

MARANTZ SA-11S1 SUPER AUDIO CD PLAYER

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UNDERNEATH THAT BEAUTIFUL EXTERIOR...

If you were choosing a new SACD player on looks alone, the Marantz SA-11S1 might very well be your choice. When the Japanese decide to build a “no holds barred” hi-end product, they go all out. Accuphase, Sony, and TEAC Esoteric come to mind.

The SA-11S1, one of the products in Marantz’s Reference Series, is a serious piece of equipment, weighing in at 30.8 pounds. It is beautifully finished in a satin gold tone, similar to Saul Marantz’s products of forty or so years ago – stunning to look at and a pleasure to own. But then, it takes more than good looks to successfully design an excellent SACD/CD player. And, believe me, this player is one hellava hi-end machine.

Perhaps the most important consideration in evaluating this player is, just how good is SA-11S1’s Red Book CD reproduction? Why? Because, should SACD eventually fail to establish itself as a financially successful new format, is the performance of CD alone sufficient to warrant the price (\$3,499) of this product?

The SA-11S1 is a stereo only player and does not provide multi-channel playback. But as a stereo player (and, I suspect, that’s what most of us are interested in), it provides a multitude of capabilities, both for SACD and CD. It can also play back CD-R and CD-RW discs.

FEATURES AND SPECS

The front panel provides for the most common functions; On/Off switch, LCD display screen, Track Skip/Search, Pause, Stop, Play, Tray Open/Close and blue illumination lamps that light up six buttons on either side of the display screen. The “Sound Mode” button allows you to switch between SACD and CD when playing back a hybrid disc. The rear panel provides balanced and unbalanced audio outputs, coaxial and optical digital audio outputs for CD only, AC power input, and remote control in-out, with switch, to control other Marantz components. Full functions are available on the beautiful, metal remote controller which includes the following repeat play features; all track, one track, and A-B repeat.

One look on the inside and the back of the unit reveals a heavy, copper-plated chassis. Marantz asserts that the extensive copper damps resonances, shields circuits from RF and electromagnetic radiation, and provides a very stable, resonance-free platform for the disc and laser system. The design also includes a Phase Error Compensation Circuit (to eliminate the phase delay error), Zero Noise LCD Display, and a DC filter switch.

There are three separate custom-configured output filters for both SACD and Red Book CD. Audio CD output filters are not unique for PCM, although I'm not aware of any other SACD player that provides three or more output filters for the DSD signal. Together with the noise shaper, you, the listener, have an unusual amount of control over the nature and quality of the sound of each and every one of your CDs and SACDs. Your choice of filter will depend on your subjective reaction with your associated equipment and the particular disc. In both instances, Filter 1 is the default filter.

Besides the proprietary, custom designed output filters, the audiophile has at hand a noise shaper switch for the CD layer that allows "...a type of digital feedback used in the algorithms for oversampling [that]...enables improved linearity for low levels...and better noise characteristics in the audible band...Low feedback is said to result in poor audio characteristics but good sound." Although the base sampling frequency is 44.1Hz/16bit for CD, the audio DACs function at 192kHz/24bit because the "DAC needs to have higher performance than CD spec to operate signal processing accurately". So, audio CD does not upsample to 24bit "...but because of the design of the player and the DACs, Red Book CDs will sound better", claims Marantz.

The transport is manufactured by Marantz. The PCM decoder is Sony's CXD1885Q. The SA-11S1's proprietary HDAM-SA signal transfer modules are designed to provide the shortest, fastest signal path with much better S/N and high speed amplification - no OP-Amps here. Remove the top plate of the player to get a good look at the internal layout. It's jam-packed with custom-selected internal components including the custom built, toroidal power transformer, choke input power supply, LCD display, and audio grade selected parts, i.e. "electrolytic capacitors, thin film coating metal resistors, and low noise, high-speed responsivity diodes". Everything is neat, simple and impressive, befitting the external good looks of this hi-end design and reflecting the ruggedness of its construction. Surely, no question why the SA-11S1 weighs almost 31 pounds!

