

## Magnum Dynalab MD209 receiver

by Alan Sircom

The stereo receiver used to be one of the biggest product categories in audio electronics. Through most of the 1970s and well into the 1980s, the combination of tuner and amplifier in the same box proved enormously popular, because it was the nearest you could get to a one-box solution at the time. The idea of just adding a turntable (or tape deck) and loudspeakers represented the pinnacle of audio technology convergence. Times change though, and the receiver fell from grace with the rise of the standalone CD player.

Magnum Dynalab still thinks the receiver has a place in the home system, and the resulting MD209 is the only FM receiver built on North American soil at this time. The basic requirements of the receiver have both radically changed and stayed perfectly still: a one-stop shop for all your audio electronics needs. What's changed is largely what's likely to be connected directly to a receiver today: while FM has stayed in place, the chances are that a listener will connect a computer direct to the receiver and, if they use a turntable, a receiver of the MD209's calibre will likely mean a dedicated phono stage. As a consequence, the MD209 features the RF tuner section

from the brand's popular MD108T and MD109 tuners, coupled with an optional high-grade 24-bit, 192kHz capable DAC section, and five line inputs (two of which are XLR, three RCA).

Unlike Magnum Dynalab's previous MD208 receiver from the last decade – which was a collaborative design with fellow Canadian brand Simaudio – the new MD209 comes from the drawing board of Magnum Dynalab design director Zdenko Zivkovic. Zivkovic is the brains behind Magnum Dynalab's current Hybrid Acoustic Circuitry designs, including the mighty MD309, offering 125W (doubling to 250W into four ohms) of power output, coupled with the pair of cryo-treated, Magnum Dynalab specified 6922 double triodes in the gain stage follows the same lines. This is no normal hybrid design, as the triodes act as voltage gain drivers, with the 10 Sanken bipolar power transistors per channel providing current drive. This circuit means an excellent combination of high-current, with triode linearity, long tube life, and – perhaps most important – no heavy output transformers to both weigh down the amplifier and ultimately colour the sound.

Back in the 1960s, amplifier designers moving from valves to solid-state used to design solid-state amplifiers as basically ▶





- ▶ silicon valve amplifiers, with a transformer coupled output stage (the concept continues to this day with some McIntosh amp designs). Then, designers started re-thinking the circuit from first principles, and eliminating the output transformer from the solid-state circuit. Except for a few OTL (output-transformerless) designs, the status quo of valve amps with output transformers and solid-state amps without remained unchallenged. Magnum Dynalab's hybrid circuit is one of the rare exceptions. Naturally, such a circuit demands high-grade components throughout, and as a consequence requires a degree of run-in.

The receiver itself pulls lots of its design cues from Magnum Dynalab's classic tuners, looking like a taller version of the MD107t, but replacing the magic eye tuning light a two-level LED readout (top for volume, bottom for FM frequency). This is flanked by two large VU meters – the left for signal strength/multipath distortion indication, the right for centre tuning. The UK distributor specifies a warm yellow display reminiscent of older Magnum Dynalab designs instead of the all blue read-outs in the rest of the world. There is one operational 'quirk'; source selection requires toggling through the inputs by pressing a single front panel button several times. The remote control is more intuitive, requiring the listener to press the input button followed by one of the number keys. Note, however, that changing inputs comes with a couple of relay clicks and, when performed on the remote, comes with a 10 second delay.

Because Magnum Dynalab is the only surviving tuner manufacturer to make its own RF front-end, and in the process eschewing any kind of synthesiser or quartz lock, the stability of the tuner comes down to its components working at thermal optimums. This means the tuner will drift for the first 48 hours of use, and slight, temporary drift when the tuner has been left powered off for a couple of hours or more. The receiver puts itself into mute for about 30 seconds during start-up anyway, and any drift after this time quickly rights itself in a few minutes. This is perfectly normal for this design of tuner, and ultimately wins out over quartz locked tuners because of the simplicity of the tuner head makes for a far better sound quality. The Magnum Dynalab's system does allow up to 20 presets to be stored, and accessed through the handset.

