

Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite (£1000)

hi-finews
 OUTSTANDING
 PRODUCT

Following the 'KI Pearl' SACD/CD player and amplifier duo designed by Ken Ishiwata to celebrate his 30th anniversary at Marantz [see *HFN*, Sept '09] comes a more affordable 'KI Pearl Lite' player/amp combo. Prices are £1000 for each component rather than £2500 each for the limited edition Pearls.

At 7.8kg the SA-KI Pearl Lite is half the weight of the Pearl player, the build being less sumptuous. Gone is the Pearl's sexy front panel illumination and 5mm-thick aluminium top plate while the Lite model comes with a standard Marantz remote handset. And the Lite's glossy side cheeks – redolent of the wooden urushi lacquered panels fitted to luxurious products of yesteryear – are in fact plastic. Nevertheless it's a handsome player and still feels a lot for the money.

Moreover, it's loaded with appealing features for a wider audience. The front panel USB input affords a digital connection for iPods and playback of MP3, WMA, AAC and WAV files from memory sticks (limited to 16-bit/48kHz and with no FLAC support) while the capability of the USB input at the rear (for computer connection) extends to 24-bit/96kHz PCM. Under the bonnet the Lite employs the same Cirrus Logic Delta-Sigma DAC but without the Pearl's selectable filter.

POLISHED PEARLS
 Whatever the music the SA-KI Pearl Lite always sounded polished, with a gracious demeanour. While demonstrating the communicative midband clarity that's a hallmark of 'classic' Marantz KI Signature



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

CD players, this Pearl Lite delivers a refined sound that makes for particularly relaxed listening.

The tone of the strings of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra sounded truly sweet – less vivid and forthright than with the Musical Fidelity and Naim players but exquisite in texture and warmth while losing nothing in terms of detail. So easy on the ear is this player that it allows you to observe fine details without any sense of strain, sounding deliciously 'open' and transparent and seducing the ear with its mellow charm.

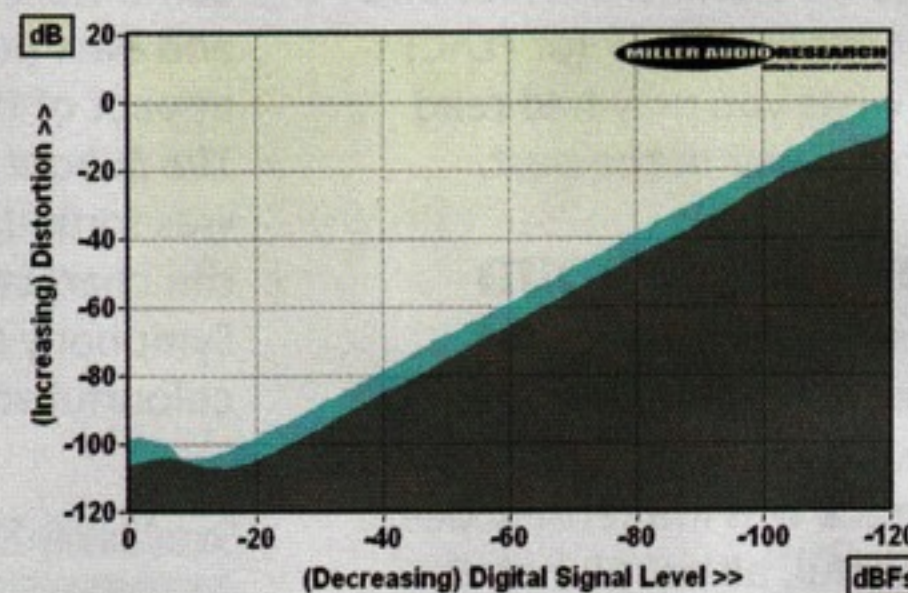
The background percussion in Maeve O'Boyle's 'Facing Home' displayed a coarse electronic 'edge' with all the players in this group, the Denon and this Marantz sounding considerably more natural and cultured when playing the disc's SACD layer. Yet even the 'standard resolution' CD layer sounded polished on the KI Pearl Lite.

Sound Quality: 88%



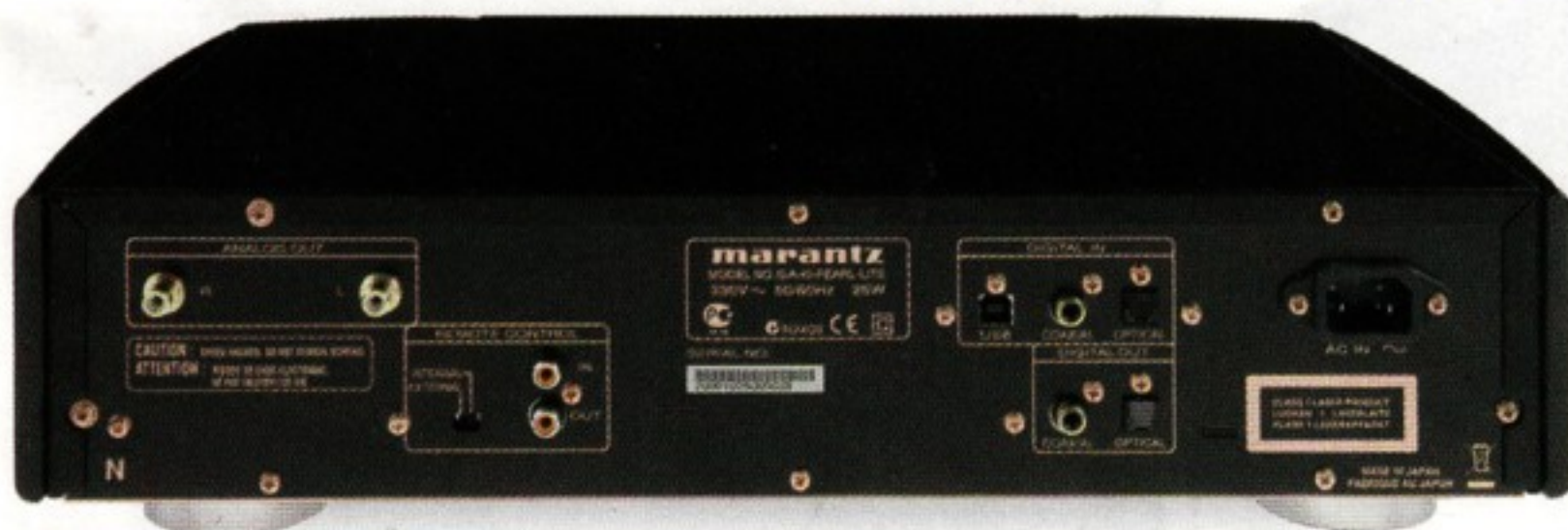
HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

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 -26.7dB/24.1kHz 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 (-14.7dB/100kHz 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	±0.8dB (CD) / ±0.05dB (SACD)
Power consumption	11W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x109x344mm



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