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M2Tech Marley Headphone Amplifier

A top-flight, relatively compact, very stylish headphone amp.

Review By Tom Lyle

M2Tech's Marley is a Class A headphone amplifier designed and built in Italy. Its esthetics are similar to M2Tech's [Vaughn digital-to-analog converter](#) and their [Joplin analog-to-digital converter](#). With their curved black front panels and brushed aluminum cabinets, it is obvious that M2Tech has made a deliberate attempt to make their products look as good as they sound. Although the front panel of the Marley headphone amplifier does not have a curved black grille as the Vaughn and Joplin it still obvious that M2Tech put the same type of emphasis on the outward appearance of their Marley headphone amp. This time out they opted to use a smooth black composite with a centrally located rectangular LCD screen on the front panel, and the black grille-like material of the other component's faceplates has moved to the top of the Marley's relatively small 8" x 8" x 2" cabinet, allowing heat to escape through grille's openings. The perforations also allow the user a peek inside to see the innards of the unit.



Not only does the Marley operate in Class A, but it is designed with a dual-stereo layout which enables it to drive two headphones with independent volume settings simultaneously. When in balanced mode the Marley bridges its two stereo amps to drive a single set of headphones, when in single-ended mode it is able to drive these two sets of headphones. So, it is literally two stereo amplifiers built into one cabinet, each with its own volume control with a bridging feature to drive the single set of headphone in balanced mode. The Marley has two line-level inputs, a preamp output and a tape-out jack, which is a tell-tale sign that M2Tech is serious about the Marley's ability to function as one's preamplifier. M2Tech claims that the Marley is a "high-performance" headphone amplifier that can drive all types of headphones; even balanced models that have their cords terminated in an XLR. When one uses headphones in the balanced mode, one can obtain 6 dB more output and improved sound quality.

The digitally controlled analog volume control on the Marley's front panel is set in 1dB steps, and a muting function allows the level to be attenuated by 2dB for those using super-efficient smaller headphones such as in-ear models. For such a small component, the Marley has lots of power on hand – 4 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms with a signal to noise ratio of 120 dB, which is quite impressive for a headphone amp. M2Tech's literature boasts that a pair of high efficiency speakers could be driven if one uses an adaptor on its output jacks! A wall-wart power supply is provided with the Marley, but as an option one can upgrade to a high-current, low noise model to connect to a 4-pin XLR socket on its rear panel.

Stylish

The clean and stylish looking design of the Marley places all of its connections on the rear panel. From left to right, sports two pair of RCA inputs, RCA inputs for the tape-out and preamp outputs, both unbalanced and balanced outputs for two headphones, the input I mentioned for the high-current power supply, and on the far right the power input for the wall-wart power supply. The sleek-looking front panel has a silver control dial on its black faceplate that M2Tech calls an encoder. It lets the user not only navigate the Marley's menu but also its volume



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same an encoder. It lets the user not only navigate the Marley's menu, but also its volume setting. By selecting the menu option then by pushing the encoder one can chose the option on each sub-menu. Menu choices are: balanced and unbalanced selection, the muting toggle operation, source selection (input 1 or 2), channel balance, output mode selection (balanced or single-ended), volume display mode (decibels or steps), an auto switch-off setting, display dimmer, and firmware revision (very much like an "about" menu selection on a website).

At the center of the front panel is its display. The multi-function LCD display glows a comforting blue and displays the volume setting during normal operation until the encoder is pressed to assess the menu. On the far left of the front panel is a rather small silver "on/off/mute/menu escape" button. Pressing this turns the Marley's power

on, a short push engages the muting function unless one is already in the menu, which causes the menu selection to revert back to the beginning (escape) and discard any menu choices made. All of this might seem a bit complex, but when actually using the Marley I thought it seemed fairly intuitive, that is, until I had to assess the manual to learn that a prolonged on/off/mute/menu escape button push will cause the Marley to power down.

