

Marantz SA/PM-KI Pearl (£2500 ea)

Launched as the Pearls in Marantz's audiophile crown, Ken Ishiwata's latest SACD player and integrated amplifier also celebrate his 30-year association with the brand
Review: Ken Kessler **Lab:** Paul Miller

It was in no way inevitable: huge corporations of the Asian persuasion do not highlight the contributions of individuals for the world at large. But 30 years after joining Marantz, Ken Ishiwata has been allowed to conceive of a pair of special components that mark his tenure. What's so remarkable is that they're 'real world' in both price and concept. Instead of unattainable, high-end excess, they embody nearly everything that Ken has had a hand in since he began his crusade to restore Marantz's audiophile credibility.

As he explained in last month's interview, Marantz had changed ownership and the original high-end purity was sacrificed for commercial gain. By the time Ken arrived, Marantz was on its way to mass-market anonymity, but he stopped the rot in the early 1980s by hot-rodding the company's affordable CD players. As a result of Ken's tweaking, something recognised first in the UK (I believe), Marantz was able to set itself apart from the great mass of undistinguished brands, joining precious few of the Asian manufacturers who could mix it up with the home teams. At a time when NAD, Arcam (as A&R), Nitech and other UK brands owned the affordable sector, Marantz was able to join their ranks with well-received separates blessed by Ken.

Marantz allowed the project to evolve quickly into a flow of models adorned with the 'KI' logo or signature. This told consumers that the bog-standard model had benefited from the inclusion of superior parts, tuning and re-voicing, and the price penalty was usually insignificant when compared to buying aftermarket tweaks like better cables, special feet or other accessories. Refined over the decades, the Ishiwata-isation of

RIGHT: Switchable digital filters influence the performance of both CD and SACD playback (the DAC Mode feature) while 'Sound Mode' selects between CD and SACD layers of hybrid two-channel SACD media

a product has never failed to improve it. And the two Pearls are the culmination of this experience.

HEAVY STANDARDS APPLIED

They don't even get numerical nomenclature, the amp dubbed simply the PM-KI Pearl and the SACD/CD player enjoying the SA-KI Pearl moniker. (I don't know if Marantz realises that some will think the latter's name refers to Japan's greatest alcoholic tippie.) Limited to 500 examples of each, they're imposing despite dimensions of only 440x444x127mm (wdh). The hefty weights of 20kg for the amp and 14.5kg for the SACD player attest to the presence of large toroidal power supplies and such cabinet niceties as 5mm aluminium top plates, heavy base plates, copper-plated chassis and heavy-duty feet. Two openings in the amp's top plate also reveal whacking great heatsinks, which certainly contributed to the mass.

Marantz scrimped nowhere: I was overjoyed to find the back of the PM-KI fitted with superb gilded phono sockets and massive, genuine WBT speaker binding posts which accept both banana plugs and over-sized spade

connectors. Swapping cables was easy, and this led me to try the Pearls with assorted Kimber, Transparent, Yter and Atlas wires. Most of the listening was undertaken with upper-level Transparent wires, which complemented the silky sound of the Pearls with most material and with other sources, but I could understand some opting for Yter.

Deceptively styled in the current Marantz fashion, and with obvious clues

'Two openings in the amp's top plate also reveal whacking great heatsinks'

like the Pearl logo being so discreet as to redefine 'understatement', the two products eschew any visual drama. If anything, they're 'stealthy' in their understatement. They are simply 'right' in every way: physically, aesthetically, ergonomically. Both are finished in a silky black anodising, every surface nice to the touch. And both units feature raised centre sections flanked by cool blue lights – alluring enough to make you succumb to the audiophile 'dark pleasure' of turning out the room lights just to savour the glow.





Almost minimalist in its presentation, the SA-KI Pearl carries its transport controls in vertical rows on either side of the centre panel, while buttons below the tray and display address power on/off, sound mode for the selectable filters and DAC mode; there's also a 6.5mm headphone socket with rotary level adjust. The DAC button allows you to access the Toslink optical input at the back, and there are also coaxial and optical digital outputs in addition to the stereo analogue output.

TWO-CHANNEL SPECIFIC

Marantz did not equip this for SACD multichannel playback, listing only 'Red Book' CD, SACD stereo, CD-DA, MP3 and WMA. At its heart are a quick-acting SACDM-10 mechanism with XYRON tray loader, processing via a Crystal CS4398

DAC and proprietary HDAM SA2 circuitry.

