

Marantz SA-11S1

A stereo-only SACD player that sounds simply sensational, but is it a case of too good, too late? Ken Kessler explains. Lab report by Paul Miller

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PRICE £2000

All dressed up and no place to go. Alas, that is the overall feeling imparted by Marantz's magnificent SA-11S1 SACD player. Aside from the clumsy name and its inherent limitation of stereo-only playback, it just may be the nicest SACD player around. Too bad it arrives precisely as the rumours fly thickest about the format's demise.

Let's back up a bit and deal with the SA-11S1's main personality quirk. It is, like Musical Fidelity's stunning Tri-Vista SACD player, a two-channel-only machine. Why? Purely consumer psychology. Y'see, I can find absolutely no justification for nobbling the player's multi-channel capability

system. Fine, then: when's the last time you actually used 78rpm? Every setting on your m-c step-up? A-B repeat mode?

Correct me if I'm wrong, but just about every multi-channel source component on the market also sports stereo-only output socketry, because the manufacturers know that the take-up on multi-channel is neither total nor automatic, and that at the very least most systems are stereo.

Lastly, we have to deal with SACD itself. Take-up is dire, record stores don't even know it exists and word has it that last year vinyl outsold SACD and DVD-A combined. Now I couldn't give a toss about DVD-A, but – damn – I do love SACD. And this player shows why: its performance with SACD is sensational, probably the most convincing I've heard for proving to music lovers that

modes, optical and coaxial digital outputs, AC input and sockets for linking it to an all-Marantz system. But a weight of 14kg and size of 440 x 123 x 418mm (whd) suggest that there's more under the bonnet.

A beautifully-made button-filled metal remote control, too, betrays hidden depths. Most important are DSP controls for DSD noise shaping, and switching of three CD-only digital filters [see Lab Report p49z]; and herein lies a problem. All sound different enough to favour either different types of material or even pressings. For example, Telarc discs, to my ears, sounded better on Filter 1, the so-called bypass for SACD, while CDs favoured Filter 2 without pre- or post-echo. Finding a 'default' setting is impossible. So my comments about sound refer only to traits not affected by filter changes, that is, those that are intrinsic of the SA-11.

Naturally, it boasts the myriad details that signify modern Marantz thinking; your first glance at the back is a dazzler as it's all-copper-clad, a clue to the presence of the copper-plated and heavily-braced chassis. The unit's heft is also increased by double layer steel bottom plate resting on shock-absorbing feet designed to minimise internal vibration and mechanically induced jitter. [See sidebar, 'And as a CD-only player?'] Within the SA-11, the digital, analogue and control circuits are separated and shielded in their own enclosures to

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because there's no reason to assume that the mere presence of 3.1 more analogue outputs will compromise the purist stereo sound.

Thus the only motive for doing this must be pandering to lunatic audiophilic prejudice, as if you guys have some malformed gene telling you that unused features automatically compromise your

the new format betters plain vanilla CD.

Although it has a clean and minimalist front panel, the SA-11 is loaded beyond the promise of the half-dozen basic transport controls, on-off and SACD/CD mode buttons. The rear is equally abundant with spare living space, containing only the stereo outputs in unbalanced and balanced



prevent cross-talk. The unit contains an over-kill choke input power supply using Marantz's Super Ring transformer, and it's bursting with custom-made components, including stress-free electrolytic capacitors, Schottky diodes in the rectifier circuit, high-grade electrolytic and film capacitors throughout the audio circuitry, regulators covered with copper-plated shielding and Marantz's Current Feedback HDAMs instead of integrated op amps.

[Snide but crucial told-you-so aside: Perusing Marantz's literature, I found this gem appended to the inclusion of one of the above: 'Achieving a more dynamic, accurate and detailed sound reproduction regardless of the amount of channels.' Yup, my italics. Despite the syntax, they just confirmed

Clean, minimalist front panel belies the fact that the player offers sophisticated user-selectable filters



what I said above regarding 2-vs-5.1 channel playback.]

