

TEST: Manunta Marley MkII - high-end headphone amplifier in mini format

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If you want to listen to music well and don't want to sacrifice a lot of space for a hi-fi system, you can hardly avoid the Rockstars series by Marco Manunta from Manunta Audio. The complete system of the Italians offers the best sound in the smallest space. If you also want to save on loudspeakers and listen to headphones or simply want to use personal headphones, there is now another device in the series: The Manunta Marley MkII. A high-end headphone amplifier with several features.

Marco Manunta has put together a supergroup in his rock star series. Each device measures just 20 x 20 centimeters in footprint, but still doesn't need to hide from heavy, high-end cars. Rather, they sound just as grown-up as the big ones, but only need a fraction of the space available. In this way, they create the perfect symbiosis of sound quality and suitability for everyday use. What the high-quality combo of DAC preamplifier, phono stage, powerful output stage and power supply unit was lacking so far was a headphone output. Due to the lack of space, only a compromise solution would have to be accommodated in the compact devices, as is often the case in large devices. There the headphones are sometimes simply connected to the loudspeaker power amplifiers or a cheap amplifier chip is used. However, this would not at all match Manunta Audio's high quality standards. Instead, a befitting solution should be found and that requires a minimum of space. So the quartet now becomes a quintet: Marley Mark II is added to Crosby, Stills, Nash and Van der Graaf. This is a headphone amplifier that looks confusingly similar to its colleagues and is thus perfect for the other members of the Group adds.

Number five lives!

Like his brothers, Marley is housed in a flat housing that consists of a single folded aluminum element that is almost completely closed. However, the two ends of the case cover are not connected on the underside of the device, they leave some space for the front panel and are aesthetically bevelled (this will be important soon). The front panel is tidy, as is typical of Manunta: two headphone outputs, a balanced and a classic large jack socket. On the other hand, a volume control, which is used to navigate through the extensive menu. Next to it a small button and a blue standby LED, that's it. At least when switched off. After a short press on the button, the LED goes out and the display placed in the center comes to life.

Speaking of waking up to life:

I think if you interpret the space between the aluminum casing of the case, which is not closed at the bottom, as a neck, Marley looks like a somewhat compressed version of the tinny protagonist from the film "Number 5 lives!". With headphone output and volume wheel as eyes and the display as mouth. With a little less imagination, Marley still looks like a chic, modern hi-fi device, without a lot of frills. Anyone who thinks that a headphone amplifier only makes the music signal for the headphones louder and quieter but does not do much else, the little Italian teaches it better: Despite the compact dimensions, the small amp is crammed with functions and features that make it make suitable for every conceivable headphone.

Lush variety of connections

Marley still practices elegant understatement on the front. After all, two headphone outputs are almost standard for a dedicated headphone amplifier. Even if there is less of a symmetrical one like that of the Marley. On the back, however, the device is packed with surprises: two RCA inputs are

part of the good sound. A pair of XLR inputs, on the other hand, are also part of the sophisticated equipment for non-compact devices. Next to it is a preamp output that can be used to connect power amplifiers or active speakers directly to the Marley. So if you don't use digital devices, you could build a fantastic analog compact system from Marley, the Phono stage Nash, a few active speakers and a turntable. That wouldn't work with the Rockstars models without the Marley MKII. So far, a volume control was missing that was previously reserved for the digital-to-analog converter Young MkIII.

Additional comfort

Now the Marley MKII also fulfills the prepress function and here you don't have to do without amenities and technical chicanery. So trigger inputs and outputs are the most natural convenience. A remote control for controlling all functions from the sofa is also included. For the most convenient among us who don't feel like clicking through menu pages, the manufacturer also offers an app for Android and Apple devices. With their help, all functions can be operated in a clear display. That makes perfect sense, because there are really some menu pages that you would have to sift through with the imprecise encoder until you have found out all the functions. However, all the setting options are of course only that: options. If you just want to hear, the Marley MKII will not overwhelm you despite its flexibility. In case of doubt, the power button and the volume control are enough to hear.

Clever features

On the other hand, if you browse the depths of the menu, you will discover a surprise or two. For example, useful features such as the pre-selection of the switch-on volume. It protects headphones and ears from excessive noise pollution after being switched on inexperienced. From there, the level can then be set at selectable intervals. You can choose steps of 0.5 or 1 dB, depending on the sensitivity of the headphones and your own ears. A function for smoothly fading the signals when switching between inputs hits the same notch. Functions for automatic switch-on via the trigger input or automatic switch-off when there is no input signal provide convenience and energy saving. The optional shutdown of the standby LED in another menu item also makes a marginal contribution to this. It will be a little more technical on the next page.

Perfect freedom

Here the Marley offers the possibility to adjust the output resistance of the amplifier stage to the headphones used in three steps. The default setting is 10 ohms, 47 ohms are also possible and a Lo-Z setting in which the output resistance is close to zero. Exactly how complicated the output impedance, cable properties and headphone impedance interact with each other is electrical engineering. For home use, the rule of thumb is also sufficient here: trust your ears. As a little help, the operating instructions indicate that low-impedance headphones prefer a low-impedance amplifier and vice versa. The hearing test will show. If this subtle influence on the sound is not enough for you, a balance setting and a three-band equalizer are available. This allows the sound in the bass, mids and treble to be adapted to your own taste. This then has nothing to do with the pure teaching, but the enjoyment factor sometimes increases enormously. And that's what it's really about.

Unpack and get started

Commissioning the Manunta Marley MkII is very easy. There is also a plug-in power supply and the remote control for the amplifier. In addition, a data sheet with a photo of the back, on which all inputs are explained. Armed with it, the headphone amplifier is ready for use within a few minutes.

