

Editor's
Dream System!

THE HOME Theater



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**World's First
Fly-In Theater Toured**



HIGH-PERFORMANCE THEATER





Instant Classic

My 12-year-old son, Nikolas, pays close attention to the equipment that rotates through my home theater system. In addition to being genuinely interested in the stuff, he also has a vested interest in keeping track of the gear and how it operates, since he's determined to destroy his brain cells by playing video games on the system after school with his brother. I've warned the two of them that it's a slippery slope: First it's video games, then it's on to cocaine and heroin. Unfortunately, they're oblivious to these—and most of my other—parental concerns. The first thing this young rascal said when he saw the McIntosh MX134 pre/pro sitting in the rack was, "Gee, Dad, it looks old!" Well, the MX134, along with its companion MC206 six-channel amplifier, doesn't exactly look old—it doesn't sport any rust or faded lettering—but "old school" is certainly an apt description.

It's a look you'll either love or hate. Without hesitation, I love it. Its full-front glass faceplate, large knobs, soft-blue LEDs, understated green-backlit lettering, and rock-solid feel make the MX134 ooze character and class. The design and performance of the MC206,

Despite its conservative appearance, this McIntosh combo is one hell-raising stack of gear.

by Darryl Wilkinson

with its polished-glass faceplate and trio of large, alluring, blue meters, is the electronic incarnation of Teddy Roosevelt's famous phrase, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." (I try to type softly and do a parenthetical shtick, but that's another story.) Together,

the pair presents a vision of substance and quality that not only looks expensive but looks like it's worth every darn penny. There's no attempt to be hip or trendy; it's just classic class.

Although the once-staunchly proud American-owned McIntosh became a staunchly proud Clarion-owned company some time ago, McIntosh has pretty much remained faithful to their roots of unpretentious design and engineering integrity. Open up one of their preamps or amps, and you'll find plenty of handwritten initials on the circuit boards, a testament to the amount of human-hand craftsmanship that goes into building these beautiful boxes. I must admit that I've always had a soft spot for McIntosh. Although they've been a little sluggish coming to the home theater party, it's nice to see this soft-spoken giant standing tall again.



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McIntosh MX134 Preamp/Processor and MC206 Amplifier

A. This combo features McIntosh's distinctive "old school" aesthetic.

B. The MX134 has 11 A/V inputs that are available in any zone.

The MX134 is two preamps in one, combining a full-fledged home theater pre/pro for primary use with a two-channel A/V preamp that controls a second zone plus the recording outputs. Even though I'm absolutely infatuated with multi-room gear, I'll be the first to admit that multiroom systems can sometimes be frustratingly difficult to operate. The MX134 is a stellar example of how it should be done.

The inputs for zone A, the theater zone, are



C. The remote mimics many of the MX134's front-panel controls.

selectable via remote or by turning the knob located immediately to the right of the central blue LED display window, which indicates

the selected zone A source, the volume level, and the zone B source. The zone B inputs are selectable either via a knob, symmetrically located to the left of the display window, or from a remote

keypad (McIntosh or Xantech). Aside from the choice of input (which is available from the front panel because zone B controls the record outputs), you can only access other zone B functions from a keypad or remote eye located in that zone. (If you're a keypad fan, you can also use one to control zone A.) Conveniently, there's a system-off button on the front panel that allows you to shut down both zones simultaneously, plus a record-lock button that prevents zone B listeners from spoiling a recording-in-progress by changing inputs. For homes that require more zones, the McIntosh CR16 Multizone A/V Control Center adds another four zones (actually, you can use six CR16s for up to 24 more zones). All you need is a single DB37 cable to connect all of the MX134's A/V inputs to the CR16.

All 11 of the MX134's A/V inputs are available in any zone, although only analog audio and composite/S-video are output to the additional zones. You can rename any of the A/V inputs and assign the six digital inputs and two component video inputs to any input you choose. If an input isn't needed, you can turn off access in the setup menu, which makes it quicker to toggle through the available sources. An unusual feature is the ability to add the optional TM1 AM/FM tuner module. John Henkel, senior electronics design engineer at McIntosh, says that the \$500 TM1's performance is identical to that of the separate MR85 tuner, but its cost is significantly lower because it's just the guts of the tuner.

There are so many other cool things about the MX134, it's hard to decide where to begin. Take the volume control, for instance. John Henkel calls it a "digitally controlled analog volume control." It's actually a ladder network of resistors that are added to or subtracted from the analog circuit by a digital controller. It's very precise (all eight channels track within 0.5 decibels), wonderfully responsive, and totally quiet—with no audible pops or clicks when you make adjustments at any level. John explained that another unique aspect is the

inclusion of an op amp capable of handling +/-15-volt swings as compared with others that commonly only accommodate +/-5-volt swings. The wider input range results in a better signal-to-noise ratio and an unhampered, naturally neutral sound. The MX134 enthusiastically handled the multichannel aggressiveness of "Our Man in Istanbul" from Steve Stevens' *Flamenco.A.Go.Go* yet preserved every subtle

nuance of Bucky Pizzarelli's live quintet performance in a New York jazz club on the *Swing Live* DVD-Audio release.

