

# McIntosh MC252 Power Amplifier



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Monday, 09 March 2009

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The importance of having the absolutely correct amplifier that sends the proper amount of power to your audio systems' loudspeakers cannot be understated. And especially if your system at home features high-end speakers such as Paradigm monitors or a set of Anthony Gallo Acoustics Reference speakers, you should make sure that you purchase the right type of power amplifier to drive your loudspeakers to their peak levels, while never causing distortion in the process; which brings me to the McIntosh MC252 Power Amplifier. This power amp weighs around 95 pounds, stands about 10 inches tall and delivers a powerful 250 watts per channel.

The sleek design of this power amp will fit right at home alongside your main audio rack components and the McIntosh blue light emanating from the power output displays on either side of the amp distinguishes this product line from all others. The price of this power amplifier will run you around \$3500, depending on what kind of a deal you can find in your area. McIntosh is a well-known high-end audio/video manufacturer that began designing their first power amplifiers ages ago, starting with MC7106. They have been relentless ever since in developing power amplifiers that deliver the power that high-end audio systems require.

## Overview

The MC252 features an input impedance level of 10,000 ohms unbalanced and 20,000 ohms balanced, and this unit also contains a power guard that prevents clipping and ensures that THD never exceeds 2%. This obviously cuts down the possibility of any damage occurring to your loudspeakers when they are powered by the MC252. This particular model comes with what McIntosh labels a Sentry Monitor. The function that this fuse-less short circuit protection performs is the ability to reset automatically after it disengages the output stage if the current actually exceeds the safest operating level.

This amplifier also contains the Output Autoformer. This technology allows the MC252 to push the full amount of power output that the amp can deliver to your loudspeakers, while also ensuring that the least amount of distortion is sent to any loudspeaker with impedance of 2, 4 or 8 ohms. The MC252 also has the ability to combine its two 250 watt channels into a single channel of 500 watts. So if your speaker system configuration ohm impedance is 1, 2, 4, 8 or 16 and you really need some extra power to deliver a substantial impact, this mono operation technology will come in handy. The RMS power output of the MC252 is 250W min. (stereo) or 500W min. (mono and bi-amp parallel), with a continuous average power output from 20 Hz to 20kHz.

As far as the looks of this power amplifier goes, you still get the same McIntosh large meter knob to the left of the faceplate of the amplifier that controls the watts meter, letting you turn the faceplate lights off or on and also allowing you to check out how many watts of power your amplifier is generating to your speakers at any given moment. The large knob to the right allows you to use the remote to power the system on or off. Looking to the back of the unit, you will see eight binding posts in a red and black configuration standing on top of the stainless steel cabinet which contains the "guts" of this two-channel power amplifier. If you still need to see something on this unit that reminds you that you are still living in the 21st century, you will not find it with the MC252. The sleek-looking, yet elegant old-school design will take you back to a time in which pure power was the main concern of every audio manufacturer, unlike the sometimes needlessly flashy design of some other well-known manufacturers of today.

## Set Up

The testing of the MC252 took place at my favorite home theater store in the Las Vegas area, [Premiere Home Entertainment](#). The owners of this store favor McIntosh equipment so much that they use their biggest showroom primarily to show off an incredible array of McIntosh audio equipment that includes two MC1.2KW's to power the B&W 802 Diamond Series of loudspeakers that is featured in the showroom's main configuration of audio, along with two huge Aerial Acoustics Model 7B Loudspeakers that are used to accentuate the musical clarity of any CD played on the system's Marantz BD 8002 Blu-Ray and CD player.

The room itself is about 15 feet wide, by 17 feet long, with insulated curtains hanging over the sliding-glass entrance way, so the room has a nice, airy feel to it, which brings out the audio clarity of most of the music played through the audio system featured in the "McIntosh Showroom." The loudspeakers that were primarily used during this demonstration were the Aerial Acoustics Model 7B speakers, and when I first saw how elegant

and sophisticated these speakers look, with their wood-grain casing and their two huge woofers located near the bottom of these towering beauties, I felt my excitement level rise as I could not wait for the demonstration to begin.