For the PM-KI integrated amplifier, Marantz decided on a useable but not excessive 90W into 8ohm, or 140W into 4ohm, enough to cope with the Wilson Sophia Twos. Ensuring that the PM-KI would honour any source, there's a CD-Direct input buffer circuit and a delicious constant current feedback phono equalizer with both MM/MC gain setting.

The controls flank the centre section, as per the SA-KI, two large rotaries select inputs and level, and a classy circular display, lit in blue, tells you the source and playback level.

Enough inputs are provided to cope with two other line sources and two recording devices (in/out), as well as power amp direct inputs and the

ABOVE: Not quite 'pearlescent', the silky black finish of this special duo is still very luxurious – note the 'mother-of-pearl' effect badges!

necessary connections for multi-room remote operation. Which brings us to the one anomaly presented by the pair, given that, according to Ken Ishiwata, '80 percent of the orders are for the two to be sold together.'

In order to allow for customers who choose either/or, both units come with

'Fed all manner of SACDs, the SA-KI showed itself to be a thoroughbred player'

beautifully-made aluminium remotes. And while the PM-KI's will address most of the SACD player's functions, and vice versa, the owner of both Pearls will need both remotes handy because of functions which are not shared. Is there a more practical solution to this? Would all of the controls have fitted on to one hand-held? I don't have the answer, but I thought I ought to point out the mild inconvenience.

As the two arrived fresh from the factory sans owners' manuals, I know I missed playing with a few of the less common functions. But they're less common by nature, so they would hardly have impacted on the verdict, which I'll tell you at this early point in the review: the two Pearls live up to their name. Immediately seductive and a tad mysterious, they couldn't have been ☺

THE CASE FOR SACD

If you Google 'SACD' today, precisely 10 years after its launch, you'll find that most of the articles called up are about its demise. But Ken Ishiwata told *HFN* that the decision to support SACD with KI Pearl, long after Sony abandoned it, is due to the format's refusal to go away. Interest piqued, I checked with amazon.co.uk and found that, just in the first five months of 2009, over 300 new SACD titles were added to the catalogue! Ken reckons that more than 400 were introduced in 2008, mainly classical, with jazz in second place, and there is no sign of any let-up. 'But it is regional,' he explained, 'with audiophiles in Japan in particular still preferring it over Red Book CD.'

The fact that all SACDs these days are dual-layer means it's no big deal to compare SACD with normal CD. And despite reports by the mainstream press naysayers about the public not hearing the difference, any music lover who can't needs a session with an ear-wax remover. Ignore, if you must, the surround capabilities (your loss), and focus on the two-channel bliss. Hey, even analogue uber-guerrilla Linn still supports it.

CD PLAYER & AMPLIFIER

30TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIALS

Possibly uniquely – unless you can name other audio honchos from large Japanese audio manufacturers – Ken Ishiwata has enjoyed celeb status in the UK and Europe for three decades. Aside from the boutique brands, this is in direct contradiction to the way major Japanese manufacturers prefer to show themselves as giant collectives. In recognition of the respect the audio community holds for Ken, Terry O'Connell, Managing Director of Marantz Europe, decided it was high time that the company recognised the way he has acted as the brand's perfect ambassador.

His achievements are considerable. Ken can take credit (though he's too modest to do so) for enabling Marantz to defy convention by being one of very few multinationals with audiophile credibility. Indeed, so in tune is Ken with the brand's history, and its high-end roots, that he must be thought of as its saviour in terms of respect. Had he not championed various technologies, or banged on and on about sound quality over sheer commerce, Marantz might have ended up as just another Pacific Rim also-ran.



identified with a more suitable treasure.

It helps to understand my reaction to the Pearls if you know that I have, for over two decades, used a super-rare KI freak, the heavily-breathed-on CD12/DAC12 two-chassis CD player. It remains the best I've ever used, though I nurse it now because its transport has defied belief by surviving this long. What it did for my understanding of sound reproduction, early in the life of CD, was to show to me that, while vinyl and open-reel tape are mind-numbingly superior to CD, the latter could be made not just tolerable but even admirable.

