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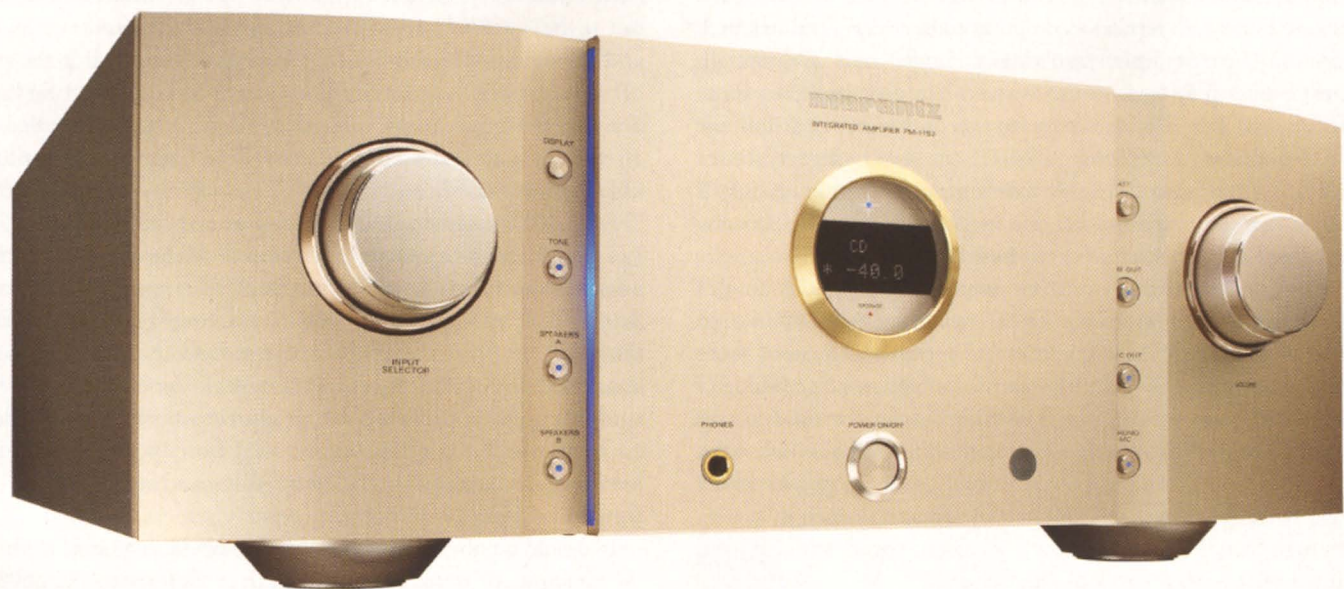
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EQUIPMENT REPORT



Puttin' on the Ritz

Marantz PM-11S2 Integrated Amplifier

Neil Gader

Some amps just know how to make an entrance. Their presence conveys an air of substance and quality. And serious intent. The Marantz PM-11S2 integrated amplifier is one of these. Clad in champagne-brushed aluminum, the Marantz is black-tie all the way. As if fashioned from a single gold ingot, its classic look summons memories of Marantz's own golden age. However, don't think that its Old School pedigree means this integrated amp is ready for the nursing home. It has enough remote-controlled flexibility and connectivity to rival any of the current breed of upstarts.

With a conservatively rated 100Wpc on tap the PM-11S2 uses Marantz's latest HDAM SA3 amp modules instead of industry-standard op-amps. Featured in the topline SC- and SM-11S1, HDAMs offer improved thermal stability and higher-speed processing. The heavily plated copper-on-steel undercarriage—a Marantz trademark—helps with EMI and RF. Additionally, there are dedicated input buffers on all line inputs. According to Marantz, the dual structure of a voltage amplifier and power-buffer amplifier is derived straight from its powerhouse MA-9S2 amp. For the PM-11S2, the power buffer drives the speakers, while the voltage amp drives the buffer. Acting collectively, they block the electrical backwave returning from the speakers.

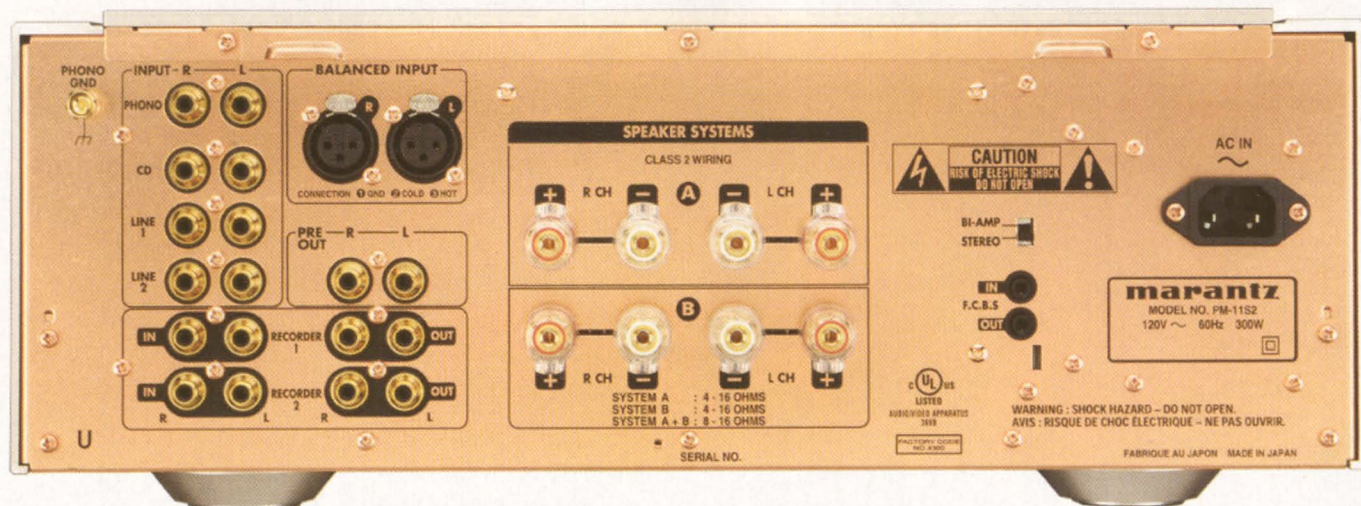
A jewel-like circular LCD display is the centerpiece of the gleaming front panel, flanked by two vertical banks of secondary-function pushbuttons, theatrically illuminated in blue and set on the sidewings of the panel. Positioned at the far left and right

