

# Marantz SA-7S1 SACD Player

by Roy Gregory

Given the cynics' view of the DVD-A/SACD "format war" I can hear them asking themselves whether this is an SACD player that also plays CD – or a CD player that also happens to play SACD, last nod to a dying format whose protagonists won't admit defeat? Well guys, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but not only is your original premise wrong but your cynicism is sadly misplaced. This is very much an SACD player, and even if you won't find Lily Allen or Girls Aloud on the format, SACD releases are going very nicely thank you. But what's really nice about the SA-7S1 is that it takes CD replay just as seriously. Clear high-end aspirations and a dedicated two-channel topology make this an audiophile player for all seasons – or should that be reasons?

Of course, Marantz started life as one of the founding fathers of the high-end, a fact reflected in the nomenclature of this latest range, the SA-7's matching amps echoing the designations of the legendary Model 7 pre-amp and Model 9 mono-blocs. The brand might be solidly mainstream these days, but it has always maintained its membership of the high-end community, underlined by occasional forays into the likes of Class A amplification and more recently, serious disc players like the two-box CD-7.

When major Japanese companies decide to do "high-end" the results

tend to divide between the laughable and the truly scary – at least as far as the established high-end boutique brands go. The combination of sheer numbers and a serious development budget can create a technological and constructional package that even the most respected specialist manufacturers can only dream about. Just witness TEAC's Esoteric line if you want to see genuine cost no object



engineering – with performance to match. Well, this Marantz is cast from a similar mould, albeit cut from slightly less extravagant cloth. The flagship SA-7S1 tops out the company's range at a price of \$5000, the same point at which the Esoterics start. But, as Marantz are keen to point out, competing players that match the SA-7's sophistication are generally far more expensive...

Interestingly, the parallels with the Esoteric range are more than skin deep. Both are built around massive, newly

developed transports, the SACDM-1 in the SA-7 featuring a die-cast aluminium tray and substantial, extruded aluminium chassis and case; it is impressively fast and solid in operation. Both feature fully balanced audio circuitry and offer inputs for an external clock (although there is as yet no such device in the Marantz range). Both also feature massive, non-resonant chassis construction, although the Esoteric leans towards sheer (extensively CNC'd) mass to achieve this goal, the SA-7 relying on constrained layers instead. Despite being lighter and in engineering terms rather more elegant, they still add up to a machine that is reassuringly solid when it comes time to lift it into a rack.

Digitally speaking, the SA-7 relies on a dual-differential pair of NPC SM5866AS DAC chips, feeding the company's latest PEC (Phase Error Compensation) 77712 digital filter, again arranged in dual-differential mode. This sophisticated multi-purpose chip acts as a digital filter, a DC filter, a noise shaper and an 8x over-sampler. These functions can be variously configured by the user, depending on format: there are three filter/DAC configuration options for SACD replay (including no filter at all), three filter algorithms for CD replay, as well as the option to defeat the noise shaping, DC filter and digital outputs for the latter. Obviously, there is no digital output ▶

▶ from SACD. The digital section is entirely ground isolated from the analogue circuitry, which offers both single-ended and balanced outputs. You can also invert the absolute phase of the signal, a function that operates in the digital domain rather than the more usual analogue solution. Marantz have gone to great lengths to develop a single, large transformer for the SA-7, preferring the unified consistency of the source impedance it delivers. Careful routing of the DC tracks for the different circuit sections minimizes interference. The chassis is extensively copper plated and the player stands on handsome, solid copper feet, which were chosen for their sonic qualities as well as the fact that they look pretty. For once, the supplied remote is clearly laid out with well-spaced buttons that include the various filter options and other settings, allowing you to switch them from the listening seat. Incidentally, the user settings can only be changed with the disc stopped. That might seem like a bad thing, but actually it ensures proper comparison rather than knee-jerk responses to tonal shifts.

Unfortunately, as a reviewer, all those options create something of a moving target, so let's get them out of the way now. On SACD, as long as the recordings were well balanced, Filter 1 offered by far the best sound, setting 2 being more precise and focused, but also more mechanical, setting 3 being airy but also vague and diffuse. I also preferred the sound of Algorithm 1 for CD replay, as well as the sound with the Noise Shaping, DC filter and Digital Outputs all in the off position. However, it's nice to have the options for the less well-recorded discs

one comes across, where they can come into their own. But for the vast majority of my listening it was Filter 1 all the way, and no extra sauce.

Getting the best out of the SA-7 is also pretty straightforward when it comes to set-up, mainly because the mechanical aspects of chassis design have been done with the requisite care. Place it on a decent stand, make sure it's level and use a decent mains lead and you'll be most of the way there. The copper feet are surprisingly effective. A trio of Stillpoints cones tightened things up, improving transparency, dynamic range and musical coherence as expected, but the degree of improvement was smaller than anticipated; worthwhile, but hardly earth shattering. One other thing: I



developed a marked preference for the single-ended outputs, even when connecting to the fully balanced Ayre K-1x pre-amp. They didn't have the grip, or absolute dynamic range of the balanced outputs, but they delivered more air, micro dynamic life, immediacy and temporal fluency. You may or may not agree, but don't just assume that balanced is best.

