

TEMPTATIONS

EXPENSIVE, YES. BUT YOU KNOW YOU WANT THEM

McIntosh MA9000

■ Integrated amplifier

■ £12,995

■ ★★★★★



Images: McIntosh

One glance at the rear panel suggests McIntosh has tried to include every possible input type



“Bold aesthetics with a black-glass front panel and blue-lit power meters grab attention regardless of surroundings”

WHAT HI-FI?

- SOUND**
★★★★★
- FEATURES**
★★★★★
- BUILD**
★★★★★

- FOR**
- Unfussy musical character
 - Huge power reserves
 - Fine build

- AGAINST**
- Not the most transparent
 - Needs lots of shelf space

VERDICT
The McIntosh MA9000 is a hugely capable, fully featured powerhouse with easy-going sonics

Everything about McIntosh's MA9000 integrated amplifier is super-sized, from its 46kg weight and 300W-per-channel power output to its baby hippo-sized frame. Even the specification list is generous, packing a comprehensive mix of analogue, digital and phono connections. This earnest attempt to cover all bases doesn't come cheap, but this kind of quality never does.

THINK BIG

Few integrated amps look as imposing as this. At 24cm tall and 56cm deep, it has the size to make even our reference Burmester 911 Mk 3 power amplifier look modest. Add McIntosh's trademark bold aesthetics with the black-glass front panel and blue-lit power meters and you have something that grabs attention regardless of surroundings.

There's plenty of substance behind that show though. A large part of that spine-stressing weight comes down to the company's use of autoformers between the output stage for each channel and the relevant speaker.

This kind of thing is common in valve-based designs, but unusual in transistor circuits. McIntosh does it to ensure a more efficient transfer of power between the amplifier and speakers. This puts less stress on the electronics and makes the amplifier more load-tolerant.

Look around on the back panel and you'll notice dedicated speaker outputs for 2, 4 and 8 ohms speakers - that 300W-per-channel power figure stays consistent regardless. While matching the output terminals to the nominal impedance of your speakers is a good place to start, it's still worth experimenting here. In our experience, the difference in sound between the outputs can be significant, and the correct option comes across as obviously more balanced.

While checking out the nicely made multi-way speaker terminals, it's hard to miss the MA9000's impressive connectivity. It feels as though McIntosh has tried to include every input a potential user is likely to need.

There are no fewer than eight line-level inputs, two of which are balanced, alongside digital connections in the form of a USB, two opticals and a pair of coaxials. The USB is compatible with files up to 32-bit/384kHz as well as DSD256 streams, while the others are limited to 24-bit/192kHz PCM.

There's also a connection called MCT - a proprietary McIntosh digital input that can accept a DSD signal from a suitably equipped source. It will also work with CD-spec 16-bit/44kHz music files.

Vinyl fans aren't forgotten either, as there are individual inputs for moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges. There's a decent range of adjustments as far as cartridge loading goes as well, so we think the MA9000 should prove comfortable with all bar the most extreme of cartridge designs.

The MA9000's pre and power sections can be split and used separately, and there are also line-level outputs to feed into a recording device. Add the front-panel headphone output and it's hard to criticise what McIntosh has done here. If you're looking for a do-it-all integrated high-end amp, this could be it. We can't see it getting caught short in any two-channel set-up.

Build quality and attention to finish is as good as the elevated price demands. While we wish the front panel dials had a more luxurious feel, there's little actually to complain about here.