are large input and volume knobs. Most noteworthy among the front-panel functions is the "Phono" button, which switches between moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges—saving the user the inconvenience of fumbling around on the back panel.

Connectivity is primary with the PM-11S2. Multichannel aficionados (and extremely well-heeled ones, too) will applaud its biamp mode and the Marantz Floating Control Bus System (FCBS), which links up to four PM-11S2s for multichannel playback of either SACD or Blu-ray Discs (from Blu-ray players equipped with their own internal decoding and multichannel outputs). Once connected each amp is assigned an ID so that the added amplifier sections "slave" to the preamplifier section of the designated "master." To be sure, one could always purchase a preamp-processor and separate additional amplification, but that introduces bales of circuitry, including video switching—a waste for a dedicated analog multichannel setup. My hat's off to Marantz for offering audiophiles this option.

The PM-11S2 has a sonic personality that immediately puts ears at ease. There's a warmth factor and midrange lushness that instantly bring to mind the comfort and relaxation of tubes. Some may construe this character as somewhat damping transient speed, but I appreciated the Marantz's refinement and lack of edginess. Orchestral soundstage information is very good; the overall acoustic of a venue is never less than well defined. However, I also couldn't shake the sensation that the soundstage could have been broader and deeper, more enveloping.

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But the strongest initial impression I had with the PM-11S2 was an imposing sense of weight and control. The PM-11S2 sounds authoritative and is able to reconstruct lower-pitched instruments with ease. When I cued up the recording of Dire Straits' "Telegraph Road," a track that begins at a very low level with tones and bass pulsations emerging from the analog tape hiss of another era, the Marantz gave this ethereal low-frequency information great shape and stability, clarifying it and ultimately turning it into discrete, focused images. Acoustic and electric bass were tight and controlled—perhaps not down to the subterranean levels that some higher-powered amps can reach, but awfully impressive for an integrated that clocks in at a hundred watts. But, there are watts and there are *watts*. The Marantz never feels as if it's working hard at any sane playback level, regardless of speaker demands. A system seems to come to attention in its presence; loose bass firms up into authentic timbres and impactful pulses and resonances.

Low-level detail and imaging are superior—a feature brought home to me by the way the amp clung to every note of the delicate 12-string guitar during k.d. lang's "Love Is Everything." I could follow the high-pitched G-string ringing out from the soundboard even though the mastering engineer pushes the guitar way back in the mix. And I had forgotten about the harp piercing the orchestral crescendos during Holst's "Jupiter" [EMI] until the Marantz came along. Also, there's a great *cappella* moment in the opening of the SACD version of "Indian Sunset" [MCA] where Elton John's vocal is accompanied only by a deep tunnel of reverb trailing after him—a slowly decaying element that I was able to follow distinctly, apart from the vocal. It's a great test for low noise and transparency.

On the other hand, on Shelby Lynne's "How Can I be Sure?" [Lost Highway], the ring of acoustic-guitar harmonics was not quite as sonorous and sustained as I've heard it. And during Kissin's performance of *Pictures at an Exhibition* [RCA], the tonal colors of the piano were slightly darker than usual. Even when Kissin begins hammering the keys in the upper octaves the concert grand seems to back off dynamically, reducing the explosiveness of the performance.

My only real issue with the PM-11S2 is a subtle coloration in the treble that slightly undercuts the singular refinement of the midrange. The top end lacks the playful micro-dynamic energy

and effortless harmonic sweetness of, say, an MBL or Pass Labs integrated. And there can be an astringency to string sections that can be a bit clinical. For example, during the Anna Netrebko performance of Puccini's "O Mio Babbino Caro" [DG] I could hear the leading edge of the violins light up a bit too aggressively. Similarly, during lang's "Love Is Everything," the vocal is pushed forward slightly, a bit more exposed in the mix. For music in general, this leaves an impression of added detail and resolution but it also complicates the overall tonal balance and finally doesn't make up for the reduction of finer dynamic gradations—factors that make the skin tingle and keep the toes tapping. To be fair there is so much going right with this integrated amp that I don't want to overemphasize this anomaly. It's only one issue to take into consideration when you sit down for an audition.

In summary, the Marantz PM-11S2 offers the kind of full-featured functionality and rewarding sonics that elegantly bridge modern convenience and purist audiophile values. Add to this a refinement that matches the ritzy fit and finish and you're looking at one of the best sub-\$5k integrated amps available. Very nicely done, Marantz! **TAS**

SPECS & PRICING

Power: 100Wpc @ 8 ohms
(20Hz-20kHz)
Inputs: One balanced, three
RCA, one phono (mm/mc)
Dimensions: 17.6" x 6.6" x 17.5"
Weight: 58.6 lbs.
Price: \$4495

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