

# Marantz

## SC-7S1/MA-9S1

### pre/power amplifiers

Marantz marks its 50th anniversary with spanking new flagship amplification in the spirit of old favourites, the Model 7 pre-amp and Model 9 power amp



#### Marantz SC-7S1/MA-9S1

PRICE £5000/£6000

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**H**ow important is Marantz's latest foray into the true high-end arena? Let's put it this way: the company sent Ken Ishiwata along to check the installation. It gets no scarier than that, for Ishiwata is The Man, and I wouldn't have been allowed to review the new SC-7S1 Stereo Pre-amplifier and MA-9S1 Monoblock Power Amplifiers, if the system didn't pass his scrutiny. It was like taking a driving exam.

Although it produced official re-issues of its classic valve electronics a few years ago, Marantz wanted to mark its 50th Anniversary with all-new

Century. All-balanced, solid-state, funky new meters, useable with multi-channel set-ups – about all you can say regarding the lineage is that

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models harking back to the company's birth, but they couldn't very well reissue a recent, er, reissue. So the decision was made to apply the spirit rather than the form of the original Model 7 pre-amp and Model 9 power amplifier to something that would be undeniably 21st

the combo is stereo, champagne-coloured, and has blue lights a'winking. The spiritual link, though, is simple: no-compromise.

Externally, both are disarmingly minimalist, despite being jam-packed with mouth-watering audiophile-grade componentry and complex

circuits. Common to both are the fully-balanced operation front-to-back and use of the latest evolution of Marantz's exclusive HDAM (High-Definition Amplifier Modules), 'for exceptional dynamic range, resolution, clarity and transient response.' Both products boast massive power supplies (see Technology panel), heavy-gauge internal wiring, extra-thick circuit boards with large circuit traces and extensive internal shielding. Their chassis are machined from aluminium alloy, and, yes, they both sport round meters on their front panels.

**Marantz SC-7S1 Stereo Preamplifier**

Impressive from the minute you unpack it, the SC-7S1 measures 46 x 13 x 18cm (w,h,d) and

because Marantz has developed a 'floating control bus system' with the aforementioned level trim capability. How I'd love to hear a dozen of 'em...

**Marantz MA-9S1 Monoblock Power Amplifier**

An equally impressive beastie, a single MA-9S1 stands 46 x 19 x 44.5cm (w,h,d) and weighs 78.9lb. A pair is not to be approached glibly. Its front panel contains a sexy, blue-lit power meter reminiscent of the new Aston-Martin's dials, and there are only three controls on the front: choice of balanced or unbalanced input, power on and meter on/off. The back of each monoblock contains two pairs of multi-way speaker terminals and the balanced and unbalanced inputs. Oh, and being rated at 300W into 8 ohms, 600W into

player, the SME V arm, SME 30 turntable and Koetsu Urushi Black through the EAR 324 phono stage – also balanced – and Wilson WATT Puppy System 7. All wiring was the latest Transparent Reference, and I avoided any tweak accessories.

**Listening**

The Marantz system has a distinct sound that, though subtle, will immediately signal to the listeners whether or not it's friend or foe. It's a deceptive, not-what-you'd-expect character, too clean and precise to be mistaken for valves and too sweet and silky to herald the presence of solid-state circuitry.

What compounds the act of trying to assess it is an absence of misbehaviour thanks to the vast power reserves. In many ways, it reminded me of 'Jurassic' Krells, which I'm fortunate enough to have savoured recently in the SME Listening Room. Because the Marantz amplifiers have no operational limits to speak of in real terms, there are few sonic clues to the nature of the amplifiers' topology, especially the lack of occasional clipping when overdriven – quite simply the best indicator of tubes or tranny comportment.

Another benefit of the zero-compromise design here is the way the amp was unfazed by speaker load, cable changes, proximity to other hardware, choice of mains cable – you name it. And that's why you'd never mistake it for a valve design: it's simply far too quiet, too well-behaved, too serene.

What does this mean for the music? Voices are warm and clear, with only the most minuscule

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weighs a confidence-building 46.3lb! That's more than most companies' power amplifiers weigh. Its other measurements, too, border on the fantastical. A frequency response from 3Hz–150kHz and reported better-than-100dB channel separation are joined by S/N ratio of 103dB for balanced operation and 105dB for unbalanced. Meanwhile, the 8-gang linear volume control operates in 0.5dB steps and there's level trimming of +/-6dB to match all sources and amps within 0.5dB.

Minimalist almost to the point of being naked, the SC-7S1's front panel contains a rotary source selector (marked 'Balanced', 'SACD/CD', 'Line 1', 'Line 2' and 'Tape'), a power on button below a meter that reads out signal output level in dB, a rotary volume control, and buttons for applying attenuation of -20, -40 and -60dB (as when changing LPs!) and display on/off. That's it, which means for a slim and uncluttered remote control.

The back sports top-quality phono connectors for all inputs and two sets of unbalanced outputs, plus XLRs for balanced input and output. Given the importance Marantz has placed on its balanced nature, I was disappointed to see only one set of balanced inputs – a curious oversight in light of the target audience.

