

SACD PLAYER/AMPLIFIER

Marantz SA-15S2/PM-15S2 Limited Edition (£2000/£2000)

These Series 15 'Premium Range' audio components have been worked over by Marantz's Ken Ishiwata to create two rather special Limited Edition audiophile models

Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Music may indeed be the food of love, but when played through a hi-fi system not all of it has the same nutritional value.

Electronic component selection, layout and mechanical integrity can all play a part in separating the good from the great. And this is the premise of these brand new Limited Edition products from Marantz.

Its 'Brand Ambassador' and designer *extraordinaire*, Ken Ishiwata, celebrated his 30th anniversary of working at Marantz a couple of years ago by producing the sumptuous KI Pearl combination of SACD player and amplifier [*HFN* Sept '09]. Manufacturing was limited to just 500 sets.

Then last year Ishiwata followed up with a couple of significantly more affordable specials, the SA-KI Pearl Lite player and PM-KI Pearl Lite amplifier, each priced under £1000. I've not heard the amplifier in my system, however the Pearl Lite SACD player has visited my home on a couple of occasions. Lite it may be, but it's certainly no lightweight performer, being one of the best bargains on the market for budding audiophiles on a tight budget: I love it!

SO DOES HE EVER SLEEP?

Quite when Ishiwata has time to sleep I'm not sure. If there's an important hi-fi exhibition underway anywhere in the world, Ken will be there. Perhaps most of his shut-eye is undertaken at 35,000ft. Nevertheless, this year he has found time to breathe on Marantz's Series 15 components from the company's Premium Range. The SA-15 two-channel SACD player and PM-15 stereo integrated amplifier were first introduced in 2005. Improved S2 versions appeared in the autumn of 2009 priced at around £1700 each. It's

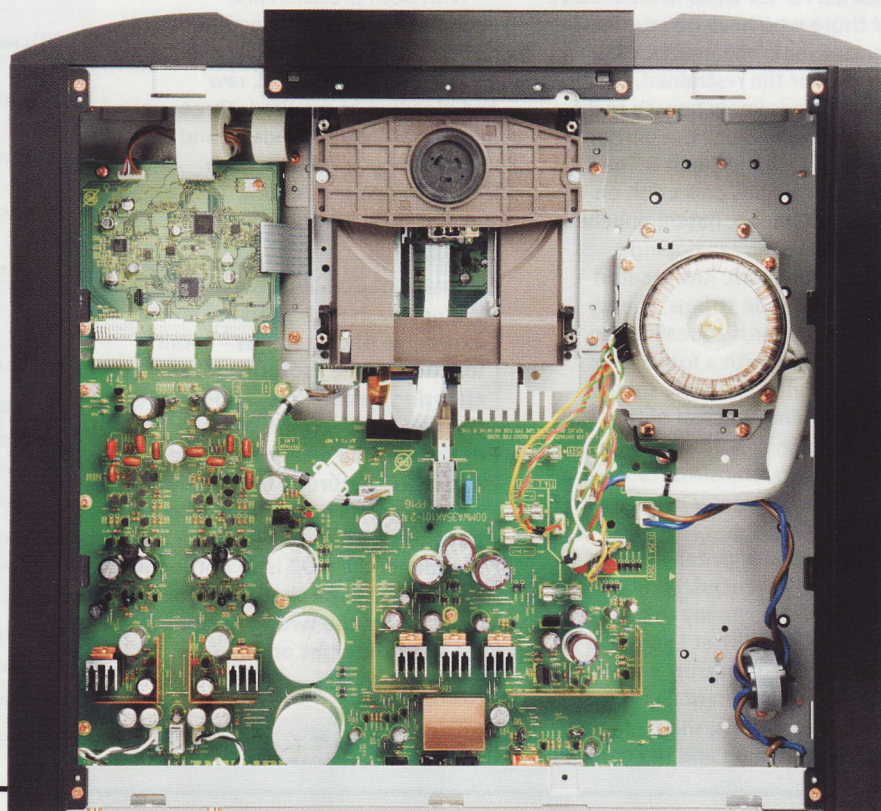
these '15S2 models that Ishiwata has now spent time tweaking to within inches of their lives, resulting in the Limited Edition versions we have here.

