

AUDIO ANALOGUE MAESTRO SETTANTA AND CD PLAYER



How time flies. It seems like only yesterday that the Italian audio industry consisted of two 'genres': gorgeous speakers and outré tube amps. But now you have companies like Opera, Pathos, Sonus Faber, Unison Research and others with state-of-the-art, bespoke factories and the sort of credibility usually reserved for slightly older, post-1970s brands like Arcam, Musical Fidelity or Exposure. Among them is Audio Analogue, which has achieved its respectability in a frighteningly short time - under a decade if I remember correctly. The secret? The appliance of science, tempered by utterly extremist audiophile practice. Sort of 'Fidelta Musicale', as it were.

Instead of freaky, seat-of-the-pants designing, Audio Analogue's Blanda family and designer Marco Manunta behave as you would expect of serious manufacturers: totally au courant with the latest technology, while demonstrating great maturity through caution. Like Quad, for example, they don't leap on the latest chip; I recall the two-to-three-year gestation period of their superb Cinecitta A/V processor. So you find their CD player boasting the best chip they could find, a 192/24 processor, yet the company is still taking its time with a universal player.

Audio Analogue's secret weapon, though is an absolute lunatic Golden Ear named Claudio Bertini, an audio retailer who has two of the best lug-holes in the business. He's the one who voices and fine-tunes the products, and I've seen/heard him at work, fiddling around with capacitors and resistors, both values and types, ironing out seemingly-minuscule flaws with brazenly vivid results. This guy ranks right up there with Pedro at Absolute Sounds, Peter McGrath and maybe even Ken Ishiwata. Trust me: a magician, despite (or because of?) his manic demeanour.

'Maestro' is Audio Analogue's bid for a slice of the 'entry-level/high-end lifestyle' market. The sublime Primo budget models duke it out with Musical Fidelity's X-Series - I'd hate to have to choose between them - and the Puccini, Donizetti and other 'composer' models have shown what the company can do for entry-level purists. The units covered here are key parts of the Maestro series, the range's upscale CD player and integrated amp; there are or will be various separate pre/power packages for those wishing to spend more for a source/amplification combo.

As is expected of Italian manufacturers, the stuff is both gorgeous to look at and so beautifully-made that you can't resist the seductive, tactile finish. They're constructed from a mix of aluminium and steel, and the sense of luxury they impart is undeniable. Each unit measures a substantial 5.3x17.5x16.8in (HWD) and the two create an impressive stack. Though absolutely minimalist and almost Copland-like, the Maestros have a distinct presence, the fascia featuring a protruding centre section housing the displays and controls. With the amp weighing in at 41lb and the CD player at 31lb, perceived value for tyre-kicker types is a given. These are seriously chunky components, so avoid flimsy shelving.

MAESTRO SETTANTA INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Although rated a seemingly sedate 70W/ch into 8 ohms and 125W/ch into 4 ohms, the solid-state Maestro Settanta (Italian for '70') is something of an animal. It was unbowed by a bout with the 1 ohm Apogee Scintilla, and was unfazed by the Wilson WATT Puppy 7. I don't know if it's possible to engineer xenophobia or nationalism into an amp, but this bambino simply adored driving the Sonus Faber Guarneri, a speaker known for its hunger; that's why I used for nearly all of the listening sessions.

Unlike the £475 Primo (a bargain, I must stress!) which is built to a price, the Maestro Settanta is uncompromised, with high-performance circuits featuring discrete components, 'function-based and channel-based' circuit sections, and PC and home-automation systems connection. So, despite its audiophile-friendly minimalism, the unit is loaded with features to keep it in step with current multi-room/multi-channel adaptability. In particular, it can be programmed with a bypass mode facility to serve as a power amp-only for integration into an A/V system, with the tap of a few buttons restoring it to integrated amp status.

A goodly portion of the unit's weight is a large toroidal transformer in the power supply, with separate supplies for each channel, and full independence for the analogue circuits. Highest-quality passive components, no doubt specified by Bertini, include the lowest-tolerance, milspec, metallic-layered resistors and low-tolerance, non-polarised polyester/propylene capacitors, high-speed, low-loss, high-capacity electrolytic capacitors and organic-electrolyte, low-capacity electrolytic capacitors.

When you realize that everything operates from two rotary controls, you rightly suspect that this beauty has some form of microprocessor control. Switch on from stand-by, if you're not using the remote (see sidebar), requires nothing more than turning the source selector or volume control. An integrated-resistance network controls levels, and there's no buffer to ensure maximum sound transparency. The micro-processor also monitors the amplifier's operation for security and protection, as well as speaker protection, with 'low impact on sound quality.'

