



Magnum Dynalab MD 801 internet media tuner

By Alan Sircom

Last time we looked at a Magnum Dynalab tuner, FM was still slated for execution. Now, analogue radio has been reprieved, but since that time the audio industry has taken the computer to heart, and internet radio has become a significant force in listening. With both things in mind, it's perhaps unsurprising that the Canadian company best known for tuners should come up with an internet-friendly option, in the shape of the new MD 801.

Of course, internet radio is just one aspect of the Computer Audio revolution, and Magnum Dynalab has been clever enough to make its first generation of media players ('Internet Media Tuner', in M-D speak) capable of hooking up to a music server, shared media on a network or even a USB drive, as well as internet radio, DAB/DAB+ and good ol' FM (this time with RDS). And, being Magnum-Dynalab, it does it with style. The overall look is very businesslike, with everything driven from a central touchscreen (with only a power-on button and a USB port elsewhere on the front panel), and a learning remote is supplied to help finding the best stations. Magnum Dynalab has also thought of its existing customers, by offering the potential for owners of its FM-only tuners the chance to upgrade to the internet radio device. There is even a potential upgrade path for MD 801 users.

The rear panel shows just how simple the MD 801 is, because there's just a Toslink, Ethernet and coaxial S/PDIF outputs on the digital side, a single F-type aerial connector and two single-ended connections on the analogue. Blanking plates cover over provisions for a DAC on/off switch, a rear USB or S/PDIF input port and XLR balanced line outs, for those upgrading the tuner to MD 806 or 807 status.

A simple way of thinking of the MD 801 is as a meeting of minds. Magnum Dynalab brings the tuner platform, Frontier Silicon provides the digital platform (very likely the company's Venice 8 module) and Wolfson supplies the DAC part. This is all-over good, and a better option than Magnum Dynalab trying to write its own digital platform, especially when trying to support or keep up to date with the latest changes. Magnum Dynalab provides a stylus pen to navigate the small colour touch-screen buttons.

In terms of formats, the tuner is capable of supporting Real Audio, AAC+, MP3, WMA and FLAC, but not ALAC or OGG as yet. Magnum and Frontier recommend using WMA as a path to music serving (the tuner can support WMA files and playlists), but this is a relatively unpopular server option next to the likes of Asset or Twonky. In fairness though, WMA is a simple (and free) option for PC users and helps keep the manual at 24 ▶

▶ pages instead of 240 pages of server-side gobbledegook. What this does lack out of the box is any Apple or iTunes support (try Allegro Media Server), but if using Apple Lossless files, you'll also need to convert them to FLAC (try Max).

Musing on the whole Computer Audio thing, it's possible that the tuner is the perfect place for the computer to pitch camp in any audio system. After all, it's the one place where users expect to do more than cue up and play a piece of music; people have an expectation to tune to the correct radio station, maybe looking at some DAB metadata or signal strength meters while they are doing so. And, let's face it, if anyone can crack the problem of receiving a RF signal at the same time as preventing radio frequency interference from ruining that signal, it's going to be a tuner expert.

And that is its biggest strength. It acts as an effective firewall between the RF-creating computer and your RF-hating audio system. Plug it into your internet router (wired or wi-fi) sign up to the Frontier Silicon radio portal on a computer on the same network (to control your favourites) and tens of thousands of stations appear, many of which are truly first rate. It's tested on a Canadian classical music station (no surprises) and defaults to that first time you set your system. If you are new to internet radio, the choice can be daunting (using the portal helps), but there are some remarkable stations from around the world in any genre you can name. DAB and FM needs an aerial (of course), but set-up is remarkably straightforward. And, by keeping the computer at arm's length (even wirelessly completely out of the signal path) it helps keep the potential nasties from a computer at bay.

USB memory sticks can be browsed and used, and if you are determined to isolate a computer from the system, this is a good angle to get computer files into your system. Many (not just M-D) feel this is the best-sounding option for computer music

replay. And the shared media option (from a UPnP media server) is relatively straightforward, as long as your UPnP server isn't configured in some avant-garde manner. It lacks flexibility compared to the Linn DS and Naim Uniti systems, but while that means you cannot set up the system in exactly the way you want it to, it at least means you stand a fighting chance of getting the system working without tears... and professional call-outs. The shared media option isn't the MD 801's strongest suit (it's best to consider this as a does-everything radio that also has streaming options, instead of a digital hub) and there is no provision for accessing the likes of Spotify or Rhapsody.

In addition, periodically it seemed as if something on the network went to sleep and switched the MD 801 into reconnect mode after a few tracks. Whether that's down to my network or the MD 801's interface is unclear, but this kind of dropout is rare on my system. Interestingly, some of what might be considered weaknesses by a younger audience are in fact strengths here. For example, the access time between pressing a soft button on the 3" touch screen and something happening would be slow if you were dialing numbers on a phone, but are perfectly placed when you are crouched over an equipment table hoping your reading glasses don't slip.

If you are using this as an all-in-one radio, the MD 801 gives a superb performance. It is first and foremost an internet radio and as a consequence delivers excellent internet radio performance. It logs on to a wired or wireless router without tears, and quickly populates a long list of useful internet radio stations, which is easy and quick to sort. Best of all though, it makes Internet radio sound exceptionally good.

In particular, there is a richness and depth to the sound that is often sorely lacking in other devices of a similar outlook. As this extends across the board, it may well make DAB sound a lot better than many people have come to expect from the format. As with previous Magnum Dynalab tuners, it's the excellent image depth, detailed yet still engaging overall presentation and vocal articulation that stand out. The MD 801 doesn't have that warm and inviting sound of the FM tuner models (not just the triode-powered ones, they all have a sound that feels like a beacon of goodness and that feeling is not as present here), but once again in context, the MD 801 sounds all Christmas-y and wonderful by comparison to most DAB/FM/Internet models. ▶

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Internet-connected DAB/FM tuner
Radio formats supported: FM, DAB, DAB+, Internet radio, Internet streaming
Formats supported: Real Audio, AAC+, MP3, WMA and FLAC
Frequency response (± 1 dB): 15Hz-17kHz
Line audio output: 1.0V
Power conception typical/max: 50W/100W
Dimensions (HxWxD): 20.4x79.5x50cm
Weight: 3.1kg
Price: £1,495

Manufactured by: Magnum Dynalab
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I find this a particularly interesting device. It's the reluctant computer audiophile's way into computer audio. There's a tendency for audiophile companies to reinvent the wheel, but here Magnum Dynalab makes no bones about using the Frontier Silicon platform, because it is robust and field-tested. I have often suggested that people who dip their toe into computer audio are adding just another shelf to the system, and this is the perfect expression of that. There will always be someone who says that a laptop and a DAC can do all of this and more, but that's probably far removed from the person who would ever even dream of buying the MD 801. It adds functionality to the existing tuner concept, and even soft-launches the idea of media serving for those who have no intention of turning in their CD players. And it does it while preserving the Magnum Dynalab sound. Overall, the MD 801 is an excellent product for those wanting computer audio but not want it taking over their audio system. +