Although I used four different sets of headphones with the Marley, most of the time I used a set of the top-flight **Grado PS-1000** headphones. I've had them since 2012, and I've used these dynamic headphones in a few other headphone amplifier reviews, as they are the most transparent, full frequency models I have in-house, and since they are easy to drive they can be used with just about any headphone amplifier on the market. Their neutrality, dynamic capabilities, and extended frequency response improve as the quality of the headphone amplifier improves. Another good reason for using the Grados, though, is that I use them every day—they are the headphones that I listen to for enjoyment, not just testing equipment. I also used the planar-magnetic Oppo LM-1 (review forthcoming) that I recently acquired, they are also easy to drive and very transparent, but similar to different makes of loudspeakers, they also present the music in a different way than the Grado's, or any other dynamic headphone. I purchased my **Sennheiser HD-600** headphones in the early 2000s, but have been updated by Sennheiser USA last year; they were almost totally rebuilt, including new driver elements. Lastly I tried the Marley with my trusty Shure E3 in-ear models that have not only been replaced with newer models by Shure many times over, but have traveled with me half-way around the world more than once. Cosmetically, they have seen better days, but they seem to be working fine. To the M2Tech's credit, the Marley had no trouble with any of these models. It had more than enough power to drive the relatively insensitive Oppo's, and was sensitive enough to drive the in-ear 'phones. In the past some headphone amps could not be set low enough to drive super-sensitive in-ear models, but the Marley was up to the task.



The majority of the time I used two different sources connected to one of Marley's two unbalanced RCA inputs -- an iPod loaded with full resolution (uncompressed) AIFF files, and the tape-out of the preamplifier of my main system. On this big rig I played FLAC files from the PC based music server with its USB output connected to a Benchmark DAC1USB, Wadia 121, or AURALiC VEGA digital-to-analog converter. And of course I played LPs: using two turntables, an **Oracle MK VI with an SME V tonearm**, or a Basis V with a Tri-Planar 6 tonearm, both of which were fitted with a Lyra Kleos phono cartridge feeding a Pass Labs XP-15 phono preamplifier. During use the Marley performed flawlessly. Lest one think that I didn't get an honest perspective when using the iPod, on it I have filled just about all of its 160 gigabyte hard-drive with un-compressed "CD quality" or better files (*on a rare occasion a 320kbps mp3 does appear on my iPod, most likely a rare out-take or live recording that is available in no other format). As much as I can appreciate mp3s space saving abilities, after only a short period they become annoying at best. I gladly sacrifice quantity for quality for the sake of my sanity. I also bypass the iPod's internal audio section by attaching to the iPod's dock connector a SendStation Pocket Dock Line-out adaptor which bypasses the iPod's internal audio section. I use a 1.5 meter Kimber interconnect with a mini-plug to connect to the SendStation, and a pair of gold plated RCA plugs on its other end to connect to the Marley's input jacks.

No, the sound quality coming from the iPod isn't as good as the system in my dedicated listening room, but using the iPod in this way was hardly lo-fi. With a minimal resolution of 16 bits and a sampling rate of 44.1k and bypassing the iPod's audio circuitry I was able to evaluate the sound quality of the M2Tech Marley headphone amplifier with a signal that was as unadulterated as I could come up with at the time while using a portable device. And since this is not only how I listen to headphones on a normal day-to-day basis, but the method in which I evaluated other headphone amplifiers. My comments in regards to the sound quality of the Marley are from both from my listening session with the system and the iPod as sources. The aggregated sound quality is also in regards to both its use in balanced and single-ended mode, as I occasionally used the Marley with a newly acquired set of Oppo LM-1 headphones with their optional XLR terminated cable.

Internal Power

There was never any question whether the Marley's internal power amplifier was operating with the relative inefficiency of Class A, as the byproduct of its dispersed energy was expressed as heat. Of course lack of efficiency is not such a big deal as the amplifier "only" pumps out 4 Wpc, but the top of the cabinet became quite hot after only a short period of time. Otherwise, my time spent with the Marley was thankfully uneventful as far as any glitches in performance were concerned. After switching on the power of the Marley, its screen reads "HEATING UP POWER AMPLIFIERS" for a few seconds, and then reverts to the screen indicating the input number and volume. Its volume control operates with an audiophile-approved smoothness, its indentations indicating each volume character, either from 0 to 79 steps or from OFF then 78 to 0 decibels. At its asking price the Marley is placing itself within a community with others to perhaps not be the best headphone amplifier on the planet, but certainly at the upper end of what audiophiles



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expect to pay for a headphone amplifier.

One would think that the sound produced through my headphones would be better when connected to the stereo system than an iPod, and one would be correct. The Marley is a high-end component, and of course sensitive to the source. Still, my comments regarding the sound quality of the Marley are a combination of time spent listening using both sources I usually use when listening to headphones – the stereo and my iPod. The quality of the source may have changed, but the characteristics of the Marley didn't. The same can be said of the headphones I used – the Grado is the best I had on hand, the Oppo a close second, followed by the Sennheiser. Even the in-ear models revealed certain characteristics of the Marley. And even though the majority of the time I used the Grados, my comments regarding the Marley's sonic characteristics is a

combination of my time spent with all of them.

