

McIntosh MA2275 Integrated Amplifier



Joel Shumer

HERE IT IS, right up front: Mac's new MA2275 tube integrated amp is one terrific piece of audio gear. My modified Quads sound better using the MA2275 than with any other solid-state or tube amplification that I have ever used, including

my Audio Research preamp and amp which have been my reference components over the past three years.

At \$6,100, the MA2275 isn't cheap but it undercuts the Audio Research units by \$4,000 making

this Big Mac, at least relatively speaking, a super bargain.

Description and Operation

Mac amplifiers tend to be rather large and heavy; the MA2275 is no exception. Although rated at only

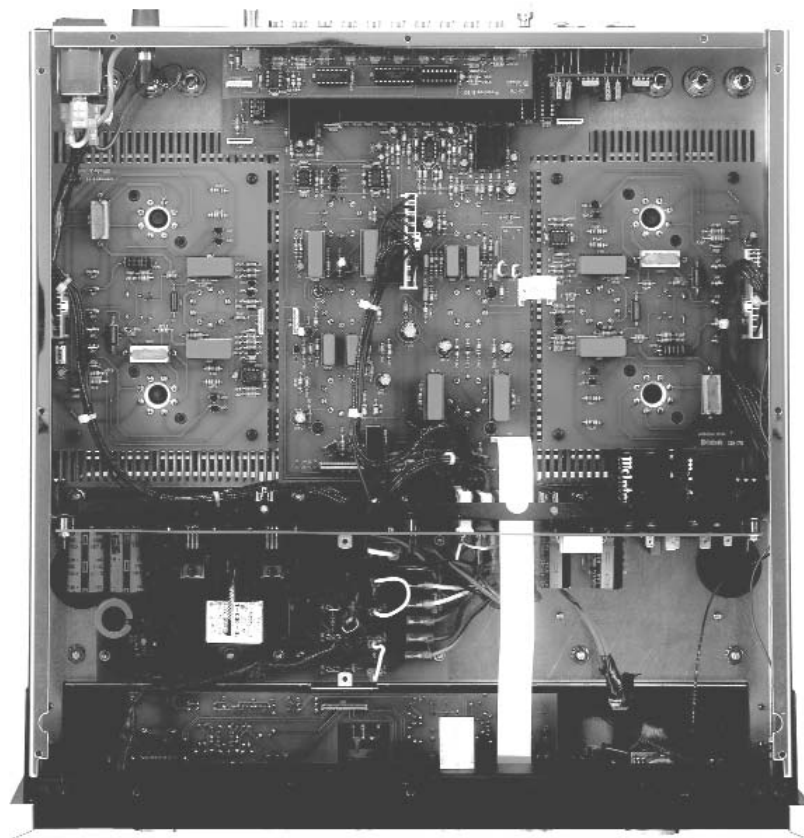
75 watts per channel, it has the substantial weight of 77 pounds. You will need to add another 33 pounds for its shipping cartons. And its dimensions, 10¼ inches high, 17¾ inches wide, and 18¾ inches deep, make it too big to slide into most equipment shelves.

Years ago Mac discontinued point-to-point wiring and now uses heavy-duty circuit boards through out. A pair of 12AX7As are used in the high-level circuitry and another pair of 12AX7As in the magnetic phono stage. The power amp employs two 12AT7s and four KT88s, although it can also use 6550s. The amp is self-biasing and McIntosh sees no potential problem when or if an owner replaces the original output tubes when they eventually wear out with a non-Mac tube product. Incidentally, a Mac rep suggested a rather long life expectancy for the KT 88s of over 4000 hours, about double the usual estimate.

The MA2275s front panel consists of Mac's traditional black glass but it is now illuminated from within by fiber optics rather than small bulbs. The upper corners of the panel present four-inch "blue-eyed" 75-watt power meters, one for each channel. Below the meters is a row of six rotary knobs which provide for the selection of six input sources including magnetic phono, bass and treble tone controls, each giving a boost or cut of up to 12 dB and an option to completely remove them from the circuit, a three-click meter knob that allows for a choice of "lights off", "watts", and "hold," balance, and a volume control. At the bottom of the front panel are pushbuttons for "Record/Monitor", tone control "Bypass", "Mono", "Mute", "Standby", power, and a headphone jack.

