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McINTOSH'S INTEGRATED SUPERSTAR TAKES ON THE BEST-EVER AMPLIFIERS



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McIntosh MA7200 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

In McIntosh world, there are things that remain forever unchanging. The planet could be on fire, aliens could be taking over and controlling our every action, but so long as McIntosh has that traditional glass with black livery, green logo, and bright blue VU meters, things will be OK. The McIntosh look is distinctive, slightly old fashioned to some eyes, matches precisely nothing apart from other McIntosh products... and any McIntosh fan would have it no other way.

Into this changeless realm of audio comes the MA7200. Irrespective of the look, this is, in fact, about as forward thinking and as flexible an amplifier you can buy, as it drips analogue, digital, and custom install connections. I kind of like the look of McIntosh equipment. Yes, it's perhaps the most quintessentially American audio design you can think of, but it brings up dewy-eyed memories of classic audio devices of a bygone age, but with state-of-the-art internals.

Or at least, mostly state-of-the-art internals. The unique part to a McIntosh amp design like the MA7200 is that it has a transformer-coupled output stage. With very few early audio exceptions, every solid-state amplifier has more or less fed the output of the power transistors direct to the loudspeaker terminals (often with little more than a Zobel network as protection). Transformer-coupled output stages are the stuff of most valve amplifiers.

There are advantages to this design layout, most notably longevity (those output transistors are playing a less gruelling role) and consistency (you are hearing the sound of the transformers instead of the transistors). But it means that, like a good valve amplifier, you are dependent on the performance of the transformers and they have coil taps for different impedance loudspeakers. McIntosh is a major buyer of output transformers, so quality is a given. ▶



“It has that kind of cachet; American-made products that are built to outlive the original owner.”



▶ The MA7200 has a bank of five RCA line inputs and a further XLR pair of balanced inputs. For vinyl replay it has separate inputs for MM and MC (in theory, you could have two turntables or two tonearms connected... in reality it's an either/or thing). However, combine this with the range of digital options (two coax, two TOSlinks, a USB input and what is called MCT for direct connection from one McIntosh digital device to another) and you have an amplifier that simply will not run out of inputs any time soon. It also includes an extensive array of custom-install comms connections for link-ups with home automation systems around the house.

Build quality is... substantial. It's little wonder that McIntosh ploughs the same furrow as brands like Harley Davidson and SubZero. It has that kind of cachet; American-made products that are built to outlive the original owner. That also makes it damn heavy, and the transformers make it an uneven lift. Fine if there are two of you. Repositioning can reposition bits of you if you try it alone.

Our sample arrived run in... probably. The thing about McIntosh products is this could have been bouncing round in the back of a Jeep for a year and it would still look brand new. The only reason I know it was run in is that I was informed it was run in before the review commenced. There's a comprehensive manual supplied too, but if you need to refer to a manual, you should probably be stripped of your McIntosh badge. Installation is a breeze, so long as you remember those tapped loudspeaker terminals.

A feature that comes in very handy at the outset is two little red LEDs inset into the middle of the front panel. These indicate muting while the amplifier powers up (they are gone in a couple of seconds), and clipping if you decided to push the amplifier to the limits (with 200W on tap, you really have to push hard). Nevertheless, you'll find that sometime in the first hour or so of listening, you'll turn the amp up to 'see what it can do' Eventually, you'll redline the amp, turn it down, only to hear a peculiar banging sound. This comes from your neighbours, who will read you the extract from the Riot Act that includes 'noise pollution'.

This is a beast and a brute of an amplifier... in all the right ways. It's the kind of amplifier that drips confidence and control. Not necessarily from a taut grip over the loudspeakers, although that also hits the spot, but from the sense of complete authority it conveys to the music. It's not total control; in fact, the transformer-coupled output stage allows for some self-determination on the part of the bass cones, in a manner not too dissimilar to that of a good valve amplifier. But in terms of getting music's house in order, it works extremely well.

The MA7200 has a great deal of finesse to its sound, but with a lot of power to back up that finesse, with a very wide and deep soundstage, but more importantly some of the most embodied and solid images within that soundstage. You get a feeling of real, visceral human beings playing music in a three-dimensional space, but you also get a very good idea of the musical intent behind those musicians.

