

TONEAudio

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Curing The Insatiable Need For More Music

The Magnum Dynalab MD-609T XM Tuner

By Jeff Dorgay

I'll say it again – I'm obsessed. I can't ever get enough music. There are always more records, tapes, CDs and downloads to buy. When satellite radio first came out, I was very intrigued with the service even though, God forbid, one is now paying to listen to the radio. All things considered, what's another \$13 a month between friends, right?



Next obstacle, limited options to get the XM radio signal into your living room. Most cars now have an XM option at the end of a check box, but the home is another story. Everything I've listened to that brings XM into your home has sounded like crap, and has been priced accordingly. What's a lover of fine audio to do?

**I've got the answer,
but it's going to cost you.**

It's going to cost you \$3995, but it's damn good. And when you pull it out of the box, it sounds like you made a \$3995 mistake. But a week later you will have a BIG smile on your face because once this tuner has some hours on it, the sound is glorious. There are about 170 channels on XM these days and some of them suck, but there are an awful lot of good ones. The wider your taste in music, the more you will love it. In addition to the talk radio, sports, news and comedy channels there are 69 channels worth of music.

**Music of every kind that you can
imagine, without commercials.**

Personally, my favorite is Channel 40 – Deep Tracks. It's exactly what album rock was in the 70s when I was a kid, obscure album cuts from bands you know or want to find more about. But there are plenty of great stations to listen to and if you would like to find out what's playing *right now*, just click on this link:

<http://www.xmradio.com/onxm/full-channel-listing.xmc>

How great is that?

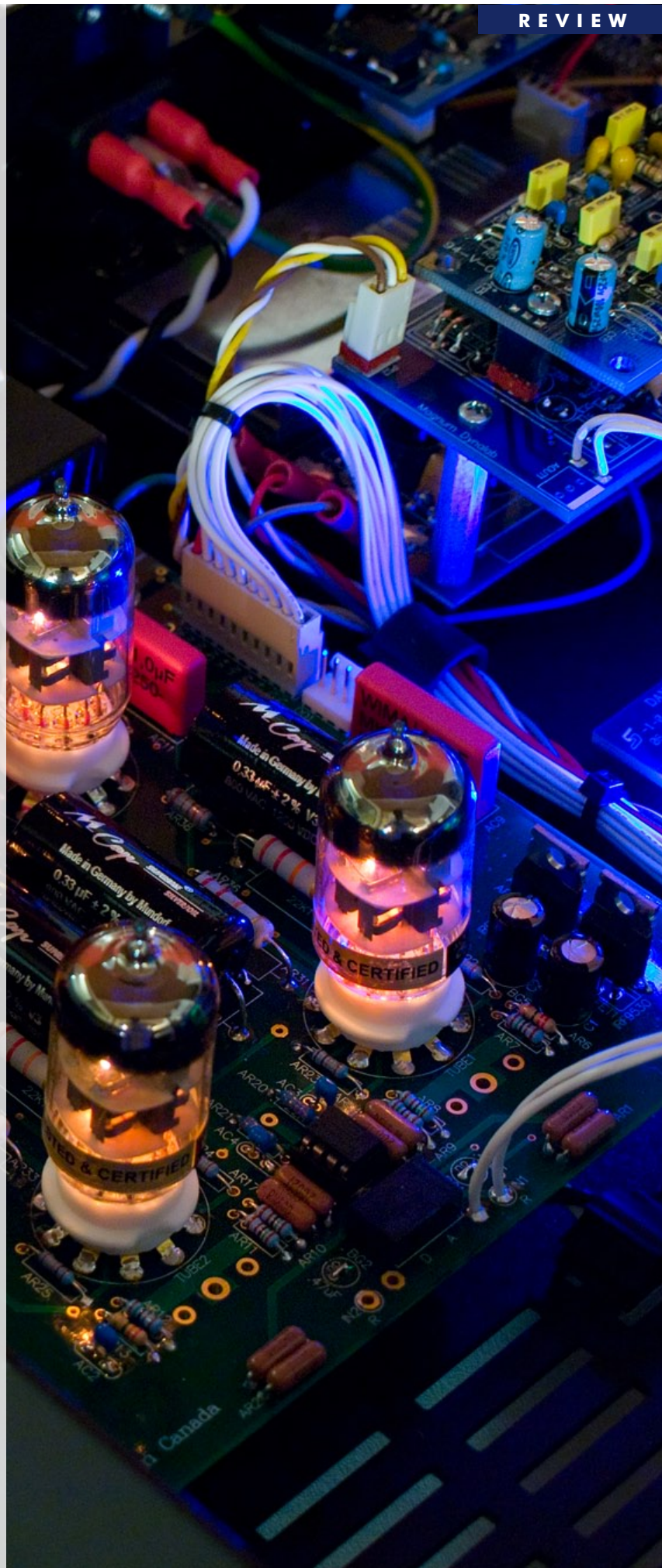
There is a punk station, a ska station, some hip-hop, classical and classic rock, any kind of music you can think of, 24 hours a day without commercials. Occasionally there is a DJ popping in and there are some premium shows with guest DJ's like Bob Dylan, Snoop Dogg, Tom Petty (another awesome show) and many others. If you don't want to keep an internet browser open, you can just peek at the blue alphanumeric display and see what artist and track is currently playing. *(continued)*