The combination of analogue FM radio and computer-based DAC represents an ideal way of reaching all the airwaves. The challenge to FM broadcasting from DAB has reduced significantly, with currently only Norway pushing ahead with an analogue radio switch off during 2017. And, while DAB supporters would like people to use digital radio, connecting a computer to the MD209 gives the listener access to practically every radio station on the planet through internet radio. This means you get all the benefits of really good FM radio sound quality – which is often stunning, especially with live BBC Radio Three concerts – and the sheer quantity of stations available online. ▶

*“The MD209 is completely free from a bright and ‘toppy’ treble or a forward sounding presentation, and has an ‘in the room’ soundstage.”*

▶ While the MD209 doesn't suffer low-quality fools gladly – pop FM stations deploying full 'drive-time' compression are a waste of good airwaves at the best of times and the MD209 shows up the limitations – feed the Magnum Dynalab good quality music from radio, analogue, or digital sources, and you get an extremely enjoyable, dynamic, and natural sound in return. Like the tuners themselves, the MD209 is completely free from a bright and 'toppy' treble or a forward sounding presentation, and has an 'in the room' soundstage and tonal integrity that lends itself to hours of effortless listening.

The MD209 is powerful by traditional receiver standards, but wields its power benignly. There is always a sense of power in reserve unless you really decide to thrash the system – but this is not the kind of receiver that ends in the hands of people who have the phrase 'thrash the system' in their vocabulary. This is a sophisticated and refined performer, one that bespeaks of a sophisticated and mature owner rather than a meatead. Speech is particularly distinct and articulate – I listened to the BBC Radio Four Archers 'Helen and Rob' storyline unfold in all its chilling detail. A storyline of coercive control and spousal abuse in an otherwise drab radio soap about country folk took on truly a malevolent and uncomfortable nature. The MD209 simple gets to the marrow of the sound playing, wherever it comes from.

The on-board DAC is one of the most effortlessly musical and dynamic I've heard on an integrated design. I fed the MD209 music direct from my MacBook Pro and an external HDD, mostly in Apple Lossless and AIFF uncompressed, and at sample rates ranging from 16/44 to 24/192 (there is no provision for DSD). While the DAC is good enough to register the differences between resolutions, it doesn't force the listener into a high-resolution corner, as it brings out the best in all formats. There is also great consistency about the sound as you move through the inputs and even onto the tuner itself. All the inputs have that combination of naturalistic presentation, and power in reserve, and the tonal balance is not only near optimum, but optimum across all the sources.

The strange, wonderful thing about the MD209 is it's different things to different people. To the FM enthusiast, it's a first-class tuner with an outstanding amp and optional DAC built in for convenience. To someone looking for a good amplifier, the MD209 is an excellent amp with a superb

FM tuner and a sublime DAC. And for those after an excellent digital hub, this ticks all those boxes and more.

Building an FM receiver in 2016 seems almost anachronistic. Then you hear what the Magnum Dynalab MD209 does as an amplifier, a DAC, and as a tuner. After that, you start wondering why more people don't look at a receiver like the MD209 as the perfect audiophile electronics nexus. Highly recommended! +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

Type: FM Receiver with DAC

### RF Specifications

Usable Sensitivity (mono): 0.7µV 9.0 dBf

Stereo Separation: 50dB

### Amplifier

Inputs: 5 Analog (2 balanced XLR, 3 single ended including Surround Sound Processor input), 3 digital (2 Coaxial, 1 USB)

Outputs: 1 line level pre-out, loudspeaker terminals

Power: 125 watts in 8 ohms, 250 watts into 4 ohms

Tube Specifications: 2 × 6922

DAC precision: to 24bit, 192kHz

Frequency Response (+/- 0.1dB): 2Hz–100KHz

Class of Operation: 50 % of gain class A, 50 % of gain class AB

Harmonic Distortion: <0.05 % (2Hz–100KHz)

Signal to Noise Ratio: >-115dB

Dimensions (WxDxH): 48.3 × 49.5 × 16.5cm

Weight: 23kg

Price: £4495 inc VAT; DAC Option – £990 inc VAT

Manufactured by: Magnum Dynalab

URL: [www.magnumdynalab.com](http://www.magnumdynalab.com)

Distributed in the UK by: Audiofreaks

URL: [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153