

Crown jewels from Marantz!!

Marantz SC-7S1 and MA-9S1 by Ronni Pedersen, reviewer at HIFI4ALL.DK

To have a couple of really hot catwalk models come and visit you is probably every mans dream. In most cases it will never happen, but if instead you could have Marantz ´ latest top-of-the-line monaural amplifiers come visit you, couldn't you settle for that?

In exactly that case I didn't have the slightest doubt in my mind when I was offered those amplifiers for a review. They are the "crème de la crème" and the most outstanding amplifiers ever to come from Marantz.

Marantz is known by many as good supplier of really musical products and through time they have delivered an entire line of fabulous amplifier constructions with model 7 and 9 from 1958 as the example of formidable constructions for many years without any real replacements. And now, more than 40 years have past and one should have the impression that many replacements had been offered throughout time, but not in this case. The amplifier constructions have enjoyed high status among enthusiasts all over the world, and even today they are still considered as being so good that there is very few serious competitors but Marantz still wanted to stir up the water in the duck pond, so they went into action developing these new top-of-the-line amplifier – a process taking 3 years in development and without any considerations about the costs of the project.



Ken Ishiwata has been in charge of the development, and most audiophiles will find the name familiar and for good reason – he is the creator of the highly esteemed K.I. Signature-series of amplifiers and Compact Disc-players refined with optimized circuits and power supplies etc.

However, the roots of Marantz go back even further in history than Ken Ishiwata. Marantz was founded in New York in 1952 with local musician Saul B. Marantz as the creator with the ideas. He simply was not satisfied with the possibilities of playback available at that time, and he therefore wished to create something unique to offer justice to the music. The first product on the shelves was Model 1 which basically was a mono-amplifier with built-in RIAA and no less than seven inputs including input for television. I guess that's what you could call the first steps towards home-cinema.

Model 1 was not supposed to be produced in dedicated series, but upon request from his wife, he constructed 100 units. Before he knew what happened, all of them were sold as really popular products, and all of a sudden more than 400 new orders was placed and Marantz was officially founded.

As time has passed by, Marantz, alongside all of the competitors, have experienced both ups and downs, and in 1986 they ran into some serious problems. In conjunction with Philips the company came up and running straight again with Philips as a new main shareholder. That conjunction gave Marantz availability to the newly invented Compact Disc-format. Unfortunately, it also gave some limitations to the company – limitations, Saul B. Marantz did not like, because their hands weren't as free to develop as he wanted. Suddenly the word mainstream came up in the hopes of introducing Marantz on the market for relatively cheap products with lower quality in mind, and that most definitely was not Marantz´ intentions. In the 1990´ s Marantz had grown big and strong enough to buy themselves free from Philips with the help from a group of Japanese investors, and after that time they have introduced one

new popular success after another. Products like CD-11, CD-16, CD-17 and PM-16 just to name a few, are products that many audiophiles will remember.

In 2002, Marantz became part of the investment group that also holds other serious brands like Nippon Columbia (Denon) and McIntosh Audio, which namely gives the advantage of sharing experiences across the development departments. Today, Marantz is 100% Japanese.

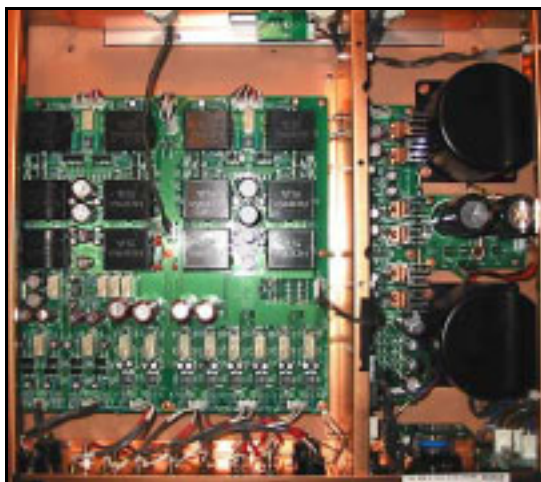
The technical part

Wow...! How am I going to fit them into my own setup? Those were my first thoughts after the parcel service dropped the three monster boxes at my front door. In the beginning, they were placed in a stack in front of my Audio Magic rack, simply because there were no room for them in other places. After some moving around, shelves were cleared and these great amplifiers came in to place – today, a place all too empty after they sadly were returned to the distributor.



