

AUDIO SYSTEMS REVIEW

Marantz KI Pearl Lite SACD and amp review

Marantz's new, Ken Ishiwata-tuned, KI Pearl Series

Our Score

Last reviewed: September 23rd

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The new Pearl 'Lites' are two of the more obvious and predictable introductions following the original Pearls, which emerged from the Marantz stable about two years ago, as a celebration of Ken Ishiwata's 30-year or so reign as the public face of Marantz.



They may be 'lite' versions, but not much has been cut from the original Pearl series

Given the effort that reportedly went into their design, there had to be a follow-up. The Pearls were limited to a production run of 1,000 units combined for the SACD player and the amp – 500 units apiece – which even with the premium pricing they commanded probably didn't represent a pot of gold.

The obvious requirement, then was for a slightly simplified version of the two units that could be sold at a more attractive price than the Pearls, and in much larger numbers, and this is exactly what the Pearl Lites promise.

Ken was also the prime mover behind a number of other enhanced models over the years, most with an 'SE' or a 'KI' designation, derived from standard components, that were often sold alongside the regular models, or in different markets.

No lite weight

'Lite' in the context of this review means 'much more affordable', but that doesn't mean the Lites have been stripped to the bone.

The amplifier is still usefully powerful in practice (though significantly less so than the Pearl) and has a broad range of inputs including an MM phono, three line inputs and two tape circuits.

The SACD player also has a USB input on the front panel and a full set of S/PDIF and optical TOSLINK in and outputs. It can be used as a D/A converter, typically with an iPod with a digital output, or to provide a digital feed for a recorder.

We had half-anticipated that the player would lose its SACD status in the move to reduce the price, but on inserting the first disc, we noticed the familiar SACD logo near the display and breathed a sigh of relief.

In common with the regular Pearls, this is a two channel player, so any multi-channel mix is not recognised by the machine and cannot be played.

As usual, the digital outputs are disabled when playing the high-resolution layer of SACDs. The amplifier includes preamp outputs and a direct power amplifier input. Two pairs of speakers can be connected and switched independently and headphones are connected via a volume control, but the SACD player has its own headphone socket and associated volume control.



We were also amused (bemused rather) to see that the unit is equipped with not the usual two tone controls, but three – bass, midrange and treble. The reason according to Marantz is that with compressed audio media in the ascendant, something needed to be done to improve sound quality with these frequently inadequate sources.

We questioned this at first (see our interview with Ken, opposite page), but at least we can agree that it gives you another fine-tuning option and many systems may well benefit from a touch of left hand up or down on the midrange control.

Marantz hasn't completely lost its marbles here as it has included a 'source direct' switch so that the tone control stage and the balance control can be bypassed. This made quite a substantial change for the better: the sound becoming fuller and palpably more focused and less 'grainy' with the 'direct'