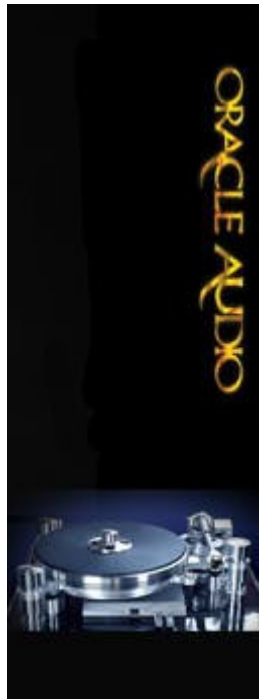
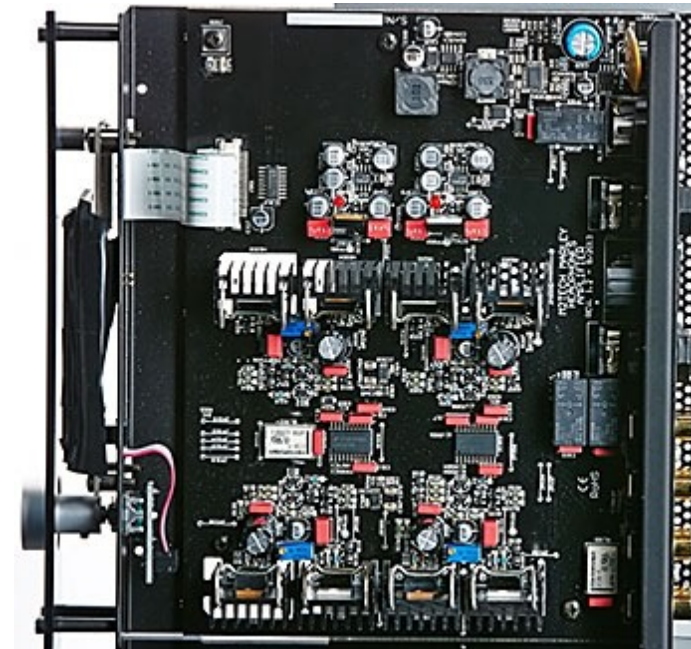
I was lucky enough to be able to critically listen to the M2Tech Marley for about two months, and during this time the Marley revealed itself to be a super-transparent amplifier, with a very, very neutral sound. Some may be drawn to its very honest sound more than others, but if one's taste in high-end equipment leans toward not glossing over any recording; be that a fine audiophile LP or downloaded pop single that has entered into the loudness wars, they may find the Marley much to their liking. Still, the Marley's ability to render each instrument and voice as it was intended is definitely its strong point. And it was its midrange where I could decipher each recording's "sound" to the fullest. Thankfully, the Marley wasn't a sonic microscope, instead it served at the pleasure of the musicians, engineers, producers, mastering engineers, and whoever else was responsible for putting the music on tape, hard drive, or whatever medium was responsible for storing the musical signal. The previous headphone amplifier that I reviewed in *Enjoy the Music.com* was the **Pro-Ject Head Box DS** in February's issue. This relatively inexpensive headphone amp/DAC might not be in same league as the M2Tech Marley, but it set itself apart from other affordable headphone amps in its amount of detail retrieval. During my initial listening sessions with the Marley it was striking how different these two headphone amps sounded from each other. Yes, the Marley trounces the Head Box DS in every sonic category, yet it still took a while to accustom myself to a sound that doesn't dissect every aspect of every sound that passes through it. The music coming from the headphones that are connected to the Marley sound more like music, plain and simple. And although I get a cheap thrill from hearing the intricacies of every waveform on a recording, this is almost a textbook definition of how one succumbs to listening fatigue. But like I said, the Marley is in a different league than the Pro-Ject, and demands to be compared not only to headphone amps within its price range, but other high-end components with aspirations to be the best in its class.

Although the Marley's sound is a transparent one, it does lean toward the yin rather than the yang as far as absolute neutrality is concerned. Although it's best to keep in mind that the asking price of the Marley demands that a reviewer be somewhat critical of its sound quality, and although I stated that it is a very neutral headphone amplifier, its transient response is not the quickest I've ever heard. Yet the nature of its sound was also very musical, so this slight paradox leads me to believe that it was voiced using recordings of real music recording in real space. Rarely does one listen to live music and make the comment, "wow, the transient response is fantastic!" Obviously, one listens to music without even thinking about such things, and that, admirably, was my mindset most of the time when listening to the Marley. This also remained true when listening to the majority of my iPod's playlists which are largely populated by guilty pleasures, not to mention material that is rarely sought after because of its recording quality. Yes, I did listen to some audiophile favorites to objectively test the sonic limits and reveal the sound quality of the Marley in regards to frequency extension, etc. But what most impressed me was how this headphone amp made instruments and voices sound like real instrument and voices. Just as impressive was how closely it could come to making me think I was hearing the exact intensions of the people who were responsible for making the music on the records, discs, and files I was playing.

