



KARAN KA L REFERENCE MKIII & KA S600

Reviewer Edgar Kramer

PREAMPLIFIER & POWER AMPLIFIER

Think of large solid state amplification and the images you conjure up might be of monster Krell, Gryphon or Mark Levinson designs. But how about a company from Serbia with gargantuan Krell-like creations?

No... seriously? Yes! Think massive all-aircraft-grade anodised aluminium panels... think a level of heat-sinking sufficient to keep the Space Shuttle cool during re-entry. That might paint you a picture of the KA S600 monster, the company's stereo flagship.

Battleship construction is also applied to the top-of-the-line preamplifier, the KA L Reference MKIII twin-box number. Peruse these products and you'll not be able to deny that here is a company with serious intent in terms of construction, at the least. And in the hands of a talented designer like company principal Milan Karan, a tangible promise of equal determination in terms of performance.

THE EQUIPMENT

The two-box KA L Reference MKIII is a full-function preamplifier with a separate power supply. The preamp features a host of unbalanced and balanced inputs/outputs (see specifications panel) with a heavy-duty umbilical connecting the main controller to the power supply in its matching solid case-work. A central cosmetic smoked acrylic insert on the fascia of the controller (also carried through to the power supply) provides a window into Karan Acoustics' (KA) backlit red logo, while small graphics depict the selected input. On either side of the acrylic panel are nicely-machined knobs for source input on the left, and volume on the right. The unit is meant to be constantly powered, so the only on/off switch is around the back, near the IEC socket.

One of the inputs caters for the built-in phono stage (MM and MC) which features variable gain,

input load and capacitance adjustments via internal dip-switches.

This is a fully balanced dual-mono design featuring zero global feedback. For the line inputs Karan Acoustics quotes a wide frequency response of DC to 300kHz +0, -3dB, while the impressive intermodulation distortion figure is quoted as below 0.006 percent. The signal-to-noise ratio for the line-level inputs is better than -112dB; for the MM input the figure is -90dB

“

Think massive all-aircraft-grade anodised aluminium panels and sufficient heatsinking to keep the Space Shuttle cool during re-entry...



Having all that power on tap, of course, also results in an effortless sound with superb dynamic expression.

while for the MC input, S/N ratio is better than -81dB.

A nifty round ‘puck’ all-metal remote control is included. Neat as it is, it features only up/down buttons for volume adjustments – a mute button might have been nice, especially given that the lowest setting on the volume control does not mute the unit totally – some low output is still clearly perceptible at a background level.

The 76kg beast that is the KA S600 is the company’s top-shelf stereo offering. It features a full dual-mono topology requiring a power lead to each of its twin IEC sockets. Again, the unit is meant to be left powered up, so you’ll find the two on/off switches around on the back panel.

At the heart of this high-current amplifier are twin sealed custom 1.5kVA transformers. We should mention that our review sample had a modulating hum (perhaps due to some DC in our room’s power line) generating from the transformers’ laminations. This was rectified via the use of a power regenerator in consultation with the local distributor Radiance AV, who indicate the hum to be a singularity not experienced on other units sold.

Further power supply robustness is provided via the power capacitor bank, which totals 132,000 microfarads of storage. The KA S600’s output mirrors its physical largess; it’s capable of delivering tremendous power and Karan Acoustics quotes 600, 1000 and 1800 watts into 8-, 4- and 2 ohms respectively. This is achieved via 20 Sanken RET high current bipolar output devices per channel. This monster will drive

any speaker, no matter the load. Karan Acoustics uses Class-A configuration utilising a sliding bias arrangement which keeps the heatsinks subtly warm (as opposed to the searing heat generated by full-time Class-A devices).

Again, Karan Acoustics quotes a wide frequency response of DC to 300kHz +0, -3dB with a signal-to-noise ratio of better than 112dB at the rated output into 8 ohms. The current feedback topology also features no overall feedback and still manages a very low 0.02 percent intermodulation distortion.

Common in Class-D amplifiers (ergo their use in many subwoofer systems), but rather unusual in even large solid-state amps, is a tremendously high damping factor of 10,000 into 8 ohms from 20Hz to 20kHz. That’s frequency wide, which is a remarkable claim and promises a fast and tight bass range with solid transient attack throughout the rest of the spectrum.

