

Magnum Dynalab 'signature' tuner upgrades

by Alan Sircom

This is a little odd as far as reviews go, because it's a review of an upgrade of products, rather than the products themselves. However, as we've already given a lot of column inches over to the Magnum Dynalab tuners upgraded by these circuit boards, it's perhaps not so odd as it first seems.

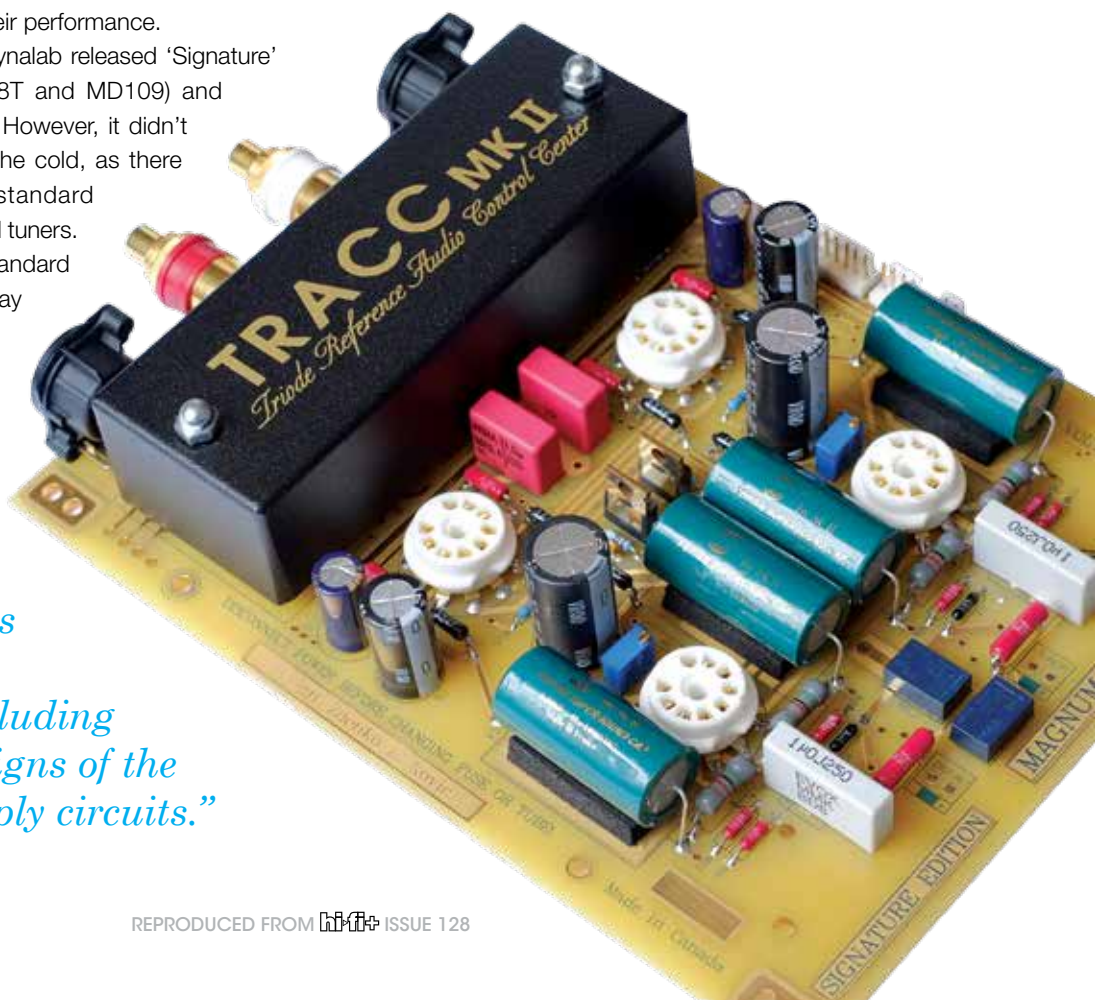
In fact, this is not a new thing for Magnum Dynalab. From the outset, Magnum Dynalab has offered multiple upgrade options to owners of its products. It has always been possible to modify Magnum Dynalab's tuners (from the early FT-101 onwards), bringing older designs as close as possible to the current specification and performance of later variants of the model in question. That upgrade path doesn't change. However, this is slightly different: instead of reinvigorating an older tuner with newer 'innards', this Signature project allows users of current tuners to raise their performance.