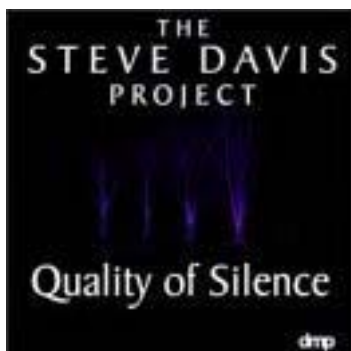
SOUND REASONS

Let me begin by answering the question I posed earlier. The Marantz SA-11S1 is capable of exemplary Red Book CD reproduction. And, were it only a hi-end CD player, its outstanding performance and near tube-like sound belies its reasonable price. But Marantz didn't just throw in SACD as an extra inducement. Its SACD reproduction is among the very best I've heard – mind boggling resolution and detail, extended and satisfying bass, glorious mid-range, smooth treble, and an exceptional sense of depth and width. It reminds me of the excitement I experienced when I first heard SACD on the Sony SCD-1. I don't want you to think that I'm renegeing on my previous review of the Esoteric P-70 and D-70 when I said they "...may make you wonder what all the fuss is about with SACD and DVD-A..." Since they "... are for me, beyond anything I have previously heard from ordinary CD playback." But it would be a terrible

waste of all the technical accomplishment that went into the creation of SACD if it went for naught, particularly when you hear what great sound and resolution a wonderfully recorded SACD can provide.

As I have described in my previous reviews: “My living room is about 24’ x 16’ with a cathedral ceiling about 9’ high in the center, sloping to about 5’10” at either end. My Piega P10 Reference loudspeakers are about 8’ from the rear wall and nearly 10’ apart measured from the center of the speakers. My far-field listening position is almost 14’ away, although occasionally I listen in the near-field. The speakers are angled in and cross just in front of where I sit. Although I didn’t consciously follow the 1/3 rule-of-thumb in set-up, that’s where the speakers sound the best.” My associated equipment is listed at the end of the review. Except when the source was vinyl, all of my listening was with balanced cables.

I spent many, many hours listening to SACDs, CDs, hybrid discs, and some vinyl in order to come to some conclusion about the capabilities of the SA-11S1. I made comparisons among the various filters for SACD and CD and between SACD and CD. Rather than suggest what I think is the best filter for playback, it seems to me that too much depends on your equipment, speakers, room acoustics, and, on occasion, the particular disc. And, in fact, this is what makes this player such a pleasure to use – the ability to tweak reproduction to suit your own personal taste and circumstances. I will give you a few examples of my listening experiences to hopefully give you an idea of how the Marantz stacks up.



Perhaps the hybrid disc, *Quality of Silence* [The Steve Davis Project, DMP SACD-04], track 4, “Yesterdays”, may be the most enlightening in characterizing my reactions. While CD playback was excellent on this exceptionally well recorded disc, SACD reproduction gave a unique sense of looking into a window on the sound – as close as one can get to a live experience. The opening drums were palpable, giving exceptional depth to the recording. The percussion was crisp, yet smooth and detailed; overall the SACD recording was clearly outstanding with more depth, dynamic bass, and apparent transient response. While CD reproduction on the

Esoteric was better than CD on the Marantz, with bass dynamics approaching that of SACD, it did not quite have the “window into the sound” of the SACD.



With Prokofiev’s, *Romeo and Juliet*, Paavo Jarvi conducting the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra [Telarc SACD-60597], the sonic experiences were very similar. Although Marantz CD reproduction was excellent, again the sense of depth was more apparent on the SACD with improved attack, wider dynamics, more cohesive bass and a slightly lower noise floor. The Esoteric CD was slightly better than the Marantz CD. Compared to the jazz quintet on the DMP recording, the Cincinnati Symphony orchestra has around a hundred musicians, making recording and reproduction of such a large group much more difficult. This is

where the SACD really prevailed, providing more delineation among the instruments – a feeling of air unmatched in CD playback. This was never more obvious than in the midrange, where it more noticeably came into its own on SACD. All of the comments above hold for Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, Paavo Jarvi conducting the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra [Telarc 60615].

