

ABSOLUTE Analog



Following tried and true design principals

Robert E. Greene

VINYL SOUND IS SOMEHOW NATURAL. This intrinsic naturalness means that even relatively inexpensive vinyl playback systems can sound, if not perfect, at least very musically convincing.

A case in point is the Marantz TT-15S Reference Series turntable. Marantz's first turntable in more than twenty years, the combo is a joint project with Clearaudio and includes a turntable, tonearm, and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood Ebony moving-magnet cartridge. The TT-15S reminded me of the historic AR—a no frills-design that also provided musically satisfying sound at a reasonable price. But progress happens, and the Marantz is a much better turntable.

The Marantz combo is a lot closer to more expensive ensembles than one might expect—a cliché to say, but the simple truth here. If you have a large vinyl collection and need something to play it on, or if you are just interested in getting into the modern vinyl renaissance without spending a month's (or a year's) pay, this is a fine way to go.

The Marantz follows patterns of design that are largely tried and true—emphasize the “true” in that phrase. A motor that geometrically fits within the turntable but is not in contact with it; the three isolation feet that give a solid support while lowering the transmission of vibrations; the Southern clamp system; the optional soft mat; the acrylic plinth and platter, which are largely non-resonant; the ultra-smooth belt-drive mechanism, and so on. Nothing comes as an engineering revelation, but everything is very well executed, and remarkably so at the price.

Everyone ought to know by now that vinyl sounds musical. If you listen to a test record, you can hear that channel separation is never absolute, that dynamic range is somewhat limited, and

Marantz TT-15S Turntable

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so on. Vinyl has its limitations. But its overall sound is so very attractive. What a potential customer for a playback system needs to do is separate the limitations of the medium from what is going wrong in the particular playback system. Fortunately, very little goes wrong in this Marantz system.

Take the matter of limiting the inevitable energy that a stylus puts into the record as it plays. How well this is or isn't achieved is not hard to check. If you tap on the record label with a hard object while a record is playing, what ought to come through the speakers is a dull clunk, with no higher-frequency content to speak of. The Marantz, with its mat and Southern clamp is dandy in this department. (Without the mat, not so great—use the mat.)

This is a real test, nothing esoteric,

Specs & Pricing

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Type: Belt-drive turntable, with anodized aluminum arm and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood Ebony moving-magnet cartridge (other cartridges also usable)
Cartridge output: 3.6mV
Speeds: 33-1/3 & 45rpm
Dimensions: 16.5" x 5.4" x 14.2"
Weight: 19.6 lbs.
Price: \$1699

Associated equipment
 Nakamichi TX1000 and Dragon CT; Townshend, original AR, and Beogram 8002 turntables; Morch DP-6, UP4, and anisotropic (prototype), Musical Fidelity, SME III and V, and Graham tonearms; Bang and Olufsen MMC1 and MMC4 (Soundsmith rebuild), Audio Technica ATML 150, Technics 100C Mark IV, ELAC ESG 896, Promethean Green, and Shure V15MRV cartridges; Classe Audio CD-1 transport and DAC-1 converter, Benchmark DAC1 converter; Plinius and Bryston BP-25 preamplifiers; Z Systems RDP-1 and RDQ digital preamplifiers/EQ devices; Bryston 14 B ST and Carver A-220 amplifiers; Harbeth Monitor 40 and Gradient 1.3 loudspeakers; Audio Physic Minos subwoofer; Liberty Audio Suite and Liberty Praxis measurement systems

not some sort of now-you-hear-it-now-you-don't thing. But does it count? You bet! The banishing of vinyl-borne energy makes for finer resolution. Sometimes it reveals things you might wish weren't there—print-through comes through very well here. But that resolution also reveals the fine structure of the music. Resolution is not a thing unto itself. Rather, it is absence of noise and, in particular, of vinyl-borne energy—probably the worst noise in vinyl playback, since it can be strong in the frequencies of maximum hearing sensitivity. Here it is all but gone. On Sheffield Labs' *Confederation*, the micro-detail of what the musicians are doing and saying comes through superbly. Hearing one of my father's favorites, “Old Joe Clark,” was like being back home in my native Tennessee, hanging out with the boys. Josh White's guitar on *One Meat Ball* [Elektra] was very natural. And the complex orchestral textures of Griffes' *Pleasure Dome of Kabla Kahn* [New World] were clearly revealed.

Speed stability of the Marantz is fine. Again, any little pitch variations you hear are going to be record-related. A much heavier platter might smooth out the sound a bit—at a price.

The Marantz has no suspension, but its feet seem to isolate it well. Setting it on a firm support in my (mostly carpeted) tile-floored audio room, I had no problems. On a floating shelf, such as a Townshend Seismic Sink, the turntable would probably benefit from some additional isolation.

The Marantz combo is outstanding, nearly unique even, in its ease and accuracy of setup. If you use the included cartridge, everything is locked in correctly. Just follow the clear instructions, and in ten minutes or less you are underway with the certainty that everything is perfectly adjusted. While vinyl fanatics may enjoy tweaking, this is a really good thing for people who just want to get down to the music. The cartridge, however, appears to be very delicate, with a long fragile-looking cantilever. And the super-tight fit of the cartridge connectors to the arm wire pins makes installation and removal of the cartridge a bit hazardous. Watch out!

The anti-skate is done by a magnetic

system, which in my first sample of the arm was installed backwards, reversing the direction of the anti-skate torque. Check this out on your sample: The screw-in stationary magnet should attract the front magnet on the arm and repel the back one. Try this with the stationary magnet not yet installed to be sure things are right.

The Clearaudio Virtuoso Ebony Wood cartridge is a moving-magnet, a type I am a fan of. It has a distinctive sonic character, being rather “soft” and rather attractively recessed in the upper mids, with a built-in “BBC dip.” Comparison to CDs made from the same masters as the records (and to other cartridges) verified the overall sonic character. The cartridge is uncolored but forgiving—in practice perhaps not a fault, given that many records were historically a bit overbearing by contemporary (and absolute) standards. Even Mercuries sound almost reasonably mellow with this cartridge.

The cartridge tracks very well at two grams, which is higher than usual for mm's, sailing cleanly through the Shure test-record torture tracks. And Ellen Westberg Andersen's Grieg Songs [Simax], fabulous if there is no mistracking, was fabulous indeed. Flawless tracking is vitally important, and not all audiophile cartridges have it.

The arm/cartridge resonant frequency of approximately 8Hz, slightly lower than the usual figure, gives good bass extension, but also adds some warped-related low-frequency noise on occasion. And the bass, while well extended, is not quite as firm as damped tonearms can give.

Much more importantly, however, in musical terms, the sound is correctly warm farther up in the middle bass. Josh White's and Sam Gary's voices were properly full-bodied, and orchestral music sounded correctly full.

The overall sonic results here are mostly positive. This system is clean-tracking, low in distortion, detailed, low in noise and high in resolution, pitch-stable, and musically agreeable. I do not see how one could ask for a lot more at the price. I pulled out many a vinyl favorite with much satisfaction. You will, too. **TAS**