SIMPLE SET-UP

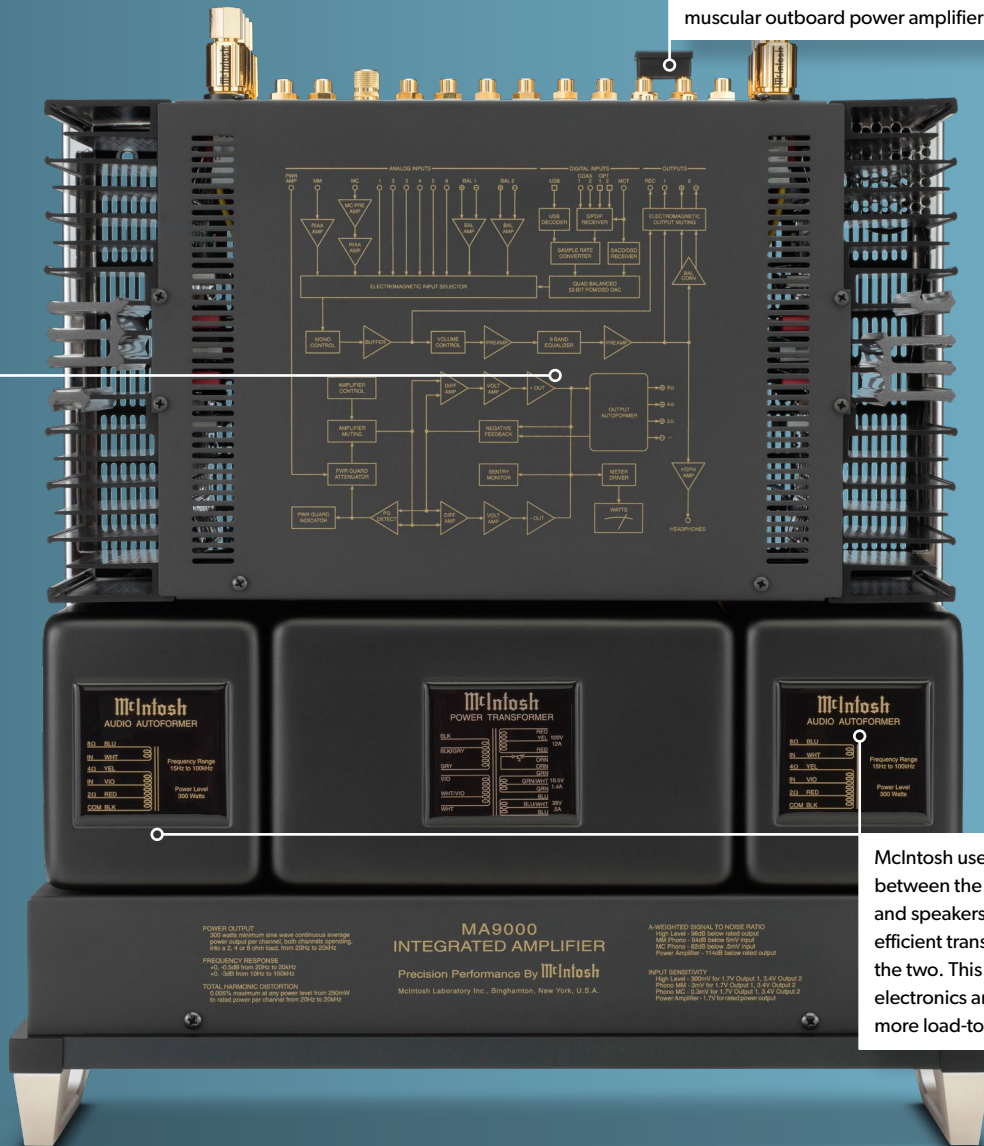
The front panel display is large enough to be useful, and makes setting up the amplifier a breeze. That set-up governs all aspects of the MA9000 from cartridge loading, input naming and display brightness all the way to switching the eight front-panel tonal controls in and out of circuit.

Such tone controls - they operate from 25Hz to 10kHz - may make purists cringe, but can prove useful to make poor recordings sound palatable. Having these suits the amplifier's all-inclusive nature.

IN DETAIL...

Should the MA9000's 300-watt-per channel output not be enough for you, it's possible to split the pre and power sections and add a more muscular outboard power amplifier

Who doesn't love a circuit diagram? This one shows the signal path and makes it easy to appreciate the sophistication of McIntosh's electronic design



McIntosh uses autoformers between the amplifier output stage and speakers to ensure a more efficient transfer of power between the two. This puts less stress on the electronics and makes the amplifier more load-tolerant

"It sounds even more muscular than its power figure suggests. Rarely have we heard an amp that sounds so in control"

Any product at this level demands a top-class partnering system, and this McIntosh is no different. While the MA9000 has a more forgiving sonic character than most of the competition, it still won't shine unless the rest of the system is suitably talented.

We use Naim's ND555/555 PS DR music streamer and the SL-1000R turntable from Technics (partnered with both a Goldring 2400 moving-magnet cartridge and our usual Kiseki Purpleheart moving-coil) as our main sources. The Naim, together with our MacBook Pro (loaded with Audirvana music software), is used to test the digital connections. Our main speakers are the ATC SCM50s we've used as reference for years, but we also try Dynaudio's

Contour 20is and Spendor's Classic 1/2s just to see how the McIntosh responds to differing loads.

