



FIRST LISTEN: IFI AUDIO RETRO MUSIC SYSTEM

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We've been talking expectantly about iFi Audio's Retro Audio System in our reports from the last several trade shows we've attended, but now the Retro System has finally arrived. We're quite excited by the system's capabilities, but before we go much further we should pause to explain just what the system contains.

Two large-ish cartons with iFi logos can only mean the Retro system has arrived

The heart of the system is an impressively full-featured integrated amplifier called the RETRO Stereo 50. On the outside, the Stereo 50 looks more than a little like one of those classic golden-era Marantz integrated amps from yesteryear, and to reinforce that look the Stereo 50 comes housed within a lovely, laminated bamboo cabinet. But while the Stereo 50 may convey an old school vibe on the outside, it is as modern as tomorrow on the inside.



iFi Retro Stereo 50 -- 21st century technology with a touch of golden-era goodness

Specifically, the RETRO Stereo 50 is a 25Wpc, valve-powered integrated amp that incorporates:

- A PCM 32/768kHz, DXD 768, DSD512-capable DAC;
- A built in 'minimum phase' filter that is applied for PCM files from 44.1 – 192kHz and a so-called 'Bit-Perfect' digital filter PCM/DXD files 352kHz and above;
- A vacuum tube headphone amplifier capable of 7,000mW of output;
- A built-in MM/MC phono stage with six user-selectable EQ curves (with very precise bass and treble EQ function to support RIAA, EMI, CCIR/Teldec, DMM, Columbia, or Decca curves);

- A defeatable, adjustable XBass low-frequency enhancement control (usable with headphones or with smaller speakers);
- A defeatable, adjustable 3D HolographicSound enhancement control (usable with headphones or with relatively closely spaced sets of speakers);
- Four digital inputs (USB, Coaxial and optical S/PDIF, and aptX 'Bluetooth with NFC pairing);
- Up to three single-ended analogue inputs (the phono input can, at the user's option, be configured as a conventional line level input);
- Analogue tone and volume controls with a remote control; and
- A (mostly) class A amplifier circuit based on four EL84 and two ECF82 valves.



The Stereo 50's rear panel shows just how full-featured this valve-powered amp/DAC really is.

One way to look at the Stereo 50 is as the combination of an iFi Micro iDSD headphone amp/DAC, an iFi Micro iPhono phonestage, and a 25Wpc valve driven power amp—an appealing combination to say the least.

Complementing the Stereo 50 are a pair iFi-designed RETRO LS3.5 mini-monitors. You guessed it: iFi describes the LS3.5 as a “21st century take on the legendary BBC LS3.5a”. The tiny monitor's cabinet is, like the cabinet for the Stereo 50 amp, made of laminated bamboo, which iFi says is two times lighter and three times stronger than conventional MDF/wood cabinet materials. The speaker uses two iFi designed and manufactured drivers: a 4.5-inch paper cone mid/bass driver and a 1.1-inch, waveguide-loaded, silk dome tweeter. The larger driver is allowed to run full range (59Hz to 8kHz) above which point the tweeter rolls in, using a simple, minimalist first order crossover. This arrangement, along with the tweeter's waveguide, which sets the tweeter's diaphragm back a bit from the speaker's baffle is said to provide nearly ideal phase/impulse response, while ensuring that all fundamentals and formants (save for bass fundamentals that fall below the speaker's low-frequency roll-off point) are handled by the 4.5-inch mid-bass driver.

iFi Retro LS3.5 mini-monitors ship with two set of grilles: Black and off-white, as shown.

The cabinet itself is a so-called ‘multi-chamber Voigt design’ with a rear firing, slot loaded port that iFi calls a ‘transmission line’. The interior of the cabinet features multiple braces that are patterned after the braces used in some musical instruments (most notably, the braces use to support the tops and backs of some acoustic guitars). The interior of the cabinet features ‘minimal internal damping’, but the damping that is used comes courtesy of ‘advanced Amino-plastic open cell foam’. This material is said to offer good absorption, but still allows ‘the deepest and cleanest bass’ along with a wide-open midrange.





iFi created its own drivers and cabinet design for the LS3.5s.