LISTENING

Now, some valve aficionados over-simplistically shun solid-state amplification devices, of course, proclaiming vacuum glass to deliver warmth and a sense of ‘body’ to the music – especially in the midrange frequencies – that solid-state amps cannot match. But the other side of the coin is that valve amplifiers can lack the current drive and control in the bass region that low impedance speakers demand. (While this is, on paper, technically correct, the musical end result is not, of course, always so black and white.)

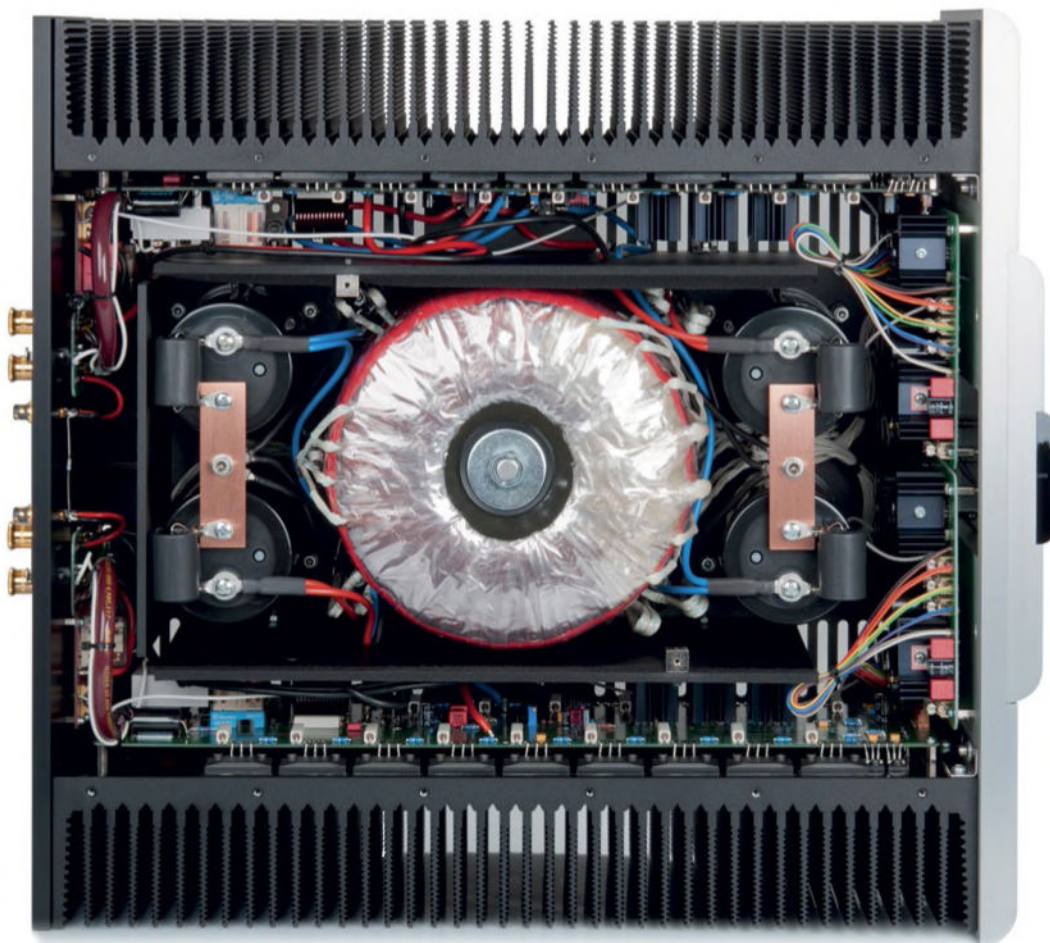
What you’ll get with the Karan Acoustics pre/power combo is a fluid and warm presentation akin to valve gear – but without the associated reliability and potentially expensive valve replacement issues. The combo presents music with smooth tonality in the mids and highs and ties this in with superb low frequency control and slam. Are we talking the unattainable ‘best of both worlds’ scenario here? For many listeners, quite possibly so...