The dearth of balanced inputs aside, Marantz is proposing decidedly weird, over-the-top audiophilic behaviour from the SC-7S1 owner. (Remember: at least one lucky audiophile bought five Project T1s for an all-valve multi-channel set-up.) Check this out: 'For the ultimate in sonic performance, two SC-7S1s can be used together in mono mode, to create a completely separate stereo audio signal path from the source to a pair of MA-9S1 amplifiers to the loudspeakers. Up to six SC-7S1 preamplifiers and 12 MA-9S1 amplifiers can be combined for a multi-channel system of awe-inspiring power and impact.' The driving of two or more pre-amps is possible

4 ohms and 1,200W into 2 ohms, the MA-9S1 is unlikely to meet a speaker it can't whup.

To pass muster with Marantz, I used the system with components familiar to Ken Ishiwata and Marantz's Neil Gill, who also joined in for my SATs (Subjective Audio Trial). Sources included the Marantz CD12/DA12 in balanced mode, as modified by KI, Audio Research CD3 Mk II CD



The SC-7S1 pre-amp here sits atop a pair of MA-9S1 monoblocks. Multichannel use is also catered for

**FAMILY MATTERS**

There's nothing incongruous about launching a scarily high-end pairing because Marantz loves to – on occasion – flex its audiophilic muscle with masterpieces like the Project T1 valve amp (300Bs as driver tubes!) and a series of high-end CD and SACD players.

With the SC-7S1 and MA-9S1, Marantz hopes to accomplish a number of things beyond marking an anniversary. Firstly, it intends to have this pre/power package carve a niche of its own amid the more obvious choices like Krell, Classe, et al. For another, it wanted to find a worthy recipient for its cutting-edge CD and SACD

players. And for a third, well, let's just say that its newest sibling is also its first-ever rival: McIntosh and Marantz share the same owners. It may just be me reading something into it, but a spat amongst these sisters would certainly make for interesting market shenanigans.

Anyway, what we have before us is a pre/power package that, at every level, bears comparison to the most exotic hardware available. For the sake of clarity, let's leave out the valve rivals, because I firmly believe that the two camps remain as far removed from each other as is possible – even with some brands, like McIntosh, working with both

technologies. And customers for one type couldn't give a hoot about the other.

Ken confirmed that just about all of the SC-7S1s and MA-9S1s have been sold together, although you can mix'n'match.

I tried them with McIntosh's C2200 and MC2102 all-tube rivals, with interesting results, but – aside from satisfying my curiosity – the listening sessions involved using them as a combination. And they are as closely-related as a pre/power pair can be. Or, ironically, as closely related as Marantz and McIntosh now are. In 1958, who'd have believed this would ever happen?

traces of sibilance keeping you from thinking that Alison Krauss or Joss Stone is in the room with you. The copious amount detail was another indicator that you were listening against the sort of silent background attributed to solid-state gear and massive power supplies. Massed, amplified instruments benefited from this because even

himself. Transients on guitar, the solidity of the bass, Peter Wolf's vocal rasp – it was as if the Marantzes knew that their roots lay in analogue, if only because the '7' and '9' in their names.

If the Marantz system exhibited one particular trait that convinced me of its greatness, it was the soundstage. This set-up has it all. Image height,

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overlapping guitars enjoyed their own sonic space. While I've never been hung up on a hygienic, warts-and-all sound, some of the revelations caused by the Marantz combination were shocking, especially when listening to vinyl. Low-level detail came through intact, a boon for acoustic instruments if you want to hear the body of an acoustic guitar as well as the strings.

Tim de Paravicini's sublime EAR 324 phono stage matched the SC-7S1 perfectly in balanced mode, and it served as yet another reminder of analogue vinyl's superiority over CD. Magic Dick's harmonica on the first J Geils Band album – original pressing, well-played over the past 34 years – cut through with a visceral, sharp stab that was oddly muted on CD, with better body, decay and, yup, breathing from the player

the correct scale, stage width and depth – it could not be faulted beyond one odd little quirk. So silent are the spaces between and around the performers that some recordings, especially overly-processed multi-mic'd affairs can leave the musicians sounding disembodied. But feed it a

great recording, and the sound is seamless from left-to-right and front-to-back.

But will Marantz dealers have the balls to carry this unbelievable combination? A pair of MA-9S1 monoblocks will set you back £12,000 while the SC-7S1 preamplifier carries a tag of £5000. I reviewed it thinking that the system cost £3000 more and still thought it was a bargain.

The SC-7S1/MA-9S1 combination reeks of the spirit of Saul Marantz. It's a pleasure to use and I've no doubt it will be a pleasure to own. So, yes, Ken, you were right: Marantz did create a Model 7 and Model 9 for the 21st Century. ■

Ken Kessler

### Technology

Inside the SC-7S1 pre-amp are no fewer than eight HDAM modules 'for maximum signal purity and lowest noise', four on each input-output buffer and another four HDAMs on the V/I converter. Ultra-wide bandwidth circuitry is used throughout 'to achieve a frequency response from 3Hz–150kHz, and Marantz reports better-than-100dB channel separation, 'for a natural tonal balance and superlative image specificity upon a vast, wide and deep soundstage.'

As for the power amp, Marantz filled this mad bastard with a massive power supply with a large Super Ring Core toroidal power transformer, heavy-gauge internal wiring, six HDAM modules and audiophile-pleasing, top-quality internal components to provide the capacity to deliver instantaneous current greater than 150 amps. Its damping factor is 200, the frequency response is stated as 3Hz-120kHz +0, -3dB, and the S/N ratio is 120dB. I needn't tell you that this is one quiet system.

### Features

- Massive power
- Seamless, stress-free sound
- Multi-channel capability