The packing was done so accordingly to all the rules for packing high-end gear with double boxes and everything that comes with that, but I guess this should be a small demand when we are dealing with that kind of exclusive gear.

As the first part of the system, we have the preamplifier and it quite simply has this WOW-effect on people when they see it for the first time. It is consistent in every way and with a really exclusive look of the most beautiful kind, and from the first time you lay eyes on it, it is obvious that no expense is spared anywhere. The weight is impressively 21 kg., making it one of the heaviest preamplifiers I have bumped into. It is not without a cause and taking off the lid shows a construction based on three layers of copper plated iron, each with a thickness of 3 mm. Furthermore, several walls of aluminium are added to the construction. The entire outer casing is made from 5 mm aluminum profiles and damped in any way possible. The front fascia is by far the most impressive thing in this design counting a thickness of 40 mm making it the thickest fascia I have ever seen. It most definitely gives the word "safe" new meaning.



If we take a look inside it is obvious that no expense has been spared here either. All components are carefully selected after strict listening sessions, and the basic construction is made in such a way that I hardly think it can be done much better.

The glass fibre print is filled with Marantz's characteristic feature – the HDAM-module (High definition amplifier module), and in this case it is in the new SA-version with a bandwidth of 120.000 Hz. This amplifier is naturally prepared for the digital future in form of Super Audio CD, which Marantz is very much in favour of. In SA-7s1 no less than 12 of these circuits are implemented and alongside these, high quality components, relays and capacitors.

The connections for the inputs from the main board are made with cable in good quality – no cheap click-connections here.

On the right side, looking from behind, we find the power supply build around two Super-ring transformers and two High-grade capacitors from Elna counting 4.700 uF/65 volts each. The power supply is dual-mono and the balanced and unbalanced part of the circuitry is also separated. In strategic places we also find ferrite cores.

The circuitry for the volume control is the part of the SC7-s1 which has taken the longest time in development, because Marantz wished to include a volume control working in the digital domain but without the known problems of loss in gain and the problematics with noise as a result of the regulation from standard volume-circuits. They have most certainly succeeded in that mission, and even in really low listening volume there is no lack in dynamics, which is a problem on some competitors. The knob also runs very delicate.

On the front of the SC-7s1, we find the volume control together with the input selector controlling the five inputs. Furthermore, there is a display indicating the volume level and TRIM-function, which is used to match the balance of the monoblocks. The display is red with a blue backlight – I would have preferred it to be yellow to match the champagne-colour as it easily looks a bit too "high-tech".

On the SC-7s1 there are four unbalanced inputs including a tape-loop and a single balanced XLR-input. Nothing extreme but in most cases it is sufficient. Perhaps, Marantz should have considered including a home theatre-bypass for those people who include this setup in a high-end home cinema setup.

The inputs are placed in such way that there is plenty of room for even very thick cables, and they are made in really good quality. This includes the XLR-inputs from the German company Neutrik. Besides the inputs, we also have a set of balanced XLR-outputs and no less than two sets of unbalanced outputs meaning that it is possible to use six monoblocks with this pre-amplifier – now, that's what I call overkill.

Trigger-connections make it possible for SC-7s1 to turn on the power on amplifiers when activated.

A beautiful remote control with aluminium top facing finishes the list.

The MA-9s1, on the other hand, is another chapter in this review, and most definitely they are just as uncompromising in the construction. The weight is back-breaking 35, 8 kg.

From the beginning, they were constructed with capability to drive the B&W Nautilus 800 speakers, which means that they are capable of heavy loads. The power is rated at 300 watts in 8 ohms and 600 watts in 4 ohms, which should be sufficient for most people.

In this construction no expenses have been spared either, and it includes some of the biggest aluminium cooling profiles I have ever seen in an amplifier with a thickness of 1.2 cm. stretching all the way through the amplifier. On these profiles, 12 high-class Sanken transistors in the most powerful versions are mounted combined with HDAM-SA modules.

