

Marantz SA8003

On a dealer's shelf there's little to differentiate the SA8003 from the much more costly KI Pearl player introduced recently by Marantz and featured on the front cover of last month's *HFN*. Build quality is reassuringly solid with its copper coloured chassis extending to the rear panel, while the feature count is extremely high.

As well as being an SACD player (two channel output only) the '8003 is compatible with CD-R/RW media containing DRM-free MP3, WMA and AAC files, its front panel USB slot allowing direct connection of an iPod that can be controlled with the Marantz's accompanying system remote controller. 16-bit WAV files up to 48kHz are accommodated via the USB. Moreover, if you're connecting a 5th generation or later iPod, iPod Nano, iPod Classic or iPod Touch the audio from the iPod is transmitted digitally as linear PCM.

HIGH CLARITY

Like so many generations of Marantz players before it, the SA8003 has a highly intelligible midband that works wonders on vocal clarity. Glen Tillbrook's diction seemed improved when listening to Squeeze's 'Walk Away', and compressed layers of harmony overdubs came through uncommonly clearly. Musically the player draws you into a performance, never sounding forced or stressed – even with

dynamically compressed recordings.

Mark Knopfler's vocal was similarly clear and vividly portrayed when listening to 'Private Investigations', while the drama of the piece was thrilling all the way through to the dynamic climaxes, the assault on the piano coming across with fine emotion.

The subtle clues within the recording of Barb Jung's 'Lilac Wine' took the realism of the musical performance to another level since we were now accessing the disc's hi-res SACD layer. The string bass and piano sounded altogether more lifelike than previously witnessed.

LIVING TOGETHER

Disc loading isn't particularly fast, but skipping tracks is truly rapid and scanning within tracks can be accomplished at varying speeds. Furthermore the numeric keys on the handset provide direct track access in the truest sense: place a disc in the tray, press '5'... and the disc loads and commences playing from the beginning of the fifth track.

This is a lovely player to live with, right down to its headphone socket with independent level control. The SA8003 is both a revealing and musically rewarding player, and can be highly recommended.

Sound Quality: 75%

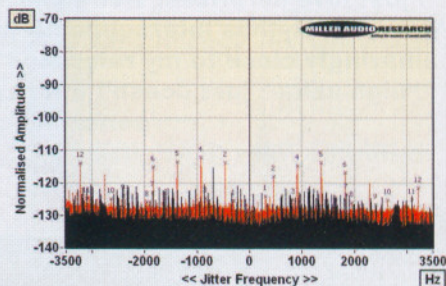


ABOVE: Thoughtful design offers comprehensive facilities and excellent disc navigation. USB input provides a digital connection with 5th generation iPods and beyond

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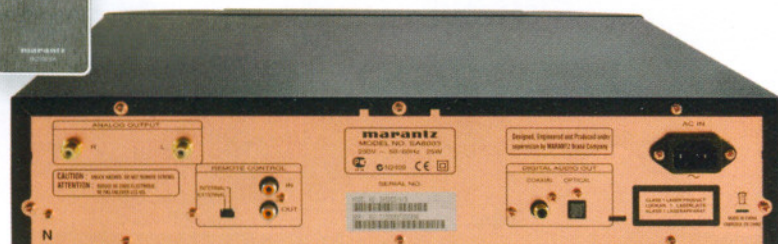
This is both a flexible and highly capable performer that ticks all the technical boxes. Its peak output with both CD and SACD media is slightly higher than its competition here at 2.36V and the A-wtd S/N ratio very high at 109dB. Distortion remains less than 0.001% over the top 25dB of its dynamic range (falling to 0.0003% at -10dBfs) and remains at the limit of the player's noise floor down to -100dBfs. Low level resolution is excellent too, especially with SACD which holds true to ± 0.2 dB over a full 120dB dynamic range.

