

MARANTZ SA-7S1

High-end player sets standards for SACD and CD performance

Marantz is known for its audio players but this could be its best yet, says Andrew Everard

It might be tempting to sense a bit of hubris going on at Marantz – after all, it's advertising its latest Reference products as the "Legendary Series". Dig a little deeper, however, and you find this is a foible of the marketing and public relations people – those involved with the design and engineering of the range know that it's extremely good, as was proved by the demonstrations the company has been giving at shows this year, but they seem a bit embarrassed by the tag-line.

Not that Marantz has much need to be modest about its products, especially when it comes to CD players: even in fairly recent years the company has proved its worth with machines such as the CD-63 MkII KI-Signature, which really did raise the bar for sensibly priced CD hardware, the heftier CD-17 and its KI derivative, and the tank-like black and grey CD-10, which made few concessions to style but more than compensated with the performance it delivered.

Then there was the CD-7, a real statement product if ever there was one, with all of the company's familiar design elements, from extensive copper-plating to the proprietary Hyper-Dynamic Amplifier Modules. It was, and is, a remarkable player, capable of giving many even more expensive designs a run for their money.

In even more recent times, the company has been nailing its colours to the Super Audio CD mast, but with a twist: while it does make multichannel SACD players, in the form of its "universal" DVD machines, many of its

mainstream audio players have SACD capability, but deliver sound only in stereo. To many, this seems like an ideal compromise, giving the quality benefits available from the DSD recording format and the SACD disc, but without the distraction of multichannel audio – and, indeed, the need for a roomful of speakers to reproduce it.

The £5000 SA-7S1 is the latest in a range of "Reference Series" players which includes the earlier SA-11S1 and SA-15S1 – in this section of the Marantz catalogue, the lower the model number, the higher the performance – and has a model designation that clearly harks back to the CD-7 and the previous flagship SA-1. It was launched as part of the "Legendary Series" alongside a matching pre-amplifier, the £5000 SC-7S2, and 300W monobloc power amplifiers, the MA-9S2s, costing £6000 apiece.

All the products come in matching gold finish and certainly look pretty imposing when the pre-amp is racked up with the CD players, the big monobloc speakers sitting either side of the equipment support, or out next to the speakers.

Ah yes, speakers – just what can you use to make the most of these components? As readers may remember me mentioning previously, at the Munich High End Show Marantz Brand Ambassador Ken Ishiwata came up with a solution in the form of a pair of Mordaunt-Short Performance 9 speakers for each channel, the company being the European distributor for the speaker brand. Two speakers per channel? Yes, and as if that wasn't mad enough, one speaker in each channel's pair was suspended upside-down

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above the other! But back to the SA-7S1, and I have to say that even with experience of past high-end Marantz players, I was very impressed with the feeling of quality and solidity this machine gives as soon as it's unboxed. It weighs over 22kg – almost 50lb in old money – which is more what you might expect of a solidly constructed amplifier, and the fit and finish are exemplary, as you might hope given the price. It's a minimal player, both in terms of front-panel layout and rear socket provision: you get little more than transport function on the fascia, and beyond the choice of conventional and balanced outputs, there are only optical and electrical digital outputs only available when CDs are being played, as is the case with most SACD players.

There's also an input to allow an external clock signal to be fed into the player. This is in response to the availability of several external master clock generators available to audiophiles in some markets, with prices going up to \$10,000 (£5000) or more. Reading between the lines of a technical briefing from Marantz, it seems the company is more than happy with its own internal master clock, but high-end dealers, I suspect mainly in the home Japanese market, demand such a facility on a player at this level.

The player is built on a substantial double-layer chassis, with the transformer further shielded with copper. The SACDM-1 transport mechanism uses an all-metal loader, treated to eliminate reflections, and is both decoupled from the rest of the player and isolated in its own internal casing, aluminium being the material of choice for this all-new disc-reading section, and it's up to 1cm thick in some parts of this construction.