They come only in black, but certainly look handsome thanks to a silky finish to the aluminium casework and 'Limited' insignias on their fascias. Each product is housed in a 1.2mm-thick chassis – 'environmentally-friendly chrome-free', says the company – with an additional 3mm bottom plate and substantial diecast aluminium vibration insulators, 'footed' with felt pads to protect the shelves of your equipment racks.

Even before one considers what's under the bonnets, it is clear from the high quality of fit and finish that you're getting a great deal for the money here.

The SA-15S2 LE features the familiar SACD-10 disc mechanism, with its loading tray made from Zyron. It employs Cirrus Logic's CS4398 Delta-Sigma DAC with two filter-settings switchable via the player's remote handset. Filter 2 is in fact the 'conventional' steep roll-off digital filter while filter 1 (the player's default setting) offers a slower roll-off characteristic. Playback of MP3 and WMA files on CD-R/RW media is supported.

The power supply's dual-shielded toroidal transformer has separate windings for the player's digital and analogue sections, the front panel display, and the final audio output stage. Circuit components such as film capacitors, main electrolytics and decoupling capacitors in this LE version are similar to those used in



RIGHT: The SA-15S2 LE's power supply employs a toroidal transformer. The disc mechanism is mounted on 2mm-thick steel, designed to reduce the effect of vibration from the spindle



Marantz's high-end (circa £5k) SA-7S1 SACD player, as are the company's proprietary HDAM and HDAM-SA2 amplifier modules in the output stage. The player's optical and coaxial digital outputs can be disabled, as can the display, while an optical input allows the player to be used as a DAC for an external digital source (up to 24-bit/96kHz). The headphone socket is driven by a discrete output circuit.

The 18.5kg PM-15S2 LE features bass/treble controls that are subtle-acting and defeatable and balance can be set via menu-controlled trim settings. A standout feature of all amps in Marantz's Premium Range is the ability to cascade them for bi- or tri-amping and use in multichannel systems. Again, via the set-up menu the SA-15S2 LE can be assigned to be a 'master' or numbered 'slave', in conjunction with a slider switch on the rear panel that should be left set to Stereo for normal use.

In particular it's the attention to detail in the amplifier's power supply that

differentiates this Limited Edition version from the standard PM-15S2. Employing techniques first used in Marantz's gorgeous MA-9 monoblocks, the transformer is carefully shielded, while the supply's main electrolytic capacitors are now the same proprietary designs featured in the KI-Pearl amplifier. Ishiwata says the discrete HDAM-SA2 and SA3 amp modules have been specially optimised here.

EXTRA CREAM

In the past I've described the SA-KI Pearl Lite player as sounding detailed and precise, with the bonus of simultaneously possessing a relaxed, easy-going nature.

And this new SA-15S2 LE sounds similarly explicit with good detail definition, but adds a creamy, luxurious flavour to the mix. Auditioned through my Mark Levinson No.383 amplifier the SA-15S2 LE sounded

'The player made good sense of the mounting torrent of room-shaking bass'

ABOVE: Blue front panel lighting, which can be switched on/off, adds a touch of luxury to the silky black finish of these Limited Editions

extremely refined, full-bodied and rounded, with delicate and sweet high frequencies that rarely grated even when playing brash pop/rock recordings. The modern electronica of Chase & Status's *No More Idols* CD [Mercury 2745135] is typical of

the genre with its dense, impenetrable sound. Despite the compression, this LE player managed to make good sense of the cacophony as the mounting torrent of room-shaking bass

flooded my listening space when listening to the track 'Blind Faith'. Singer Liam Bailey's vocals were portrayed most vividly, his voice seemingly pulled out from the mix with plenty of space around it to aid clarity.

And again, when referencing how I've perceived the sound of the Pearl Lite disc player in the past, I can hear that this SA-15S2 LE possesses a velvety smoothness that polishes off the edges somewhat. So if you're after a sharply-etched, crisp and 'brilliant' sound, you might not be thrilled by this Special Edition. It is highly vivid in the critical midband, however. Consequently, vocals are always explicit and easy to decipher, while the player's weighty and vigorous bass stops and starts with great precision.

