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It's been a long time since Marantz sold a serious hi-fi turntable, but the new TT15S1 is here at last. David Price puts it through its paces...



As I write this, news comes that CD has just had its best ever year. Strange then, that I'm sitting here, reviewing Marantz's first turntable aproper since Compact Disc was invented, the brand new £999.95 TT15S1... How so? Well, when large multinational companies like Marantz start marketing turntables again, then you can be sure that there's real demand for vinyl.

It's no secret that one man behind Marantz's success – Ken Ishiwata – is something of an analogue addict. Sadly, if you chat to many high-ups in big hi-fi companies, they'll happily admit to either not owning a turntable or (at best) having it sat up in the loft boxed since the days of Margaret Thatcher, shoulder pads and red braces. As both a vinylista and an audio mover-and-shaker, KI is almost in a gang of one.

His own turntable is a Marantz

TT10000 (his own variation of the classic late seventies 'Esotec' TT1000 – with a production run totalling, ermm, one...) To this you can add a Koetsu Rosewood Signature cartridge (*de rigueur* with vinyl aficionados, inevitably) and his own assorted home-made tube and solid-state phono stages. Despite being behind some of the very best sounding CD spinners ever made, analogue is his reference – and his digital gear is assessed by how it performs relative to this, not the other way round). With this in mind, surely a new record deck from Marantz was only a matter of time?

Well, the backroom boys at Marantz were sceptical all the same – this is not traditional Marantz territory (not in the modern age at least), especially in the UK where the company is still associated (wrongly, in my view) with budget CD players. As a result, the TT15 was more of a leap of faith for the company's top brass than you might

think. To wit, they weren't prepared to tool up for a completely new design, and instead opted to do what Marantz does (very) well, which is to tweak another manufacturer's design...

IN DETAIL

Clearaudio's entry-level Emotion was the deck that KI decided to cast his spell upon – and why not? It's a well conceived bit of kit; simple and elegant, well made at the price and sounds good to boot. The TT15S1 isn't simply a rebadged Clearaudio though – there's a considerable number of changes.

The TT15S1 is a non-suspended sub-platterless design with an 420x137x360mm Acrylic plinth and platter, the latter driven by an endless silicon belt around its rim (Michell-style) by an AC synchronous motor – total weight is 8.8kg. Unlike the original Clearaudio, the 3mm platter boasts a thick felt platter mat – an interesting choice,



as the trend in recent years has been away from this. To ensure record stability, a 'Clever Clamp' is included – a very simple but effective plastic dished affair. The polished, hardened steel and sintered bronze main bearing feels a quality item, its spindle sitting very tight inside the bearing housing. The company claims a signal to noise ratio of 80dB and a wow and flutter figure of 0.07% RMS (DIN) – not great by superdeck standards, but decent enough.

The tonearm is also a variant of a Clearaudio design (the 'Satisfy'), a multi-pivot type with wolfram bearing shafts, its polished ends running in sapphire watch bearings. The arm's vertical bearing is of long life ceramic. The anodised aluminium arm tube is straight, with Clearaudio OFC 'superwire' used inside. The counterweight screws on and then fastens with a tiny locknut, and bias adjustment is magnetic rather than the more common (at this price) weight and pulley arrangement. The supplied Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood MM cartridge is a nice touch, as it makes the Marantz a neat, and complete, package – precisely what this product is all about.

There's no doubt that when assembled, the TT15S1 seems an extremely pleasing turntable. It looks gorgeous, and feels it too. Best of all is the fact that it's an all-in-one package – you get a motor unit, tonearm and cartridge, all of which are quality items designed to work synergistically with one another. However, as turntable packages go, this is a fiddly thing to build up. We're not in Rega P5 territory, where everything comes bolted together and all you have to do is put the platter on, plug in and cue up. Rather, the Marantz comes as a big Meccano kit that you have to build yourself. Now, it's possible that your friendly local Marantz dealer can do it for you, but as many audio emporiums these days seem to know more about composite video than cartridge compliance, I wouldn't be too sure... So my first quibble is that – whilst not being an evening's work like, say, a Michell GyroDec, this is no plug and play design...

