



McIntosh  
MC252  
POWER AMPLIFIER



# McMini

**The McIntosh MC252 Power Amplifier**

By Rich Kent



The MC252 is McIntosh's "entry-level" solid-state power amplifier, rated at 250 watts per channel and weighing in at a hefty 94 pounds. It is the smallest solid-state amp in McIntosh's line, measuring roughly at 10x18x15 inch, with an MSRP of \$5,000. This model includes their famous Autoformer transformer circuitry and sentry monitor protection circuits as well as the option to use the amplifiers as bridged monoblocks, offering 500 watts per channel.

The rear connections include balanced and unbalanced inputs, speaker outputs for two, four and eight ohms, and a trigger to power it on automatically with your preamp. As long as your preamplifier has a three- to 30-volt trigger (high on, low off, center positive) the MC252 will work with your other components.

The rear connection markings are easily read and spaced appropriately for easy access with whatever cables you possess. The front panel features two knobs; one for power and one to control those big, blue power meters. You can select real-time power display, a peak-hold function or, if you prefer, turn off the front panel lighting completely. But who would want to do that with a McIntosh? *(continued)*

*Burmester*  
ART FOR THE EAR



061 CD Player



035 Pre Amplifier



931 RDS FM Tuner



036 Power Amplifier

Classic Line



The meters make the presentation for me and now they are backlit with LEDs for much longer life. McIntosh tech guru Chuck Hinton estimates a 70,000 hour lifespan, perhaps longer, so when your kids inherit your MC252 it will still be looking sharp.

#### Full Disclosure Before I Begin

While I used to be a solid-state guy with a penchant for Class A power amplifiers, the tube McIntosh sound has won me over for the past couple of years. My reference system features their C2200 preamplifier and the MC275 IV power amplifier, running balanced throughout with MIT cable for signal and speakers.

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#### As most audio enthusiasts know, this game is always a series of tradeoffs.

But the tubes were a nice compromise from where I had spent the past few years, and my MartinLogan CLS speakers are not the easiest to drive. A little restless, I was starting to get intrigued by solid-state power again.

It is worth noting that McIntosh gear typically has a short break-in time and I received the MC252 with a few hundred hours on the clock, so I was ready to start the audition immediately. My first choice was Bill Evans' *Waltz With Debbie*. I had a few new magazines to read while getting a casual first impression, but it didn't take very long for this change in my system to capture my full attention. Stone cold, it sounded very musical, and it became somewhat more open after about 30 minutes. *(continued)*





### A Brief Comparison

As I kept inching up the volume control, I was not noticing the edge that I've experienced from other solid-state amplifiers that I've owned. Fully warmed up, I was enjoying a huge soundstage, with a wider and deeper presentation than I was accustomed to with my MC275. I also was impressed with the additional bass articulation the solid-state amplifier brought to my system. Due to a slightly lower sensitivity (3.2v input for full output in balanced mode, vs. 2.5v input for full output with the MC275) I had to run the volume control higher for the same sound levels, but the C2200 was up to the task.

Switching the program to large-scale orchestral music, I noticed that the meters were occasionally jumping up to the 250-watt level, making me wonder if I needed more power after all. I did notice more detail and separation of the instruments with this type of music, especially at slightly elevated listening levels.

Whether you choose the tube amplifier or solid state is personal choice. I found the piano recordings that I auditioned

slightly more true in tone with the MC252, and slightly more full and romantic with the MC 275. The MC252 reminds me more of the sound of a Steinway, while the MC275 sounds more like a Yamaha or Baldwin piano.

### An Excellent Dilemma

I made the switch to tubes a while back for that extra romance when listening to vocals. I admit to being a big fan of female vocalists. Listening one of my favorite test tracks, "Here, There and Everywhere" from Erin Bode's *Don't Take Your Time*, the solid state amplifier does not convey the last bit of control and phrasing in Bode's voice the way my MC275 does.

However, when I switch to Led Zeppelin's "I Can't Leave You Babe" and those big blue meters start bouncing, it's another ballgame entirely. The solid-state amplifier has the extra punch and weight to do this recording justice. If most of your music leans towards heavy rock, you will appreciate the extra headroom an amplifier of this size offers. *(continued)*

Listening to Martin Pearlman's recording of the Bach Brandenburg Concertos tips the scale back toward the tube camp again. It's no contest with intimate classical pieces like this. I prefer the additional warmth of the tube Mac with solo instrument recordings and quartets.