An audio rack to the left of the room contained the MC252, along with three MC501's directly underneath the Furman IT-Power Conditioner that all the power amplifiers in the rack were connected to, which ensured that the sheer power of the McIntosh amps never pushed distorted signals to the MX136 Audio Video Control Center that integrated all the showroom's components together. The Aerial Acoustics speakers were aligned at an 80-degree angle facing the listener, placed at about seven feet apart from each other and about 9 feet away from the chair I was sitting in. The Aerial Acoustics Model 7B speakers consists of two twin towers encasing the two 7" woofers and the 5" midrange as well as the 1" tweeter on top of the towers. These hefty speakers weigh 100 pounds each and the midrange section of the speakers is basically an unshielded variation of Aerial's CC3-center channel driver that comes with a wool-filled compartment, ensuring that music emanating from this part of the speaker comes out at full impact, with little to no displacement of sound.

A major component of this entire system sits in the middle of the room: the McIntosh MX136 receives all the audio and video signals from the A/V sources and processes those signals into the correct sound/audio modes that best suits the type of input the MX136 receives. This a/v processor contains four HDMI digital video inputs and five Component video inputs, all which are assignable to any source you need to configure to your particular needs. The surround modes included in this model are DTS ES, DTS Neo:6, Dolby Digital, EX and PL Iix. Surprisingly, this component only weighs a light 31 pounds and contains a total harmonic distortion rate of 0.0005% from 20hz to 20khz, which should help to eliminate any power line noise running through most audio systems.

Another element of this a/v configuration was the Marantz BD8002 Blu-Ray player that would be playing all the media during the demonstration for the MC252. This black-metal Blu-Ray/CD player sits roughly 17 inches high and 15 inches long, weighs 23 pounds and contains a dynamic range of 110dbs. The unit also contains 7.1 channel analog connections and will also let you use an HDMI connection for digital processing. It comes already installed with Dolby True HD as well as dts HD Master Audio processing that will handle any Blu-Ray DVD's audio soundtracks if they are enabled with the latest upgraded surround sound modes that future DVD's should be including on a regular basis very shortly. It also helps that this Blu-Ray player features advanced D/A converters that produces 24-bit resolution as well as providing a dynamic audio range that exceeds 120 db, almost guaranteeing that every CD I would be putting in the player's CD tray would get the full push of audio signals that I needed to experience the entire power of the MC252 power amplifier.

## **Movies and Music**

The co-owner of Premiere Home Entertainment, Jim Wicklund, wanted me to hear some very well-engineered esoteric and moody tracks from the band "Depeche Mode" off their 1989 Reprise release, "Violator." After hearing the intro to the first song off of that CD, "World in My Eyes", I could see why he wanted me to hear this band's widely varied collection of keyboard-dominated songs on the CD. The aforementioned song starts out with a weird intro that sounded like an undersea monster rising to the surface of Loch Ness, and then dropping back into the black water without a sound. The keyboards then quickly cut in as the main vocalist, Martin Gore, begins singing in his dark yet captivating voice and the quiet thuds of the drums begins to pick up momentum. The MC252 had no trouble delivering the needed power to bring the concise and clear song structure of this electronic band to fully envelop the showroom in Depeche Mode's pulsating musical soundstage. Since the first song off of this CD was such a good showcase for proving that the MC252 could manage to refine the sound from such an eclectic band, I could not wait to hear if the next song could also prove the MC252 worthy of carrying the correct amount of power to the entire audio system on display.

"Sweetest Perfection" was the next song on the CD, and it began with the eerie sound of the keyboards delivering a warm and gentle strain of high-pitched treble that cannot be easily described, but the weird tones fit the song's lyrics about yearning for a woman that you know you should stay away from but find it impossible to accomplish. I turned up the master volume control so I could see if the amplifier lost some amount of compression in the audio range when the song began to feature some low-end emanating from the acoustic bass used on the song. I also listened for the next few minutes to hear any lack of compression in the mid range or any degree of flatness to the tone of the song, and I could not hear either one, definitely a good sign that the MC252 knows exactly how much power to produce at each moment the unit is powered up. It must also be noted that the Aerial Acoustics were able to duplicate "Sweetest Perfection's" drum sound with no problem, even though the percussion on this airy song is just slightly in the background of the song. But since the Aerial Acoustics thrive on subtlety, they really brought out the invigorating and palpable crisp tones of the drummer's driving rhythm of this track.