The total price of the system in the US is \$1999.

How does it all sound? Well, I'm still in the midst of very early days and I was given to understand that while the Stereo 50 amplifier/DAC/phono stage had received considerable run-in time, the speakers—I believe—had not.

Taking the Stereo 50 in isolation, I would say that it sounds very much like what it is; namely, an iFi Micro iDSD headphone amp/DAC that has just received a massive infusion of pure, clean, but harmonically rich valve power. Thus, the rich, vibrant, clear, but not detail-obsessed, AMR-influenced sound for which all iFi components are known is still present and accounted for in the RETRO Stereo 50—only more so. How so? Well, the addition of valve power not only brings—in a headphone context—a terrific amount of musical muscle to the party, but also brings a sonic quality that is at once relaxed and yet vibrant and full of beautifully saturated tonal colours. If you've ever wondered what an iFi Micro iDSD would sound like if it had effectively unlimited power for driving headphones, plus the ineffable harmonic rightness of valves, then the Stereo 50 is your answer.

Two more beautiful things about the Stereo are its wonderfully precise, switch-defeatable tone controls, and its remote. One point I should mention, at least for Windows-based music server owners like myself, is that the Retro rig does require a new-generation iFi device driver, version 2.23. If you try to run the Retro with the earlier v2.20 driver, you'll get nowhere fast (as I learned the hard way).

iFi's Retro system comes with extensive accessories so that you can be playing music within minutes of unboxing.

How about the LS3.5s? For me, the jury is still out on the speakers. I had been advised that they liked to be placed fairly close to the wall (although there is a practical limit, as the speakers do feature a rear-firing port, meaning some clearance is of course necessary). Thus, I initially installed the system in my office rather than in my adjacent main listening room, since the office more readily allows near-wall placement and is probably the sort of relatively small space for which the RETRO system is ideal (my listening room, though not huge by any stretch of the imagination, is considerably larger than my office).

On first listen, the speakers sounded wonderfully open, focused, and coherent. I then followed iFi's recommendations and applied both the lowest level of XBass compensation and the lowest level of 3D Holographic Sound enhancement iFi Retro (iFi recommends using this setting when the LS3.5 monitors are positioned relatively close together, as was the case in my office). Once configured in this way, the system instantly began to throw remarkably wide, deep, spacious soundstages. The only catch, really, was that while the LS3.5's bass output was taut and crisp, it was far from ample—so far from ample, in fact, that I think many would have simply called the speaker 'bass shy'. In these early days, I'm not overly worried about this, as the LS 3.5's low end may very well loosen up and breathe as run-in hours accumulate. Nevertheless, it's a performance parameter I intend—pardon the pun—to monitor closely.

An iFi Retro Stereo 50-based headphone listening station as set up in the author's office. Stand-mounted LS3.5's can be moved into position when it is time for some speaker-based listening sessions.

Where does this leave us in terms of first impressions? Well, the Stereo 50 is an unqualified success and for this reason I expect there will be a lot of market pressure for iFi to 'un-bundle' the Stereo 50 from the rest of the system and sell it separately. If they did so, I suspect they would sell a ton of the things, as the Stereo 50 takes everything audiophiles have loved about the



Micro iDSD headphone amp/DAC and the Micro iPhono phonostage, and applied valve 'turbocharging' to telling effect. Who wouldn't like that?

The LS3.5's will have to receive further run-in time before a useful judgement call can be offered. Out of the box, the speaker has many attractive qualities but falls short of being a slam-dunk winner owing to—in my room at least—a certain paucity of mid and upper-bass output. Time will tell, though.

If you get a chance, do try to give this system a listen. It's full of promise plus a touch of out-and-out sonic enchantment.