### **A Quick Switch to Some Dynamic Speakers**

The CLS has a reputation for being a very analytical speaker and one that is tough to drive. To round the test out, I wanted to try some dynamic speakers as well. I have some modest alternatives, the Paradigm Atoms and Monitor Audio B100's, that I was able to raid from other listening areas in the house. The comparison was very revealing.

Both sets of speakers had more dynamics and pace with the MC252. This amplifier turned my modest monitors into major overachievers with so much power and control on tap. They also played much louder and cleaner with the MC275. This exercise reinforced my belief that one should spend hard-earned money on stellar electronics to build a good foundation and upgrade speakers as your budget allows.

The McIntosh MC252 is one of these stellar amps to consider. Its rock-solid build quality barely works up a sweat, even at full output, and it will silently protect itself and your speakers if it senses any problems. In the current economy, a purchase of \$6,500 is no small investment, but it is comforting to know that McIntosh components have an uncanny ability to retain or even appreciate in value over the years. If you are in the market for an amplifier in this price range the MC252 deserves an audition, one that any McIntosh dealer would be happy to arrange. *(continued)*



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## Second Opinion: Jeff Dorgay

I also own the MC275, but having current MartinLogan speakers, which dip even further on the impedance curve than the CLS, I've never been happy with the presentation. The solid state Mac was really the way to go in my system. It offered the necessary air and dynamics to make the CLX come alive, where the smaller tube amplifier always sounds rolled off to me.

Reviewing power amplifiers tends to be straightforward because they usually don't have more than a power switch, so we don't have a list of super cool features to take half the review telling you about. Once you fire up the MC252, it just goes about its business, though you do have those hypnotizing meters to enjoy.

One thing worth noting is McIntosh's Power Guard circuit, which is a soft clipping circuit that prevents harsh distortion from reaching your speakers if you get carried

away with the volume control. If you really like to rock, this feature will probably save you the cost of the amplifier in speaker service calls.

### Extremely Versatile

I compared the MC252 to a number of different solid-state power amplifiers from C-J, SimAudio, Marantz and Burmester. Granted, they all have their own signature sound, but I found the 252 to be very dynamic and ever so slightly on the warm side tonally. While it was here, I also investigated a number of speaker combinations to see what synergies might exist.

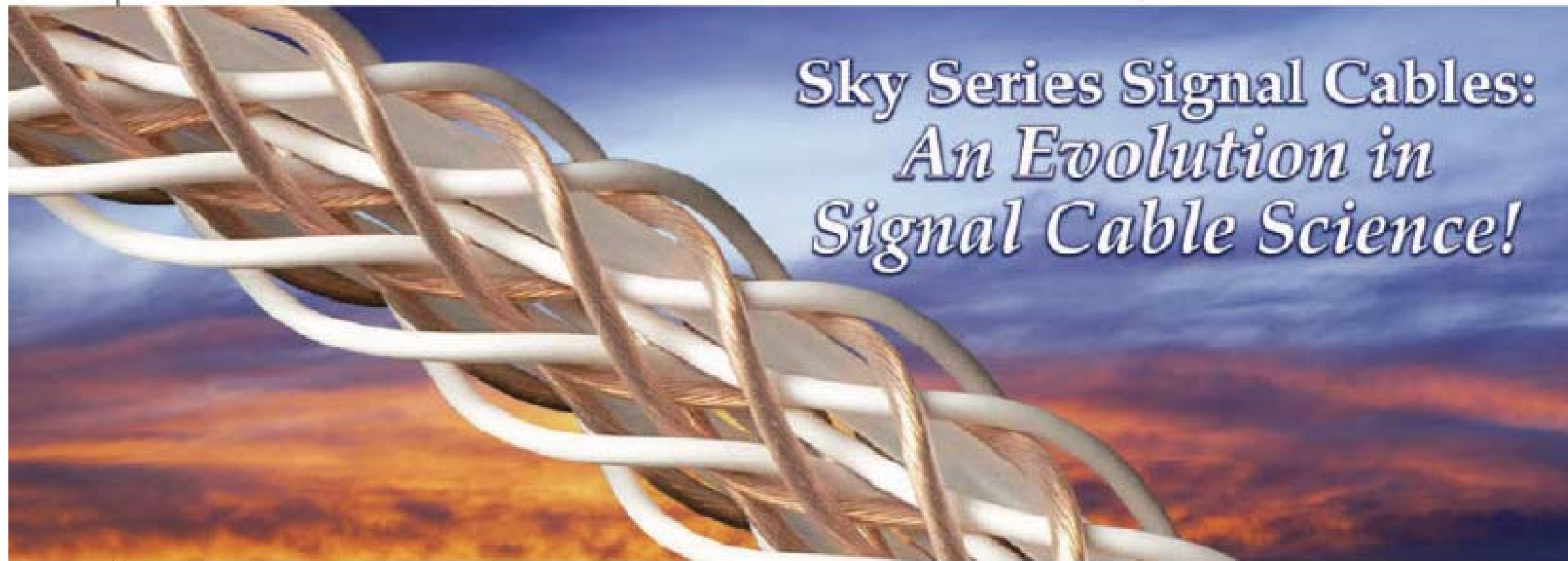
With my reference MartinLogan CLX's, I was able to drive them quite loud before the red Power Guard lights came on, but the Magnepan 1.6's seemed to just gobble up the output of this amplifier, so perhaps even more power is required? *(continued)*