Just for fun I also used the Marley as a linestage. I first connected it to my main system in my dedicated listening room. In this system, when I do use a preamplifier I often use one that is priced many times the price of the Marley, let alone one that is designed for this purpose, not a headphone amp that can also be used as a preamp. The Marley performed surprisingly well. I've used a headphone amp as a linestage once or twice before the Marley's time in my system, but when I did it did not having enough gain, the speakers and room demand more gain than the component can deliver to drive the speakers to a volume that is greater than what is used for background listening. There are a few DACs that I have used that can perform this task, but with 4 dB on hand this is the first headphone amp that has allowed me to listen to music at a "normal" volume. Kudos to the Marley for accomplishing this feat! On the other hand, my main system demands a greater level of transparency than the Marley delivered when using it in this way. When moved downstairs to my second system which uses not only speakers that are much easier to drive, but is in a room that is much more lively sounding. To the Marley's credit, I could probably live with using the Marley as a preamplifier in this system. Alas, this is so when only using one source, since changing sources involves not a flick of a switch or turn of a control knob as on most preamps, but the comparatively laborious task of using the Marley's multi-function encoder to access the menu to switch between the two sources. Life is tough.

And In Conclusion

The only downside to the M2Tech Marley is not a sonic characteristic, but its price. No matter how you slice it, most would consider \$1700 is a great deal of money to pay for a headphone amplifier, especially for a headphone amp that doesn't have an internal DAC. Just one example of many is the Oppo HA-1, which is priced at \$1200 includes a DAC that is DSD capable, and is also a Class A balanced amplifier. But then again, the Oppo has a much, much larger cabinet. And it is not imported from Italy. This is the third component from M2Tech that I've had the pleasure of reviewing, and not only does it share the same sense of cabinet design artistry, but those other component also share the characteristic of service to the source. The M2Tech Marley headphone amplifier is not one to gloss over a recording's flaws, but when presented with a good recording from a good source using a good set of headphones the resulting sound places the Marley in the company of high-end audio products that aspire to be the best available. It will likely be the last headphone amplifier that one purchases. I would recommend the M2Tech Marley to any audiophile who desires a top-flight, relatively compact, very stylish headphone amp.



Ratings (I tend to rate very conservatively; a five-note rating is equivalent to the best I've ever heard):

Tonality	
Sub-bass (10Hz - 60Hz)	
Mid-bass (80Hz - 200Hz)	
Midrange (200Hz - 3,000Hz)	
High Frequencies (3,000Hz On Up)	
Attack	
Decay	
Inner Resolution	
Imaging	
Fit And Finish	
Self Noise	
Value For The Money	

Specifications

Type: Solid-state stereo headphone amplifier
 Inputs: Two line in on female, gold-plated RCAs
 Outputs: Two 1/4" stereo jack (single-ended)
 4-pole female XLR (balanced), pre out on gold-plated female RCAs
 Tape out on gold-plated female RCAs
 Supply Inputs: 5.5/2.1mm jack, positive on tip, 4-pole male XLR for +15V/-15V/+5V
 Output Voltage: 8Vrms max (single-ended), 16Vrms max (balanced)
 Output Power: 4Wrms per channel @ 8 Ohms
 Input Impedance: 40kOhms
 Gain: 12dB (single-ended) / 18dB (balanced)
 Input Sensitivity: 2Vrms in for max output
 Frequency Response: 3Hz-80kHz (+0/-0.5dB)
 Signal-To-Noise Ratio: 120dB (8Vrms out, 1kHz, A-weighted)
 THD+N: 0.003% (2Vrms out, 1kHz)
 Volume Range: 0 to -78dB plus total mute (1 dB steps)
 Muting: -20dB
 Balance Range: +/-6dB (1dB steps)
 Auto Switch-Off: disabled, 0 to 240 minutes (30 minute steps)
 Supply: 15VDC
 Dimensions: 200 x 200 x 50 mm (WxDxH)
 Weight: 4.41 lbs.
 Price: \$1699

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