If you like to listen in the dark, the supplied remote lights up. It is designed to control a McIntosh tuner and CD player as well as a Mac preamp but with the MA2275 only the standby on/off, input selection, volume, and mute buttons are operational. Too bad, I think, that the balance function wasn't included. This is an adjustment that really is best done from one's listening position.

The rear of the MA2275 has a standard three-wire a.c. power input receptacle, five pairs of RCA input jacks and a sixth set of inputs that



accept either XLR-type balanced or RCA interconnects. There are also line level RCA output jacks for making tape recordings and a pair of preamp output jacks. Jumpers connect a second set of preamp out jacks to amplifier in jacks. When the jumpers are removed, it is possible to use the preamplifier and amplifier sections as separate components. Sitting on a shelf above these jacks five-way gold plated binding posts offer 2, 4, and 8-ohm speaker connections. For owners of other Mac gear, data and power control ports round out the rear panel.

Because of its size, I had to place the MA2275 on top of an equipment stand, which was just as well since the tubes and transformers do produce some heat. With no shelf above the unit, the tube cage and transformers grew warm after several hours of use but never so hot that I couldn't rest my fingers on them.

With its unconventional illuminated black glass front panel, bright blue power meters, mirror-polished steel chassis, large transformers and glowing output tubes, the MA2275 is striking in its appearance. It is hard to imagine that anyone who buys a MA2275 would not take

great pride in ownership, so having the amp sit out in the open, for all to see, might not be a bad thing at all.

Listening

The MA2275 lent to me by Mac had been previously used before it reached me and did not require breaking in. Initially I connected an Audio Research CD3 player to the MA2275 and the 4-ohm outputs to my Quads. My subwoofers sat idle.

My immediate reaction to hearing the MA2275 was one of astonishment. Perhaps that's too strong a descriptive term but I was certainly very surprised and a bit awed by how much better my system was sounding. I decided to postpone my planned A/B comparisons and played CD after CD just enjoying what I was hearing.

Listening to a wide variety of symphonic music, I found a mid range that was more liquid, with a reduced sense of grain and harshness. This was particularly evident in string sections. Upper frequencies were more open and extended, perhaps most noticeable with flutes and clarinets but strings and brass benefited as well. But I was also surprised by the bass. It seemed deeper



and more robust. Tube amplifiers aren't supposed to be able to reproduce bass this well and I did a double check to make sure that my subwoofers weren't accidentally getting a signal from my Audio Research preamp.

Not only was the entire tonal pallet sounding better balanced, with fewer annoying artifacts, but transients were sharper as well. Snare drums, tympani, chimes, and triangle all had cleaner attacks. And perhaps more importantly piano CDs sounded much improved with better transients and as the struck note decayed the tonal quality had greater purity and realism.

Listening to choruses, opera, and vocal soloists, I was aware of how much more natural their voices seemed. Often it was if they were present in the listening room, their voices emerging from a black background, transparent and pure with a reduction in unwanted sibilants. I think anyone who particularly enjoys the female voice would be quite taken by the combination of the ARC CD3 CD player, Mac's MA2275, and the modified Quads.

As you might expect, jazz recordings, particularly with plucked acoustic bass, were a lot more involving. Better transients and a bigger, deeper bass really helped. And there is another factor, toe tapping. I am reluctant to say that some pieces of equipment are better able to reproduce rhythm in

music than others, but it was pretty obvious that I was responding to the pulse of the piece with more of the sympathetic finger-tapping and dancing-toes than usual.

One other thought, the MA2275's balance and tone controls can really be useful at times. After a few days of listening to the Quads without my subwoofers, I connected the MA2275's secondary preamp outputs to my self-powered Sunfire Signature subwoofers. On some recordings, I get a mid bass hump in my listening room that I was able to reduce by cutting the bass on the MA2275 and increasing the deep bass on the subwoofers. I don't think that Mac intended to

use their tone controls in this way, but it works.