## NEW PRODUCT

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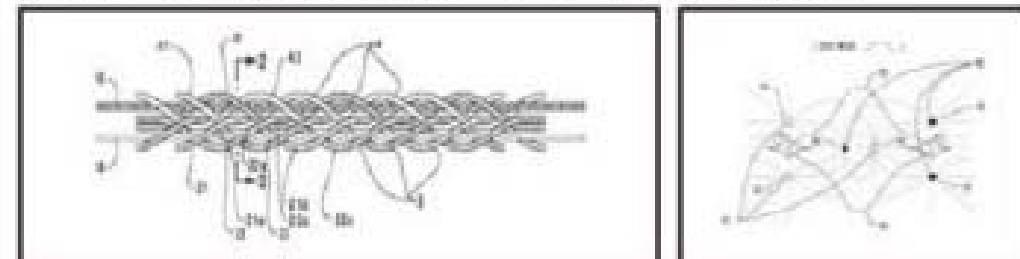
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating geometry eliminates the self-induced distortions that plague other cable designs.

All signal cables have a characteristic resistance and reactance (capacitive and inductive), which is essentially a simple type of filter. Resistance is a linear function and simply reduces signal level while reactance is much more destructive to signal integrity in that it is frequency dependent. It skews amplitude and phase as frequency increases.

Conventional cable geometries dictate that a cable must be either capacitive or inductive, if one is reduced the other increases and vice-versa. By all accounts, the ideal cable would have virtually zero resistance, zero inductance and zero capacitance — which of course is impossible to achieve, but it should be the design goal. No cable should be designed to be either capacitive or inductive.

*Shunyata Research's* patented *Helix Geometry* solves the cable reactance problem. Wide conductor spacing and 90-degree crossing angles, minimize capacitance. Counter-rotating helices that are longitudinally offset create disparate EFF (electromagnetic flux fields) that minimize inductive reactance! Only the *Helix Geometry* achieves both low capacitive reactance AND low inductive reactance.

By virtually eliminating the self-induced distortion inherent in all other cable designs, *Shunyata Research's* hand-braided *Helix Geometry Cables* have brought about universally documented endorsements from the world's foremost recording engineers, studios and sound professionals, as well as the industry's toughest critics and most renowned electronics manufacturers.



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The *Cohergenic Process* creates an electrical alignment of the molecules through the use of a *Shunyata Research* designed electromagnet. The electromagnet's powerful electromagnetic field induces an electrical current within the conductor while the conductor cools, locking the molecules into electrical alignment — PERMANENTLY.

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Switching to the Verity Audio Sarastro II's (92.5db sensitivity), the meters rarely jumped up to even the 100-watt level even when playing music at ear-splitting levels.

Though many people like to assemble an all-McIntosh system, don't count out this amplifier if you are looking for a higher-powered solid-state amplifier, no matter what you are using as a front end. In today's economy, I'd call a 250 watt per channel power amplifier with this pedigree for \$5,000 a bargain. There are a couple of big solid-state amplifiers out there that will reveal more music than the MC252, but you're looking at a five-figure pricetag. ●

### MANUFACTURER

#### McIntosh Laboratories

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www.mcintoshlabs.com

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Sources** Linn LP-12 w/ Sumiko Blue Point Special, Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm and Lyra Skala, Nakamichi Dragon

**Digital Sources** Krell KPS20i, Naim CD555

**Preamplifiers** Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2, McIntosh C2200, Nagra PL-L

**Power Amplifiers** Conrad Johnson Premier 350, McIntosh MC275, Nagra PSA

**Cable** MIT, Shunyata and Cardas