There's the inevitable lift in ultrasonic noise that comes with SACD encoding but the SA8003's response is ruler flat with CD, rolling off thereafter with SACD to -1.3dB/40kHz, -12.5dB/60kHz, -28dB/80kHz and -44dB/100kHz. Pioneer's player has greater ultrasonic extension [see p55] but shunts more noise into the partnering amplifier. Importantly, jitter is low here too, almost independent of format [see graph, below], with no low-rate smearing of the central peak. PM



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plot using CD (black) and SACD (red) data. Jitter sidebands marked in pairs

Maximum Output Level	2.36Vrms
A-wtd S/N Ratio	108.6dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00052% / 0.0038%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs)	0.001%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz, CD/SACD)	-0.0dB to +0.0dB/-0.0dB to -0.3dB
Digital jitter (CD/SACD)	265psec / 258psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD/SACD)	± 0.2 dB / ± 0.0 dB
Power consumption	11W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x109x344mm



ABOVE: The copper-coloured rear chassis and screws are a Marantz hallmark although the stereo audio outputs and optical/coaxial digital outputs are standard fixtures. SACD bitstreams are not output via the digital connections

Group Test Verdict

This was a fascinating group of players to audition side by side, each model delivering a unique flavour of the recordings played. Carat's C57mk2 sounded a little soft and was too smoochy in my already-civilised sounding system. Consequently the C57mk2 might be a good choice if your system is a little fatiguing and you're looking to upgrade from a cheaper machine that has a tendency to brightness. The Carat looks sharp too, so pride of ownership is assured – for as long as it doesn't clash with your existing amplifier. A complete Carat system would look very smart in a modern living room.

So too would a complete Cyrus Audio system, which is clearly where the CD 6 SE will best fit in. Due to its diminutive proportions, and its mere 3.1kg weight being half that of the others in this group test (and barely more than a quarter of the mass of Pioneer's cheaper PD-D9MK2) it really doesn't feel like you're getting very much for £900.

SYSTEM BUILDING

Not everybody likes using slot-loaders, but if you're comfortable with them you'll find the Cyrus a pleasure to use, thanks to the logical layout of its system controller and clear display. And of course it would be the natural choice for partnering to a Cyrus amplifier with its MC-BUS control system.

Don't expect to slot the CD 6 SE into a high-end system with large speakers however, as it really isn't adequately transparent and it sounds blurred in the low bass. With small speakers this shouldn't be an issue, the CD 6 SE delivering an immediate and engaging sound through the presence region that is musically highly enjoyable.

Sounding vivid and exciting the NAD C 565BEE offers a lot for the money and can be recommended if its upfront balance won't prove too exuberant for your system. Loaded with facilities – and the only player of the group featuring an RS232 terminal for installing in a 'wired home' – its thoughtful design



is spoiled only by its austere styling and resonant bonnet that makes it feel a little cheap. As is so often the case with NAD components, the C 565BEE may not be dressed to impress but in fact offers tremendously good performance for the money. At £600 it was the least expensive of the group, despite its high feature count.

AUDIO SUPERIORITY

The two SACD-compatible players were the best sounding models of the group. There's little to criticise about the performance of Marantz's SA8003, or the quality of the overall package it offers. Its chassis is sturdy and the facilities on offer are increasingly what are required

'The two SACD-compatible players here were the best sounding of the group'

to attract 21st century buyers, not least the USB input that works in the digital domain with modern iPods.

Nothing has been left out of its feature count; even the display has three brightness level settings (plus off) and, as with the Pioneer, the digital output can be disabled to avoid any possible chance of it interfering with the analogue output stage. The sound of the SA8003 is confident and refined with excellent midband clarity and a sweet treble. Only a mild compression of very low bass information that disguises the texture of bass instruments spoils an otherwise



audiophile performance. Of course, if you're assembling a high-end system with large floorstanders Marantz has several high-end players in its portfolio to fit that particular bill.

Which leaves the Pioneer PD-D9, this brand new MK2 version having literally just begun landing in countries around the world. We suspect we're the first magazine to have actually got our hands on a sample, and excellent it sounds too. Compared with the others in this test group it feels like a high-end player thanks to its substantial build quality that includes aluminium side and top plates in addition to its fascia. It sounds like a high-end player too.

I would still question the wisdom of its ultra-minimalist design: the lack of track navigation keys (other than play/stop) means you'll be cursing if you mislay the handset or the batteries die just when you've a group of friends arriving for a music session. ☺