

Bravo Maestro!

Music Maestro please! The new high-end Audio Analogue duo are two slices of musical heaven

PRODUCT Audio Analogue Maestro 192/24 and Maestro Settanta

TYPE CD player and integrated amplifier

PRICE £1,650 (CD player) £1,750 (amplifier)

KEY FEATURES (CD player) Size: 45x14x41cm

• Weight: 15kg • 24-bit/192kHz upsampling converter
• Balanced (XLR) and single-ended (phono) outputs
• (Amp) Size: 45x14x41cm • Weight: 18kg • Rated power: 2x70W • Five inputs • MM/MC phono stage

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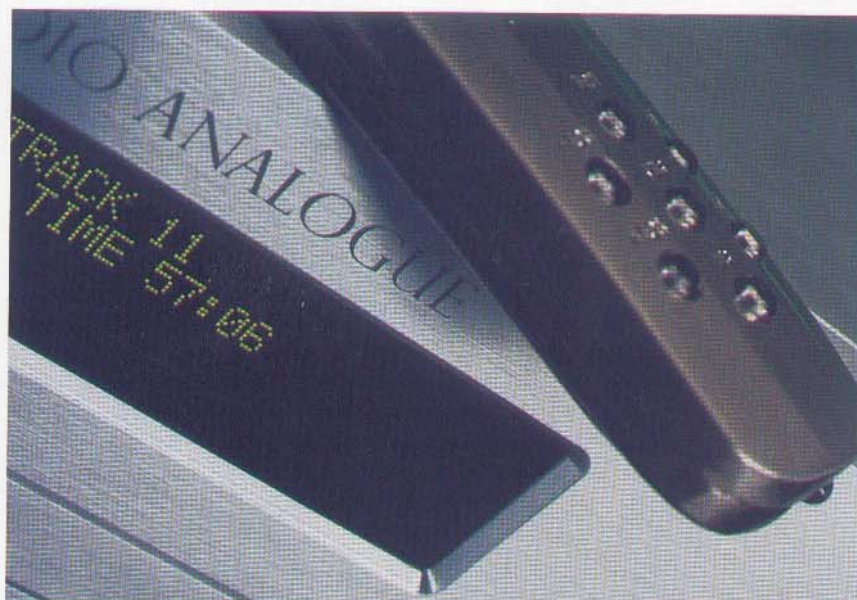
A CD player is essentially a specialised computer. It's possible – and altogether practical – to consider amplifiers in much the same light. Audio Analogue is now in the habit of making extremely specialised computers, and guess what... they've never sounded better.

The new Maestro 192/24 CD player and Maestro Settanta integrated amp are very sophisticated audio computing stations, but without the complexity that would appear to entail: just two knobs and a display on the amp and a seven-button rosette, a standby button and a display with the CD player. Yet both have a flexibility that belies the elegantly minimalist lines. Both feature RS232C connections at the rear for control by AMX or Crestron multiroom controllers, the CD player has both XLR balanced and (high-quality) phono single-ended connections and the amp has a built-in MM/MC phono stage that can be accessed from the remote. Those big knobs on the front of the Maestro Settanta are not what they seem, either – they are essentially digital switches leading back to logic circuits.

The Maestro 192/24 represents the top of the Audio Analogue CD tree. It's built around a humble CD-ROM mechanism, like the Primo before it. This is no bad idea, as CD-ROM mechs are plentiful and robust. Unlike the Primo though, it takes the S/PDIF output of the CD-ROM mechanism and puts it through the company's 24-bit/192kHz upsampling circuit, with Analog Devices chips. This is fed by a potent power supply – eight regulators and two power transformers. Naturally the demon jitter is held at bay, even through the sample rate converter, and everything else bristles with high-class componentry.

In contrast to the 192/24's range-topping status, the Settanta is the lowest rung in the Maestro amp ladder. It's a 2x70-watt design with five single-ended inputs (the first of





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which is switchable between line level and phono) and uses fully electronic switching throughout. The volume control is a buffered 100-step resistor array, selected electronically, and – like the CD player – sports high-quality components internally and has a massive power transformer driving individual supplies fine-tuned for each section. According to the literature, it doubles its power from 70 watts into eight ohms to 140 watts into four, a statistic that will bring satisfied, knowing nods and mumblings of “good, stiff power supply” from the technoscenti.