Essentially, once you've pulled all the bits out of the foam packing, you have to put on the supplied white gloves (nice touch – it reduces the risk of you sullyng the plinth's

beautiful matt white Acrylic finish), squirt a dab of oil into the main bearing housing, insert the spindle, screw in the tonearm (after having installed the cartridge first), wire in the earth lead, connect up the motor, fit the platter, balance the arm, align the cartridge, tighten up all the bits, fit the belt and err, that's it. Piece of cake (to me, but not to someone who's getting back into vinyl after twenty years away – or worse still, who's a newcomer!)...

SOUND QUALITY

When assessing the sonics of this deck, it's important to remember that the bundled cartridge is worth a good £200 of anyone's money, and that there's also a fine tonearm too. Essentially then, it's up against the likes of Rega's P5 (with Super Elys) and Michell's TecnoDec/TecnoArm (a) with, say, a Goldring G1042. Oh dear! These two aforementioned machines define the state of the 'affordable audiophile turntable' art – both are exceptionally good packages, with real engineering innovation and superb build and finish. They might lack the sophistication of £1,500 machines (with which they share

some DNA), but they come surprisingly close in performance terms for a lot less money... The new Marantz TT15S1 has something of a fight on its hands.

Having a Rega P5 to hand, I initially didn't fit the Clearaudio cartridge, so I could get an accurate gauge of how the two decks performed with a Shure V15VxMR on board. It was fascinating how different the two performed. If you remember last month's review of the Rega, you'll recall that it's an extremely musical and engaging deck with a somewhat two dimensional soundstage and rather a small palette of tonal colours available to it. Well, the Marantz isn't any of these. Rather, it's quite an 'analogue' – and in some ways – traditional sounding device, with a warmer, fuller tonality and a more enveloping recorded acoustic.

Kicking off with ABC's 'The Lexicon of Love' (appropriate, I thought, considering it's just been remastered on silver disc), the TT15S1 presented a very pleasing sound. It's obviously more capacious than the Rega, with instruments hanging back and projecting forward more easily, and the left to right soundstage is expansive too. In fact, it does that clever trick of making the loudspeakers seem to 'disappear' – something that not even SACD can do as well. As the slow orchestral intro morphed into the song in earnest, those eighties Linn drums crashed with gusto and the song got into its groove. The TT15S1 sounded like it was loving every minute – engagingly musical, dynamically expressive and with no shortage of *joie de vivre*, it proved a real hoot to listen to.

Although in some ways less 'emotionally constrained' than the Rega, and better able to let the rhythms flow in an organic and unfettered sort of way (in a sort-of Thorens TD160 style), the P5 did prove to have more precision and grip. This was particularly obvious on the leading edges of notes; attack transients were more accurately carried on the Brit deck, meaning that the musicians' individual accents and inflections (i.e. the phrasing) was slightly more explicit. This meant with long, deep, intricate groove-based pop such as 'Date Stamp' from the same album, the Rega was more able to convey the song's reason for being. Still, the Marantz was certainly no slouch, it too could be extremely quick of the mark, its sense of effortlessness making up on the swings

what it lost on the roundabouts.

New Order's 'World in Motion' on 12" showed the TT15S1 to be an extremely satisfying listen, with oodles of pace, punch and power. Bass is surprisingly fulsome for a deck with such a basic plinth design (although me putting it on Audiophile Furniture Base SP01 platforms certainly didn't hurt), and in this respect it made the Rega sound just a tad lightweight. Sequenced basslines were fast, full and fluid via the Marantz, while the Rega made them sound a tad lighter, tighter and more 'joined up'. Neither presentation was obviously better; both proved very enjoyable and left me musing about how different analogue can sound (with any two classy £1,000 CD players, the differences would be far less explicit and more nuanced!)

Moving to Lonnie Smith's 'Think', and the Marantz proved obviously more at home. The Rega is a fairly 'technical' sounding machine, working very much in the domain of time rather than space. The Marantz is the opposite, and given a nice broad canvas of sound with which to work – such as the huge recorded acoustic on this classic sixties BlueNote recording – and it flies. The Rega sounded two dimensional ('spatially constrained') by comparison, but there was no doubting its superiority with rhythmic accenting of the music. It was as if the Marantz swayed smoothly in time with the groove, while the Rega pogo-ed like its life was at stake. Still, the superior depth perspective of the TT15S1 helped convey the atmosphere of the live event better, and gave that all important sense of being there that vinyl is so famous for.