High-quality digital-to-analogue conversion



from NPC is used, with twin monaural DACs each comprising 23 1-bit converters. In addition the player has switchable digital filtering – more on that when we get to the sound in a moment or two – and a ground isolator designed to keep any digital interference away from the analogue audio sections.

The analogue section uses fully balanced dual-differential circuitry to minimise noise and enhance resolution, and makes use of an enhanced version of the Marantz HDAMs, with the company's latest HDAM-SA2 modules in the output stage. The phase of the output can be inverted with a push of a front-panel button, the switching being carried out in the digital domain.

PERFORMANCE

The idea of the pricing balance within that "Legendary" series may seem odd, as a £5000 player to be used with £17,000-worth of amplification flies in the face of established "source first" system-building philosophy. But that simplistic view overlooks one small matter: the SA-7S1 is a superlative player of both SACDs and compact discs, and at least good enough to be considered in a very elite group of world-class machines. To these ears this is the best Marantz player I have ever heard and only the vagaries of audio memory hold me back from suggesting it's quite possibly the best CD player I have ever encountered.

It's hard not to be impressed with this machine's handling of standard CDs, to the extent that the SACD capability is almost – but not quite – more icing sugar and egg whites than

fruit, sugar, yolks and flour. One could quite happily live with this player spinning conventional discs, so great an insight does it give into recording and mastering – for better or worse. This isn't a sonic fireworks display, all flash and attention-grabbing, underpinned with very little, but rather a mature, considered presentation capable of breathtaking revelation and precision at one moment, and jaw-dropping, chest-thumping scale and impact the next. The choice of digital filters is as much a matter of taste as anything else, and while the player sounds perfectly splendid in the Filter 2 position, which gives a good all-round balance, some slightly muddy recordings may benefit from the slightly sharper-sounding Filter 3, while discs given to some sharpness or abrasiveness will be improved by the smoother-sounding Filter 1.

There's also switchable filtering for SACD, but here the differences are much more subtle. I think I preferred the Filter 1 position, which sends the signal straight to the digital-to-analogue converters, but again this preference varied according to disc being played. What I can tell you is that the player ably demonstrates the benefits of a good SACD recording: it sounds amazing with standard CDs, but the SACD layer has just that bit more presence, power and openness to draw you into the music.

If anyone ever tries to convince you that a player has no role in the dynamics of music, and that this is purely a function of amplifier power, point them in the direction of this machine: I have never encountered such power or impact coming from a CD player, and it would be a very special package

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of amplification and speakers that would be able to make the most of what it can deliver at its output sockets. Maybe that £17,000 pre-amp and power amplifier combination isn't overkill after all!

Full orchestral works are delivered with shiver-inducing vibrancy and sheer thump, and the closeness with which the player acquaints the listener with the finest details of a recording ensures that one might find oneself getting emotional rather more often than is seemly – I know I did, and I'm not going to conceal the fact.

A lot of discs did get played through the Marantz during its longer-than-usual tenure for this review, making it quite a disappointment when it finally got taken away to fulfill some commitments as a demonstration machine for a series of hi-fi shows. Marantz kindly offered to return it to me for further assessment after the shows, but I declined – it would be dangerous for my wallet were I to get too attached to the way this machine plays music.

Don't expect one of those conclusions that say "yes, this player is remarkable, but then £5000 is a lot of money". The Marantz is simply so good that it puts most rivals in the shade, and if I had the money to hand to buy it, it wouldn't have gone back, however much the company needed it. ●

MARANTZ SA-7S1

Type SACD/CD player

Price £5000

Disc formats played SACD, CD, CD-R

Analogue audio outputs Stereo line, stereo XLR balanced

Digital audio outputs (from CD) electrical, optical

Other connections IEC mains, external master clock

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Dimensions (HxWxD) 45.9x13.5x42.6cm

Weight 22.3 kg

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