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Marantz AV8003/MM8003 review

★★★★★ By [Richard Stevenson](#), August 16, 2008 [Receivers](#) 🎵

Marantz chases Denon into the upper reaches of the pre-power AV market.



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OUR VERDICT

A fantastic system that offers competitive value for money and some impressive features

+ FOR

- Awesome value for money
- Sophisticated sound
- Balanced hook-up
- Networking features

- AGAINST

- No GUI
- Relatively limited feature count
- Lack of wi-fi

So, [Marantz](#) launches a flagship multichannel AV pre- and power combo in the AV8003/MM8003 to keep up with the Denons next door.

This isn't surprising, as the two are owned by the same company and all but share office stationary in the UK. But what is surprising is the price.

This is a stonkingly huge pre-power set-up for one-third the cost of Denon's flagship AVP & POA A1HD duo, and a cool five hundred quid less than Denon's AVC-A1HD integrated beastie. Sibling rivalry? More like all-out war.

Of course, to hit this rather attractive price for a two-box system, surely features have been kept to a minimum and the build quality gone all Citroen. Er, no actually. While Marantz's offering doesn't quite go to Denon's nth degree features-count or absolute battleship robustness, the 8003s are no slouches in functionality, and at least frigate class.

THX appeal

The higher price of the AV8003 processor over the power amp is indicative of the greater tech contained within. It offers full decoding of all the HD audio formats, has 4-in, 2-out v1.3a HDMI's with all the associated trimmings, and a shiny THX Ultra2 (not Ultra2 Plus) badge to wear with pride – particularly if you are a fan of the THX post-processing 'sound'.

Key internal audio design bears all the hallmarks of Marantz's hi-fi components and it offers 1080p upscaling of all video inputs (a first for Marantz) including

streamed video media.

In fact, networked media is one of the AV8003's major attractions. While there is no wireless connectivity, relying on a sole RJ-45 Ethernet network connection instead, the built-in DLNA-compatible media player offers audio, video and JPEG playback (both slideshow and thumbnail), and straightforward access to server-based media on your PC, sound-server or even a dumb NAS drive.

Spectacularly specced system

The interface is both pretty and effective, and I managed to access content from my PC even by compounding the complexity of the system with a wireless bridge. Marantz's M-DAX does a fine job of jazzing up compressed audio and the Anchor Bay scaler worked a treat on downloaded video from basic MPEG-4 files to WMV-HD at 720p.

The MM8003 power amp is an identically-sized, but much weightier beast, boasting a solid 140W to its eight channels in wide-bandwidth glory. It shares Marantz's reference M1 chassis construction, which employs a double-layer bottom plate, shock-absorbing feet and extensive copper plating.

Best of all, both units are replete with eight-channel XLR balanced connections allowing you to hookup without fear of earth loop hum or cable-borne interference.

Wrap up the whole package with a dollop of multiroom connectivity, a sprinkling of IR repeaters and 12V triggers, and ice with two remotes – including Marantz's superb RC-2002 PC-programmable remote control – and you've got a tasty-looking cake. Er, AV combo, I mean.

Cut corners

Get up close and personal with the Marantz duo, beyond the sexy, curved styling and matt black finish, and you can see a few indications of where costs have been saved.

The case, while no Kit-Kat wrapper, isn't audiophile grade, the outer-fascia panels are plastic, the XLRs lock with a sloppy action rather than a crisp one, and there is a lot of flex in the speaker terminals.

Moreover, power up the system and you are greeted with an old-school monochrome text menu rather than a more modern GUI. It's very simple to use, but at this price there is no excuse for such a visual atrocity; public flogging of the product manager should be mandatory.

And while I am giving the 8003 pair a bit of a kicking, I shall also point out the

lack of a built-in web-radio tuner (possibly a software update in the future, says Marantz), lack of USB input and... well, that's about it actually.

Gritting one's teeth and accessing the text menus takes you straight into the auto-setup routine. Set up the mic in your listening position and press start. If you want to run the full gamut of the Audyssey MultEQ abilities, in my case, to ensure the wife and both dogs are all within the surround sound sweet spot, you can re-run the process in all listening positions and calculate a best-case setup.

Big sound

And best-case is really rather good. Fortuitously arriving the same day as both *The Mummy* and *The Mummy Returns* on US Blu-ray release, the 8003 pair creates a simply huge soundstage with gin-clear detailing.

The pre-amp is smooth and fast, with the power amp supplying an abundance of welly and grunt. Our Tech Labs measured 141W into 8 ohms across five channels, which is a very good performance; the fidelity firewall rating of 167W is equally impressive.

But far from being a die-hard bass-and-effects monster, the Marantz 8003 duo is altogether more refined and subtle. Films immerse you without drowning you in LFE chaos or artificial surround sound fireworks, and dialogue is wholly natural rather than larger than life.

In a head-to-head with the similarly-priced Denon AVC-A1HD integrated, the Marantz takes a sophisticated high ground to Denon's more shirt off and up-'n'-at-'em approach. It's a very close call.

Ambient performance

With more introspective movies, the Marantz nudges ahead in seamless speaker-to-speaker integration, but the noise floor seems a little higher than the Denon's despite this test going through the full XLR balanced connection.

In the most moody of scenes in *Dark City* (Blu-ray) the oppressive ambience and real sci-fi noir flavour shine through in the intense dialogue and the rich tapestry of eerie effects.

The 8003s create a wonderfully intense movie-watching experience that sires the urge to watch another movie, and another... After *Dark City*, it has just got to be the Criterion Edition DVD of *Naked Lunch*.

The Marantz even manages to craft Cronenberg's dated stereo soundtrack into a masterpiece, enriching the mumbling dialogue of character Bill Lee (Peter

Weller) to intelligible levels.

Bass management

Of note rather than criticism, there is a marked difference in the Marantz's sound between inputting bitstream HD audio and LPCM over HDMI.

The latter has a delicate and sprightlier air, while TrueHD and DTS Master Audio are projected with greater weight and presence, a consequence of better in-processor decoding and superior (and more accurate) bass management.

That said, users can exploit this difference. Those with a decoding Blu-ray player can use it as

a subtle way of tailoring the sound dependent on content. With analogue multi-channel connection the sound is nearer the smoother LPCM balance, and you can't fail to love that for its refined aplomb.

Music fans are catered for, too. Put the AV8003 in Pure Direct mode and feed it a good-quality stereo analogue source and it does a frankly stunning impression of an audiophile stereo amplifier, with an equally lush, refined and detailed signature.

Marantz's AV Bargain

The 8003 combo never missed an audio beat or film effect for the duration of the test and its sophisticated presentation is wholly addictive and immersive. The unit's M-DAX compressed audio enhancer is one of the best out there, the media streaming facilities point the way ahead and the sheer presence on the rack, and material value for money, is unbeatable.

It also has plenty of useful features even if it is some way off the lunatic fringe levels of tweakery to be found in Pioneer's SC-LX90, Yamaha's Z11 or Denon's AVP & POA A1HD combo.

But even drawing comparison to the latter pre-power marque is praise in itself for the AV8003 and MM8003; for day-to-day home cinema and music entertainment the Marantz pair gets damn close in absolute performance to the Big D's reference standard – at less than one-third of the price.

A genuine AV bargain that deserves considerable applause.