

toneAudio.

The e-journal of analog
and digital sound.

no.22

2009



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The Rebirth of Marantz

By Jeff Dorgay

If you or your parents were listening to music in the '70s, chances are someone in your circle had one of the ubiquitous "2200 series" of Marantz receivers. If you are even older, you may have had the pleasure of listening to the legendary Marantz tube amplifiers that now fetch more than 10 times their original cost to collectors.

Much like Luxman, and a few other prestigious brands from the '70s, Marantz went underground in the US market during the '90s to embrace the Home Theater market, allowing the two-channel components in their lineup to fade away. However, they were still going strong with their design team intact in Japan, and their products still sold briskly in Europe and Asia.

After living with a full system for a few months, I can attest that these components are top notch, equal to anything else you would purchase from the other major brands we enjoy today. Along with great sound, they bring a unique styling aesthetic in their warm gold finish with copper-plated chassis. Next to my reference gold Conrad-Johnson gear, they look slightly pink in comparison. Paying homage to the Model 9 amplifiers, the amplifier and the preamplifiers use small, circular-window-housing power meters in the Model MA-9S2 mono-block amplifiers, and showing input selection in the Model SC-7S2 preamplifier.

Marantz is 56 years old and has been solidly back in the U.S. two-channel market since 2003, with their second generation of engineering talent working on their current products. The preamplifier has an MSRP of \$7,999, the disc player is \$6,999, and the power amplifiers are \$7,999 each. Marantz is playing to an upscale crowd, but the performance is in line with the price tag. Those seeking an analog phono stage to match the rest of the system are out of luck for now, but Kevin Zarow, Marantz' U.S. Product Manager, told me that there are "some new things in the works" that he couldn't talk about right now. I am hoping that one of those things will be a matching phono preamplifier ...

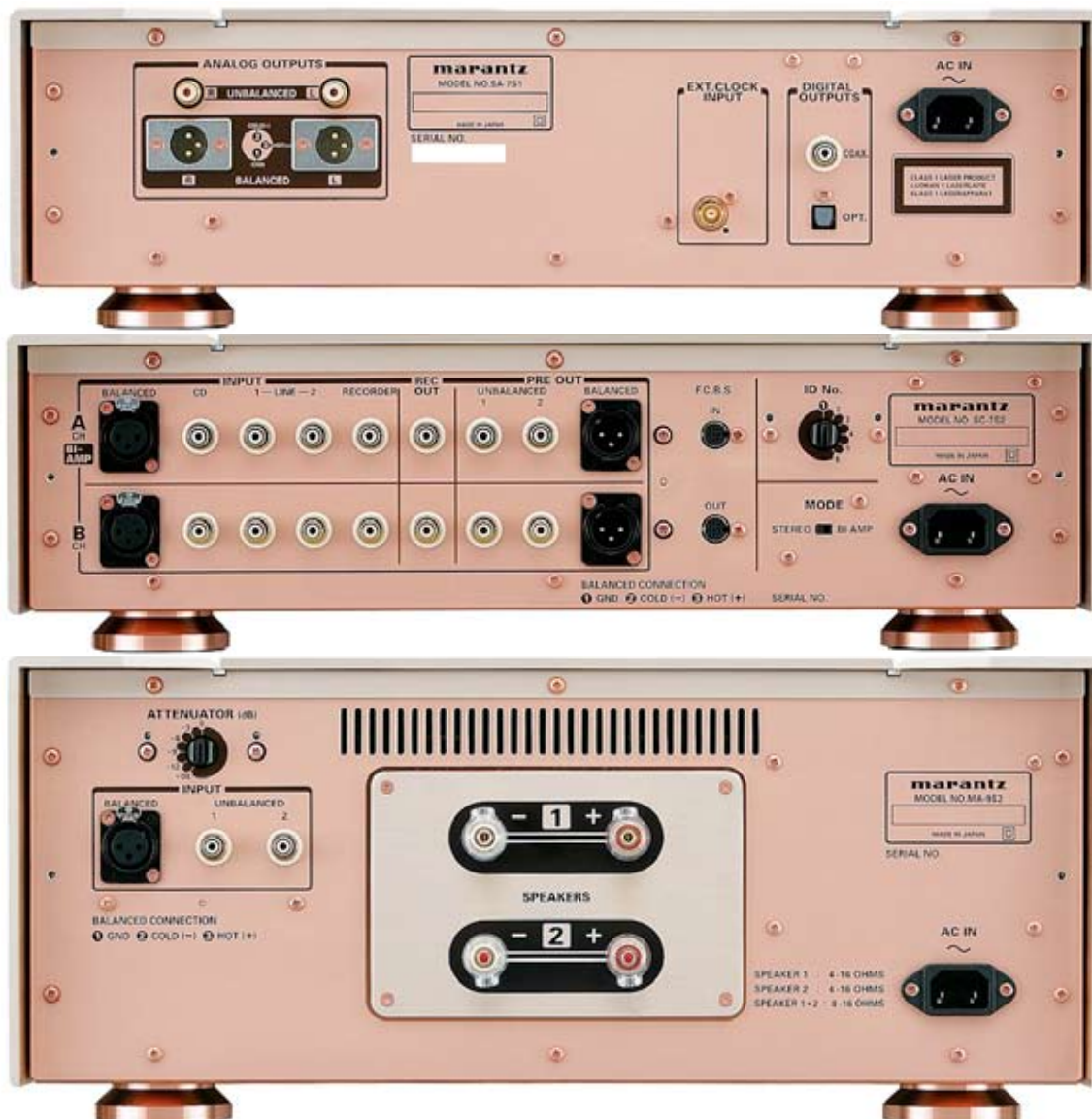
Quick Setup

The Marantz system is fully balanced from input to output, and I had the best results running in balanced mode. I used Furutech Reference III cable throughout with excellent results. The neutral balance of the Furutech cable complimented the slightly warm tonal balance of the Marantz gear perfectly. The preamplifier has one balanced XLR input and five single-ended RCA inputs, all high level. Everything comes packed with its own manual, and the preamplifier and CD players have a common remote. Paying homage to Marantz past, every component comes with a basic

RCA patch cord, so you can at least hook it up when you get it home, a nice touch. All of the components can be connected together via a data cable so that the entire system can be switched on with a single remote.

