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VOLUME 6



Beauty *and*

Beast

— *the McIntosh*
MC2152
power amplifier

By Marc Phillips

For years I've been hearing stories about the "McIntosh sound." For some audiophiles, it's the be-all, end-all sound, the end of the destination. For others, the sound can be "dark" or "warm" or about a half-dozen other adjectives. I've always declared myself neutral on the matter, mostly because I haven't lived with Mac gear over an extended amount of time.

I did have seat time with a couple of McIntosh products many years ago. First was the McIntosh C2300 preamp. I was mightily impressed with the incredible list of features, which included one of my favorites of all time—the ability to load a cartridge via remote control. I didn't get a chance to write a review because I was deemed too much of a novice reviewer and I had to send it on to someone more experienced with McIntosh Labs. I was, shall we say, disappointed AF.

Photo Courtesy of McIntosh



Photo Courtesy of McIntosh

The second product was the venerable MC275 power amplifier, then in one of those anniversary editions. I wasn't supposed to review it—I was looking for a reference amplifier for reviews, and it was one of my choices. I loved how the 275 made almost every recording at least listenable, and it gave me one of my first tastes of classic tube sound. Why didn't I pull the trigger? I don't remember, but in retrospect it was a dumb move.

I have a few more McIntosh stories to tell, such as really, really wanting one of those gigantic integrated amplifiers like the MA7000 or even the tubed MA2275, but I think they were just above my means at the time. Instead I spent many years with modest integrated amplifiers, minimalist in design, usually from the UK. Loved the sound, but I

still thought about all those features you get with a McIntosh product.

Now I have the new MC2152 power amplifier from McIntosh, and now I feel like I can comment responsibly on the McIntosh sound without being thrown under the bus by hardcore fans. Maybe.

McIntosh MC2152

I didn't know what I was getting into with the MC2152 until it was too late. The shipping weight on this beast is 138 pounds. The UPS driver was mildly annoyed with me when he dropped off the box on my front porch. (Are you supposed to tip these guys when they break a sweat?) It took every ounce of strength for me to get it off the porch, unpack it and hook it up in my system.

That reminds me of my days as an importer and distributor—I know, what doesn't remind me of that these days?—and working with a famous audio reviewer who was well into his seventies. He had a weight limit on what he'd review. I totally get it now.

The MC2152 isn't just heavy. It's big. It wouldn't fit on a rack, which is okay, but it wouldn't even fit on my trusty amp stand. I felt nervous about keeping a \$15,000 amplifier on the floor, but that's what I had to do. If I owned an amp like this, I would certainly find something massive enough to support it. Something beautiful, too, since the MC2152 is such a gorgeous piece of gear and it deserves to be properly displayed under the subtle glow of appropriate mood lighting.



Photo Courtesy of McIntosh

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Living with a Beautiful Beast

Once the McIntosh MC2152 was properly hooked up and turned on, it was a source of constant pleasure. I don't know if I mentioned this, but the 2152 is gorgeous to behold. It marks sort of a turning point for McIntosh lab designs—it lacks the square profile and the Famous Blue Meters (apologies to Jennifer Warnes). The chassis is sleek and streamlined, and the side panels are made from carbon fiber. It's a new look for Mac, so new that many people who looked at my photos didn't recognize it was a Mac while the power was off.

You're rewarded when you turn it on, however—eight KT88s and four 12AT7s and four 12AX7s light up, and all the tube sockets are lit up in a rather dramatic fashion. Oh, and there's one

more fun feature—you can make those lights either blue or green via a knob on the front panel. You might choose blue to match the lit McIntosh logo on the front, or you could choose green, like I did, to make an even bigger visual splash. Imagine this spectacle during the holidays—it's the ultimate Christmas amplifier.

But enough about the stunning looks. The MC2152 has a whopping 150 watts of pure tube power at two, four or eight ohms, thanks to the patented McIntosh Unity Coupled Output Transformers, housed under McIntosh glass—the same type of transformers used since 1949. (This is one of McIntosh's 70th Anniversary products.) I loved the Solid Cinch binding posts, which were incredibly solid and cinched amazingly well, especially with the included McIntosh wrench.

The MC2152 features both balanced and unbalanced connections, activated by a switch on the back. I experimented with both, but I was able to use the Cardas Audio Clear Beyond XLRs (\$6950 for a 3-meter pair) because I really wanted to treat the McIntosh right. Sonically, there was no contest—the Clear Beyonds were miles ahead when it came to lowering the noise floor and increasing overall dynamics.

I used two pairs of speakers with the MC2152—my reference Brigadier Audio BA2 monitors (\$12,000/pair), and the Von Schweikert Audio ESE loudspeakers I currently have in for review (\$25,000/pair). The Brigadiers, with their 85 dB sensitivity and 5 ohm impedance, loved the Mac.

The ESEs are 91 dB efficient at 4 ohms, but if you talk to Leif Swanson of VSA, he'll tell you to go as big as possible in order to extract that last bit of dynamic range from his designs. I wound up sticking with this latter combo for most of the review period.

Sound

Warm? Dark? Whatever, dude. With the ESE/MC2152/Clear Beyond combo, I felt as if I had hit the PowerBall jackpot. I started this gig at *The Occasional* thinking I could offer plenty of experience with mid-priced gear—well, mid-priced for audiophiles—but the sound of my system jumped up several levels of yummy aural goodness. This is the great stuff, I thought, the stuff audiophiles strive to acquire by the end

of their fascinating musical journey.