There's plenty of scope for tailoring the Maestro Settanta to complex systems. You can, for example use every input for line sources or set one up for MM or MC phono, the former with 40dB of gain and the latter with 60dB - they're damned fine phono stages. Balance is by the decibel, and it's very precise.: I thought the image in a pure mono recording seemed off centre. A check revealed that the balance (probably because I screwed around with the remote) had been set accidentally a single dB up to the left. All of this is monitored through a fabulously legible, high-contrast 'PLED' dot-matrix display that also shows standby mode with a red indicator for off and blue for on, the input selected, and the playback level in dB.

For £1750, you feel even before switch-on that this is an awful lot of amp for the money. The only marketing concern? Too many of you demand separate pre/power packages at that price. But that's probably considered to be an old-fashioned attitude by today's standards. Me? I have no trouble with integrated amps. Remember: there are technical pros and cons for both...like no evil, loss-inducing wires between pre-amp and power amp in integrated units!

MAESTRO CD 192/24

Possibly more interesting for some of you is the Maestro CD 192/24 - an absolutely, resolutely two-channel CD-only player with minimal gimmickry. Instead, the goodies are found on the inside and the benefits are clearly audible: this is one sweet-sounding CD player.

AA wanted a 'no-compromise' player, so the Maestro CD 192/24's model nomenclature indicates the use of Analogue Devices' AD1955 192/24-bit D/A converter. In keeping with the technological pedigree of the Settanta, the Maestro CD 192/24 also boasts function-based and channel-based separate circuitry, PC and home-automation systems connection via an RS-232 and that tasty, high-contrast PLED dot-matrix display. It also uses a massive, by CD player standards, power supply with two transformers (one of which is a toroidal adequate for a small integrated amp!) with eight separated sections and the analogue stages are isolated from the digital.

Bertini's benediction includes ultra-high-quality passive components consisting of milspec, lowest-tolerance metallic-layered resistors,; low-tolerance, non-polarised polyester/propylene capacitors, high-speed, low-loss, high-capacity electrolytic capacitors and organic-electrolyte, low-capacity electrolytic capacitors. Spinning the discs is a heavily-modified Samsung CD-ROM, specially enclosed and mounted.

Differing only from the Settanta in that the two rotaries are replaced with the basic transport buttons, the Maestro CD 192/24 is about as clean a CD player as you can get. Around the back, there's little clutter, with an RS-232 socket and both single-ended and XLR-balanced analogue and digital outputs. But, sadistically (because the price increase that would be caused by fitting true balanced inputs would have pushed the Maestro Settanta way upmarket), you cannot actually use the Maestro CD 192/24 in balanced mode with the matching integrated amp. Bugger!

Instead, I assessed the player's balanced output through the McIntosh C2200 and, as I expected, it was audibly superior to the unbalanced output, especially for dynamic contrasts and bass control. But as the importer pointed out, 'This CD player addresses the whole Maestro range up to existing and forthcoming "extreme" models, including the Maestro fully-balanced two-chassis line pre-amp, and the high-power monoblocks.' In AA's defence, too, this isn't the first time I've had two products in the same series with one balanced and one not. Indeed, cost concerns contributed to the lack of XLR/balanced output on the otherwise hard-to-fault Audio Research PH-5 phono amp. It's a judgment call, and - I suppose - the right one. Why? Because all this wonderfulness is available for £1650.

THE SOUND

In addition to the speakers tried with the Settanta and the brief burst of the Maestro CD 192/24 though the McIntosh to audition the balanced output, I also used the SME 30/2 turntable with Series V arm and Koetsu and Decca cartridges, the Musical Fidelity X-Ray V3 CD and Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD players and Transparent Reference and Kimber Select interconnect cables. Speakers were wired with Transparent Reference. Accessories? None, bar LAST for LP and stylus, and a Relaxa 3 platform beneath the Musical Fidelity X-Ray.

Not sure if the units were burned in, I gave them a few days before settling in for serious listening. I hadn't realised how they grew on me until I swapped cartridges: instantaneously, the Settanta displayed the sort of transparency that reviewers crave if they're to detect tiny nuances. Now transparency is a virtue I recognise, but I don't value it above, say, midband accuracy, so I wasn't shanghaied into thinking that I had a world-class amp in front of me on those grounds alone. But it was reassuring nonetheless: AA was making my job easier.

Part and parcel of this was a clarity and openness that really made the Settanta seem more than the sum of its parts, the property that will make you forget about the pre/power separates issue: in effect, this amplifier sounds 'huge', both in terms of dynamic force - grunt, power, call it what you will - and the actual scale of the images it produces. Because of the presence of my father's RCAs and Mercurys, I had plenty of fodder to assess scale, including a particularly jingoistic LP called This Is My Country. Right wing sentiments aside, which in my case is preaching to the choir, this disc features massive choral groups and orchestras laying it on

thick, stunningly recorded and oozing majesty. I'd love to chain Vanessa Redgrave to a chair Clockwork Orange-style and play it to her at 115dB.