It turns out that the MA9000 has no difficulty driving any of these to high levels. If anything, it sounds even more muscular than its impressively high power figure suggests. Rarely have we heard an amplifier that sounds so in control and composed.

We play *The Battle* from Hans Zimmer's *Gladiator* OST and the McIntosh handles this demanding piece without breaking sweat. The volume levels are high, yet there's absolutely no sign of stress; the unit simply gets on with the job with the minimum of fuss.

It's a large-scale presentation underpinned (but not dominated) by powerful, authoritative lows. It's the kind of bass that you feel as much as hear. We're pleased to report that those low notes are rich and tuneful.

For all the MA9000's titanic delivery and sumptuous tone, this isn't the most insightful amplifier you'll find for the money. The McIntosh likes to paint in broad strokes rather than concentrate on the finer details, but it communicates the musical message well. It delivers a suitably rousing performance with *The Battle*, capturing the changes in dynamic intensity well.



There are dedicated (and beautifully made) outputs for 2, 4 and 8 ohms speakers

The MA9000 has an organised presentation too, with individual musical strands tracked with confidence and never sounding confused, even when the music becomes busy and demanding.

Stereo imaging isn't the most expansive we've heard, though the MA9000 is more than capable of rendering a nicely layered soundstage and locking instruments firmly in place. Image stability is absolute.

Anyone familiar with the McIntosh brand will recognise this amp's sonic character in an instant. It's a smooth, slightly rich presentation that places solidity and ease of listening over outright agility. If you want the last word in precision or speed you'll have to look elsewhere.

EASY DOES IT

That said, few alternatives are as easy-going as this. Long listening sessions pass without fatigue creeping in, and the McIntosh's innate refinement and rounded nature mean that the negative aspects of poor recordings or aggressive sources tend to be tempered.

Moving to Bruce Springsteen's *High Hopes* set once again puts the spotlight on the amp's muscularity. The MA9000 has no trouble moving up the gears as the stadium rock version of *The Ghost Of Tom Joad* kicks in. The McIntosh isn't the most rhythmic of electronics but its sound remains cohesive and, most importantly, musical. There's power and drive to spare here, and the MA9000, perhaps predictably, sounds right at home.

Yet, when the music changes down a gear, as it does with *The Wall* or *Down The Hole*, this amplifier is happy to oblige.

“It captures the passion and sensitivity in Springsteen's gritty voice well, conveying the music's low-key but heartfelt message superbly”

It captures the passion and sensitivity in Springsteen's gritty voice well, conveying the music's low-key but heartfelt message superbly.

We switch to records and are pleased by the quality of this amplifier's phono section. Both the moving-magnet and moving-coil sections are decently quiet and have enough gain for the cartridges we're using. The amp's appealing character shines through, though there's the expected subtle drop in outright clarity compared with the line stages. This performance will be good enough for all but the most committed of vinyl purists.

We play a range of music from Bob Marley's *Catch A Fire* and Four Tet's *There Is Love In You* to Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, and the McIntosh sounds happy regardless. Despite all the power on tap, this brute also has a sensitive side. It has enough finesse not to bulldoze through tracks that require subtlety, coming across with a surprising lightness of touch when required.

DIGITAL DETAIL

The story is similarly positive with the digital inputs. While Chord's exceptional Hugo 2 DAC brings out even more in the way of fine detail and rhythmic precision, the McIntosh's digital module still produces a pleasing, well rounded performance.

It's entirely in keeping with the sound we hear through the line-level inputs and delivers enough in the way of detail and expression to keep us listening. The digital section also works seamlessly between file types, swapping between hi-res PCM and DSD without issue.

We spend some time listening to the amplifier with headphones. We use Focal's closed-back Stellias, Grado's RS1s and the T1s from Beyerdynamic without issue. All perform as well as we would hope.

The MA9000 is a truly complete product in the sense that none of the additional features - phono stage, digital inputs or headphone output - perform as though they were afterthoughts. Every one of these works well, retaining the positive traits of the line-level inputs. That's a difficult feat on a single-box product such as this.

We like the MA9000 a lot. It isn't the last word in transparency or rhythmic drive, but it remains a lovely thing to use and listen to. If you're in the market for a top-end do-it-all integrated amp, make sure you listen to this one. You may just fall in love.