Raising the bar with a disc of audiophile quality, the hybrid SACD of *The Look Of* ☞

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

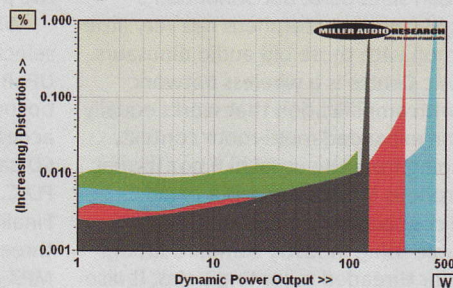
Marantz's Ken Ishiwata takes a holistic approach when tuning the sound of disc players and amplifiers to maximise their potential. For him it's not simply about selecting more costly, higher specification internal components, or beefing up power supplies. Nor is it solely about circuit topology, or heavy-duty chassis construction to avoid vibration of electronic circuits. Rather, he is looking to find the 'sweet-spot' where elements of a product's design seem to work in harmony with each other. His passion is for musicality alongside wide and deep sound-staging. Says Ken: 'Preferred tonal balance will always be a personal matter, of course. We have individual tastes, so some people may find the Marantz sound too warm, for example.' We couldn't agree more. Indeed, how can one possibly account for the balance of an enthusiast listener's monitors?

LAB REPORT

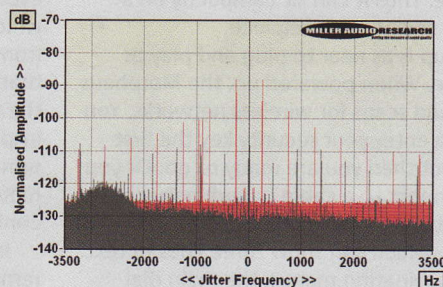
MARANTZ SA-15S2/PM-15S2LE (£4k)

Let's kick-off with the SA-15S2LE player. Unusually, it's Marantz's Filter 1 option that offers a slow HF roll-off, trading reduced ringing and group delay in the audioband for a poorer attenuation of stopband (aliasing) images. Filter 2 offers the more traditional 'brickwall' cutoff (-78dB at 24kHz vs. -24dB at 24kHz with 48kHz digital ins and -22dB at 51kHz vs. -6dB at 51kHz with 96kHz digital ins). However, the frequency response within the passband is unaffected by filter setting: -0.26dB/20kHz (44.1kHz CD), -0.24dB/20kHz (48kHz digital in) and -1.9dB/45kHz (96kHz digital in). On the other hand, the Filter settings do impact on the practical response of SACD replay, with Filter 1 the 'flatter' extending out to -19dB/100kHz vs. -45dB/100kHz with Filter 2. Jitter shows the same slightly untidy pattern observed with recent Marantz players at ~400psec with CD/SACD but rather higher at 2280psec via the digital input with 48kHz media [see Graph 2, below].

Marantz's partnering amplifier exceeds its 90W rating at 2x110W/8ohm and offers a full 140W, 250W and 410W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1]. Distortion is low through the bass and midrange and increases gently with output from 0.0018% at 1W to 0.0037% at 10W and 0.01% at 100W. THD necessarily increases at higher frequency to just 0.017% at 20kHz/10W. Response is very extended: just -0.7dB/100kHz but with an unusual subsonic bass boost of +7.5dB at 3Hz. Readers may view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for Marantz's SA/PM-15S2LE CD/SACD player/DAC and amp by navigating to www.hifinews.com and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



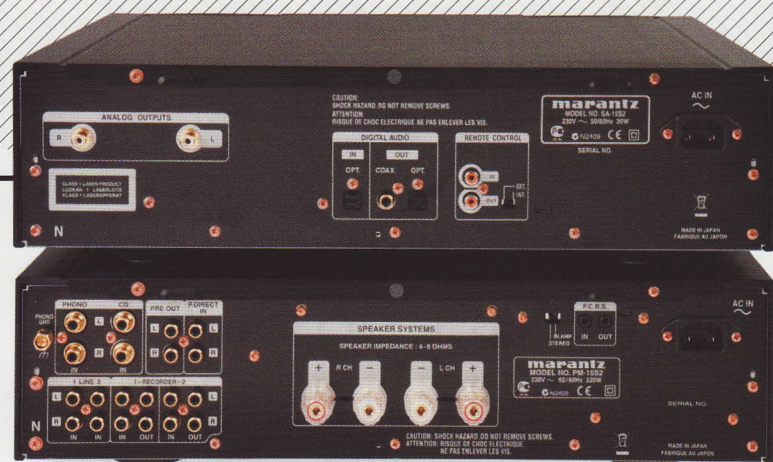
ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads



ABOVE: High resolution jitter spectrum for SA-15S2LE: SACD (black spectrum) and 24-bit/48kHz digital input (red spectrum) – jitter is higher at 48k than 96k

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	112W / 180W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	138W / 250W / 410W / 114W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.01–0.047ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, SACD/amp)	+0.2dB to -0.7dB/+0.2dB to -18dB
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/amp)	108.5dB (0dBfs) / 89.3dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, CD/amp)	0.002–0.005% / 0.05–0.02% (10W)
Jitter (CD/SACD/48k dig in/96k dig in)	370/450/2280/230psec
Power consumption (CD/amp)	6W/325W @ 2x90W (35W idle)
Dimensions (WHD CD/amp)	440x123x419/440x123x444mm



ABOVE: Connections are single-ended (RCA) via gold-plated sockets. Amplifier has a high quality MM/MC phono stage, pre/power in/out and WBT speaker terminals

Love by Diana Krall [Verve 589 507-2] sounded sumptuous. Swapping layers showed clear differentiation between CD and SACD sound quality, the soundstage captured by this recording opening up considerably when playing the hi-res option. The bass was rich and extended and the accompanying strings and piano were focused beautifully to create a wonderful 'picture'. Krall's voice was delivered with a sensual warm glow.

AMP WITH AUTHORITY

Auditioning the PM-15S2 LE amplifier in isolation – a line input fed from Chord Electronics' QBD76HD DAC and music from my digital library – proved that, like its partnering disc player, it has a refined and easy-on-the-ear quality. It sounds muscular and authoritative too, with spacious stereo imagery that really comes to the fore when listening to powerful orchestral material. I was able to really wind it up without it sounding stressed or on the edge. And with more delicate material – for example, the frail voice and solo piano of Radka Toneff's 'The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress' from *Fairytales* [Odin CD-03] – it was evident that this is an amplifier capable of subtlety and grace in equal measure.

Paired up, these Series 15 Limited Editions sounded calm and unforced with enchanting depth-layering of stereo images. Resolution of instrumental textures was excellent too, especially when listening to SACDs, despite a warm tonality giving the impression of indifference to the analysis of fine details in recordings with forensic precision. 'Lilac Wine' from Barb Jungr's *Just Like A Woman* SACD [Linn AKD 309] brought a lump to my throat, with her intimate, rather husky voice sounding full of passion. Danny Thompson's string bass sounded

woody and full-bodied, and Jenny Carr's piano accompaniment was eerily lifelike, thanks to the sense of space around the instruments.

These Series 15 Limited Editions have an ability to cut right to the heart of the music played. A great example of this came with the marvellous 'Feel Good Inc' from the 2005 Gorillaz album *Demon Days* [Parlophone 0946 311691], the infectious bass line served up wonderfully by this Marantz pairing. The vital (Grammy awarded) contribution to the song by the American hip-hop trio De La Soul was most specific – where so many system components fail to resolve the various individual elements.

These two new designs from the hands of Ken Ishiwata deliver sound that's also extremely valve-like, which will undoubtedly be 'music to the ears' of many. But seriously... mellifluous, smooth and silky, and with an intelligible and vivid midband. Engaging in spades, and easy to listen to for hours on end... Mightn't I be describing many a valve-driven combo? These '15S2 LE components really do sound deliciously sweet. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Delivering holographic image perspectives and extremely fine and polished sound, these Marantz Limited Edition components are nothing short of delightful to listen to. Given the attention to detail in their build quality, they clearly represent excellent value for money and can be highly recommended. Certainly they could form the basis of a fabulous hi-fi system for less than a king's ransom.

Sound Quality: 85%

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