The power amplifiers are monstrous, each weighing close to 100 pounds each, so enlist the help of a friend to muscle them to their final resting points. Initial listening and break in was with the stock power cords, but at the 100-hour mark, Shunyata Python power cords were substituted. This did not transform the system, but they did take a slight solid-state edge off the presentation. At about \$500 each, they are highly recommended for a system of this caliber. *(continued)*

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The matching Marantz SACD/CD player was used for the bulk of the evaluation because this was intended to be a full system review. Analog was supplied by the Rega P9 with Dynavector XV-1s cartridge and the compact Nagra BPS phono stage, since I didn't want to distract from the aesthetic of the full rack of Marantz.

These are Beautiful Components

The full set of Marantz components are really a gorgeous sight to behold in your listening room, with those tasteful blue power meters, however they are really more for decoration as they are too difficult to be read from across the room. Perhaps making the pointer needles red instead of gold would really help this situation. With tiny meter needles and no LED to indicate a clipping situation, they aren't terribly useful.

The designers at Marantz have created a set of components that honor the design cues of their past equipment, with a style that is firmly rooted in the 21st Century. They are some of the most beautiful components I've had in my listening room. Car enthusiasts often talk about cars like the Mercedes Gull Wing or the Ferrari 275 GTO, saying "it looks like it's going 100 mph standing still." The Marantz Reference gear is in that league. It just looks great even without music playing! I really enjoyed the continuity to Marantz gear of old, by using the same font on the front panel that Marantz used on my 2220B receiver.

The preamplifier features the same size blue backlit circle, though a meter is replaced by a red LED readout for volume level, which is easily read from a distance. There are two matching knobs for volume and input selection. The blue backlight on the window can be shut off, but the blue LED on the selector switch cannot. The meters on the power amplifiers can be shut completely off, but why would you?

As you can see from the photos, form follows function in the Marantz Reference Series. The gold anodized-aluminum outer chassis bolts to a copper-plated inner chassis, with copper shields around all of the power transformers to keep noise to a minimum. Everything is sturdily constructed, with high-quality parts used throughout. *(continued)*



If you like to listen at extremely loud levels, I would suggest having a dedicated 20-amp line for these amplifiers due to their current requirements. Moving the MA-9S2's to a dedicated line gave them quite a bit more headroom at high playback levels.

Commitment to SACD

Given the current level of excitement for the SACD lately, between the audiophile labels and the classical labels, I was pleased to see that Marantz has not abandoned this format. SACD performance of the SA-7S1 was excellent, yet I felt there were no sacrifices in the CD playback either. For those of you considering this player as a standalone in a non-Marantz system, the overall tonality is somewhat laid back and forgiving.

The SA-7S1 gives up a bit to its immediate (and slightly more expensive) competitors in terms of ultimate dynamics and resolution, but rewards with a smooth presentation that is forgiving of the digital format. Unfortunately, right at the end of the evaluation period, we received the new MCD500 from McIntosh, utilizing the latest DAC chips from Sabre, which takes performance at this price point to another level for a thousand dollars less. So it appears we have a bit of "sibling rivalry," as McIntosh and Marantz are both part of D&M Holdings.

The Marantz is just to the laid-back side of neutral and the McIntosh is dead center. I would like to see a player at this price point feature a digital input like the MCD500, so that this system could be integrated into a computer based music system.

The Preamp is the Jewel

While I found the overall level of performance very high in the Marantz system, the component that stood out for me in the stack was the SC-7S2 Reference Control Amplifier. The \$8,000 - \$10,000 range is highly competitive, and as much as I love tubes, I'm always on the lookout for a world-class preamplifier that doesn't require glass bottles. I'd put the Marantz on my list of top preamplifiers, offering a big, expansive sound, with a delicacy that rarely exists in the world of solid state. *(continued)*

MARANTZ
super audio cd player sa-7s1



I was impressed with its ability to dig low-level information out of my favorite recordings, combined with a huge soundstage in all three dimensions. When playing in my main system with the MartinLogan CLX's, I was able to achieve an image that extended way beyond the speaker boundaries, which only has happened with the best preamplifiers I've had the opportunity to audition.

This was also the most neutral sounding of the stack, too. I found the amplifiers and disc player to be slightly polite sounding. The SC-7S2 was right in the middle of the range and worked well with every other power amplifier I tried it with, tube or solid state.

Power, Flexibility and Beauty

Either of these components has enough performance by itself to stand on its own merits, but the system synergy of putting them all together is unmistakable. Where the audiophile customer often mixes and matches components to achieve the perfect system, the qualityphile customer tends to be as interested in design excellence as well as audio performance, often wanting a set of components from the same manufacturer to complement the installation.

If this describes your criteria, look no further than the Marantz Reference Series. This is gear that has top-shelf sonics, museum-quality aesthetics and is easy to use as well. I can't imagine anyone putting up a roadblock to displaying this gear in their home, and the level of sound quality should be able to keep even the fussiest audiophile happy.

I'm glad to see this old favorite back in the U.S. and doing well. ●

marantz **stereo control amplifier sc-7s2**



power on/off