Comparisons

I have long been enamored with Audio Research tube amplification and I have used it as my primary reference for almost 20 years. I have used them with dozens of speakers from WATT/Puppies to LS3/5As. In that time, I have owned five of their preamps and five of their amplifiers. Except for one, all have been tube components. During that time, I have had the opportunity to audition many other tube and solid-state units and I have always felt that the ARC amps and preamps offered the best balance of those attributes that are the hallmarks of a great amplifier. Then along came the MA2275 upending this maxim of mine. Not only did the Mac unit sound better in every important parameter than my Audio Research LS25MKII and VT100MKIII but it's a bargain as well. As you might imagine not only was this a surprise, but a bit of a shock as well. Now, I don't suggest that you have to agree with me, but I do suggest that you make the time to listen.

McIntosh also makes separate units that are similar to the integrated MA2275 but with greater flexibility and sophistications. I asked Ron Cornelius, product manager at McIntosh, how he thought the separates and the integrated units might compare. His answer was to deliver a C2200 preamp and a MC275 75-watt amp so I could hear for myself. The C2200 has twice as many tubes as the MA2275 uses in its preamp section, has more inputs, output

N O T E S

McIntosh MA2275 integrated tube amplifier, \$6,100.00. McIntosh Laboratory, Inc., 2 Chambers St., Binghamton, New York 13903; phones 800/538-6576 or 607/723 3512, fax 607/724 0549; e-mail feedback@macintosh, website www.mcintoshlabs.com.

Associated Equipment

Audio Research LS25MKII preamp and VT100MKIII amplifier, McIntosh C22200 preamp and MC275 amplifier, Audio Research CD3 CD player, modified Quad Pro 63 speakers (See TAV Vol. 4, No. 1 for a description of the modifications), Sunfire Signature subwoofers, Music Metre RCA interconnects, Audio Research balanced interconnects, Tara RSC Master Generation 2 speaker cables, ASC Tube Traps, and Target stands.

meters, and an alphanumeric read-out on settings. The MC275 has the appearance of a classic Mac tube amp but its circuitry and component parts are completely modern. It also uses more tubes, although like the MA2275, it has four KT88's in the output stage. As you would expect, the integrated and the separates sound very much a like. The MA2275 is a little cleaner on top and transients are more precise. The separates have a warmer, more burnished mid-range, and a slightly bigger, more powerful bass. Listening to Diana Krall or a Mozart flute quartet, I would prefer the MA2275. Listening to Count Basie or a Mahler symphony, I would rather go with the C2200 and MC275 combo. But overall I preferred the MA2275 and there's another advantage. It costs \$2,000 less than the Mac separates.

What's Not to Like

If you have read this far, then you know that I think the MA2275 is a superb preamp and amplifier, all on a single chassis. So what, if anything, is there not to like? As far as I am concerned, I haven't a single complaint about the sound but a prospective buyer should keep in

mind some potential shortcomings. The MA2275 is rated at only 75 watts per channel. Fine for me but others might want more power. It's big. It's heavy. It has only six inputs and only one pair are balanced. Even though Mac says that the output tubes have a much longer life expectancy than usual and the replacement tubes would be self-biasing, it is still a tube unit with the heat and the maintenance so implied. That said, I have no other caveats to my enthusiasm.

Summary and Recommendations

The MA2275 is a wonderful piece of audio gear. It's a handsome 75-watt, integrated tube amplifier with enough flexibility to satisfy most audiophile's demands. After several months of auditioning the MA2275, I continue to be amazed at how good it sounds. I have heard nothing in my listening room that equals its naturalness and purity. If the 75 watts per channel, the bulk, and hefty weight of this integrated amp are not problems, then I would urge any prospective purchaser to audition a unit in their home and hear it for themselves. I doubt they will be disappointed.

