

MARANTZ PREMIUM SA-11S2/SC-11S1/SM-11S1

Marantz combo delivers affordable luxury

PRICE SA-11S2: £2,799; SC-11S1: £2,500; SM-11S1: £2,800 **CONTACT** Marantz UK ■ 01753 680868 ■ www.marantz.com

This version of the Premium series was introduced comparatively recently as an option for buyers looking for a high-performance combination of disc player, pre and power amplifier who, if they could, would otherwise go for the Reference series. The two ranges look very similar, and have a similar baseline performance, and much, though not all, of the same technology, but the Premium models are necessarily simpler, and cost less as a result.

What we have here are three components that have been designed to work together if required. They are all stereo components, even the SA-11S2, an update of the SA-11S1, is limited to working in stereo with SACDs.

This increasingly common trait is a recognition, perhaps, that the Japanese home market is predominantly interested in stereo and not multichannel, even from high resolution discs. Some users may regret the loss of flexibility, but there is little doubt that increasing the number of channels would have had a negative effect on ultimate stereo sound quality at this price level.

The SA-11S2 does have the switchable output filters from the senior model, and the same ability to suppress out-of-band noise and group delay, not forgetting Marantz's speciality discrete operational amplifier, currently in HDAM SA3 guise in the output stage, which is also found in the pre and power amps. The power amp is rated at 100 watts per channel into eight ohms, which doubles into four ohms and all but doubles again into two ohm loads.

A key internal difference from the Reference is that the internal architecture of the amplifier is single-ended rather than balanced. The pre and power amp both have balanced inputs and outputs, but the signal is converted to single-ended for internal processing. A shame perhaps, but, in fairness, few in the UK have systems that are truly balanced nose to tail.

As it happens, the disc player does run in balanced mode internally, presumably to maintain commonality with the senior SA-7S1. Other cost-cutting measures are adopted with this model instead.

Some of the fancier digital processing bits have been dropped, but the analogue processing appears to be identical, including Marantz's proprietary phase error correction and the use of Seiko hybrid four-channel DSD/PCM SM5866 DACs. The player will talk to an external digital clock, although Marantz doesn't list one.

The preamplifier is home to a quite sophisticated internal phono step-up, and a Wolfson WM8816 as a volume control, chosen for its high resolution and good sound quality. Rear panel links enable the pre and power amp to be operated together, but this is just the icing on the cake for a combination that is always smooth and polished in operation.

Musically, the three Marantz Premium components are clearly thoroughbreds. They sound as smooth and as polished as they handle. The disc player is a classic of its kind, with first-rate SACD sound, and CD performance that is almost as good given the right type of CD to start with.

If anything, it is the disc player that takes the crown. It is an exceptionally transparent and three-dimensional sounding player, which more than justifies the asking price. Choosing to buy a CD player at this price when the option is there to go SACD with essentially no trade off would, in my opinion, be nothing less than perverse.

The preamplifier is also a class act. In addition to being a better than class average phono preamplifier, it's also a fine line-level amplifier, thanks in part to the discrete HDAM circuitry and the use of quality components in critical areas.

There is plenty of raw power on tap from the SM-11S1, except that the word 'raw' could give the wrong impression. The power is enveloped in kid gloves, always sounds well in control, and is very difficult to drive over its natural limits. Both components have unusual transparency, with no noticeable texturing or granularity. Singly or in combination, Marantz has produced a blinder with these components. ■■

Alvin Gold

See the March 2008 edition of *Hi-Fi Choice* for our original review of this product

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