A number of evolutionary steps have affected CD, not least being the sorely under-used HDCD, culminating in SACD. (Note: I have not yet spent quality time with the new audio-only Blu-ray format.) SACD was so clearly superior to vanilla CD that I can feel the pain of its supporters, who prayed it would supplant CD. Given that it didn't, and that it has become a special-interest connoisseur's pursuit like expensive wines or cigars, the SA-KI focuses enough attention on the format to beg

a reassessment. Equally, I know that suddenly hitting the hustings for SACD is a futile exercise.

A GLORIOUS SHEEN

Which is a shame. Fed all manner of SACDs from Mobile Fidelity, Linn, Telarc and other admirable die-hards, the SA-KI showed itself to be a thoroughbred player reminiscent of the far costlier Esoteric devices, though the voicing differs. Marantz itself used the adjective 'silky' to describe the Pearls' black finish. It also applies to the sound, a glorious sheen possessed by both the amp and the player, and a trait shared with the CD12/DAC12 from the upper mid-band through to the highest treble.

Someone, somewhere is thinking, Kessler has just praised a coloration. Perhaps it is, in the same way that a valve amp's warmth must surely be some detour from the truth. But I'm way past giving a toss about suffering for my pleasure, and I have always maintained

that I prefer the beautiful lie to the ugly truth. Even when fed aggressive, raucous or cacophonous music for which the edge and rawness are integral parts, like the Pixies' indie classic *Bossanova* or the heads-down-no-nonsense boogie of Foghat's *Fool For the City*, the SA-KI managed to impart this diaphanous texture without either robbing the music or blanketing it.

However hard it is to find words for the phenomenon, it characterises the

'Well-recorded bass drum kicks were reproduced with a vividly detailed sensation of pedal'

Pearls' overall behaviour. The Pixies' 'Rock Music', which presaged later work from Nirvana, is as grungy a track as one could hope to find, from the opening feedback screech through the staccato drumming and snarled vocals. At no point, via the Pearls in SACD mode, does it sound emasculated or sanitised. And yet, moving on to the CD or playing it via another system, the rasp element increases to a point that diminishes the pleasure for all but the most committed of thrash merchants.

But that is to make too much of one trait. Foghat's 1975 HM epic in no way possesses the grainy/gritty textures of the Pixies' set, though the continual presence of fuzz-tone guitar suggests much the same. The difference is that the Pixies' distortions are random and



LEFT: The selected source and digitally-governed volume level is indicated in a porthole-style window whose display may be switched off. Marantz's bass and treble tone controls may also be defeated

LAB REPORT

CD PLAYER & AMPLIFIER

MARANTZ SA/PM-KI PEARL (£2500 ea)



ABOVE: Single-ended analogue and digital outputs on the SACD player (top) join phono, three line and two tape inputs on the amp. Pre-out/power-in are included

aggressive, whereas Foghat's guitar sounds are constant and consistent, as much a trait of the specific instrument as the sizzle of a cymbal. Augmented by clear, stinging lead guitar and ringing slide, the rousing 'My Babe' tests the KI Pearls' ability to deliver punch while retaining the textural characteristics of the guitars. Yet again, the Pearls exhibited a silkiness that can only be described as 'more-ish'.

THE PHONO STAGE

Although Ken Ishiwata was careful not to influence my listening sessions via long-distance, he did lead me toward the phono section, and did intimate that the bass is as fast as he could make it. Right on both counts: the phono stage was open, quiet and precise, especially the MM setting, and in every sense – from vinyl to CD to SACD – the bass was consistently quick. It behaved unwaveringly enough to render the lower octaves as much a part of the units' personality as the aforementioned silkiness. Decay or transient stops down below were as progressive or abrupt as required, nigh on perfect, while well-recorded bass drum kicks were reproduced with a vividly detailed sensation of pedal, hammer and skin in motion.

What was missing, and this is down to the PM-KI rather than the SACD player, was the kick-in-the-chest punch of more powerful amplifiers. Know, please, that I am not talking about SPLs, nor the

ability of the PM-KI to drive the Wilsons, Sonus Faber Guarneris or LS3/5As. The amp simply didn't seem to convey sheer mass to the level of, say, the Belles SA-30 or Quad's II-eighty. Is it an indictment? No – it's recognition of a matter of degree. I suppose one who listens only to Kodo drummers through 24in cone subwoofers might feel cheated, but for the rest of us, it's a small trade-off for the utter sexiness of the overall sound.

