



McIntosh MA9000 Integrated Amplifier

Passport to a universe of music

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McIntosh Labs was founded in 1949 by Frank McIntosh, a design consultant for broadcast and TV stations. Now part of the McIntosh Group, along with sister brands Audio Research, Pryma, Sonus Faber, Sumiko, Wadia and WOM, the McIntosh name remains one of the most renowned brands in audio.

As a historical aside, did you know that McIntosh amplifiers powered the sound at *Woodstock*? Five years later, the Grateful Dead's *Wall of Sound* employed forty-eight 300-watt-per-channel McIntosh amplifiers, used as mono-blocks, for a total of 28,800 watts of continuous power!

The **MA9000** under review here also puts out 300 watts per channel, making this device the most powerful integrated amplifier on the market, with enough power to drive essentially any loudspeaker on the market. Its universality doesn't stop there though, as we'll see in the next few pages.

FIRST CONTACT

Weighing in at 134 pounds (60.8 kg) packed, it took three of us to carry the device to my listening room; the packaging alone exceeds thirty pounds! You'll need a solid stand to support the MA9000 and one that can accommodate its 9" 7/16 (24 cm) height. Width is a more standard 17 1/2" (44.5 cm).

A first indication of the MA9000's universality is its forty-page user manual, beautifully illustrated and well written. The instructions are clear and will guide the most novice user in the installation and operation of this multi-functional component.

Given that the **McIntosh MA9000** represents the sum of at least eight devices (preamplifier, two phono preamps, frequency equalizer, power amplifier, headphone amplifier and a universal digital to-analogue converter) the number of controls and connectors is impressive to say the least. Let's examine these elements in more detail.

The MA9000 provides a total of ten analogue inputs: six unbalanced (RCA) line inputs, one moving coil phono input (RCA), one moving magnet phono input (RCA) and two balanced inputs. On the digital side, two coax, two optical, one USB and one MCT input (for use with McIntosh's MCT450 SACD/CD Transport) complete the inputs. The amplifier has three audio outputs: one fixed output (RCA), one variable balanced output and one fixed balanced output for connecting the MA9000 to external power amplifiers. Via its rear panel, the MA9000 also provides eleven control ports for the device.

The façade is dominated by two large VU meters in the brand's signature blue colour. Below these, two large rotary controls provide input selection and volume control. Note that tonality can be finely adjusted via the eight-band equalizer, with centre frequencies set at 25 Hz, 50 Hz, 100 Hz, 200 Hz, 400 Hz, 1 kHz, 2.5 kHz and 10 kHz.

The lower section of the front panel features a headphone jack followed by two output selection buttons, an equalizer bypass button, a mute button and a standby function. An information screen indicates source, volume and other settings.

The solidity of the MA9000 and its impressive construction quality are slightly marred by the connectors on the back panel, which give an impression of fragility that seems out of place on an amplifier of this calibre. Fortunately, they do not seem to detract from the unit's performance.

SETTING UP

Installation is simple, requiring connection of the speakers to the appropriate impedance taps, either 8, 4 or 2 ohms, along with the power cord and any external devices via the dedicated inputs. Press the power button, select the desired input, adjust volume and prepare for the music!

As the device was brand new, I let it run in for a good week before starting my first critical listening. Evolution was slight, with the sound taking on a more natural and less electronic presentation over the course of the run-in period.

WHERE TO START?

CD

As the MA9000 is essentially eight devices in one, I began the listening sessions with some CDs to gain an appreciation of the amplifier section. As I expected, with all its power, the MA9000 gives a solid presentation, well articulated and accurate with sound leaning more to that of transistors than tubes. Curious to test the limits of the amp's power, I cued up Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue". Even in passages with densely massed orchestra, there is no sign of breathlessness or confusion amongst instruments. Even the most intense piano fortissimos are reproduced without clipping. Once reassured by these tests, more subtle characteristics can be examined, with the help of Beethoven interpreted by the Vegh Quartet. Everything is in its place, instruments are distinct from one another, while imaging is three-dimensional. Even the sound of fingers moving on the violin and viola strings are perceptible.

For evaluating voice, I select *Cecilia Bartolli - Live in Italy*. Captured at the Olimpico Theater in Vicenza, this recording brims with the subtleties of the chamber music orchestra. The lute and harpsichord are delicate and precise, while Cecilia's voice is captivating and emotionally charged. The feeling of the concert hall is palpable, with applause reproduced very realistically.

VINYL

I just had to review the phono module of the **MA9000**, although I could only test the moving coil section as I did not have a moving magnet cartridge at my disposal. To calibrate my ears, I first listened to a few tracks using my regular phono amplifier. I then connected my turntable to the MA9000's phono input. Using the selector knob, it only took a few seconds to find the appropriate level of resistance for my cartridge.

