tuners.

So, one Monday lunchtime, we tuned in to Radio 3's live Wigmore Hall recital, with soprano Solle Isokoski and pianist Marita Viitasala in songs by Schumann, Duparc and Kuula. On hand for immediate comparison was the Creek Destiny, which performed well in our September 2010 group test.

Compared with the notably-weighty Creek, the Micromega sounded rather lightweight in the bass, and although it gave a pleasing image spread, it couldn't match the impressively layered depth effect that the Creek could give. In that Wigmore Hall recital, the Creek presented a convincingly three-dimensional image of the piano and a tangible, flesh-and-blood soprano. The Micromega was rather laidback, even diffident by comparison.

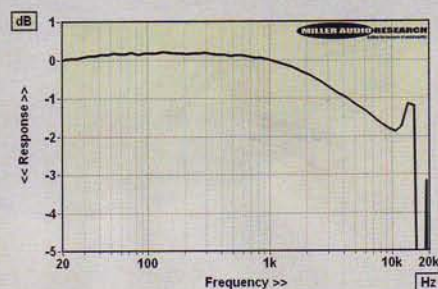
Yet the Micromega, perhaps unlike the admittedly more dynamic-sounding Creek, had no tendency to take on a tinge of stridency. It was not to be tripped up by complex music and could sound acceptable on poorer-quality broadcasts with a lot of compression. It didn't really put a foot wrong.

And the FM-10 delivered a smoother, more detailed and seemingly low-distortion sound than most mid-price tuners can manage. It was free of that rather dry, brittle and uninviting quality which characterises many of those, instead giving a subtly rounded yet well-detailed sound, which proved easy on the ear. ☺

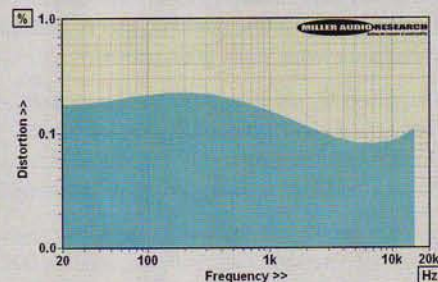
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

With a style and character of its own, individualistic without being quirky, the FM-10 also scores fairly well on sound quality. Its lower-than-average sensitivity won't be an issue if you have a good outdoor aerial, but it may well be otherwise, depending on location. This, and the lack of AM, means it must be marked down on value for money, though it will serve well if you like the rest of the Micromega system.

Sound Quality: 70%



ABOVE: FM frequency response showing a slight peak before its steep pilot tone filter takes hold



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency from 20Hz-16kHz at 60dBµV (1mV RF at 75% modulation)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level/Impedance	1.32V / 465ohm
Muting threshold/Sensitivity (65dB SN)	125µV / 1.1mV
Distortion vs frequency (20Hz-16kHz)	0.08 to 0.22%
Pilot/Subcarrier suppression	65dB / 68dB
Ultimate A-wtd S/N ratio (75% mod)	63.5dB
Frequency response (20Hz-15kHz)	+0.2dB to -1.0dB
Stereo separation (1kHz)	40dB
Power consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD)	430x70x250mm