Concord Records originally released *Soular Energy*, featuring The Ray Brown Trio, on LP back in 1985. It was recently reissued as a hybrid SACD on Groove Note [GRV1015-3], distributed, I believe, by Telarc. The LP, an outstanding recording, has always been one of my favorite jazz records. When I received the SACD/Hybrid disc, the opportunity to make a three way comparison presented itself. I'm happy to say, the recording of track 2, "Cry Me a River", in all three formats sounds very similar. The LP and SACD sounded almost exactly the same – so much so, that I found it very difficult to identify differences. CD reproduction on the Marantz and Esoteric were very close with the nod going to the Esoteric.

Finally, my last SACD is *A Love Affair: The Music of Ivan Lins* [Telarc SACD-63496]. Freddy Cole sings "I'm Not Alone" on track 9. Cole's voice and accompaniment is just so smooth and relaxed sounding – very easy on the ears. Red Book CD on both the Marantz and Esoteric, although quite good, is not quite so smooth with just a hint of hardness in the midrange – the Esoteric just a bit more expansive than the Marantz.

SUMMING UP

Only on the best recorded performances on hybrid SACD discs was the superiority of SACD versus Red Book CD so clearly apparent. This was true whether the comparison was with the reproduction of the CD layer on the Marantz or TEAC's Esoteric. I would be less than honest if I failed to note that CD playback was noticeably better on the Esoteric, but not by much. Would you expect anything less since TEAC put all of its efforts into designing the two-unit Esoteric D-70/P-70 to provide the best possible CD reproduction at a cost four times that of the Marantz. But the SA-11S1 will get damn close.

If you are in the market for a truly hi-end, SACD/CD stereo player at relatively modest price, be sure to audition the Marantz SA-11S1. I have not heard all of the players out there, but I'm confident that reproduction of SACD on the Marantz can hold its own among (and in my humble opinion, probably better than) the few excellent units available – add to that, reproduction of Red Book CD playback just short of the best reference CD players. There are some SACD/CD hi-end products available (a few that are significantly more expensive) without a DSD DAC, that use a PCM digital to analog converter, albeit with a very high sampling rate. Prior to reviewing the Marantz, I listened to one such expensive player for several months with the feeling that SACD, although quite good and superior to the exceptional reproduction of CD, left something to be desired. When I received the Marantz SA-11S1 with true DSD, D/A, it was clear to me that the expensive SACD/CD player with DSD converted to PCM at a high sampling rate, lacked that last measure of resolution and detail that I found so outstanding in the SA-11S1.

Final Thoughts

It was just five years ago that I wrote my brief impressions of Sony's SACD/CD player for STEREO TIMES. I wondered then, "...how would Sony's SCD-1 perform with ordinary CDs...since there are only a handful of SACD discs available while many of us have a large

collection of regular CDs?” That question is nearly as valid today for the Marantz SA-11S1 as it was back then for the SCD-1. In the more than five years since the introduction of SACD, there are only about 2000 SACDs available while the music lover can draw on a collection of over two million CDs. Also, since then, we have seen the introduction of Multi-channel SACD and DVD-A, a rival format of SACD.

So, what’s the story – are any of these “new” formats ever going to get off the ground? With only a couple of thousand of SACDs and a few DVD-As, these formats seem to be languishing, in spite of the clear improvements in resolution and sonics they provide, while I-POD, MP3, etc. are experiencing a huge success. I checked Universal Music Groups combined releases in SACD as an example. The total number for this giant conglomerate is 183 (many of which are re-releases in the SACD format) – very unimpressive! Maybe that’s why record companies seem to be in financial trouble. If all future CD releases were SACD/CD Hybrids, perhaps the production costs would level out to be no higher than that of CD alone, and eventually the music lover, with a growing collection of hybrid discs, would embrace SACD. Then record companies, as well as equipment manufacturers, would get a real “shot in the arm”. I suppose this controversial idea reflects my real ignorance of the costs facing the music industry. But Telarc, a relatively small company, has managed to stay afloat while releasing all of their output; classics, jazz, etc., in hybrid form - and many of them are wonderful, technically and musically.

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