Opening those delicious alloy cases goes some way to demonstrate why the AA kit is so damn heavy. It’s filled with heatsinking to dissipate the heat generated in the amp stages and power supply. The amp is more densely packed, with four pesto-tin sized reservoir capacitors, massive heatsinks and a hefty power transformer. Although it may not be germane to the sonics of the player, the wiring of the transformer isn’t as dressed as you might find in a Naim amp, for example. Instead of neatly arranged rows of leadout wires aligned with military precision, the cables are just tied together in a more organic manner.

No review of this AA Maestro duo would be complete without discussing their fantastic remote handsets. Chrome, teardrop shaped and with a rosette of buttons controlling amp and CD, for once all the usual grumbles fade away and you end up wanting to have two almost identical handsets in the room. They feel as good as they look, too, with excellent weight and the right balance. They are so Italianate, they look like the shiny-cool bits that occasionally fall off Alfa Romeos.

SOUND QUALITY

A good 24 hours are required to bring both CD and amp on song; they sound good out of the boxes, but get better with time. Only one oddity springs to mind in functionality terms – why does the CD player include balanced connections but not the amplifier?

This duo marks a continued return to form for Audio Analogue, first seen in the diminutive Primo products tested a couple of months back in HFC 255. After fabulous, classic products like the Puccini SE, AA seemed to rest on its laurels and some of the intervening products have been considered relatively so-so by comparison. The Maestro designs of old, for example, always had promise and poise, but not so much of the passion. The new Maestro Settanta and 192/24 hark back to earlier, more sanguine times.

These are detailed and satisfying sounding products, with an amp that has ideas above its station; there seems no way this model delivers just 70 watts as suggested by its maker... it has all the makings of a bigger amp, with the sort of volume levels and bottom end grip that seems more like a 150-watter at least.

The upsampling DAC makes the player sound truly musical and magical, the way few players costing less than £4,000 could before the turn of the 21st Century. There is a strong, robust, Wadia-like sound, here – the player is smoothly extended, detailed and exceptionally natural. There is also a decent sense of soundstage, though with a close-knit bolus of sound between the speakers rather than the wide steppes of some of the masterpieces of the CD player art. That’s about the only area where the AA shows its limitations against the big league, however. In fact, the player is so enjoyable that it invites the question about the need for SACD or DVD-Audio – if CD can sound this good and there are millions of CDs on sale, why bother with new formats? In particular, the close-miked vocals of Damien Rice’s ‘O’ came out so beautifully well, and the CD layers of SACDs like Eleanor McEvoy’s *Early Hours* were so well presented, it was hard to question the performance in absolute terms. Yes, you get slightly better sound as the money rises, but the law of diminishing returns kicks in around this point.

The Settanta amplifier is almost in the same league, but in fairness, it has more rivals from amp manufacturers (and, indeed, from AA’s own higher end range). Once again it’s consummately musical, fluid and detailed. It is also extremely extended in both the top and bottom ends of the register, yet has a smooth and attractive mid-band. Perhaps the amp is not the most keenly dynamic product on the market today, but it makes up for this with its smooth and detailed presentation.

But the two together blend so perfectly that you would never want to break the chain. They look right together and they sound even better. The refinement and detail of the ■



Q & A

We spoke to Stefano Blanda, Audio Analogue's managing director, about his brand's latest pairing



HFC: What changes have been made to the new Maestro Settanta?

SB: The Maestro Settanta can be considered a simplified, less powerful version of the big Maestro Integrated. The Maestro Settanta has completely new control and protection circuits and, like other new products in the Maestro line, it uses Vishay-Dale military standard resistors and polypropylene WIMA Capacitors (MKP4 and MKP10 series).

What about the 192/24?

The new Maestro CD 192/24 and the old Maestro CD player are two completely different products: from the CD mechanism to the output stage there is almost nothing similar. The only common characteristics are that both have a fully discrete and balanced circuitry.

Will these developments trickle down the Audio Analogue range?

When we start the development of a new product, generally speaking we try to give to each model its own character. Of course, at the end, many things can be similar about the aesthetic or in the choice of components. This can be even more evident in products in the same family.

All new products are designed with quality of construction, raw materials used and especially sound quality in mind. But we never forget that our company is quite famous as a manufacturer of products that are good value for money and our target is to keep the same philosophy for the entry level as for the real hi-end products.

The CD includes balanced outputs, but the amp has no balanced input. Why?

