

BEST BUY

HI-FI CHOICE
magazine



Ken's on form

New Ken Ishiwata-tweaked Marantz is an audiophile dream

PRODUCT Marantz SA8003

TYPE CD/SACD player (stereo-only)

PRICE £700

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 44x10.5x33cm

• Weight: 7kg • Analogue outputs: 1x RCA phono
• Digital outputs: 1x coaxial (phono), 1x optical
(Toslink) S/PDIF • Input: USB • Compatibility: SACD,
CD, CD-R, CD-RW, MP3, WMA

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Marantz has an enviable history of keeping on top of the audio separates game, which these days means a pretty active programme of new product development. Indeed, it doesn't feel like very long since we saw the SA7001 and now we're testing its replacement.

Well, sort-of replacement. If you've paid attention to past Marantz form, you'll have noticed that the company likes its 'Special Edition' models (that very nomenclature is believed to be a Marantz invention) and the ultimate expression of these was always the 'KI Signature' range, reflecting the personal tweaking input of brand ambassador and

noted audiophile Ken Ishiwata. There was an SA7001KI, but it seems there will not be a corresponding version of the '8003 because this is already the 'Ken'd' model. In other words, it effectively replaces the SA7001KI, not the base model: something less exalted will be along to fill the 7001 slot soon.

However, it seems that in terms of evolution this model has more to do with Marantz's premium range, the 7 and 11 series (components which sell for quite upmarket money). Like many firms, Marantz does its R&D at the high-end and lets the results 'trickle down' to lesser products as the march of technological progress makes them less expensive. Hence, for instance, the use of the Crystal Semiconductor CS4398 DAC chip inside this player, one of the highest-performing parts on the planet.

Before we get too deep into the insides, there's a more obvious external feature that demands comment: a USB socket. We haven't seen this before on any separates CD player, but immediately realised that it is an extremely

useful and clever idea. Some manufacturers have provided digital inputs on CD players before, but the USB slot is even more useful. If you have high-quality music on a portable player of some sort, plugging it in to a socket like this makes it instantly available via your home hi-fi, with the considerable advantage of high-quality digital-to-analogue conversion. It won't turn low-rate MP3 files into miracles of high fidelity, but it will certainly extract the most from uncompressed audio.

That apart, the SA8003 continues the current trend among SACD spinners of offering stereo-only replay. It does seem to be something of an improvement over similar machines in terms of loading time (a frequent gripe) and loads a CD in about five seconds, which is just about bearable. In terms of build quality it's nicely done, the front a mixture of metal and plastic, but so well finished that it's not obvious which is which, while the whole of the main chassis tray is copper-plated. The top is thin and a little resonant. Good-quality analogue output

sockets are fitted and there are quite a few high-grade components internally.

That said, of course, circuit design is probably more important and here Marantz has a unique attraction in its 'Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Module', a configuration used in preference to the more popular op-amp, which certainly gives consistently excellent results in technical terms. Distortion from this player is down among the noise, though surprisingly there's a little jitter in evidence, just enough to be measurable.

SOUND QUALITY

We make measurements of aspects like distortion and jitter as much as anything out of curiosity, but the correlation between very low (but not vanishing) levels of such nasties and subjective performance is weak and uncertain. At any rate, the jitter certainly didn't seem to be enough to interfere seriously with our enjoyment of this player, which did nothing to dim our enthusiasm for either its maker, or any of the favourite discs we played on it. It is



subjective lift in roughly the region occupied by a male voice.

It would be a harsh judge who would proclaim that unpleasant, though. At worst, it leads to a very minor reduction in detail, but it does add a certain 'glow' to the sound and if that's helping Marantz shift players in

Most of all, what we appreciated in our brief listening sessions with the SA8003 was the ease with which it adapts to everything from funk to opera, folk to thrash. It has a terrific knack of not just coping with any style, but playing it as if it was the principal source used by the designers in the final stages of voicing the circuitry. It can be civilised in string quartets, soulful in ballads and mental in punk, one after the other and with complete conviction; that is perhaps nothing more than a statement of what hi-fi should be about, but it is notable how few components really shine in every area. Some seem a little polite in rock, others a touch harsh in classical, but this one just doesn't seem partial.

We're very impressed with Marantz's ability to turn out great disc players. There are many fine CD players around between £500 and £1,000, but they don't all play SACDs (and our comments above apply equally to both CD and SACD replay), nor are they all as smartly turned out as this one. The USB input is a clever and useful addition and the player is pleasant to use. Another winner! **HFC**

Richard Black

“Some manufacturers have provided digital inputs on CD players before, but the USB slot is even more useful.”

lively, impartial in its musical tastes, detailed and frankly a delightful performer. If it gives any ground to high-end esoterica then it's in the very finest gradations of insight and, perhaps, also control. In general, though, it's really rather lovely.

It's always a little dangerous to talk about a company's 'house sound', especially in the case of CD players which, on the whole, show quite subtle personality traits, but we've had so much experience with Marantz in particular, that we're more confident than usual in saying that this player does indeed show some similarities to its stablemates. The sound in question is characterised by a very slight degree of added warmth, a small step from absolute neutrality in the upper bass/lower midrange region. Of course the frequency response is as flat as the proverbial, but our analysis is that the sound is not quite as precisely controlled in that region as it may be and the result is a small, but audible

comparative demos we wouldn't be at all surprised. In day-to-day terms it's something one gets used to quite quickly and it doesn't grate or irritate in long listening sessions. Indeed, had we not been using some particularly high-resolution loudspeakers for the listening, we may hardly have been aware of the detail aspect at all.

Low bass is exceptionally well presented for a product in this price bracket, with extension, precision and generous helpings of tunefulness, which all goes to set up a particularly pleasing foundation for almost any style of music. In the high treble there's occasionally a hint of congestion, not a big problem, but something we've found before with Marantz players. We suspect this is due to the unusual digital filter the company employs. Ultimate treble cleanliness is possible in digital audio, but unfortunately, it is one of those things one tends to have to pay a lot for!



VERDICT	
SOUND (CD) ★★★★★	PRO Excellent low bass and admirably clean treble and midrange, plus an unusually even-handed approach to different musical styles. USB input a nifty plus.
SOUND (SACD) ★★★★★	
FEATURES ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON A slight added warmth in the upper bass may not be to every taste and minutely compromises detail. Highest treble just a shade shut-in too.
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION A welcome newcomer which offers some classic Marantz sounds in a classy and attractive package, with intelligently thought-out features too. Slightly, but certainly not oppressively characterised.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/456022	