What is less immediately apparent is the way in which the player interfaces with different systems. The SA-7S1 possesses a definite character that makes matching a critical consideration. Like

many SACD machines it exhibits the natural, unforced and fluid detail that I've come to associate with the medium. But unlike machines from dCS and the aforementioned Esoterics, it doesn't drive that point home by majoring on focus and transparency, qualities those players extend to CD replay too. Instead this is a warm, weighty sounding machine with a full balance, solid presence and a distinctly mid-hall nature that's almost analogue in character. The exceptional positional stability combined with the warmth of its tonal balance makes the Marantz very easy on the ear and un-fatiguing to listen to. The question is, when does something get so laid back that it actually topples over? Which is where the question of matching comes in...

The SA-7S1 will sound at its best used with electronics and particularly speakers that are on the leaner side of neutral (begging the question as to how it gels with its own, matching electronics). So, it performed far better with the solid-state Goldmund Telos 200 amps than it did with c.j, while the KEF 207/2 and even the Avalon Indra (which is neutral to a fault) delivered too much bottom end flesh for the SA-7's bones. And that's the point; because the Marantz sits right at the

leading edge of the system, it doesn't just add a hint of flavour, it dominates the underlying foundation and overall balance of the music. Any extra weight at all and the sound will become one paced and two-dimensional. Running it in a lean system is correction after the fact; it will help restore the balance, but it can't reconstitute the structure, which brings us to the second consequence of the player's chosen approach to the music.

You don't get nothing for nothing, and that warmth and solidity comes ▶

▶ with a price tag attached, in this case a lack of micro-dynamic discrimination and temporal precision that robs the music of immediacy and phrasing, the directness of its expression, and which adds to the mid-hall perspective. If you like your music up close and personal (which I do) you'll likely look elsewhere. However, if a more relaxed and less intense presentation is your thing, the Marantz could be exactly what you are looking for.

Positional stability is a seriously underrated quality when it comes to hi-fi systems, and it's at the core of the SA-7's sound. Of course, it's not the music that's relaxed, it's you listening to it – and that's because the stable picture means you're not working so hard. Voices and instruments are rock solid and impressively dimensional, without having that hectoring "look at me" quality that makes ultra transparent systems initially impressive but so often ultimately wearing. So whether it's Sonya Kitchell doing girl and guitar, sat solid in front of you, or Barbirolli's reading of Mahler 5 with the NPO, with its wonderfully terraced orchestral perspective and the sheer presence of its percussion, there's no tendency for instruments to wander with level or crowd forward in the soundstage. You are here, the orchestra is over there and there's never any doubt or shift in that relationship. And, in exactly the same way that reverberant information fills out and smoothes over the gaps and jumps in the performance that you hear sat mid-hall, or further from the stage in a bar, so the SA-7 delivers a big, smooth and rounded presentation, but one that's underpinned with a real sense of substance and power. The performance is all about poise and a commanding

presence. The sweeping seascapes and crashing storm of the Reiner *Scheherazade*, re-mastered to SACD, are mightily impressive, almost physical in their weight and impact. There's no missing the vast sweep of



the ocean or the destructive forces unleashed by the tempest. At the same time, Eleanor McEvoy's 'Non-smoking, single female' majors on sheer presence, but skates over the wry humour in the lyrics.

It's a conundrum that is neatly summed up by the Polski Radio live recording of the Gorecki *3rd Symphony*. This is a fantastic performance built on a measured development of the opening melody, played by the basses. The Marantz gets the solid weight and pitch of the notes just so, but it misses the texture of the bowed notes, the air of menace that creates the musical tension. Which in turn begs the question, what do you want from your music? Play the CD layer of the Gorecki on the ARC CD7 or the GNSW modified Wadia 861 and you get weight and drama, the sort of tension that has you perched on the edge of the listening seat. These more expensive, CD only players put the SA-7S1 in context, with a more musically communicative performance of greater emotional range. But then they do the same to everything else at around the price of the Marantz!

Which brings us finally to the

question of value. The SA-7S1 is a beautifully built and presented player. It's versatile and it's operationally really well sorted. It delivers a presence and solid stability from both SACD and CD that no player at its price can match. If its powerful performance matches your tastes or your system, you'll do well to find a player you prefer (certainly one that plays SACD too) much short of twice its price.

Those in search of more immediacy, dramatic contrast or transparency, or whose systems fight with its chosen balance, will find it wanting. But such is its poise and natural refinement that a home audition will be both mandatory and far from a chore. The SA-7S1 is a player that even if it doesn't satisfy, will rarely disappoint. On the other hand, those who crave its particular virtues can look forward to a long and happy marriage. Marantz have chosen a singular path; vive la difference! ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	SACD player
DAC:	2x NPC SM5866AS
Digital Filter:	Marantz PEC777f2
Analogue Circuitry:	Fully balanced
Analogue Outputs:	1pr RCA (single-ended) 1pr XLR (balanced)
Digital Outputs:	1x SPDif 1x TosLink optical
Output Levels:	5.1V balanced (SACD) 2.5V single-ended (SACD)
Input:	1x BNC for external clock
Dimensions (WxHxD):	459 x 136 x 426mm
Weight:	22.3kg
Finish:	Champagne Gold
Price:	£5000

#### UK Distributor:

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