The Input/Output Format LEDs on the front panel are another welcome feature. To the left is a set of seven speaker icons arranged in a standard home theater configuration. These LEDs show you which channels are active in the input format and are an immediate visual cue to the system's status. If your DVD player, for example, defaults to a movie's Dolby Digital 2.0 soundtrack, only the "L" and "R" icons will light up, rather than the normal six (an "S" icon will



HIGHLIGHTS

- Silkscreening behind the glass panels never wears off
- Simple and easy-to-operate multiroom capability
- Power Guard prevents damaging distortion from reaching your speakers



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also light up if the material is Pro Logic-encoded). To the right is a set of six Output Format icons that

show which channels are active as a result of whatever processing you're using. This cool little feature saved me a minor headache while I was listening to the *Swing Live* disc. Before I remembered that I was listening to the 4.0-channel mix, a quick glance at the Input/Output Format LEDs explained why I wasn't hearing anything from the center speaker.

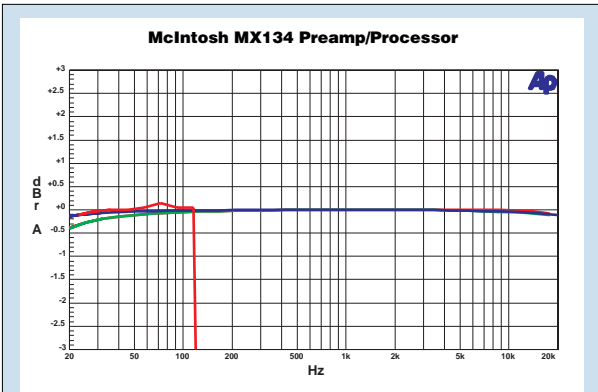
Although I preferred the unprocessed Pure Stereo mode, the three music-processing modes were admirable for their light touch. Music 3 (based on Pro Logic II) provided a nice expansion for the vocals, banjo, and guitar on Rebecca Pidgeon's *Four Marys* CD, as well as on Pink Floyd's "Money." Music 1, which re-creates a large or outdoor setting, was more suitable for the soaring of Carla Lother's "Jaelish" on the *Ephemeria* SACD. Music 2's smaller-room mode did a superb job of re-creating the space in which you'd listen to Quartetto Gelato's eclectic accordion-dominated mix. For each sound mode, trim-select and trim-level knobs (also adjustable from the remote) allow easy adjustments of up to +/-12 dB to the volume levels of the center, subwoofer, and surround speakers. You can save all of the levels in permanent memory except for the movie modes, which revert to zero when the MX134 is turned off. You can also save bass, treble, and loudness-compensation-trim adjustments for each input in permanent memory. Loudness

compensation, by the way, is a variable circuit that boosts the loudness by as much as 18 dB at low-volume listening levels (when the bass becomes harder for the human ear to hear) and gradually decreases the boost as the volume level increases. When engaged, it's simple and automatic—exactly as loudness contour should be.

The MX134's digital video circuit upconverts composite video to S-video and component (plus S-video to component), so you only need to run one type of video cable to your display. Although it's another element of simplicity that I appreciated, it's the one area in which I found something to be disappointed with in the MX134. In general, the preamp's video quality was impeccable; however, while watching the upconverted composite output of the *Fifth Element* DVD, I noticed slight step-by-step variations in the picture's brightness. A few other DVDs had similar, although lesser, variations, while some had none. The results were identical whether the MX134 was converting composite or S-video to

MX134 Preamp/Processor	\$7,000
MC206 Amplifier	\$4,500
McIntosh Laboratory (800) 538-6576 www.mcintoshlabs.com Dealer Locator Code MCI	

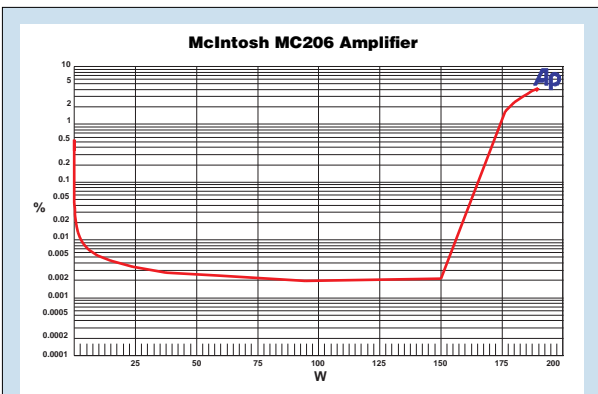
component. John Henkel clued me in to why this effect occurred only on certain DVDs with one word: Macrovision. Without getting into the various sides of the copyright



HT Labs Measures: McIntosh MX134 Preamp/Processor

The above chart shows the frequency response of the left (purple), center (blue), LFE (red), and left-surround (green) channels at the preamp outputs of the Dolby Digital decoder. The left, center, and surround channels are all flat, +0.01/-0.38 decibels from 20 hertz to 20 kilohertz. The LFE channel, normalized to the level at 40 Hz, is -0.15 dB at 20 Hz, reaches the upper -3dB point at 119 Hz, and reaches the upper -6dB point at 122 Hz.