In May this year, Magnum Dynalab released 'Signature' versions of its analogue (MD108T and MD109) and Internet media (MD809T) tuners. However, it didn't leave existing customers out in the cold, as there are upgrade packages for standard versions of these popular high-end tuners. Theoretically, you could buy a standard version of one of these tuners today and upgrade to 'Signature' status at a later date, but economically

speaking, this doesn't make a lot of sense: the Signature upgrade costs £1,990, while ordering a Signature version of the MD108T, MD109, and MD809T adds £1,500 to the respective prices of the standard models, which will continue to be available.

The Signature upgrade kit replaces two-thirds of the tuner internals, including completely new designs of the multiple power supply circuits and the crucial analogue output audio boards. In fact, all that remains from the non-Signature product is the chassis, mains transformers and the FM front-end module for signal reception; or, in the case of the MD809T, the streaming and Internet tuner module. All the rest of the tuner is completely new. ▶

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- ▶ Actually ‘new’ isn’t necessarily the right term, because each ‘Signature’ tuner uses a set of rare and newly discovered, specially selected, NOS (new old stock) Telefunken E88CC valves, which have been cryogenically treated, which should deliver better performance and reliability from already highly rated classic valves. Nothing in the modern hollow-state world comes close to these classic valves. Everything else in the ‘Signature’ upgrade is brand new.

In essence, the Signature upgrades are wholly new analogue audio and power supply boards. Zdenko Zivkovic, Magnum Dynalab’s in-house designer, has completely redesigned and in the process improved both stages. In the analogue audio boards, this involved implementing a new valve biasing solution within the proprietary TRACC MkII module, as well as sourcing significantly better passive and active components (such as Mundorf Supreme and Teflon by-pass capacitors) in the audio signal path. Meanwhile, the power supplies for the FM front end, analogue audio, and ancillary circuits have been redesigned from scratch, with solutions that give much lower noise levels and cleaner frequencies within the voltage and current required for the active segments of each tuner. Again, with the exception of the two mains transformers (one for the audio circuits and other for the rest), virtually every component on the power supply motherboard has been improved relative to the standard version.

A/B demonstration is very difficult for two understandable reasons. First, you need to have a standard and Signature tuner side-by-side, and these tuners don’t tend to hang around long enough to have two similarly run-in models available for comparison purposes. Second, radio is a fast moving stream, and you won’t be able to listen to the same piece of music twice for comparison purposes, unless you have your own FM station... or a time machine. That being said, the internet-enabled MD809T does allow you to stream the same music from your server, but they are still too rare for there to be two in the same room at the same time. Nevertheless, the upgrade from standard to Signature tuner is large enough to be noticeable, even after a protracted absence while the tuner is upgraded.

Magnum Dynalab’s tuners are already currently the best FM you can get, so the Signature upgrade has some big shoes to fill. Frankly, any improvement brought to these

DETAILS

Upgrades for: Magnum Dynalab MD108T, MD109, and MD809T

Price: £1,900 (Signature versions of tuners bought new adds £1,500 to standard prices)

Manufactured by: Magnum Dynalab

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tuners could be likened to Usain Bolt trying to shave a couple of hundredths of a second off his 100m record – nothing and no-one else comes close, but there is always room for improvement. The end result of the Signature upgrades is a sound that gives an even more holographic presentation of good FM broadcasts, better low frequency extension, overall improvement in natural transparency throughout the audible frequency range, and a more solid and full-bodied sense of dynamics both in speech and music. This makes a lot of sense when listening to productions like BBC Radio Three’s Proms season or Radio Four’s often-fascinating weekday at 11am audio documentaries, because these are often some of the least interfered-with radio moments on the airwaves. But the Magnum Dynalab tuners are also remarkable at extracting good radio moments from almost any station (even compressed prime-time music stations don’t sound quite as vexatious through a decent system), and the Signature versions help raise the audio quality still further.

The only downside to the Signature upgrade (for existing owners) is the upgrade cannot be fitted by the end-user, and you have to wave goodbye to your tuner for a short while. The retro-fit upgrade can be performed by Audiofreaks’ own engineers, however, so the tuner does not need a return ticket to Canada, and you don’t end up with months without a tuner. Audiofreaks suggests the turnaround time is ‘fairly quick’, if you get in the queue fast enough...

Magnum Dynalab has stayed true to the path of making the best tuners it can, and its tuners are incontestably the best sounding FM devices you can buy at this time. The Signature upgrades, then, take already great tuners and make them better in almost every way, because the upgrades improve two core sections of these devices. Form an orderly queue... +