



# Magnum Dynalab MD-108 FM Tuner

by Alan Sircom

It's not often that a product comes along that is so good, it changes your view on some aspect of hi-fi you already thought you knew and knew well. The Magnum Dynalab MD-108 is one such product. This is the best tuner in the world today, without question. There, you've read the review now. Move along... buy one.

What makes this tuner so damn special? It's not just the packaging, although that helps. The big blue flight case the MD-108 arrives in suggests this is Something Important (although it would be even more Important if the remote control could fit in with the tuner in the ubersnug case; it just has room for tuner, a strapped down manual, a mains lead in a pocket and about 10cm of protective foam in almost all directions.

Even without the protective case, the MD-108 is built to take knocks. It's a big tuner, about the size and weight of a \$1,000 seven-channel home cinema integrated amplifier. Magnum Dynalab supply the MD-108 in a choice of three top-class finishes; silver with black lettering (shown), black with gold lettering or gold with black lettering. The latter two are not as tacky as they sound, and the three finishes mean the MD-108 will blend in with practically all high-end hi-fi.

As ever, this is an analogue tuner, writ large, with not a single concession to digital technology (barring an LED read-out and the logic circuitry to drive it). The five-stage varactor tuner head is custom made by Magnum Dynalab (about the last company to still do so) and phase-locked loop synthesis is missing in action. Instead, the tuner allows absolutely precise tuning of a station, locked in place by the stiffness of the power supply. This means the tuner takes a couple of days to settle down and there is mild station drift

when first powered up. But this is why the tuner can only be placed in standby, never switched off without ripping out the rear IEC cable.

The big knob on the left of the front panel switches between aerial inputs; there are two cable/satellite radio inputs and two FM inputs, using screw-in aerial sockets. On the right, there is a large tuning dial. Between them is an array of toggle switches and a display panel, which contains a pair of VU meters (signal strength and multipath distortion level) a yellow LED read-out for frequency and a magic eye valve. This last is an extremely useful affair, as it gives an instant and graphic display of how good the signal is; it also looks amazing (in a 1950s sci-fi style) and is one of the few meters that is sonically benign, arguably sonically beneficial. The magic eye is not the only valve; under the skin is a pair of 12AX7 tubes in the audio switching stage.

The row of toggles is impressive, too. Alongside the usual power, mute and stereo/mono switches, there are three different bandwidth settings (wide, narrow and super narrow) a blend control (to eliminate interstation noise) and display dimming. Three bandwidth settings means the tuner can deal with different levels of signal strength, not overpowering weak signals or being overpowered by strong ones. As ever with Magnum Dynalab, muting works only to suppress signals while tuning from station to station; it is not a mute button in the amplifier sense of things. The tuner's output features both balanced XLR and single-ended phonos,

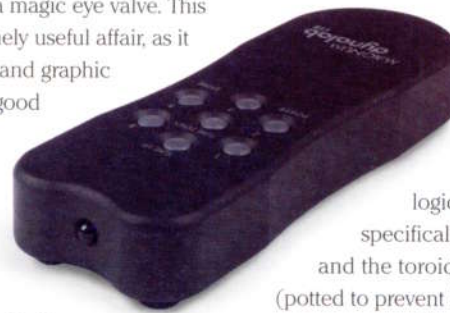
with good quality sockets in both cases. In fact, look closer and you'll discover there are two separate output stages, for balanced and single-ended outputs. Now, that's impressive.

There are many commonalities between this tuner and others in the Magnum Dynalab range. On the face of it, only the magic eye and extra bandwidth control mark out the MD-108 above its brothers. In fact, the differences are massive. The Class A audio stage was redesigned from scratch, or rather from

scratches, with the discrete single ended output stage and the bi-polar balanced driver. The CMOS

logic circuit is designed specifically for the MD-108

and the toroidal transformer (potted to prevent interference) is also custom specified for the tuner. This may bear strong familial resemblance to the other models in the Magnum Dynalab range, but it is very, very different. If you've read Plato, think of it as almost the Perfect Form or the Archetype of the Magnum tuner, or perhaps it's the genius brother that got all the good DNA. Not that the other tuners in the Magnum Dynalab range are somehow the idiot cousins of the MD-108; on any level playing field, even the entry-level model in the range is far beyond the performance of pretty much any other tuner. It's just that with the MD-108 in the running, there is no such thing as a level playing field. It's like playing footie against the slope... and with a team of 45 premiership players on the other side. And a referee who's accepted a big bung from the other side. Still, it's easier to use a raft of metaphors than use up all



▶ those superlatives I have saved up for the performance.