Alongside this there is a massive Toroidal transformer rated at about 800 VA, two large high-grade capacitors rated at 22.000 uF/85 volts each and two smaller capacitors rated at 6.800 uF/85 volts each, also from Elna. It might not seem extreme, but it's sufficient.

The chassis of the monoblocks is also constructed with three layers of copper plated iron and aluminium almost everywhere else, including 40 mm fascia.

On the front of the MA-9s1 we find a level-meter reading out the dB-level of the amplifier, but it isn't the most exact I have seen. Response is very slow and considering the price this could be better. Competitor Accuphase, just to name one, excels this even in their smaller amplifiers. The backlight is blue on the MA-9s1 as well. Below the dB-level meter there is a button which doesn't match the beautiful design at all and if I were to decide, this button should be placed on the backside instead. The button gives the possibility of switching between balanced and unbalanced drive, but be careful not to use it while the power is on since it creates a banging sound in the speakers when operated. It is a minor detail, though.

The finishing description is of the backside of the amplifier and also here, the connections are in really high quality with plenty of room for thick cables. XLR-connections are once again from German Neutrik. Speaker terminals are from WBT and the quality is top notch. There are two pairs for bi-wiring, and they take anything you would be tempted to use – bananas, spades, plugs, you name it.



The sound...

Is nothing less than phenomenal – I can not express it more precise! Marantz have without a doubt created a musical masterpiece with this system, and it more than anything else, confirms that Marantz most definitely is something in the recreation of music.

After warm-up the soundstage reveals itself being so large, wide and deep that I have never heard it better anywhere else. Words like captive, engaging, dynamic, beautiful, musical and exciting are so small that they still don't describe what both I and the many people who also had the pleasure of listening to this system, experienced.

All musical genres are handled with an A+ and nothing is left out for wishful thinking. This set is like a musical chameleon who quite simply adapts to everything you feel tempted to play. It is without a doubt the music you hear and not the technology.

My excitement was enormous when the day finally arrived and I threw in the first piece of music after the warm-up manoeuvres. Norwegian Kari Bremnäs' "Livet som blei borte" from the album "Gåte ved gåte" was played with almost exemplary dynamics. The grip on the bass was really top notch and the voices was given new life in a 3-d soundstage filled with myriads of details, which never at any time went ballistic and turned out to be tiring to the ears.

No matter whether you playback ordinary studio productions, unplugged or live music, Marantz excels with a breathtaking soundstage where you have a very exact sense of the studios, the stage size and general acoustics. The perspective is enormous and it is just as deep.

All of my records literally went through the machinery in the 14 days I had the pleasure of living side by side with these beauties, and no matter what I played, the tonal variations was in a class of its own. The smallest sense of the instruments were present on everything played – the guitar strings' vibrations even at the smallest tones, the drum skins' vibrations down to the slightest touch of the drumstick, the movement of the hi-hat cymbals just as it rolls of, the dynamic appearance of voices down to the slightest whisper. These amplifiers quite simply do everything so well that I'm still in a condition of shock over the reproduction qualities, and it was the exact same view of literally everybody listening to them.

The bass never gets pumped and runs out of control, on the opposite it always remains fast, precise, well defined and controlled. The midrange is excelled with super definition and the illusion of voices is quite simply stunning with a degree of warmth that makes the artists come out alive and personal in a very intimate way.

The sense of all over- and undertones all the way through and across the tonal spectrum is clear and present through the entire chain of playback as long as it is matched with gear of equal high-end characteristics. Balanced connection is a must in this matter, because even if the sound is still top notch, there is a slight limitation in the soundstage when used in an unbalanced configuration. It is nearly nothing, but still mentionable. In addition to this listening session, a couple of balanced connectors were supplied with the set, but I got better results with my own GamuT and Harmonic Technology Pro-Silway connectors, which added just a bit more details and definition.

