

Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite (£900)

Designer Ken Ishiwata celebrated his 30th anniversary at Marantz by producing the sumptuous KI Pearl SACD/CD player and integrated amplifier priced at £2500 each. A year later came the less elaborately-built Lite versions at £1000 a piece.

We thought the SA-KI Pearl Lite fabulous value when we tested it last autumn, since when its suggested retail price has reduced. Shop around and you'll find it for less than £900. It's a solidly built player, with copper-plated chassis, substantial power supply with toroidal transformer and – unlike any of the other players in this month's group – the not inconsiderable bonus of SACD playback capability.

The feature set is fabulous. Alongside 24bit/192kHz-capable S/PDIF inputs that allow the player to be used as a DAC, there's also a B-type USB socket (24bit/96kHz) that your computer sees as an external soundcard. And a further USB input on the fascia provides a digital connection for an iPod/iPhone. Memory sticks containing MP3, WMA, AAC and WAV files can also be played via this input. The absence of FLAC support is the only slight disappointment.

MODEST REFINEMENT

The voicing of the Pearl Lite appears to have been particularly well-judged, balancing detail and precision with a relaxed, easy-going nature that is focused on midband clarity. The Helicon Ensemble weren't described quite as authentically as by the ultra-sounding Primare CD32, missing the



ABOVE: High feature count includes front panel USB input and built-in headphone amp with volume control

'edge' of the early instruments. But it still appeared pleasingly open.

The angry vocal that commands: '...stand still, laddie!' in the Pink Floyd excerpt from *The Wall* might have been a tad recessed, nevertheless the balance overall was full-bodied with smooth high frequencies, and the powerful bass kicks possessed tremendous weight. The Pearl Lite is a player that really shines with powerful rock music, is never forced or uncomfortable, but full-bodied and vigorous.

The Marantz was also insightful of fine details in recordings. With Patricia Barber's 'Bye Bye Blackbird' her intimate vocal was comfortable but also focused sharply in the sound image. The Pearl Lite has a highly polished sound that sounds fabulous with top-notch recordings and also makes the most of dynamically compressed productions, sounding vibrant and up-beat with Adele's 'Rolling In The Deep'.

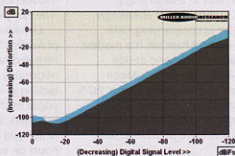
Sound Quality: 85%



ABOVE: As with the KI Pearl, the player can be used as a DAC. But while the Pearl had only an optical input the Pearl Lite includes coaxial and USB inputs too

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

By any measure (especially weight) this is an awful lot of player and one that compares very favourably with the £5000 SA KI Pearl [HFN Sep '09]. The Lite player utilises what is essentially the digital 'Filter 1' setting on its bigger brother, trading a slow out-of-band roll-off of just $-26.7\text{dB}/24.1\text{kHz}$ for reduced ringing in the time domain and reduced group delay at the top end of the audioband. Nevertheless, the Lite's bespoke analogue stage offers a flatter response than the Pearl, ruler flat in fact with a mere -0.03dB drop at 20kHz ! The SACD response is also fractionally more extended ($-14.7\text{dB}/100\text{kHz}$ instead of -16.7dB) and while it enjoys the same wide 109dB in-band A-wtd S/N ratio, its low-level linearity is actually slightly improved with errors of just 0.2dB at -120dBFS and 2.0dB at -130dBFS . Jitter shows the same complex pattern we saw with the Pearl's CD stage (300psec), clearing up slightly with SACD (235psec). Distortion remains very low at 0.0004% through bass and mid, but note that the maximum output with CD (2.45V) is higher than from an equivalent SACD layer (1.75V). Beware quick A/B demos! PM



ABOVE: Distortion versus digital signal level at 1kHz (black trace) and 20kHz (blue trace) over a full 120dB dynamic range

Maximum Output Level/Impedance	2.45V (CD) / 1.75V (SACD) / 145ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	109.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS) / (-30dBFS)	0.00035% / 0.0037%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS)	0.0004% (CD) / 0.11% (SACD)
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.0dB (-0.1dB, SACD)
Digital jitter	300psec (CD) / 235psec (SACD)
Resolution @ -100dB	$\pm 0.8\text{dB}$ (CD) / $\pm 0.05\text{dB}$ (SACD)
Power consumption	11W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x109x344mm

GROUP TEST VERDICT

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Thanks to its fulsome bass and a smooth treble, Densen's B-4408X sounds notably sumptuous and is adept at glossing over the hard edges of sharp and 'hot' CDs that might otherwise be considered intolerable to listen to. But when auditioned back-to-back with other players in quick succession it could be heard to be noticeably soft of focus, masking fine details in recordings and blurring the image.

You might deem it a tonic for an otherwise fatiguing sound from CD in your system, but even the humble Cambridge player proved more revealing of the true character of recordings, offering greater fidelity to the studio engineer's art.

SOMETHING OF A BARGAIN

Indeed, to say that the E330 Cambridge Audio 650C punches above its weight is something of an understatement. Several Cambridge Audio products are renowned for delivering tremendous performance at unbeatable price points, this player proving to be one of them. OK, so you might occasionally criticise the 650C's slightly grainy quality, but even when auditioned through a revealing high-end system it didn't disgrace itself. It proved capable of resolving fine details in dense productions and creating a holographic image from purist audiophile recordings, its only real failing being a lack of sweetness when compared alongside more refined (and costlier) machines.

Simaudio's Moon CD.5, with its large, easy-to-read-at-ten-metres status display and rugged 'pro-sumer' appearance, is a little expensive for what's really on offer, although you might feel its premium price worth paying for the cachet of owning a machine imported from Canada. Mind you, even the budget-priced Cambridge Audio

player comes with a remote control handset that's better designed. The Moon CD.5 sounded noticeably smooth, with a relaxed demeanour that avoids all traces of CD's 'digititis'. Certainly it will curry the favour of hi-fi enthusiasts who find CD replay fatiguing to listen to.

In terms of faithfulness to the source it's a close run between the Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite and Primare CD32. As reported when we first tested the Marantz many months ago, it offers tremendous value with a sound that is commendably revealing and sophisticated. And it plays SACDs! An enthusiast with a fabulous high-end system might well consider the Pearl Lite for SACD replay alone if they lack this facility – the price is probably less than replacing the stylus of a beloved MC cartridge.

Compared side-by-side with the Primare CD32 it was observed to be not quite as squeaky-clean or

open-mouthed: a bit softer-focused and less explicit. As is the case with hi-fi's law of diminishing returns, the slight increase in fidelity afforded by the Primare does come at more than double the price.

HANDSOME COUPLE

Needless to say Primare's CD32 can be regarded the *de facto* choice for partnering with its eco-friendly I32 Class D integrated amplifier that featured in last month's group test. With their matching OLED displays

(really classy) and common remote control handset the two components will make a lovely couple. On the other hand, used as a standalone player in a system

of mixed components... well, if the price ticket is acceptable, the CD32 certainly won't disappoint thanks to a sound that's explicit and highly revealing. You'd need to spend a small fortune on a very esoteric high-end player to better it. ☺

'You'd need to spend a small fortune to better the CD32'



ABOVE: Primare's new CD32 delivers superb transparency, the best in the test group. But if you're looking for value the Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite is frankly a steal

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