

899 words

**One-Chassis Wonder**  
**Music Hall Maven Receiver**  
Neil Gader

The Music Hall Maven is a stylish updating of one of audio's most enduring components, the stereo receiver—the one-chassis solution that integrates the preamp and amp stages with an AM/FM tuner. Classic, sensible, understated. Dig a little deeper however and the Maven reveals that there's more going on here than mere tradition.

The Maven offers audio *and* video connectivity, a combination that makes it ideal as an audiophile den system or versatile enough to double as a 2.1- channel home-theater setup. On the audio front the Maven outputs a healthy 100Wpc and includes a preamp output for biamping or driving an active speaker, most likely a subwoofer. Video switching can be tapped via a trio of inputs for either S-video or composite sources. No component or HDMI? Easy does it, the Maven's video side is targeted towards users who prize connectivity, and reducing the wire bundles, not driving a big screen DLP. There's a pair of digital audio inputs with available 24-bit/96kHz upsampling. In fact, one of the first things I did during setup was to jack my DVR into the TosLink input of the Maven, which provided improved listening quality for broadcast television. This feature can also be used to enjoy DVDs that offer a two-channel PCM mix. Keep in mind, however, that the Maven is not a home-theater processor and hence won't decode surround formats like Dolby Digital or DTS.

Construction quality is impressive. The hunky aluminum faceplate and adjoining panels and heatsinks are tightly flush-mounted, and the internal layout is neatly executed. The top-panel venting testifies to thoughtful thermal engineering. The minimalist front panel is dominated by twin knurled aluminum volume and input knobs (the latter doubles for radio station tuning) and an offset circular display. Which brings me to my biggest gripe—a bewildering lack of intuitive control and ergonomics. For example, where's the front-panel mute button? Only on the remote control, mate. Also, it took some super-sleuthing to activate the upsampling DAC. Turns out I needed to press the CD/AMP button *first*, then the neighboring SRC/INPUT. Otherwise the Maven would only cycle between inputs. The manual was silent (mute?) on both of these issues. Finally with its cookie-cutter micro-buttons the remote control would test even the most nimble text-message addict.

All was forgiven however when music began coursing through the Maven's circuitry. Sonically the Maven performed at or above my expectations. Its tonal signature was essentially neutral with an appealing warmth in the lower-mid/upper-bass region. It reproduced the wider frequency spectrum with ease, and with a firm grip on tonal and dynamic reality. The mids were full-bodied. The treble range was extended if not ultimately translucent. Imaging was good and the sensation of dimensional space and soundstage information (particularly width) was very good. Some moments were even revelatory. During Jane Monheit's cover of "Over the Rainbow" [*Come Dream With Me*, N-Coded] for example, I could hear more of her chest and body enter into the mix as the melody descended, the music literally resonating through her frame in a way that reminded me that this was an acoustic instrument not merely a recording. Similarly, bass

had noteworthy punch and extension. Even on big-bottomed transients—Holly Cole’s rendition of “Train” [*Temptation*, Alert] will suffice here—there was little evidence of dynamic compression. However, savvy speaker-matching is important. On an intelligently designed speaker with good-to-excellent sensitivity like the Gershman Sonogram the Maven maintained easy control. It was only in comparison to the larger 200W output and superior damping factor of a stand-alone amp like the 200W Plinius P10 that the Maven seemed to cede some ground and sound less decisive reproducing the rush of competing orchestral timbres during Beethoven’s *Ninth* [Decca].

Like most receivers, which strive to combine three components worth of circuitry under one roof, the Maven’s top end was a bit dry. It could have been sweeter and more open. A soprano like Audra McDonald sometimes sounded a little constricted hitting notes in her upper range, as if her throat had momentary need of a lozenge [*How Glory Goes*, Nonesuch]. The Maven was very strong as McDonald stormed into her crescendos. But it didn’t quite capture the micro-dynamic gradations as she modulated the amplitude. Classically trained singers like Monheit and McDonald move a lot of air, and you should almost feel the pressure changes through the song. Taken as a whole, the Maven at times comes achingly close to the higher-priced spread.

A tip of the hat to the switch-hitting capability of the Music Hall Maven. Its sonic credentials are above reproach in this price category. And I still can’t get over its superior fit ‘n’ finish. Even though its user interface needs some polishing, **it garners an easy recommendation—truly a maven worthy of its name.**

### **Specs & Pricing**

Power Output: 100Wpc into 8 ohms

Inputs: Five analog, two digital, one optical, one coaxial

Dimensions: 17\*\* x 16.5\*\* x 5\*\*

Weight: 33 lbs.

Price: \$999

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### **ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Ortofon Black and Red cartridges; Simaudio Moon Supernova, Sony DVP-9000ES; T+A; Plinius P10; Tara Labs Omega, Synergistic Tesla Apex, Nordost Baldur, Kimber Kable BiFocal XL; Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Palladian power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners; Sound Fusion Turntable stand