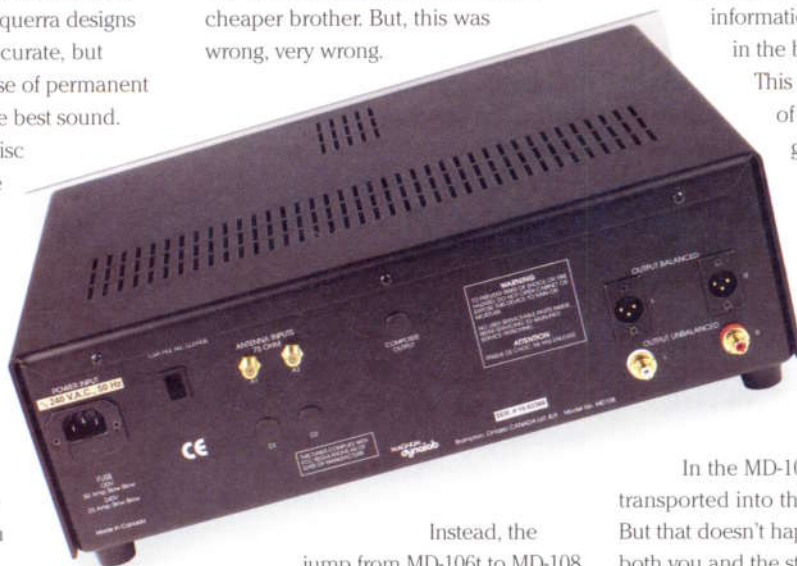
The tuner has considerably more analogue control than any other, although this control can be neatly side-stepped by using the chunky and stylish remote control. But the basic non-remote handling may seem daunting at first, unless you are a bit of a tuner buff. For all its relative complexity, the tuner is intuitive and easy to use. The manual is almost a help, but in fairness, understanding a tuner comes with handling it, not with reading about it. The use of the bandwidth settings looks daunting on paper, but becomes second nature over a very short time.

You get used to the magic eye in seconds and it remains the best tuner signal strength indicator around (the oscilloscope of Day-Sequerra designs was arguably more accurate, but induced a healthy sense of permanent fiddling to try to get the best sound. Here, you just fill the disc with green light). If the sound is still difficult to pin, down, flick one of the three bandwidth toggle switches and possibly the blend toggle. That'll nail 95% of signals, with other surprisingly distant signals capable of sounding more than decent by dropping the tuner into mono to eliminate hiss. The multipath and signal-strength VU meters simply confirm what the magic eye already knows, but careful twiddling of the tuning dial can turn a good signal into a great one.

The MD-108 has some healthy competition from below. The other tuners in the Magnum Dynalab range also vie for the place as the best tuner in the world today, too. First, I listened to the MD-102t and thought it was brilliant,



then I listened to the MD-106t and it was better. But, when I listened to the MD-106t, I secretly harboured thoughts that the law of diminishing returns would make the MD-108 only slightly better than its cheaper brother. But, this was wrong, very wrong.



Instead, the jump from MD-106t to MD-108 is wider than you'd expect; wider than the difference between MD-102t and MD-106t. Arguably, wider even than the gulf between regular price tuners and the MD-102t. It sets such a high benchmark that it puts the whole tuner market into

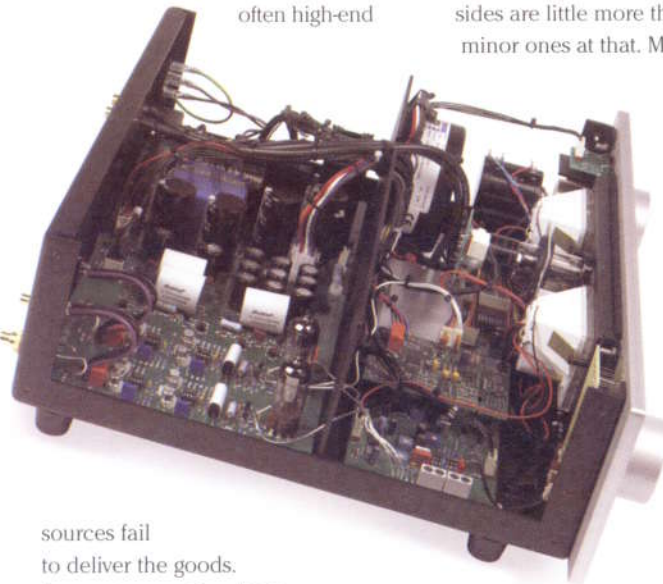
perspective; suddenly, you see the bigger picture, and see justification for the diversity of tuner prices, why there are no expensive digital tuners as yet and just how special the airwaves are.

