



# Marantz HD-AMP1

**M**arantz MusicLink emerged in the 1990s as a range of exclusive, audiophile-grade components with a compact form factor, specifically designed and developed by Marantz's in-house sonic guru and brand ambassador, Ken Ishiwata.

These were legendary audio pieces, built to very high standards, and with a sonic and tactile appeal usually associated with much dearer, more esoteric brands. In short, MusicLink components were Marantz's statement products.

It's been a while since Marantz has released anything bearing the MusicLink moniker – but the arrival of the HD-AMP1 also heralds the return of MusicLink, with its emphasis on musicality, elegance and lavish execution.

The HD-AMP1 features a compact but classy form factor that has strong life-style appeal. The combination of black faceplate and high-gloss wood-veneered cheeks is certainly different from the norm, although the 'porthole' display is a trademark Marantz feature. A brushed silver fascia finish is also offered.

The front panel is dominated by two

large rotary controllers – source selection on the left, volume adjustment on the right. A USB Type A port accepts flash drives and iPod/iPhones, while there's also a full-size headphone jack.

A soft-touch on/off button powers up the HD-AMP1, while a set-up button invokes a configuration menu on the display. The latter is legible enough, but a little on the small side – although the menu structure is intuitive enough.

The supplied remote control handset offers source selection, playback functions including transport commands and repeat/random selection, volume up and down, and a cursor controller.

The rear panel proves there's more to this little Marantz than meets the eye. It features sturdy, gold-plated binding posts, and an IEC kettle-type power socket.

Only two stereo RCA analogue input sets are provided, which may seem a little sparse, but those are joined by three digital inputs (one RCA coaxial, two Toslink optical), as well as an asynchronous USB Type B input for hooking up a computer.

Thus the Marantz also fulfils a DAC role – and a pretty comprehensive one at that. It employs an ESS Sabre DAC chip

that copes with PCM files of up to 384 kHz/32-bit resolution, as well as with DSD at 2.8 MHz, 5.6 MHz and even 11.2 MHz. Also provided is a choice of two selectable digital filters.

The HD-AMP1 is nominally a Class D switching amp – a Marantz first – but with a twist that treats the feedback loop differently to minimise speaker-specific anomalies. HDAM-SA2 op amp modules are retained for the analogue and digital sections, as well as for the dedicated headphone amp.

I hooked up the Primare CD22 reviewed elsewhere in this issue to the Marantz as a primary source, utilising its digital and analogue outputs, while our KEF LS50s were on speaker duty. I also plugged a flash drive with music into the front panel USB Type A slot.

The HD-AMP1 sounded lively and exciting with a compelling sense of pace and rhythm.

There was nothing 'small' about this sound: the amp treated its sonic wares with plenty of urge and authority.

The tonal balance was neutral rather than overtly warm or clean, delivering a sound that was full and wholesome –





there certainly wasn't any sign of any digital glare or high-frequency fizz. The midrange was smooth and clear, while bass notes were presented with loads of oomph and authority.

Also instantly noticeable was the ability of the HD-AMP1 to create a large, engaging and well-dimensioned soundstage, on which the music was allowed full freedom to breathe and express itself.

On Mark Knopfler's *Tracker* (Verve CD), a combination of swift pace, solid tonality and airy stage made for a riveting listening experience. 'Laughs And Jokes' was presented with ample authority, not least because of the solid bass underpinning the performance.

The acoustic bass sounded both powerful and boisterous, but never flabby or ponderous, easily keeping up with the percussion's engrossing beat.

Knopfler's guitar was rendered with a richness and a presence that made it sound almost startlingly real. His vocals were also incisively presented, but without dominating proceedings. The Marantz had no trouble with the often fully populated arrangements, retaining both its agility and its lucidity.

Thus, it was easy to pick out the drum kit's snare and hi-hat, while the amp easily kept track of the dynamics. It always sounded completely in control, but never to the detriment of the music's flow or sparkle, while the sound image was marvellously open and accessible.

The on-board DAC does a great job of making the most of the digital signal, even in the company of the talented Primare. The sound was spread wider with the Marantz, filling the stage from side to side and offering a good perception of depth.

However, the Primare was better at creating a sense of three-dimensionality

across all three planes. Common to both scenarios was loads of detail and finesse – even on the crowded soundstage – revealing surprise elements like the organ, and the flutes.

The Marantz operates well with USB flash drives, and navigating multiple folders was easier than expected. Again the sound had plenty of meat and impetus while retaining clarity and insight.

On 'Don't Know What It means, from the Tedeschi Trucks Band's album *Let Me Get By* (Fantasy 96/24 FLAC), the bass guitar takes on the anchor role, with a funky lead guitar vying for attention with the sassy brass section, and the slide of Derek Trucks adding to the dialogue.

Tedeschi's vocals were fresh and vital, despite the full-house arrangement, easily projecting above the dense tapestry of sound, yet never separated from the impact and impetus of the music. Again, the Marantz sounded eloquent and musical, ensuring that both the broad brush strokes and the subtle details – piano, organ – were brought to the fore.

By the way, the headphone jack offers three-step adjustable gain to cope with difficult transducer loads. The amp's characteristic large, generous sound carried across into the cans too – the amp had no trouble driving my Sennheiser HD800s, and sounded marvellous with the HiFiMan HD400S Planars, too.

All in all, the listening experience remained a cut above, and continued to exceed expectations. This is an amp that sounds bigger and more generous than it looks, while also introducing a sense of musical refinement and believability to the equation.

The smaller form factor only serves to emphasise the tactile appeal and obvious

workmanship exuded by the HD-AMP1, while the combination of analogue and digital inputs, as well as USB, ensures ample versatility.

Welcome back, MusicLink!

Deon Schoeman

## VITAL STATS

Power output .....	2x 70/35 watts RMS per channel (4/8 ohms)
Frequency response .....	20 Hz - 50 kHz
Signal-to-noise ratio .....	105 dB
Analogue inputs .....	2x stereo RCA
Digital inputs .....	1x coaxial RCA, 2x Toslink optical, 1x USB Type B, 1x USB Type A (front)
Outputs .....	Subwoofer out, five-way binding posts, headphone jack
Dimensions (WxDxH)	304 x 352 x 107 mm
Weight .....	5.8 kg

### Verdict

Beautifully crafted, compact amplifier also fulfils DAC and headphone amp roles. Sounds lively, exciting – and a lot bigger than its form factor suggests!

Price ..... R19 990

Supplied by HFX Systems  
011-907-9092

e-Mail sales@hfxsystems.co.za

Website www.hfxsystems.co.za

OUR RATING: 86/100

