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McIntosh C45 Audio Control Center

It looks like a pre/pro, but it's not.

by Steve Guttenberg

Long before the words “high” and “end” were first conjoined and decades before Krell, Classé, Lexicon, and Mark Levinson formed the genesis of the modern high-end era in the late 1970s, the world's audio cognoscenti

boards and fabricate the entire chassis, including those gorgeous McIntosh black-glass faceplates. It's all crafted in-house. Nowadays that's a rare feat. But the company that has maintained a peerless reputation for reliability for more than half a century isn't about to entrust a component's manufacture to an anonymous plant in, well, who

to music lovers—or, to put it even more succinctly, DVD-Audio- and SACD-infatuated audiophiles. It will do its stuff with DVD movies, as well; however, if you really need a pre/pro, your McIntosh salesperson will probably direct your attention over to the digital-to-the-hilt MX134 pre/pro. Whether for music or home theater, they've got you covered.

The company's classic black-glass faceplates and austere chromed knobs remain immune to fashion trends; you could mate a C45 with one of McIntosh's multichannel amps like the MC126 or MC206, or possibly a few sets of vintage McIntosh stereo or mono solid-state or vacuum-tube amps, and they would all look swell together.

The C45 is as close to being plug-and-play as a multichannel component can be. Most owners won't ever have to peruse the owner's manual or navigate inscrutable menus to get sound. Or they can take a little extra time to balance each source's volume level so that they won't wind up with the DVD player sounding a lot louder than the radio. The C45's signal path is pure, unadulterated analog from input to output, but that design mandate didn't suppress the engineers' desire to innovate. They cooked up a two-stage circuit to maximize the C45's dynamic range and an optical encoder that uses pulses of light to precisely control the volume of each of the six channels with 0.05-decibel accuracy. Cool!

Conventional input-selector switches (aux, VCR, etc.) can get



A. The C45 sports that same gorgeous McIntosh aesthetic that we've come to know and love.

B. It's hard to believe that not one of the C45's many connections is digital or video-based.

lusted after McIntosh electronics. Flash to today: McIntosh's market dominance may have faded, but the company is still based in Binghamton, New York, where it still engineers and builds just about everything that carries the proud name. McIntosh doesn't merely assemble parts manufactured by outside suppliers. No way. Their employees hand-stuff circuit

boards and fabricate the entire chassis, including those gorgeous McIntosh black-glass faceplates. It's all crafted in-house. Nowadays that's a rare feat. But the company that has maintained a peerless reputation for reliability for more than half a century isn't about to entrust a component's manufacture to an anonymous plant in, well, who

knows where to save a couple of bucks. That's not how McIntosh works. I'm sure the C45 Audio Control Center (\$3,600) might—correction, will—regularly be mistaken

for a preamp/processor, but it's an à la carte preamp, sans processor. Look closer and you'll see that the faceplate doesn't boast the familiar parade of processing logos—there's nary a Dolby EX, Dolby Pro Logic II, DTS ES, or Logic7 insignia in sight. Friends, what we have here is a six-channel, all-analog preamp, targeted primarily



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noisy as they age and inevitably corrode. The C45 uses laboratory-grade electromagnetic switches. This elegant system employs a magnetically activated switch

sealed inside a glass tube to ensure ultra-low contact resistance and consistent operation over decades of use.

The C45 also scores with a few rarely seen

features—namely, bass and treble controls, a turntable input, and an optional AM/FM tuner (\$500). McIntosh doesn't just toss in a generic, off-the-shelf radio chipset. No sir. This company built a good part of its reputation engineering some of the best tuners ever, so it made sure that the C45's radio delivers truly astonishing FM and AM sound quality. The analog tuner comes equipped with a McIntosh-engineered AM antenna

and 50 feet of cable, enough to allow placement flexibility for the best possible reception. Hell, with this über-tuner snagging the signals, even the drug-addled Rush Limbaugh started to make sense.

While this McIntosh does without even a single video or digital doohickey connector, analog audio jacks are downright plentiful. You get two sets of six-channel stereo ins, including the phono input (if you don't have a turntable, you can convert the phono in to a line-level aux input). Oh, and there's also a set of balanced stereo XLR inputs. Preamp outputs are similarly liberal: RCA and XLRs for the 5.1 outs, along with an extra set of RCA and XLR front left and right outputs (ready to run a stereo amp in another room). The C45's analog nature doesn't forego system-automation amenities, such as 5-volt trigger outputs, an IR input, and an RJ-45 interface for McIntosh's Keypad or other brands' system controllers.

The mid-size remote is backlit, and it works with other McIntosh components like their DVD players. Great, but it's not programmable for use with other brands. Strange. Then again, the C45 also has a headphone jack, and when was the last time you spotted one of those on a pre/pro?

I've had the pleasure of living with more than a few of the better pre/pros, and I have to say that the C45's sonic charms exceed most of them. The McIntosh's enriched realism is, well, more

musical, and not just in the sweetened, richer tonal hues. This preamp's old-skool charms continually pushed my pleasure buttons. The weird thing is that the C45 also seemed more powerful than other pre/pros. But wait a

sec, it's a preamp, not a power amp, so it doesn't drive the speakers. Still, my B&K AV6125 power amp's 125 watts per channel sounded more like 200. My Dynaudio Special 25 speakers and REL Storm III sub also sounded bigger; bass had the sort of commanding muscularity that makes you sit up and take notice. I hooked up my Linn LP12 turntable, and my LPs had more palpable presence than even the best-sounding SACDs and DVD-Audio discs. Hey, vinyl still rules.