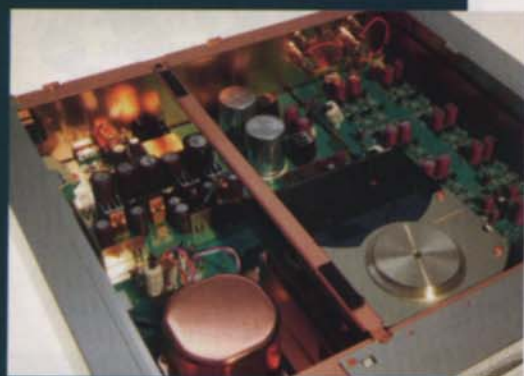
A couple of set-ups hosted the SA-11, including the MF kW pre-amp and kW 750 power amp driving Wilson WATT Puppy System 7 or PMC DB1+. I also used the Marantz with the McIntosh C2200/MC2102 and Quad's 99CDPII/909 pre/power combos driving Sonus Faber Guarneris or the Wilsons. Wiring was Transparent Reference. Armed with a stack of mainly hybrid stereo

SACDs, I set to work with every intention of playing CD vs SACD head-on before realising that it was futile. The filtering saw to that. So I just concentrated on the SACD playback, comparing the SA-11 to the Sony XA333EX SACD player, as well as the Theta Compli and the trusty Denon 2900 universal players. That took about two seconds. Not only did I not expect universals to compete on an even playing field with an SACD-only player, I figured that the Sony was a

And as a CD-only player?

Most notably among its extras, the SA-11 also features switchable CD filters and 'noise-shapers' that 'allow you to fine tune your preferred music reproduction.' As Paul Miller points out, there's no 'plain vanilla' CD setting free from Marantz's proprietary filtering. As I was concentrating on the SA-11 in SACD mode, with secondary thoughts about its CD playback, this wasn't a major issue. But it may be for you if you're considering an SA-11 to replace a CD player while adding SACD to your system. So, I will say that - when used strictly as a CD player - the SA-11 can sound, depending on filter usage, like a player with a

valve output stage: rich, lush and incredibly euphonic. You can even tweak it to sound a lot like the company's non-valve but tube-like CD-12/DA-12 combination. Such euphony, of course, will anger those who prize accuracy above all else, but it makes the SA-11 a very 'more-ish' player to use for CD. It has a wonderfully fat, extended bottom end, plenty of weight and scale, but utter freedom from the kind of bass that induces queasiness. Could I live with this player for CD-only usage? Yes. But not for reviewing purposes, as the added lushness below can even make undernourished systems sound full-figured.



generation or three behind, as well. So I immediately learned that SACD circa 2005 is a format with which to reckon. The Marantz sounded blindingly good. Absurdly good. So instead, I used vinyl as a reference: SME 30, SME Series V, Transfiguration Temper V moving-coil, Audio Research PH-5 phono stage.

Ten Kinks SACDs including *Misfits* and *Muswell Hillbillies*, some Dylan, some Stones, Steely Dan's *Aja* and others I had on LP. Plus SACD blockbusters like Gershwin

All-metal remote, and [below] copper-clad rear panel



on Telarc and the Police in concert. The SA-11, no matter how superior the vinyl rival, never spat or hissed, never suggested the likelihood of listener fatigue. It was so devoid of digitalia that I had to return to vinyl for confirmation. Better still, its handling of voices let me know that I was in the presence of something special.

Normally, a component has an overall character and one or two areas of strength and/or weakness. These, added to its overall feel, define its 'personality'. The SA-11, on the other hand, excels in so many areas that it's almost baffling. Its bass is gloriously large, deep and controlled, with a roundness and warmth that favours the acoustic, but it's just dry enough and sufficiently damped to handle synthetic bass. The midband, too, is warm and uncannily natural, with just the right amount of sibilance to indicate an 'S' sound, yet not enough to suggest any nastiness.

Yet the single most impressive quality in this catalogue of strengths is the sense of air and space created by the SA-11 – especially

when played against the equivalent CD. This player is world-class in this respect, displaying the music on an open soundfield, absolutely shorn of congestion or artifice. For this alone, I could love it. But add to this and the above such qualities as exceptional transparency, breathtaking speed and wonderful resolution of detail without sounding clinical. Undermining it for some will be its inescapably romantic, rounded warmth, regardless of the filter settings. But weighed against its strengths it's like a much-needed soak in bath salts, every time you switch it on.

I absolutely love this machine, even with the quirks and oddities. Quite blatantly, despite or even because of the stereo-only playback, and regardless of a £2000 price tag, the SA-11 is one of the best ambassadors SACD ever had. Too bad it arrived too late. ■

Supplier

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Hi-FiNews verdict

A benchmark with SACD thanks to exceptional transparency, speed and resolution, plus deep bass and an uncannily natural midband. CD-only replay can be euphonic, thanks to the proprietary filters.