Both mid-band authenticity and delightfully-convincing three-dimensionality are the by-products of the clarity, transparency and refinement shown by both components. In so many ways, bar low-end impact, the PM-KI reminds me of outstanding 50-60W classics like the small AR power amps or Krell's KSA-50. Like those, the PM-KI is a little jewel. ⚡

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

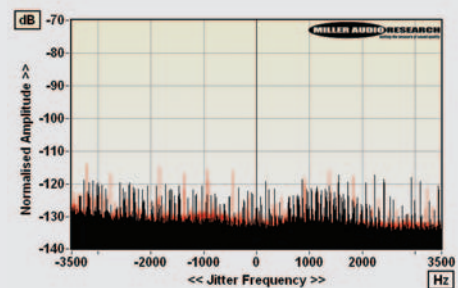
Those who have followed 'KI' products over the years will see in the Pearls a distillation of Ken Ishiwata's musical values: subtlety, coherence, naturalness, grace. While the two are designed to work together, the SACD player stands slightly above and apart, its performance a clarion call to music lovers to support the format. In tandem, they are as elegant-sounding as anything even near the price.

Sound Quality: 82%

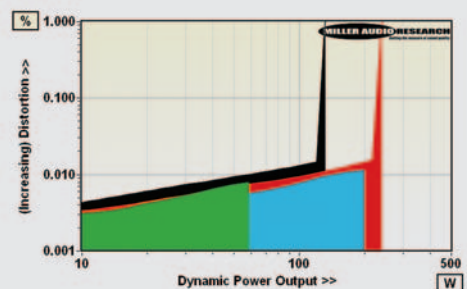
0 - - - - - 100

The SA-KI Pearl is every inch the modern SACD player and even comes with two digital filter options. The first offers a limited 26.8dB attenuation of stopband images with CD but with a reduced in-band group delay over filter 2 with its superior 102dB attenuation. Neither option has any impact over the miniscule -0.25dB/20kHz treble roll-off, the 108.5dB A-wtd S/N ratio or low 0.0008% distortion at 20kHz, all of which are determined by Marantz's HDAM output op-amps. The two filters do have a bigger effect with SACD however, adding an extra pole around 50-60kHz to reduce any ultrasonic re-quantisation noise by about 30dB at 100kHz, relative to filter 1. Of course, filter 1 also offers the flatter and more extended SACD response, just -9.8dB at 80kHz versus -27.5dB with filter 2. Filter 1 will be the choice when partnered with amplifiers like the PM-KI Pearl that are fundamentally insensitive to ultrasonic noise.

Talking of which, the Pearl amplifier also outstrips its 90W specification with a full 2x106W/8ohm and 2x175W/4ohm, albeit with a gradually increasing distortion trend that falls to a low of 0.0016% at 1W/8ohm, rising to 0.005% at 10W/8ohm and 0.013% at the rated 90W/8ohm. Power consumption is just 37W idle (not standby) and 325W at its rated output. Interestingly, the amp has a subsonic 'tweak' that lifts bass below 10Hz to +1.2dB while distortion also climbs at very low frequencies, from 0.005% at 40Hz to 0.026% at 20Hz. At the top end of its response, the PM-KI is flat to -0.02dB/20kHz and -0.75dB/100kHz with stereo separation held to >90dB. The output impedance is a uniformly low 0.026ohm from 20Hz-10kHz and the A-wtd S/N ratio wide at 90dB (re. 0dBW). Very modern, very controlled, very Marantz! PM



ABOVE: Jitter is a little lower at 220psec via SACD (red) than the 330psec via CD (black)



ABOVE: Output into 2 and 1ohm loads is limited to 200W and 90W by protection so the PM-KI should not be treated as a bottomless pit of power

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	106W / 175W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	130W / 240W / 200W / 60W
Digital jitter (CD/SACD)	330psec / 220psec
Frequency resp. (CD/amp, 20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0 to -0.25dB/+0.2 to -0.0dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/90W)	25mV/243mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (SACD/amp)	108.9dB / 90.0dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, SACD/amp)	0.0012-0.0025%/0.026-0.11%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	37W/325W
Dimensions (WHD, SACD/amp)	440x419x127/440x444x127mm