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GOING FOR THE GOLD

THE SOUND OF MARANTZ'S REFERENCE SERIES COMPONENTS TOOK MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY TO PERFECT. BY STEVE GUTTENBERG

By the time Elvis recorded "Mystery Train," and years before Cadillacs sprouted tail fins, Saul Marantz's start-up company was fast becoming a force to be reckoned with. And its early creations still enjoy esteem. Pristine examples of its most celebrated models now fetch many times their original prices on eBay. The Marantz Model 10B, for example, is frequently cited as the best-sounding FM tuner of all time. Which is all the more amazing when you discover the legendary product was introduced in 1963, just two years after the creation of the FM format. The company, founded in the basement of Marantz's New York City home, has since blossomed into a full-line manufacturer whose operations are centered in Japan.

Fast-forward to 2006 and it's starting to look like one of those "déjà vu all over again" stories: While most Japanese con-

sumer electronics giants are moving manufacturing to such countries as China and Malaysia, Marantz is keeping Reference Series production in Japan to ensure the highest possible quality. This flagship series now includes a turntable, a stereo preamplifier, a power amplifier, and the components we examine in this review: the PM-11S1 stereo integrated amplifier and the SA-11S1 stereo SACD/CD player. Reference Series components are all conceived with the performance-oriented audiophile in mind.

Few comparably priced high-end products can touch the Reference Series' luxurious look and feel. The front panels' curves are set off with crisp grooves hosting soft blue backlighting, and I must say these Reference components look pretty darn snazzy at night. Push a button on the amplifier and before the music starts you hear the hushed sounds of internal relays engaging, leaving no doubt this is a seri-

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ous piece of gear. Both of these components feature HDAM-SA2—Marantz's complex name for its proprietary modular audio circuit topology—which is said to reduce distortion and deliver the purest sound ever. The entire lower half of each Reference component chassis is copper-plated; whether this is primarily to shield the sensitive internal circuitry or just to look cool, I cannot say. The amplifier produces 100 watts per channel and sports bass and treble controls.

The PM-11S1 integrated amplifier's connectivity contingent accommodates as many as five sources—i.e., tuner, SACD player, turntable, etc.—plus two audio recorders. The inputs are of the standard RCA type, and there is one set of professional-style balanced XLR-type connectors. Impressively large, gold-plated speaker binding posts provide an interface for two sets of speakers. With the addition of a second PM-11S1, your installer can "bi-amplify" compatible speakers. Bamping can enhance sound quality and double the power driving the speakers.

The PM-11S1 is a stereo component,

The SA-11S1 plays both CDs and Super Audio CDs, but like some other high-end SACD players, it has no multichannel capability—it plays all discs in stereo. Its champagne finish echoes the classic look of Marantz's past high-end audio components.



but 5.1-channel operation is possible by ganging three PM-11S1s together in a master/slave arrangement. I'm not suggesting anything weird or kinky, just that Marantz's Floating Control Bus System can control up to four PM-11S1s from one PM-11S1. It's something you might want to discuss with your installer.

The SA-11S1 SACD player's connections are even more minimal than the PM-11S1's. There are stereo RCA and XLR outputs, coaxial and optical digital outputs (for CD only), and RCA-type connectors that allow the unit to be linked to a Marantz remote control system. Curiously, neither Reference Series unit offers 12-volt triggers, RS-232, or infrared multiroom control facilities. I suppose Marantz sees Reference Series buyers as serious audiophiles disinterested in such conveniences.

On the upside, no on-screen menus are required for system setup, so I have everything hooked up and playing music in a matter of minutes. While the PM-11S1 and SA-11S1 each come with their own remote, I use the amp's remote to

The back of the SA-11S1 seems spare in these days of jack-filled DVD players and receivers, but it has everything the audiophile needs, including XLR balanced outputs. The copper chassis provides superior shielding from outside electrical interference.

control both units. The slender, metal-faced remotes are not bakelit, but their eminently logical design makes them easy to use, even in a darkened room.

I am tempted to describe the Reference sound as vacuum tubelike, but it is as clear as a bell with a smoothness that renders the sound of everyday audio/video receivers harsh by comparison. I listen to the integrated amplifier and the SACD player individually and together within my own system, and their sound is consistently first-rate.

A spectacular CD such as *The Fantasy Film World of Bernard Herrmann* can really show off the Reference gear's talents. Herrmann's ravishing scores for *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* are densely orchestrated, but the References effortlessly resolve the maestro's unflinching silky string tone. The References can also unleash the massive grooves pulsing through James Brown's *Soul On Top* CD without raising a sweat. This long-lost recording pairs JB with the Louie Bellson Orchestra tearing through Soul Brother #1's biggest hits, including "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," and moving onto outside choices such as Hank Williams' "Your Cheatin' Heart" and Kurt Weill's "September Song." (Seems Papa really did have a brand-new bag!) Even as Brown whips the band to frenzied

peaks, the PM-11S1 integrated amplifier never gets more than slightly warm.

Of course, the SA-11S1 also plays Super Audio CDs, and the sound of my Bob Dylan, Rolling Stones, Peter Gabriel, John Hiatt, and Kinks SACDs is markedly better than the CDs of the same music. By better, I mean more meat on the bones, more of a natural balance, so instruments sound more like themselves and vocals sound more human. When I switch back to CD, the music is still great, just smaller and less lifelike. Unusually, the player is equipped with three filters that allow a degree of sonic tailoring of your CDs and SACDs. After carefully scrutinizing their subtle effects on the sound, I settle on Filter 2 and never look back. Or you can just leave it in the factory preset mode and live happily ever after.

The References' persuasive sound and refined elegance make for a mightily compelling package. There are many competitors vying for the same market share, but when you stop and consider that the company that Saul Marantz founded in 1953 is still making first-class products in the 21st century, that longevity has to be reassuring. **[E]**

■ **PRICE:** SA-11S1 SACD/CD player \$3,499, PM-11S1 integrated amplifier \$4,399

■ **CONTACT:** 630.741.0300, marantz.com

