

Magnat[®] MA 400

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Magnat MA 400
Test result: very good

- + a compelling performance during CD and vinyl playback through a balanced sound
- + skilfully combines tubes and semiconductor technology

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Price tip



Magnat MA 400



Sound quality	very good
Processing	very good
Overall result	very good

"In aircraft, the balance of power and weight is everything; in terms of flying, ballast is just as debilitating as a lack of thrust. The question is whether the MA 400 hybrid amplifier from Magnat is successful in its balancing act between audiophile performance, configuration and workmanship.

'Concentrating on the essentials' is a way of summing up what Magnat had in mind when developing the MA 400 hybrid amp. Just like low-cost airlines concentrate on flying and moving their customers en masse at competitive prices, Magnat's primary focus with its 400 series, which also includes the MCD 450 CD player and MT 420 tuner, is on the sound performance of its components. Unlike the airlines, however, the Pulheim-based company aims to combine class with its price: It wants its hi-fi devices to soar in the audiophile world.

Cockpit with an overview

Accordingly, the MA 400 is not a Swiss Army knife in a hi-fi guise. Many of the tools in the little red aid, aside from the knife, are seldom required in everyday life. Why include them then in the first place? The configuration of the amplifier, which appears modest at first glance, has an advantage in that the front is only adorned with a few control elements, thereby ensuring more of the beautiful, solid aluminium front panel is visible. However, this doesn't mean that it is unable to change some of the basic parameters of a stereo amplifier in any way.

This is simply effected via menus and interaction between the display and volume knob, as there is no dedicated controller. Bass and treble levels can be freely selected and the sound pattern can be spiced up via the loudness function. The input gain feature really makes sense, as it can be used to adjust the input level of sources with varying volume settings. This avoids the sometimes tedious process of manually adjusting the volume when changing the source. Dealing with the menu is simple, intuitive and quickly learned. Besides the few control elements on the front there are also two inputs for 3.5 mm and 6.3 mm jacks, which can be used to quickly connect an MP3 player or a set of headphones. The headphone jack also serves to switch the connected pair of speakers on and off.

A small round window between the standby switch and display provides an unobstructed view of the glowing selected and burned-in preamp tubes. Overall, however, it's not just the uncluttered front that generates a high quality impression. The amplifier is well packed in a sturdy metal housing and its 5.8 kilogram weight is not overly apparent at first glance. If workmanship and tactile quality are anything to go by, the MA 400 should also cut a good figure in the listening test.

An emphatic drive

This is something Magnat wants to achieve via the potent toroidal transformer, which is set to generate sufficient power for all genres of music. Two electrolytic capacitors, each with 10,000 microfarad capacitance, serve as a buffer between it and the power amplifier chip for absorbing faster pulse peaks. A solid aluminium heat sink runs through the device and divides the preamplifier and power amplifier from one another, while providing cooling for the amplifier chip. Durability and an optimum signal flow are ensured via the gold-plated RCA jacks for the four high level inputs and the phono input, as well as the speaker terminal screws, which can accommodate both banana plugs and fork fittings. The Magnat unit has its own power supply for the standby mode, which reduces energy consumption to one watt - an extremely important measure in times of debate over nuclear power. The mains switch at the rear of the MA 400 means it can even be completely disconnected from the mains supply.

Magnat has offset the increased cost of materials for an enhanced sound by making sacrifices elsewhere. This enables the hybrid amplifier to cavort in a price class that would otherwise belong to purebred transistor amplifiers. Interested parties who are looking for a superior sound quality at an attractive price and who deem a high quality sound to be more important than a long list of equipment, need to understand that the 400 series does not feature a preamplifier output, Source Direct button or any digital interfaces. And the fact that there is no Rec Out Selector means it is also not possible to listen to CDs, for example, parallel to radio recordings.

The fact that Magnat is serious about its audiophile claim is not only demonstrated by the use of a tube in the preamp, but also by the consultation of experienced electronic engineers Walter Fuchs in the development of the phono stage. Particularly low-noise operational amplifiers take care of the tiny signals from MM pickups here, whereby the connection of high output MC systems is also possible. Further customisation options for capacitance or resistance, however, are lacking. The sound character of the hybrid unit is formed by the ECC88 double triode before the preamplified signals are enhanced by the power amplifier chip in the output stage to a level similar to a transistor amp and sent to the speakers.

Take-off instead of no-go

The MA 400 performed gracefully and delicately during CD playback and alluded immediately to its character which is shaped by the tubes. The strengths of the unit emerged beautifully, for example, in tracks dominated by acoustic guitars, such as Lynard Skynards' »The Last Rebel« (»Endangered Species«, Sony Music) or Kansas' »Dust In The Wind« (»Dust In The Wind - Kansas Best«, Sounds): With wonderfully transparent highs and rich, full sounding string instruments, it simply underpinned the impression of a rather warm and soft sound pattern.

The fact that the MA 400, despite two different origins, is ultimately a whole unit and is capable of really rocking out with relatively modest power reserves, quickly became clear after a courageous twist of the volume knob. This was evident in the Police classic »Message In A Bottle« (»Live!«, Universal Music) from the excellent recording of November 1983 in Atlanta. Stewart Copeland's exciting drum beats, Andy Summers' brilliant guitar riffs and Sting's intricate bass work were reproduced by the Magnat cleanly, clearly and stress free at relatively high levels.

The MA 400 generated more oomph in the phono stage, where it reflected on the virtues of its high level inputs. It successfully generated and maintained the punchy beat of the drum and bass guitar in the bass and mid-ranges in a powerful and lively manner to provide Bruce Cockburn's »Lovers In A Dangerous Time« (»Stealing Fire«) with a relentless energy. Queen's »Is This The World We Created?« (»The Works«, EMI) sparkled throughout the room with a crystal clear treble that never appeared too sharp and voluminous vocals from Freddie Mercury.

Magnat's MA 400 caters for the needs of ambitious music lovers and elevates them to a higher plane. It skilfully combines the advantages and strengths offered by tubes and semiconductors to generate a compelling performance when playing both CD and vinyl with a balanced sound, an outstanding circuit arrangement and good workmanship. 400 euros for a hybrid that has been devised and developed in Germany is not only perfectly fine, but a downright special offer. We only hope that Magnat continues with such developments to pave the way for many other similarly beautiful devices."