With the C45 holding down the center spot in your system, you can have the best of everything.

The C45's transparency was put to its ultimate test when I played Franz Liszt's *Dante Symphony* SACD from Telarc. Oh my, the orchestra's sweep was truly a breathtaking sight—well, sound—and the music's unbridled intensity caught me by surprise. The lush string tone raised goosebumps, and the sense of concert-hall acoustics surrounding the orchestra was as real as I've ever heard it at home. The old McIntosh magic was there in spades.

On the fabulous *Sinatra at the Sands* DVD-Audio, ol' Blue Eyes is backed up by Count Basie and his orchestra. I've listened to the disc on lots of systems, but the C45

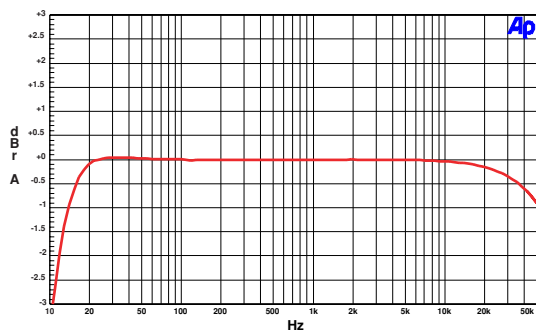


HIGHLIGHTS

- Classic McIntosh style and feel
- All-analog design
- State-of-the-art AM/FM tuner

C. The remote is capable of controlling other McIntosh components, but you can't program it to control other brands.

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HT Labs Measures: McIntosh C45 Audio Control Center

The above chart shows the frequency response of the left front channel from the multichannel input to the XLR output with the tone bypass enabled.

The analog frequency response, from the CD input to the main output, measures -0.10 decibels at 20 hertz and -0.12 dB at 20 kilohertz. Looking at a broader bandwidth, the response measures -3.60 dB at 10 Hz and -0.76 dB at 50 kHz. With the tone bypass enabled, the response is -3.58 dB at 10 Hz, -0.10 dB at 20 Hz, -0.15 dB at 20 kHz, and -0.91 dB at 50 kHz. Response from the multichannel input to the main output with the tone bypass enabled measures -3.58 dB at 10 Hz, -0.09 dB at 20 Hz, -0.15 dB at 20 kHz, and -0.90 dB at 50 kHz.

The analog THD+N is less than 0.010% at 1 kHz with a 100-millivolt input and the volume control set to 58. Crosstalk with a 100-mV input was -74.01 dB left to right and -74.58 dB right to left. The signal-to-noise ratio with a 100-mV input from 10 Hz to 24 kHz with "A" weighting was -121.32 dBra. —MJP



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uncovered revelries in Sinatra's voice—his masterful phrasings and dynamics were newly apparent. The Count's swinging rhythm section swung a bit harder when the C45 was in my system.

To my ears at least, minimally miked audiophile recordings are the only ones that conjure holographic imaging. On *The Coryells*, a ravishing SACD with Larry Coryell and his two guitar-playing sons, I could hear each instrument filling the recording venue, a 150-year-old church in midtown Manhattan, and every aspect of their sound appeared to be intact (I was present at the session). I was privy to the telepathic interplay of three musicians with decades of experience playing together. Methinks the C45's easy-going transparency must have something to do with its digital and video processing-free innards. Remember, the designers didn't even have to take any heroic measures to shield analog signals from digital or video noise. Whatever the reason, the C45's tube-like sound is sweeter than any conventional pre/pro I've had at home.

Ah, but what about DVD movies? Man or woman cannot live with

music alone; it would be a shame to assemble a killer surround system and never partake in a flick or two. Have no fear; remember, just about every universal player comes equipped with an onboard Dolby Digital/DTS processor, so DVDs are fully compatible with the C45's talents. I used my Denon DVD-2900 to spin *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* and got my 5.1 jollies via the C45. The DVD's coherent surround panorama was to die for, but there's no denying that the C45 forgoes the fine-tuning options and up-to-the-second processing modes we get with every standard pre/pro or humble A/V receiver. Honestly, the C45's minimalism didn't bother me one bit, but I can happily live without stadium or cathedral pseudo-surround effects, thank you very much.

So where exactly does the C45 fit in the scheme of things? There's an undeniable satisfaction in own-

ing something as solid, in every sense of the word, as a McIntosh component. Then consider that the C45's lack of cutting-edge digital technology makes it considerably more futureproof than any of the more-conventional pre/pros—as long as you feed it a 5.1 signal, it'll always be able to do its thing. No one's claiming that the C45 is any sort of universal component, and it probably won't be the right choice for die-hard home theater fans. However, if you're like me and spend more time listening to music than watching movies, the C45 deserves a serious audition. 🎧

C45 Audio Control Center	\$3,600
Optional Tuner Module	\$500

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