When a phono stage is built into an integrated amplifier, the fragile phono signal risks being degraded by the strong fields from the power supply transformers. That was not the case here, however, as the phono stage seems relatively well isolated. The results were better than I expected and overall performance was excellent. The background noise level was a touch higher than usual, but not to a degree that interfered with the music. While the MA9000's phono section reveals less detail than my reference phono stage and loses resolution of the low bass, the difference is not immediately obvious. What the phono section misses in the bass is somewhat compensated by the amplifier's power. A well-informed audiophile will probably hear the difference, but the music lover, whose focus is not primarily on sound, will probably not notice it. In its overall presentation, the MA9000 remains remarkably musical.

DIGITAL AUDIO FILES

Few top-of-the-range devices have such an elaborate and universal digital section. It can read all the following file formats: 24 bit/44.1 kHz to 192 kHz via coaxial and optical inputs, 16 bit/44.1 kHz (CD) and DSD64 (SACD) via the MCT (DIN) input. The USB input handles 32 bit/44.1 kHz to 384 kHz (PCM) and DSD formats (DSD64, DSD128, DSD256, DXD352.8kHz, DXD384kHz).

Using the digital section is truly "Plug & Play". I simply connected my computer via USB and the MA9000 played everything I sent it, whether in PCM format or DSD, up to DSD 256. The DAC automatically recognizes the file type and adjusts accordingly, no user intervention required. All that is left is to get carried away by the music. For that alone, the MA9000 deserves high praise. It's so simple to use.

But what about sound quality? I'm not a DAC expert, as I've not had the opportunity to review many converters. It is a thriving market and each month seems to bring a host of new products. Nevertheless, as I have a series of albums in different resolutions, from 44.1 to 192 kHz, up to DSD 256, I could make comparisons. First observation, the differences and improvements from one resolution to another were audible, a testament to the high quality of the converter. The results were in line with my expectations. Jean-Pierre Ferland's *Soleil* album was released at the time



when it was possible to have a complete orchestra at one's disposal, in this case, Paul Baillargeon directing a group of thirty musicians. The comparison was made between the vinyl version, released in 1971, the CD version and the 24/96 kHz version remastered by René Laflamme of 2XHd.

Vinyl is far superior to CD, with much more space, breadth, dynamics and body. The CD sounds as if it were playing back inside a cardboard box. The 2XHd version restores the sparkle to the recording and sounds cleaner, with better defined and tidier bass. The recording finds all its space and is a wonder through the **MA9000**.

On the classical side, I opt for a Beethoven septet recorded by the Vienna Octet in 1959 and transferred to digital format in 24/176. There is a disarming natural feel to the recording and I completely forget about the sound system. Everything is airy and light, with the sound stage becoming becomes wide and deep.

As for jazz, an album of standards on the 2XHd label in DSD 2.8 MHz format, features such stars as Bill Evans, Stan Getz and Sarah Vaughan, to name but a few. There are moments of truly resplendent jazz on this album. Under the lens of the MA9000, the musicians reappear with their talent and virtuosity intact.

Another interesting experience accomplished with the MA9000: Thanks to its RCA outputs, I used the MA9000 as a source and connected it to my own integrated amplifier, so that I could listen to DSD files through my reference amp. This

allowed me to compare the amplifier section of the amplifier MA9000 with my reference. This again confirmed the fact that the MA9000 is very powerful and very revealing.

**EVEN IN PASSAGES WITH DENSELY
MASSSED ORCHESTRA, THERE IS NO SIGN OF
BREATHLESSNESS OR CONFUSION AMONGST
INSTRUMENTS.**

THE FREQUENCY EQUALIZER

Personally, I'm not a fan of this feature because it often degrades the sound rather than improving it. However, I admit that, for many people, and in some circumstances, it may be useful. At low volume, for example, a low-frequency boost can lead to a more uniform reproduction. Also, in situations where the listening room is far from ideal, the equalizer can compensate for some deficiencies. Nonetheless, it remains a crutch and I prefer to solve problems at the source. With the MA9000, since the equalizer can be completely deactivated by a touch of a button, there is no penalty to having the feature.

IN SUMMARY

The McIntosh MA9000 integrated shines, foremost, by its unparalleled versatility. I'm tempted to describe the device

as “tour de force”. Few manufacturers would have managed to combine so many functions in one device, with so little compromise and with such a satisfactory result. The great beauty of the MA9000 is that it is a universal music machine. It opens all doors, reproducing everything with a high degree of musical truth.

If one does the math, considering that the **MA9000** successfully combines nearly eight separate high-end components, not to mention all power and interconnect cables, the price of the MA9000 appears quite attractive.

For sure, you can find separates systems that provide even more music, among McIntosh and other manufacturers, but at a much higher price. But this is not the purpose of the MA9000. Its mission is to give the listener easy access to music in all its forms, from a single device.

The MA9000 is probably destined more for the music lover than for the audiophile. It’s a component that one buys, installs and forgets. The focus is on music, no matter what format or resolution. The McIntosh MA9000 opens a very wide door to music.



McIntosh MA 9000: US\$10,500
 Distributor: McIntosh Laboratory, Inc.
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