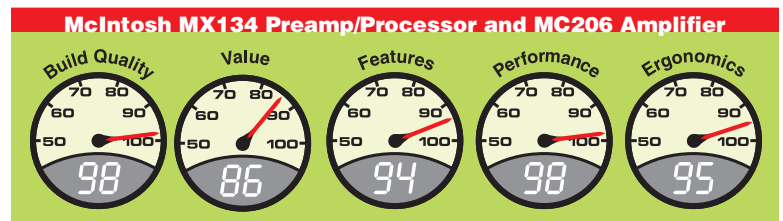
The analog frequency response of the left channel is -0.42 dB at 20 Hz and -0.07 dB at 20 kHz. The response dropped to -1.26 dB at 10 Hz and to -0.57 dB at 50 kHz. The analog THD+N is less than 0.040% at 1 kHz with a 100-millivolt input and the volume control set to 70. Crosstalk with a 100-mV input was -89.21 dB left to right and -90.30 dB right to left. The signal-to-noise ratio with a 100-mV input from 10 Hz to 24 kHz with "A" weighting was -95.65 dBBrA.—AJ



HT Labs Measures: McIntosh MC206 Amplifier

This graph shows that the MC206's left amplifier channel, with two channels driving 8-ohm loads, reaches 0.1% distortion at 165.3 watts and 1% distortion at 174.4 watts. Into 4 ohms, the amplifier reaches 0.1% distortion at 261.7 watts and 1% distortion at 301.6 watts. An input level of 103 millivolts was required to produce an output of 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load, indicating an overall gain of 28.8 decibels. With all channels driven into 8-ohm loads, the amp reaches 0.1% distortion at 121.8 watts and 1% distortion at 139.0 watts.

The amplifier's frequency response was +0.00/-0.21 dB from 20 Hz to 20 kHz. The response dropped to -0.68 dB at 10 Hz and to -0.57 dB at 50 kHz. THD+N from the amplifier was less than 0.007% at 1 kHz when driving 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load. Crosstalk at 1 kHz driving 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load was -86.53 dB left to right and -87.51 dB right to left. The signal-to-noise ratio with 2.83 volts driving an 8-ohm load from 10 Hz to 24 kHz with "A" weighting was -103.06 dBBrA.—AJ





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debate, suffice it to say that this problem is more a legal than a technical issue. In the end, unless you watch a lot of Macrovision-encoded VHS tapes or haven't upgraded your DVD player to take advantage of your TV's component video inputs, it probably won't be much of an issue. For watching time-shifted recordings, camcorder tapes, and (yes) those mind-numbing video games, the upconverter works fine—and, of course, the MX134 does a spectacular job of passing along the input signal in its original form.

One minor thing that I disliked is that you can't directly access a listening mode from either the MX134's front panel or its remote control. Instead, you have to toggle through the settings one by one. This isn't a bother when you're using the knob on the front panel, but it's a pain in the posterior if you're using the remote control. In my impatience, I usually overshoot the setting I wanted and had to go around the dial a second time.

While there's less to say about

the MC206 amplifier, it's no less awe-inspiring than the MX134. Aside from the drop-dead-gorgeous blue meters, its most endearing feature is the elegant Power Guard circuit. A standard of McIntosh amplifiers for years, Power Guard continuously monitors each amp channel's distortion level. If any channel is overdriven, Power Guard reduces that channel's input volume to keep the distortion level below 2 percent. It's quick, automatic, and virtually inaudible. Generally, the only way to tell that Power Guard has kicked in is by the flash of the Power Guard front-panel lights above the meters. The worst (and I mean that in a positive way) that Power Guard does is ultimately limit the dynamic range if you're listening at a really loud level. It sure beats lugging your speakers in to have the tweeters replaced.

Sonically, the McIntosh combination never called attention to itself. It was most impressive in its neutral-

ity and ability to confidently handle loud and soft effects with equal aplomb. Whether it was the airborne destruction of *Pearl Harbor* or the dramatic all-speaker onslaught of "Bohemian Rhapsody" from Queen's newly remixed *A Night at the Opera* DVD-Audio release, the pair never flinched. Yet, with a cappella music from Anonymous 4, the pre/pro and amp allowed the beautiful and subtle harmonic interplay of voices to fully blossom through my Sonus Faber Grand Piano speakers.

With its stout, sturdy nature, the simplicity of its setup and operation, and its natural and unhindered sound quality, this pre/pro-and-power-amp combo from McIntosh is one of the most profoundly enjoyable packages I've played with in a long time. It's unassuming simplicity masks the complex and meticulous engineering inside, making it a perfect setup for anyone who truly values performance but doesn't want to dedicate his or her life to learning how to operate the gear. If you thought McIntosh was just for old fogies, think again. Class and performance like this never go out of style. 🎧



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