“When the whole band steps up a gear, the McIntosh is ready to take it. This is how it should be.”

► The MA7200 lends itself toward rock music like the two were made for one another. ‘La Grange’ by ZZ Top [*Tres Hombres*, London] is the perfect example of this; Billy Gibbons’ swampy guitar licks and his drawl are so in the room that you feel like breaking out the beard oil. You hear all the little string squeaks and Frank Beard’s sophisticated stickwork, and when the whole band steps up a gear, the McIntosh is ready to take it. This is how it should be; loud, bold, and fun.

I’m aware that there could be a dismissal of this amp as ‘brute force and ignorance’ and that it makes a lot of noise and not a lot else. In fact, it’s a more nuanced performer than that. Yes, it has the muscle and sinew to play like a bruiser, but it also has the harmonic structure and refinement to play some more subtle works. Uchida playing Beethoven’s sonatas [Philips] is not perhaps the most nuanced of performances, and anything that played with brute force would make her clean delivery tip over into ‘sterile’, but the amplifier lets her controlled passion take over. Yes, she does sound a little more like she is playing a sewing machine than some of the best of the best, but it remains a great overall presentation.

What I didn’t get in playing the piano pieces was the audiophile richness that sometimes over-exaggerates the performance. Her playing is cool, but some amplifiers make that ‘cold’ while others make it too ‘warm.’ The MA7200 strikes an excellent balance.

Once you get past that initial hurdle of wanting to play the amplifier at full-on levels, what you are left with is a very elegant sounding amplifier with a lot of power in reserve. One of its strongest suits is its ability to play at relatively low listening levels, too. The big amp can sound surprisingly small and quiet when turned down for late night listening.

If I’m going to point to a weakness, it’s possibly in the DAC section. While more than capable, it’s not a match for separate standalone devices. In particular, These deliver greater degrees of resolution and inner detail than the on-board converter of the MA7200. The DAC is no mere add-on afterthought, but in absolute terms, there are better DACs to be had in the after market. It has the same broad tonal balance of the MA7200 proper, a sound that is naturalistic, especially across the midrange. However within that is a great strength, because the headphone amplifier section is a real killer, and the DAC and headphone amp make good sense.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier

Analogue inputs: 1× MM phono, 1× MC phono, 5× single-ended RCA, 1× XLR balanced

Digital inputs: 2× S/PDIF (RCA) 2× Toslink, 1× MCT DIN, 1× USB, 1× Service port

Outputs: 2× RCA variable outputs

Additional control inputs and outputs: 4× data ports, 2× external control, 4× power control (all minijack connectors)

Best digital precision: to 32-bit, 384kHz (PCM), DSD 256, DXD 384kHz (all via USB)

Power: 200 watts per channel

Frequency Response (+0/-3dB): 10Hz–100kHz

Total Harmonic Distortion: 0.005%

Sensitivity (balanced/unbalanced): 0.5V/0.25V

Signal to Noise Ratio (power amp): 113 dB

Damping factor: 45

Phase: speaker output is phase correct, sub-woofer output is phase correct

Dimensions (W×H×D): 44.5 × 19.4 × 55.9cm

Weight: 34.1kg

Price: £9,995

Manufactured by: McIntosh Labs Inc

URL: mcintoshlabs.com

Distributed by: Jordan Acoustics

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A McIntosh review is almost academic. People know what they want from McIntosh, and the MA7200 is going to deliver on that. But, in a way, McIntosh needs to be reappraised in the light of modern audio. As a complete package, without recourse to any other device (so no visual mis-matches between amp and disc player) the amp stands up as a fine audio option. This is more than some blue VU meters (although familiarity has made me rethink of them as ‘cool’) and a beefy build quality. It is an amplifier that I might not have considered through sheer weight of my own snobbery, and yet I came back from listening feeling very impressed by the MA7200 as the complete package. A hefty amplifier that is capable of great things and a lot more than just brute force, the MA7200 doesn’t just look the part, it sounds the part! +