I could go through the list—deep and satisfying bass, a huge soundstage, lifelike imaging, but that doesn't get to the heart of what I'm hearing with the McIntosh. This is the kind of tube sound we all secretly want, with utterly no constraints on frequency range. It's not that the MC2152 sounded like an excellent solid-state amplifier, but rather that exquisite intersection where both solid state and tubes start to sound the same because they're approaching a more faithful reproduction of the signal.

I brought out the big guns for the MC2152, most notably the Analogue Productions' 45RPM remastering of Dean Martin's *Dream with Dean* and the Classic Records' 9-LP, 45RPM box set of *The Royal Ballet Gala*

—Photo by Marc Phillips



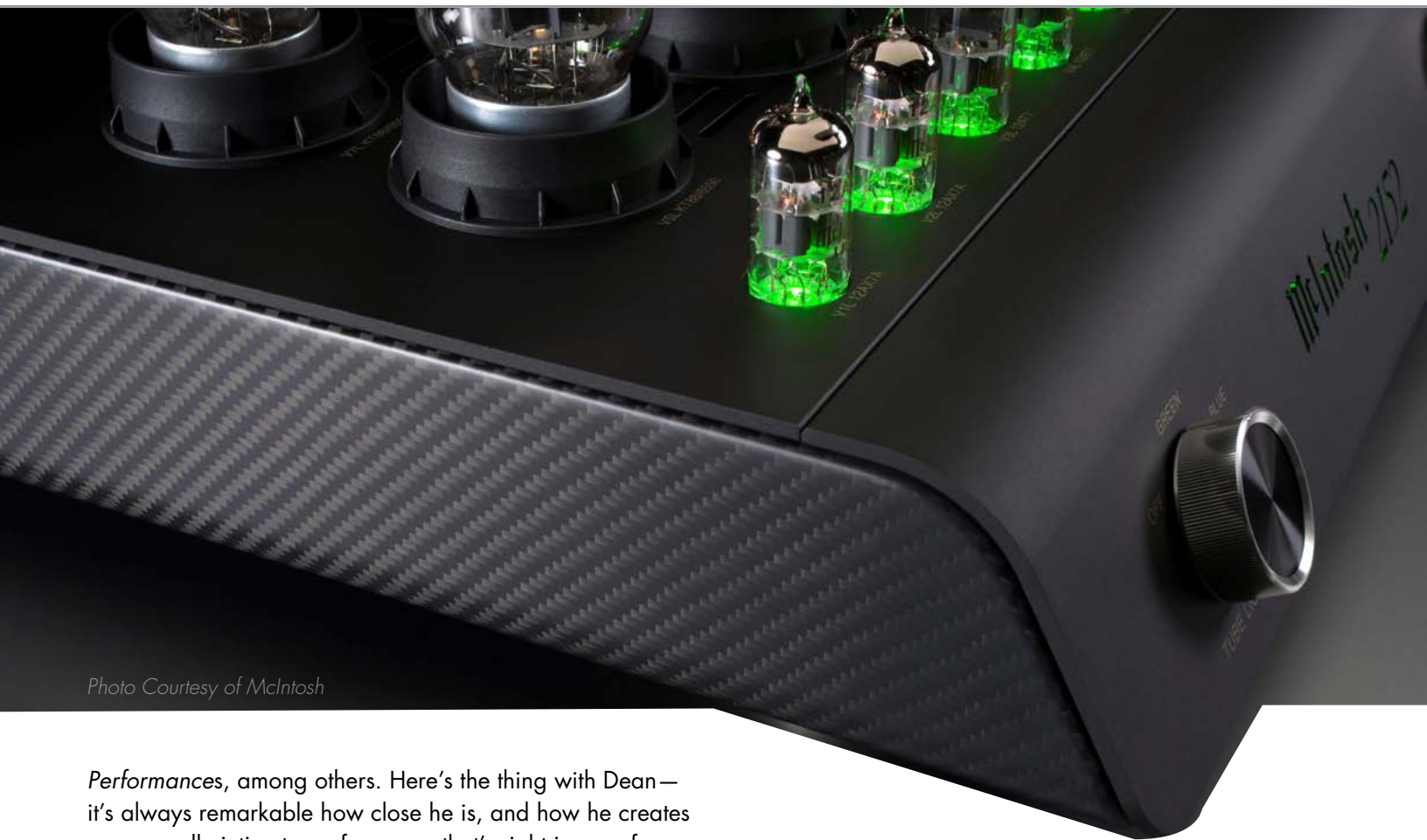


Photo Courtesy of McIntosh

Performances, among others. Here's the thing with Dean—it's always remarkable how close he is, and how he creates an unusually intimate performance that's right in your face. With the MC2152, Dean took a half-step back and let the rest of the studio make an appearance as well, resulting in a more believable and realistic scale to the other sounds in the room. I've never heard Dean sound more present in my listening room, and that's really saying something.

Conclusion

This is the part of the review where I say I hated to send the MC2152 back to Binghamton, but if I say that you'll think it's because I don't have the muscle to pack it back up and put it in my car. (On a side note, I watched one of the shipping guys at the McIntosh Labs headquarters pick up the box containing the MC2152 like it was nothing, which is probably a prerequisite for working there. I won't send them my resume just yet.)

What the McIntosh MC2152 power amplifier did accomplish was this: I no longer have to worry about the McIntosh sound, and whether or not it's right for me. If the MC2152 does mark a change in direction for that trademark sound, count me in. I loved every minute I had with it.



—Photo by Marc Phillips