Lab Report

Measured via its balanced outputs, the SA-11S1 achieves a high 5.0V output at an exceedingly low 0.0003% distortion and covering a wide 112dB A-wtd S/N ratio with both CD and SACD software. Diehard enthusiasts can download the three QC Suite Test Reports encompassing every aspect of this player's CD and SACD replay for all three filter profiles from www.milleraudioresearch.com/avtech.

These reports clearly distinguish the three (digital) filter settings both in the stopband rejection of digital images and effect on response with CD replay. Because SACD's DSD data is handled natively and not converted to PCM, the digital filters only refer to CD. Nevertheless, there remains some processing of the DSD data in Marantz's Motorola DSP core which switches in parallel with the (CD) digital filters. As a result, the Test Reports also show clear differences

Fig 1: Three digital filters means three different impulse and response characteristics to audition with CD software...

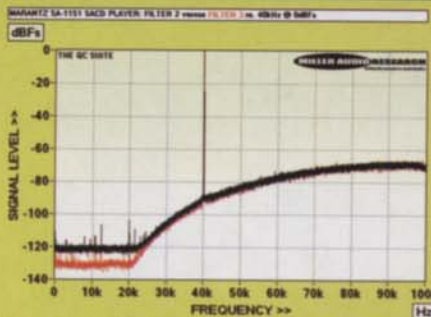
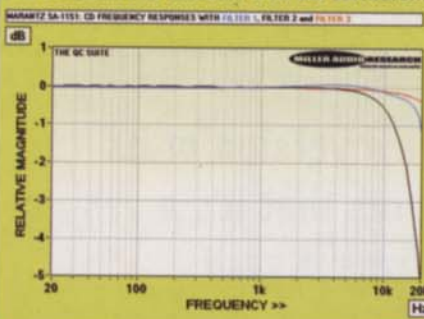


Fig 2: SACD's dynamic range is squeezed at higher frequencies, but Filter 3 (red trace) retains an edge in the audioband

in both low-level resolution and dynamic range with SACD in each of these three modes.

Jitter is exceptionally low in all modes and beneath the level of noise with SACD but, as I have mentioned, there are differences in low-level resolution with the different filters via SACD. Filters 1 and 3 are good to ± 0.5 dB down to -120 dBFs but only Filter 3 reproduces a credible signal at -130 dBFs. As Fig 1 illustrates, this is also the filter with the flattest CD response and, turning to Fig 2, the filter with the widest dynamic range for SACD. Regardless of the 'filter' setting, there's no appreciable difference in SACD's response up to 100kHz (-3 dB at 50kHz and -14 dB at 100kHz) nor in its separation which holds to a fabulous 130dB through the midrange.

Fig 2 includes a 40kHz peak level signal and shows both the reduction in SACD's dynamic range with increasing frequency but also the -10 dB difference in audioband dynamic range between Filters 2 (black trace) and 3 (red trace). The spurious tones (most obvious at 20kHz) are rendered by the player and are not present on the test signal.

Filter 2 is described as having no 'pre- or post-echo' and behaves like the Legato-Link filter implemented by Pioneer a decade ago. Images of signals in the audioband, reflected back off CD's 44.1kHz sample rate are only weakly suppressed (just 4dB at 24.1kHz) giving the impression of a gently-filtered response that extends above 20kHz with CD. The reduced group-delay of this filter may have some subjective benefit, however.

Filter 1, by contrast, employs a slightly sharper filter that trades better suppression of images (13.1dB at 24.1kHz) for greater 'time-based' distortions. Filter 3 gives the best stopband rejection with CD of 38.6dB, but this is still some 70dB short of today's best. In practice, the filter coefficients are derived from code used in Philips' venerable SAA7220, raised to 352.8kFs (8x) before being addressed to an SM5866 DAC, from NPC.

What the SA-11S1 lacks is a 'plain vanilla' setting – the brickwall FIR digital filter used in almost every other CD player – so A/B comparisons between the CD and SACD layers of hybrid discs are inevitably coloured. While SACD is as clean as SACD gets, the CD performance may well incur a degree of euphony, regardless of the filter setting.