Anyway, this has become for me a demo title with the worth of the Glory sound track and Kodo drumming to show how a system handles dynamic contrasts, from soft-ish vocals to marching bands, with all the magnitude of the recorded space. The Settanta? Clearly its phono section was up to the task, only slightly less punchy or detailed than the Audio Research PH5. What it did with the signal from there on was expand it to fill the room seamlessly, whether using the Guarneris or the LS3/5As. RCA Red Seals have a distinctive sheen that the Settanta preserved, but the way the three-dimensional qualities were resolved made the experience something special. By that, I mean 'absolutely convincing.'

With smaller works, with fewer individual sounds vying for your attention at the same time, the Settanta showed that it could also deal with intimacy. Small jazz ensembles blended smoothly, yet each instrumentalist enjoyed his or her own space. Piano-based works in particular enjoyed a richness and weight that demonstrated a particular sort of finesse that often eludes less capable amplifiers: the ability to preserve hints of 'mass' in minimalist recordings. If this sounds bizarre, try something like a Nat King Cole Trio LP on Capitol. You get real presence-plus-intimacy, with life-size images. Bliss!

When it came to the Maestro CD 192/24, it was clear that Bertini wanted the two units to complement each other like the blood relatives that they are - Romulus and Remus. It's worth pointing out that there's nothing valve-like about the Settanta, and it can be unforgiving with bright recordings. Because the Maestro CD 192/24 is so silky-sounding, you get the impression that old Claudio was damned if he was going to let grating digital edginess spoil things. In this respect, the Maestro CD was deliciously close to the venerable Marantz.

Brief time-out: the Musical Fidelity X-Ray V3 is my current sub-£1000 reference for CD. It's gift at £899, I'd recommend it to anyone wanting a CD player JUST for CDs, and it can hold its own in £50,000 system. What the Maestro offers is the next step up, if you have nearly double the budget and want a clearly discernible clamber up the food-chain. Where it scores so marvellously is in the area of retrieving low level detail and presenting sublimely fluid bass without any sense of artificial truncation.

It was fed a smorgasbord of CDs from the latest Mavis Stables R&B-fest to Ella And Basie on Verve to the live Red Hot Chilli Peppers to the Dillards' transient-laden bluegrass (buy the 3-on-1 set just out on Elektra, 8122 76508-2). And it was the last-named that stood out because of the challenges it presented. Those boys sure knew how to layer the sound, with myriad guitars, banjos and other instruments favoured by mountain folk, enhanced with close harmonies. Think of it as a raw, undistilled alternative to the delicious Alison Krauss. Anyway, their magnificent version of 'I've Just Seen Face' is a one-track hootenanny, full of delightful touches that will dazzle fans of 'pickin'-and-a-grinnin'. Blatantly, this is material that I'm sure would show an upward tilt if played through a spectrum analyser.

And yet...through the all-AA system, there's no fatigue, no sizzle, and still you entertain a feeling of complete assurance that you're hearing every single pluck, with the transients suffering no overhang. Move on to their take of 'Reason To Believe': in this 35-year-old-plus precursor to 'unplugged' roots music, you can savour the bodies of the acoustic guitars, the nasal twang of some good ol' boys' singing, the click of a woodblock, the resonance of a banjo's 'skin', and hillbilly strings that simply soar.

An absence of digital nasties, detail up the kazoo, bass with form and weight but shorn of aggression - I sat there for hours on end savouring this set-up. But where does it belong in a market overburdened with fine products? I'm working hard at this one, but I think I have an analogy: it's a perfect combination for the person who wants all the benefits of high-end sound, without the aggravation or loss of precious living room real-estate. Which makes it the Alfa Romeo GT of hi-fi: a beautiful, brilliant performer that doesn't cost a king's ransom. Somehow, calling it the Audi or BMW would rob it of its soul.

SIDEBAR: HAUTE REMOTE? NOT

A word about remote controls. The ones with the Maestros, while utterly beautiful to behold - like props from 1930s science-fiction serials - are poorly thought-out and unreliable. Sorry, but they suck. Why, for example, does the amp's standby button sit in the centre, while the CD player's is at the top? Tell me you're not gonna get confused by two virtually identical remotes with that bit of illogical topography. I switched off the amp more than once when I wanted to hit 'play' on the CD. Worse, I couldn't count the number of times the amp remote didn't even perform the function I was addressing!

As for the CD's remote, Audio Analogue doubled up fast-forward/reverse with track skip, and the difference in pressure required to select either mode is inconsistent and hair-trigger sensitive. Forget the sexy stainless steel, swoopy shapes, however wonderfully weighted and joyous to fondle - like Greek worry beads. Stuff the minimum number of buttons for the sake of la bella figura. For once, I wished I had a single, generic (if plasticky) system remote. One that worked.

AA's Stefano Blanda told Hi-Fi News that the company, '...will do a larger, clearer engraving on the two separate remotes so you'll know which is which without having to study them. As for the sensitivity of the double functions, we will look at the possibility of changing the feel.'

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