There is a strength and dynamism to the sound of the MD-108 that simply doesn't happen anywhere else. It is, of course, extremely accurate and tonally honest, but so is a Naim NAT 03 or an MD-102. It's also good at picking up and discriminating signals, but probably not as easily as the MD-106t. But what the 108 has is a smoothness and richness that simply fails to register on any other tuner.

This is not soggy smoothness or enhanced rosy-glow valve like warmth. This is like the best Koetsu cartridges, digging up all the information, but presenting it in the best possible manner. This is a unique sound of high-end in all its glory. It delivers detail like the starkest information-hound, yet presents this information in the sort of package that would even chill out Graham Norton on crystal meth.

In the MD-106t, you get transported into the radio studio. But that doesn't happen here. Instead, both you and the studio are transported to a place where compression and microphone spitch doesn't happen; where everything sounds real and everything sounds good. Beautiful soundstaging, too. It's also something that belies description; a tough call ▶

► when that's your job. So, instead, I did the journalistic thing; I hoiked the thing back into its flight case and played it through a number of different systems and discovered it to be perhaps the most transparent source you can possibly own. It has one priority – to make the best sounding airwaves you will ever hear. It does this beautifully, and doesn't require a system to be attuned to its charms to deliver the goods. Of course, if you play this through a high-resolution high-end system (it's natural home), the detail shines through, but it also sounds exceptionally good through a more modest system, where often high-end



sources fail to deliver the goods.

I am not suggesting this is justification for spending £5,000 on a tuner and £500 on amp and speakers (there is a thin line between 'tuner fan' and 'tuner nutcase'; this would cross the line), but the MD-108 is so sensational-sounding, such systems seem more appropriate than usual.

What the MD-108 does extremely well is to make listening to the tuner a far more active process than usual. You can play the tuner at whisper quiet levels in the background, but people will comment and your attention will be drawn into the music or speech playing. Play this at a cocktail party (welcome to the 1970s, again) and the conversation will trail off as people listen to the Jazz

FM dinner jazz. Have this quietly knocking out Radio Four while working and suddenly bland news items about share prices take on Black Wednesday gravitas. You drift into the programme and lose the thread of what's going on around you. A good tuner can do this occasionally; the MD-108 does it so commonly, it's almost impossible to use as background. It's a good job there isn't an in-car version of the MD-108, people would drop off the road every few hundred yards when listening to the radio.

As you might expect with such a powerfully good product, the downsides are little more than niggles, very minor ones at that. Most surround the

integration of remote to tuner. The absolutely, unrelentingly analogue nature of the MD-108 doesn't sit comfortably with a remote control, so the tuner needs to be switched into remote mode... and this effectively disables the front panel. Also, the remote codes just

happen to match those of an NTL digital cable TV box; if you have both in the same room, it's difficult to put the NTL box to standby and use the MD-108. As I said, minor niggles in the extreme, and ones far outweighed by the sheer performance of the MD-108.

Many reviews end paragraph begins with the word 'ultimately', as an alternative way of saying 'in conclusion'. But 'ultimately' is appropriate here, because this is the ultimate product for a radio fanatic. There is nothing thus far that gets close to the performance of the MD-108, save for long lost classic tuners

like the Marantz 10B. It's built to live out the end of analogue radio in style and manages to combine the 'wow' factor needed by audiophiles and radio buffs alike. Raises the bar? We need taller posts now. This is the most fantastic tuner you can buy today and if you are really hardcore about your airwaves, this will set you salivating and put your bank account to condition red. DAB – who needs it? ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Analogue FM tuner
Usable Sensitivity-Mono:	0.7 $\mu$ V 9.0 dBf
50 dB quieting-Mono:	2.0 $\mu$ V 9.9 dBf
50 dB quieting-Stereo:	2.3 $\mu$ V20.0 dBf
Capture Ratio:	1.5 dB
Image Rejection:	125.0dB
Signal to Noise Ratio:	80.0dB
Alternate Channel Att:	Wide - 46.0dB
Alternate Channel Att:	Narrow - 60.0dB
Alternate Channel Att:	Super Narrow - 80.0dB
Adjacent Channel Att:	Wide - 3.0dB
Adjacent Channel Att:	Narrow - 21.0dB
Adjacent Channel Att:	Super Narrow - 48.0dB
THD - Mono:	0.10%
THD - Stereo:	0.10%
Stereo Separation:	50.0dB
AM suppression:	70.0dB
SCA rejection:	80.0dB
IF Rejection:	125.0dB
Audio frequency response:	15Hz-17kHz ( $\pm$ 1dB)
Balanced Audio Output:	2.2V
Single-Ended Output:	1.0V
Dimensions (WxHxD)	483 x 128 x 407mm
Weight:	17.7kg
Price:	£5,850

#### UK Distributor

Audiofreaks  
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#### Manufacturer

Magnum Dynalab Ltd  
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