Milan Karan has ‘voiced’ the KA L Reference MKIII and KA S600 combo to provide the strengths of solid state in the bass regions and – ever so subtly and expertly achieved – to tread on the warm side of the ‘yin and yang’ divide. This has been achieved without a sickly sugary or flatly unexciting midrange or over-bloated slow bass. In fact, the balancing act is so beautifully conducted that there’s no loss of detail, separation or resolution despite the ‘musicality’ on offer. What there is, however, is an extraordinary sense of solid-state refinement.

On The Pine’s “Tumbling Down” from their *Phantom Limb* CD, the Karan duo hit hard with punchy and detailed drumming in the track’s

▽ THE FULLY-FEATURED PREAMPLIFIER INCLUDES A MIX OF BALANCED AND UNBALANCED INPUTS (INCLUDING A PHONO STAGE) AND DUAL OUTPUTS.





intro, while the bass line drones through with depth and wallop. Elijah Ford's vocals are realistically rendered, articulate and with good image density. Towards the end of the track, a chorus breaks out in support of singer Ford and while some amplifiers tend to homogenise the different voices, others also make the crescendo somewhat strident. The KA duo did neither. The voices were defined and separated into individual entities, while not a trace of brightness or hardness detracted from this quite natural-sounding production.


Even closely-miked challenges were handled beautifully. Although the overall recording is excellent, Petra Magoni's close-miked vocals on "Roxanne" from Musica Nuda's self-titled release can get shrill in some systems. The KA components handled the let-fly vocal transient attacks with utter control – again, no hint of glare. And then Ferruccio Spinetti's accompanying acoustic bass was rendered with fullness yet was tightly gripped and thoroughly nuanced.

Having all that power on tap, of course, also results in an effortless sound with superb dynamic expression. Our reference Wilson Audio Alexia speakers are 91dB efficient, so a few watts

can make them sing. But the headroom and limitless power the KA S600 has in store can take that speaker to dynamic and low frequency places no 15-watt SET (and very few push-pulls) can, no matter the quality.

Another superiority valve aficionados attribute to glass designs is their tonality or timbral beauty (which strictly speaking can also translate to accuracy, as they go hand in hand – donning flame suit now...). The KA combo handles timbral information with accuracy, translating to verisimilitude representative of true instrumental tonal colours.

CONCLUSION

Karan Acoustics are a relatively new brand in this country. However, in Europe and the USA the brand has had enthusiastic consumer acclaim and professional reviewer praise. There's no doubting both the preamplifier and power amplifier circuits' proficiency with a musical signal. Add the battle-ship chassis construction, the wealth of inputs and outputs – including the high quality MM/MC phono stage – and you're talking upper echelon electronics wizardry. Milan Karan, we may be seeing your superb namesake electronics in this country for some time to come, I'd wager... 



SPECIFICATIONS

KA L REFERENCE MKIII

FREQUENCY RESPONSE:

DC–300kHz, +0, -3dB

INPUT IMPEDANCE:

RCA 30kohm, XLR 30kohm, MM 2mV/47k; MC 0.2mV

INTERMODULATION

DISTORTION: < 0.006%

SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO:

Line-level better than -112dB, MM better than -90dB, MC better than -81dB

OUTPUT LEVEL: 6V/0.6 ohms

INPUTS: 3 x RCA, 2 x XLR, 1 x phono (MM/MC)

OUTPUTS: 1 x RCA, 1 x XLR

DIMENSIONS (WHD):

500 x 110 x 367mm

WEIGHT: 16kg control unit,

17kg power supply

PRICE: \$27,000

KA S600

POWER OUTPUT (PINK

NOISE): 600/1000/1800 into 8, 4 and 2 ohms

FREQUENCY RESPONSE:

DC–300kHz +0, -3 dB

SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO:

better than -112dB; rated output 8 ohms

DAMPING FACTOR: better

than 10,000:1 into 8 ohms, 20Hz-20kHz

INPUT SENSITIVITY: 2V

DIMENSIONS (WHD):

500 x 240 x 600mm

WEIGHT: 76 kg

PRICE: \$42,200

CONTACT: Radiance Audio

Visual on 02 9659 1117, www.radianceav.com.au