If you want to know it more precisely, a printed QR code will bring you to the manufacturer's homepage. What we as users have to bring with us is a cinch or XLR cable for connection to the source and headphones and of course a place for installation. Given the small dimensions, the latter should be the least of the challenges. The best place for the Marley is of course between his brothers. But it also looks great on another device, a sideboard or just on the shelf. The cable of the plug-in power supply is about one meter long, so an outlet should not be too far away.

Comfortable app

If the connection to the power supply and the source device is established, the headphones can be inserted. After pressing the power button (or the remote control) you can start. Commissioning the app is just as easy. The iMarley can be downloaded free of charge from the Apple Appstore or the Google Playstore. Once installed, you just have to open it, the connection to the Marley then takes place in a matter of seconds independently and as if by magic. For the hearing test, I provide the chic amplifier with two partners to choose from: the outstanding Quad ERA-1 and the new, recently tested SedyAudio Aiva. Once you have found the right album, nothing stands in the way of potential listening pleasure.

Lively and lively

I start my test with the Quad ERA-1 headphones. I know him very well, since it is my own. I particularly like its round playing style, which is pleasantly bass-intensive for a magnetostat, without playing too fat or omitting details. On the Manunta Marley MKII it sounds much more lively and lively than usual for me. So he blows the high tones around my ears that it's a real pleasure. In addition, the finest details are audible, which otherwise remain hidden to me. After a while, I start to think about the long-term suitability, because I fear the fireworks in details and the resulting demanding reproduction could overwhelm the ears in the long run. It's Monday evening, I just wanted to take a quick look and now I decide to start a long-term test.

Marley MkII sounds live

It starts with Adele in the Royal Albert Hall: With the right volume, it only takes a song or two before I no longer notice the comfortable headphones. It can hardly be felt and is actually no longer audible. Instead, it's like sitting in the Royal Albert Hall myself and listening to Adele in person. Right at the start I found an album where Marley MKII and Quad ERA-1 can fully demonstrate their qualities. The detailed way of playing makes the Albert Hall and the interaction of musicians and audience so clearly perceptible. Then I try something different and put Frank Zappa's "Zoot Allures" on the turntable. Here, too, I discover details that have so far remained undetected despite dozens of reproductions. And although the music is more demanding this time, I don't feel overwhelmed by the rousing combination. In fact, listening to music is a lot of fun here.

A question of attitude

But there was something else: a menu packed with settings that you can discover in practice. The output impedance is set to the pre-set 10 Ohm and so I am quite satisfied with the sound. Nevertheless, I switch to 47 ohms and hear again. First I notice that the station wagon is quieter than before. In addition, the bass range seems a bit withdrawn. Above, the reproduction loses its brilliance and liveliness. However, she now looks a little more serious. Not as extremely serious (bad tongues could also say boring) like on an Accuphase pre-stage, which is ready for comparison, but also less eccentric. The zero-ohm setting, on the other hand, behaves completely differently; it sounds almost like a bass boost with the Quad. In the long run that would probably be too much for me. So I'm sticking to the default 10 ohms.

Equalizer and app convenience

For a more targeted influence on the sound, there is still the equalizer. It also works as it should, there are no surprises here. The same applies to the balance setting, which I use regularly in speaker mode, but I usually don't need it for headphones. However, if you build a compact system with active loudspeakers around the Marley MkII, it will surely provide valuable services. The app and remote control also do this in headphone mode, with which the amplifier can be operated without delay and easily. In addition, it offers greater ease of use than with the very sensitive and somewhat choppy encoder on the device.

Matching headphones

There remains the SendyAudio Aiva, which is ready for testing with the Marley. It is also an excellently manufactured magnetostatic headphone in the same price range as the Quad. The multi-adjustable ear cups consist of fine wooden parts and are closed on the back with metal grids. The Aiva is significantly smaller than the relatively large Quad. Thanks to its light weight and super soft padding, it is extremely comfortable to wear. The connection cable of the SendyAudio Aiva is cooler than that of the Quad: It consists of braided conductors with transparent insulation. Due to this structure, it shines in color between copper and rose gold and could almost be used as jewelry.

Adjustable character

In terms of sound, this also fits the Manunta Marley just as well. The tonal characteristics of the two are not dissimilar. Both act with temperament and attention to detail. So the combination of both invites you to indulge in the finest details. Such a detailed way of playing naturally also demands the listener's attention. This combination is never overly exhausting. The bass range is rather lush for magnetostatic headphones, although in absolute terms it can be found on the slimmer side. In direct comparison to the Quad, the SendyAudio is a bit slimmer, you can hear that very clearly with the Marley MkII. Soberly considered, this is probably the more neutral and correct tuning, but depending on the music genre, a somewhat lush bass can sometimes be more fun. Fortunately, with the Marley, the sound is quickly adapted to your own taste.

Conclusion

The Manunta Marley MkII is the perfect addition to the compact and melodious Manunta Rockstar series. The small amp also cuts a great figure solo. Its features, starting with the adjustable output resistance, through the balance setting, to the sound adjustment using the equalizer make the Marley the ideal partner for all conceivable headphones. But even without sound-influencing measures, the Marley plays rousing and in love with detail, so that the adjustment options are only the crowning glory. In terms of sound, it doesn't have to hide from full-blown high-end racing cars and is also super convenient to use using the remote control or app. At just under 1,250 euros, the Marley MkII has its price, but the sound performance and extensive features make it a good investment for demanding headphone listeners.

Rating

Overall grade: 94/95

Class: top class

Value for money: Very good