All the way through the period of listening, the amplifiers played with brilliant authority and control. The sound is indeed very powerful, but still in a way very gentle, meaning that it doesn't favour anything in any way. The music is very much alive and is coming out of the speakers in an excellent manor without overexposing certain areas, and it is very obvious that the many watts available most definitely are an advantage. Some people are led to believe that many watts available is synonymous with playing at high volumes all the time, but there is a lot more to it than that, since it is also a very important factor to have lots of power available at all times to maintain control and not running empty when things are really happening. This set is not one of those running empty. My speakers are not the heaviest of loads and so for obvious reasons, I could not test the performance with a dedicated heavy load, but with the reference to the Nautilus-speakers in my mind, I can't imagine that lack of power should ever be a problem.

Conclusion...

Quite simply, I have given up trying to describe all the music I have listened to along the way, because no matter what I played, the music just turned out very much alive. This amplifier just swept my and my listeners feet away in surprise, because the knowledge of this relatively unknown set made our expectations seem relatively small.

But... this set is absolutely gorgeous and it plays with a reproduction quality that literally makes the birds sing. It is engaging and it carries you along for a ride where you just keep on playing more music till early in the morning. The eager to play more music is so extreme that you don't stop on your own.

Rarely have I heard voices so much alive in the speakers as when played by these monster beauties and the control and definition is a class of its own – matching all of the top notch high-end constructions out there.

Marantz has most definitely constructed a set of crown jewels which has the abilities to walk right in and place themselves on the throne with only a very few other really superb constructions out there in the class where music really matters.

You could point your fingers at the price, but after listening to it, it just clearly proves what happens when we enter the area with gear in this class – it is the most dangerous and addictive of its kind.

And it just gets even more exciting when Marantz introduce their upcoming addition to this range, namely a matching CD/SACD player, but it is very clear by now, that the competitors need to watch their backs, because Marantz has now entered the high-end class and they are coming on fast.

With this set, things are excelled to a higher level, both technical and musical, and I recommend everybody to listen to it if the possibility ever occurs.

I give it my warmest recommendations – dreams usually cost a lot of money and this is definitely the reason to start saving money. I was really sad to see them go, so that was my reason to start the savings account.

HIFI4ALL.DK says "TOPCLASS"!!

Technical specifications:**Specifications for the MARANTZ SC7S1 Pre Amplifier**

Rated Output (20-20,000Hz)	1.7V
Maximum output (20-20,000Hz)	13.5V
Total Harmonic Distortion (20-20,000Hz)	0,0015 % (Balanced) 0.003 % (Unbalanced)
Frequency Response	3Hz - 150kHz
Input sensitivity/impedance	420mV/20kOhms
Output impedance	220 Ohms
S/N Ratio	103dB (Balanced) 105dB (Unbalanced)
Channel separation	>100dB
Volume control	-100~0dB (0.5dB steps)
Channel level trim	±6dB (0.5dB steps)
Attenuation	-20, -40, -60, -
Power Consumption	18W
Dimensions	Width 459mm Height 136mm Depth 441mm
Weight	21kg

Specifications for the MARANTZ MA9S1 Power Amplifier

RMS Power Output (20-20,000Hz)	1x300W @ 8 ohms 1x600W @ 4 ohms
Total Harmonic Distortion (20-20,000Hz)	<0.01 %
Frequency Response (1W, 8Ω)	3Hz - 120kHz (+0, -3dB)
Output range (8Ω, 0.05% THD)	5Hz - 55kHz
Damping Factor	200
Input sensitivity/imp.	1.7V
Voltage Gain	29dB
S/N Ratio	120dB
Attenuation	0, -3, -6, -9, -12, -∞
Power Consumption	450W (minimum)
Dimensions	Width 459mm Height 198mm Depth 451mm
Weight	35.8kg

Retail price 200.000,00 DKK. /complete set

SC-7s1 54.900,00 DKK

MA-9s1 75.000, 00 DKK / pcs

Delivered exclusively from:

MultiMedia Presentations Denmark A/S
Kongevejen 150A
3460 Birkerød

Mail: POlsen@multipre.dk

All certified Marantz-dealers should be able to deliver the set on specific order.

Gear used in test:

Meadowlark Nighthawk speakers
Accuphase DP-65 compact disc
Accuphase P-360 power amplifier
Interconnects, Loudspeaker cables and power cables from GamuT, Harmonic Technology and JPS Labs.