Let's talk more about this tuner, shall we?

I'll agree that four grand for a tuner is a bit much, especially considering the nature of the XM broadcast. According to most of the technical information I read about XM, it is digital but compressed to about a 400kb/second data stream. So, it's not CD quality, but awfully good. Kind of reminds me of the old days listening to a good FM station on a legendary Magnum Dynalab analog tuner...

Taking a peek inside reveals the best goodies the high end has to offer; the latest CS8416 Digital Audio Receiver from CIRRUS and the ubiquitous Burr-Brown PCM1794 oversampling DAC chips. The analog board applies everything MD has learned over the years in analog tuner construction, with four of their cryo'd 6922's offering a fully balanced output as well as single ended RCA's. The lesser-priced MD-606 (\$2500) does not have as elaborate of a digital or analog circuit, but should still be excellent.

I also noticed a pair of digital outputs, (RCA and TOSLINK) but with this level of construction, you won't get better quality by going to an outboard DAC. To verify this, I did try the 609 with my Wadia 521 and actually preferred the sound straight from the 609. I would guess that that wonderful tubed output stage works a bit of magic on the compression artifacts! *(continued)*





The Sound

The only limitation of this format is truly the source. I am confident that the 609 is wringing every last molecule out of the XM data stream that is there to be had. I compared it to a few budget models and it was dreadful. Once you have this baby in your system, you will never be able to go back!

On a good station, XM is very pleasant and offers you a way to get a lot more music into your diet. I think all but the fussiest audiophiles should be able to live with this tuner and be quite happy with the format. You can get a little picky and complain about the slight degradation from compression, but I've never heard FM sound this good and I have a lot of awful rock records from the 70s that don't sound this good either.

On the best sounding stations, I often forgot I was listening to a tuner. Bass was tuneful and tight, the midrange was wonderful and there was enough of a three-dimensional image happening that I could just relax and enjoy. It certainly is nice to have a stream of uninterrupted music at your disposal!

You will notice a bit of loss in depth from your original CDs and a touch of splashiness in the highs, but again that is no fault of the 609, it's the limitations of the XM format. Magnum Dynalab is very committed to an upgrade path on this tuner, so as XM improves, should you need an upgrade to your tuner, it will be available.

It's A Keeper!

If you are looking for a great gift for the audiophile man that has everything and one remaining rack space on which to put it, I can think of nothing more worthy than the MD-609. As the price may scare you away, they have offered to send us the 606 in the near future to investigate. While not offering the take no prisoners approach of the 609, I'll bet that it's still way better than anything else on the market to receive XM broadcasts with and the \$2500 price tag might be a little bit more palatable.

Either way, if you want the best possible sound from XM, Magnum Dynalab is the way to go. Highly recommended! ●