



All of these amps have run a good race, but it's the sharp-looking, great-sounding **Marantz** that noses ahead at the tape

NOW THE FUR and feathers have finished flying, the good news is this: £300-£350 buys some cracking integrated stereo amplifiers these days. An almighty dust-up between four products already held in high regard, a perfectly likeable alternative with a big price cut and a strong newcomer from a long-established brand has left two products contesting the top of the podium, although there's merit all through this *Group Test*. Even the Yamaha A-S700 makes a case for itself.

The three four-star amps offer something more. With the Cambridge Audio Azur 650A, that something is a brilliantly spacious soundstage. The Denon PMA-710, by way of contrast, is a much more tightly packed listen, and great if you like a good low-frequency pummelling.

The NAD's C326BEE's four-not-five-star status is more a comment on the outstanding Marantz and Rotel than on any shortcomings on the NAD's part.

A close run thing

Separating the Marantz PM6003 and Rotel RA04-SE is tricky in the extreme. Either will startle you with the sheer excitement-per-pound they offer. Push always comes to shove in the end, of course, and we've given the win to the Marantz by the shortest of heads - mostly because of its greater flexibility.

Marantz PM6003

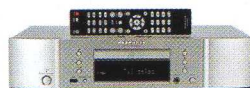


£300



"The good news is, £300-£500 buys some cracking amplifiers"

NOW ADD THESE



CD PLAYER
MARANTZ CD6003
★★★★★
£ 300

Superlative sound and handily matching looks from our test winner's sibling. All the musical elements knit together on this player to produce a hugely convincing, coherent sound. We don't always advocate same-brand electronics in a system, but here it's a no-brainer.



SPEAKERS
EB ACOUSTICS EB1
★★★★★
£ 470

You may not have heard of EB, but don't worry about that - these classy cabinets provide a detailed, dynamic sound. We rarely advocate relative overspending on one area of your system, but in this instance the EBs complement the Marantz beautifully.



SPEAKER CABLE
CHORD COMPANY CARNIVAL SILVER SCREEN
★★★★★
£ 6/m

The improvements the Chord Company cable can bestow on your set-up are far from minor. This speaker cable is as dynamic, as detailed and as confident as the best from the next price-point up.

TOTAL SYSTEM £1106

FACTS AND FIGURES

PRICE RANGE £300-£400	CAMBRIDGE AUDIO AZUR 650A	DENON PMA-710	MARANTZ PM6003	NAD C326BEE	ROTEL RA-04SE	YAMAHA A-S700
SPECIFICATION						
PRICE	£ 350	£ 350	£ 300	£ 300	£ 300	£ 400
TYPE: INTEGRATED	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated
POWER OUTPUT	75W	50W	45W	50W	40W	90W
INPUTS	6 x line level	5 x line level, MM phono	5 x line level, MM phono	7 x line level	6 x line level, MM phono	5 x line level, MM phono
OUTPUTS	Pre-out, 2 x tape loops, 2 x speakers, headphone	Pre-out, 2 x tape loops, 2 x speakers, headphone	2 x tape loops, 2 x speakers, headphone	2 x pre-out, tape loop, speakers, headphone	Pre-out, tape loop, 2 x speakers, headphone	2 x tape loops, 2 x speakers, headphone
REMOTE CONTROL	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
FINISHES	2	2	2	1	2	1
DIMENSIONS (HWD)	12 x 43 x 35cm	12 x 43 x 31cm	11 x 44 x 37cm	10 x 33 x 29cm	7 x 44 x 34cm	15 x 44 x 38cm
HOW THEY RATED						
SOUND	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VERDICT	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

Marantz PM6003



£300

IT ALL HAPPENED in a bit of a rush for the PM6003: *First Test* in October 2009 and a Best Buy Award less than a month later. After that meteoric rise, though, the Marantz has had an untroubled incumbency – until now it hasn't had to formally face down a single rival. Still, a test as stiff as this one will determine whether it still shines in good company.

“The malevolence and glee in Nina Simone’s vocal is delivered in spades”

It remains a good looker – streets ahead of most of the competition by the simple expedient of having some curved edges. Specification is more than adequate, too, with 5 line-level inputs (incorporating two recording loops), a moving magnet phono stage, switching for two sets of speakers and defeatable tone controls. The remote control is as classy and comprehensive as the rest of the package.

Playing Nina Simone’s hair-raising version of Weill’s *Pirate Jenny*, the

↑ FOR

Looks, build, finish; exciting, cohesive and adaptable sound

↓ AGAINST

Some rivals are even more extravagantly specified

→ VERDICT

The Marantz didn't win a 2009 Award by accident – here it's as formidable as ever

'6003 is immediately and reassuringly impressive. The traditional Marantz two-channel virtues of detail, fluency and comfortable listenability are to the fore, but in the PM6003 they're joined by a welcome injection of purposeful drive, dismissive dynamic agility and unshakeable solidity and focus. Low frequency extension is considerable, the soundstage cohesive and the malevolence and glee in Simone's vocal is delivered in spades.

Smooth yet authoritative

The Marantz integrates and separates each individual thread of a recording with cashmere smoothness, and has the iron-fisted authority to deal with the most awkward tempo changes and the steepest dynamic peaks and troughs with ease.

Undoubtedly the best way to listen to the Marantz is with 'source direct' selected; bypassing the tone, balance and (frivolous) loudness controls brings greater benefits here than with any other amp in the test. Configured this way, the Marantz displays powers of insight and resolution that make its position as our current sub-£500 integrated stereo amplifier of choice completely justifiable.

So capable is the PM6003, in fact, that it's forced a couple of very well regarded rivals down to four-star status and (just about) fended off an extremely spirited challenge from Rotel. It's not a huge leap of the imagination to see the Marantz in the box seat to achieve back-to-back Awards, and recommendations don't come any less equivocal than that.