Bolting in the supplied Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood moving magnet was an interesting experience. Tracking at the recommended 2g, this is a fast, lithe cartridge in the Audio Technica/ Linn mould, and as such is a superb synergistic match for the Marantz. Now, the TT15S1 was never going to have as full, strong bass as the likes of a Michell Orbe, Clearaudio Reference or Marantz TT1000, so it's not like it had to give the '15 a huge fillip in the treble department, but what it does do is provide a little bit of 'pep' which makes for a wonderful package. Simple acoustic music, such as the sublime sixties strains of John Coltrane and Jonny Hartman's 'Lush Life', is where this turntable shines. If you ask too much of it – for example to cut through the complex mix of Rush's 'Distant Early Warning' – then

it shows its budget roots, but given a rich analogue recording with simple production, it shines. Tonally, the TT15S1 is excellent at the price, making the Rega sound somewhat grey, if not 'black and white'.

CONCLUSION

The Marantz's rich tonal palette, allied to its natural musicality is to many people what analogue is all about. In a sense, if you want metronomic precision and 'analysis uber alles', some would sagely suggest you knock on digital's door. So for those wanting the joys of vinyl without having to mix and match, and/or spend an arm and a leg, the TT15S1 is an excellent product. It's a very big hearted and engaging machine which runs rings around any equivalently priced CD, DVD-A or SACD machine (even with the best hi res stereo remaster), yet is simple to use and cool to look at. Only its inferior detail retrieval compared to Rega and Michell price rivals keep it off the very top spot – that and the fact that many of its intended audience will find it a chore to set up and/or find a dealer who can do it for them. A great re-entry into analogue for Marantz then – but I'm afraid it begs the question: when will we get a TT15 KI Signature...?

REVIEWER'S NOTES

- the deck isn't brilliantly isolated from the outside world, so proper placement is vital to get it to give of its best; ideally a wall shelf should be used
- with 4mV output, the supplied ClearAudio Virtuoso Wood should drive any MM input with ease; we'd recommend a full sounding device such as a Graham Slee
- the tonearm, although a budget device, is finished to a very high standard and is decently adjustable too – it also gains cred points for not being a Rega RB250 (or derivative)!
- speed stability is good, but not up there with a Rega P5 with offboard motor PSU; it's a shame there's no option for this on the TT15S1; the KI Sig perchance...?

VERDICT

Consummately musical sound, superb build and finish and a great bundled cartridge make this a brilliant package at the price.

MARANTZ TT15S1 £999.95

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THOUSAND CC

Twenty one years ago today, £999 would have bought you this – the legendary Marantz Esotec TT1000 turntable. When a Linn LP12 cost £374 then this beauty cost big money, which allied to the UK hi-fi press's state of collective denial about the superior quality of Japanese high end direct drives, meant that few sold in this country. Germany, the USA and Japan saw better sales, but to be honest, time was not on the Marantz's side, as everybody was talking about Compact Disc, and vinyl was suddenly yesterday's news. Shame, because it's an exquisite design. Boasting a stunning looking plinth of two 15mm glass layers sandwiching an 8mm aluminium alloy interlayer (weighing no less than 25.3kg) and a glass disc topped 3.4kg balanced aluminium platter, it used the (then) obligatory (for a Japanese deck) direct driven, quartz locked motor aspirated by an external power supply housed in a classy wood veneered box. Despite the massy platter, 0 to 33.33RPM took just 1.5 seconds, showing the superb torque characteristics of the motor which turned in sub 0.05% DIN peak weighted wow and flutter numbers. Like all the very best Jap direct drives, the TT1000 sounded incredibly stable, unflappable and completely in command – offering CD's attributes of pitch stability and image solidity, but with the obvious analogue benefits of dimensionality, tonal quality and musicality. In short, it was a stunning listen and would have any of today's £2,000 belt drive superdecks on the back foot if properly sited and fettled.