The most popular song in Depeche Mode's entire career, "Personal Jesus" pounded out from the Aerial Acoustics loudspeakers next with a precision and clarity that I had never heard before when listening to this synth-driven power song. Gore's vocals popped with a cadence and vocal structure that was sent out to the speakers with exceptional gritty fervor. If there were any "hiccups" in the sound engineering of this song, the Aerial Acoustics would have highlighted them with clarity, but I could not discern any minor or major lapses in sonic

displacement in the song "Personal Jesus." A true test for any power amplifier worth its salt is to experiment with sound placement by moving around the room that you are in and seeing if the audio follows you or if it only has one truly "sweet spot" that cannot be easily reproduced. I did just that during this song, and the sound not only followed me to the right corner of the room, it actually sounded more fully solid there than where I was sitting for the last ten minutes of the audio demonstration, another solid sign that the MC252 could deliver power where it's needed the most, in the entire soundstage of the listening room, not just one or two spots.

To experience the full depth of the MC252's power, and to witness just how the entire audio system I was listening to would handle a variation of jazz vocals, deep acoustic bass tones and piano, I loaded up Diana Krall's 1999 release on Impulse! Records entitled "When I Look into Your Eyes." I skipped to a bouncy jazz number entitled "Popsicle Toes." This was an excellent song to sample as it highlighted the pure warmth of the MC252, along with the mid-range nuances that the Aerial Acoustics loudspeakers brought into the audio experience. The acoustic bass melody really sprang to life during this song, and you could actually hear the bass player's fingers snapping against the taut bass strings as the piano player began adding his flourishes to the snappy tune. The main elements that distinguish the MC252 power amplifiers from other power amps in the same price range, is the ability the MC252 has in delivering a much more "natural" sound to music CD's such as Diana Krall's 1999 album, as well as bringing the high end of her vocals to new sonic heights without any sound blur or coarse harmonics. The next song up was a very laid-back and slow building tune called "I've Got You Under My Skin." I was able to discern how this audio system sounded during the quietest parts of this song and how the MC252 amplifier would convey the emptiness of sound when there was a break in the vocals. The amplifier did a stellar job of eliminating any kind of noise at all during the silent parts, and delivered the perfect touch when it came to allowing the orchestration of this quiet piece to overwhelm the song when needed, but with a laid-back kind of smoothness that was never crude sounding.

### **Downside**

While the MC252 brought a natural kind of warm sound to the audio system, it also delivers a bright kind of clarity to the audio configuration that might prove too overwhelming to an audio system that's not set up with loudspeakers that can handle the range delivered to the speaker's tweeters. Even though the MC252 did a good job at sending quality mid range and treble tones to the loudspeakers, the bass was just a tad too light for my tastes. Your subwoofer that is currently integrated into your own audio system should be the right match for this power amplifier, otherwise you might be disappointed by the less than stellar low end that the MC252 powers out.

Another negative aspect of this power amplifier is its sheer size and weight. At 95 pounds and standing at ten inches tall and 15 inches wide, your audio rack must be customized to handle such a formidable unit and you really need to use the most reliable and expensive cable wire to get the most clean and concise power from the MC252..

### **Conclusion**

Suffice it to say that the McIntosh MC252 Two-Channel power amplifier does not disappoint when it comes to supplying the exact amount of power needed to drive any high-end audio system on the market today. The amp's ability to reproduce the full audio spectrum when it comes to intricate musical displays of jazz vocals or the much more electronically-inclined music of synth bands from the 1980's, you cannot really go wrong by purchasing one of these amplifiers for your own sound system. The engineers at McIntosh have outdone themselves by implementing several new selling points in the design of the MC252, including the exclusive power guard system which protects your loudspeakers and audio system by adjusting the input level at all times, which prevents clipping and sudden drops in sound clarity.

You must have a really good idea if your system at home would be a perfect match for the MC252 before purchasing one. This amplifier has a substantial ability to drive mid-range sounds to any pair of loudspeakers that need it, but since the low-end suffers a bit, I would highly recommend that your audio system features a very fatty subwoofer so that you can still get the low-end signals that you really need, while at the same time you are upgrading your high-end so much that even the old music CD's you have in your vast musical collection sounds as fresh as the day you bought them. And if you are a genuine fan of the McIntosh label, you will not be disappointed in purchasing at least one of the MC252's for your system