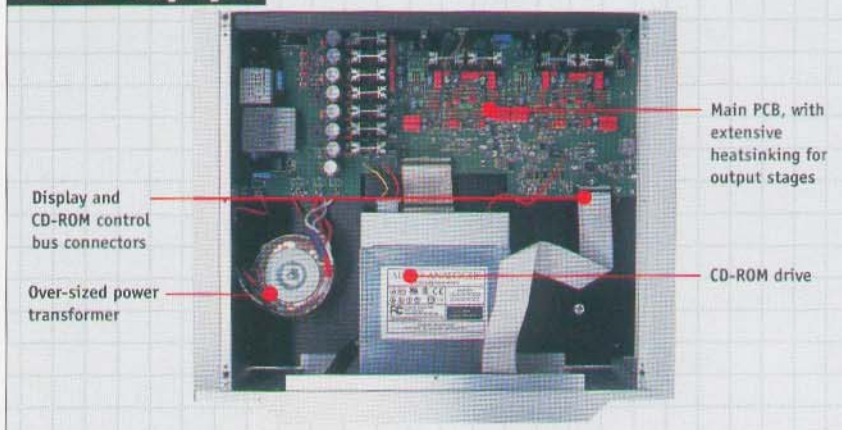
For the size it has it would be almost impossible to do a real fully balanced integrated amplifier, so instead of having a pseudo-balanced input we preferred to give the end users the possibility to use the amplifier only in its best conditions using only the unbalanced inputs.

What's next for the Maestro range?

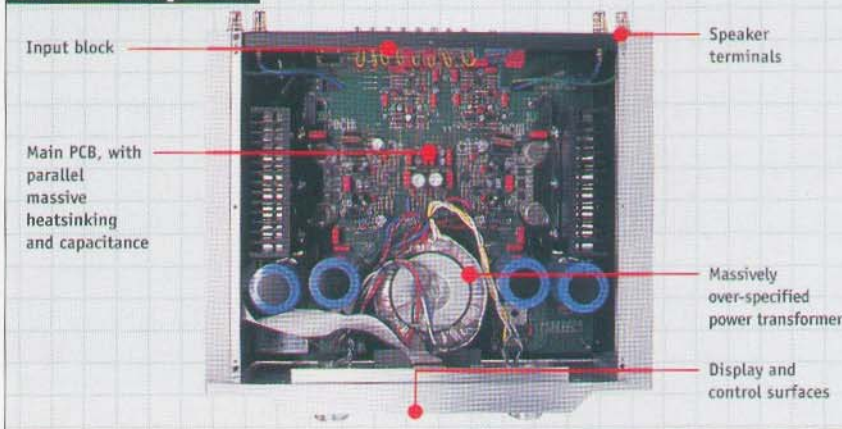
We are focusing our efforts mainly on six new products: a reference SACD player, a reference phono stage, a 100/120-watt integrated amp, a Class A integrated amp, a Class A power amp and a Class A monoblock. All of these products will be introduced between the end of 2004 and 2005.



Detail - CD player



Detail - Amplifier



CD player combines with the energy and musicality of the Settanta to make a sound that gives a palpable sense of 'thereness' that only high-end gear can muster. Out came old faves like Tom Waits' *Rain Dogs* and the diction became almost understandable, the space around the notes (always important in a sparse recording like this) became more expansive and the sense of bonkers fun came across perfectly. The same applied throughout, save for some discs so thrashy that they drove the amp to the limits.

Of course, neither component is beyond criticism. The CD player may be a champion resolver and the amp as sweet as a nut, but the two don't single-handedly revolutionise audio. The neutrality of the Maestro 192/24 can come across as worthy-dull in the wrong context, and its magical transformation of CDs does not apply universally - stick on a bad disc and you get bad sound, while some players do a better job of bringing out the good side of a bad disc. Similarly, the smoothness of the

Settanta amp can readily descend into being too warm and rose-tinted with some speakers.

And yet, given the state of today's high-end hi-fi scene, this Audio Analogue Maestro set represents something of a bargain. You get all the looks, all the build and much of the performance for a fraction of the cost of the big-name league. Specialised computers they may arguably be, but your PC will never sound this good! **HFC**

Alan Sircom

VERDICT - MAESTRO 192/24 CD

SOUND >> 90%	CONCLUSION The perfect, great-sounding high-tech antidote for those who don't want to make the move to DVD-Audio and SACD.
FEATURES >> 84%	
BUILD >> 93%	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 89%
VALUE >> 87%	

VERDICT - MAESTRO SETTANTA AMP

SOUND >> 88%	CONCLUSION A technically advanced, deceptively powerful amp with an attractive sound, if one that may prove rose-tinted for some speakers.
FEATURES >> 84%	
BUILD >> 93%	HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 88%
VALUE >> 86%	

