

Krell K-300i Integrated Amplifier

by Chris Thomas



The first time I heard the name Krell was in the 1956 sci-fi movie *Forbidden Planet* that was a remake of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* but set on a world far, far away. Glorious colour and Theremin-fuelled range of sound effects, groundbreaking at the time, leant an atmosphere of shimmering scientific achievement. The extinct Krell were so technologically advanced that they had driven themselves to extinction, leaving behind their accumulated knowledge in the shape of great glistening machines of unimaginable power.

Fast forward to the early '80s and the name Krell makes a re-appearance on British shores as an American audio amplifier called the KSA-50, followed by the 100. It was affectionately

referred to here as the first high-end solid-state amplifier, and it certainly had its advocates. It seems odd to reflect now that what we might call the British high-end, the Linn/Naim axis, was one of the only complete systems that made much sense. Love it or hate it (and some did both), it bought the system approach into stark focus. Though the worthy Krell had no ready-made supporting cast, it often found itself driving a pair of Apogees, perhaps coupled with an Audio Research preamplifier. But the important thing was that there was an American amp that wasn't only good in a straight line. It went round corners too. Dan D'Agostino and Krell had arrived.

You can research what happened next, but eventually, like many companies, new investment was sought, lots happened, ▶

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► and by 2009 the entire D’Agostino family connection was broken. They were out, but Krell ploughed on. As per usual, there were all sorts of criticism alongside the new funding. The usual post-takeover stuff really and it has been no surprise to see that Krell has now dug deep and gone back to what it has always done best. The entry-level K-300i I have been listening to is a US-made integrated amplifier that embodies some of the original amplifier’s solid virtues, certainly in so far as it looks like a Krell anyway.

This solid-cased design, with its bow-fronted central section, is an integrated design that is easy to equip thoroughly for today’s audio environment. The K-300i can be a straightforward amp with separate source components like a CD player or a turntable (though it has no onboard phono stage) or supplied with a digital module that certainly enhances its scope considerably. This latter configuration is the K-300i’s defining character because it becomes a powerful digital hub. If you like your audio system as compact as possible and want to keep the component count down, then a K-300i plus access to one of the primary subscription streaming services makes the three-box system (one-box amp/streamer/DAC and a pair of speakers) an attractive proposition.

It’s a handsome thing (silver in this case) and heavy too at around 20 kg due, in no part, to its dinner-plate-sized 771 VA transformer. It runs using Krell’s i-Bias circuit topology that reduces heat and draws less power than their original Class A designs. It is also very well equipped as far as inputs go. Three RCA and two balanced XLRs are the analogue options and there is a preamp out too. Digital inputs, with the optional card fitted, include three HDMI sockets, two of which are for inputs plus a solitary out. There are a couple of USB connections as well. On the rear panel, you’ll find a USB-B, and on the front, you can utilise the USB-A, should you want playback from a memory stick. It also offers both S/PDIF coaxial and optical options and a single pair of splendid speaker outputs with spade lugs or 4mm connectivity.

The digital card is based around a DAC from ESS and can function as a full network renderer. It can deal with the usual file formats up to 192 kHz/24-bit and will even do DSD up to 128. It caters for all the quality online subscription services as I mentioned, including Tidal and its MQA encoded Masters. For those who prefer the superb productive music surfing

environment of Roon, the Krell is ready to be utilised as an endpoint for a Roon core. There is a good Krell Connect app too. Oh, and it also has Bluetooth wireless streaming. So, pretty well equipped I reckon for just about every current eventuality. It’s easy to set up and has a comprehensive remote control. Through its menu section, you can individually name each input and even equalise their levels if you so choose. A neat but small display window allows you to control the menu section and the day-to-day operation of the amp well.

I used this Krell with both a dCS Vivaldi CD player and streamed music using Tidal through Roon while the speakers were the splendid Wilson Duette 2 all hooked up with some Nordost cabling. At 150 watts into 8 ohms, doubling up to 300 watts into 4 ohms, you might expect the Krell to be something of a powerhouse. It is, but the Krell doesn’t just rely on muscularity to achieve some very musical results. Its low-level achievements are excellent, and those late-night listening sessions find the amplifier still weighty and robust through its bandwidth, and this came to become one of its defining strengths at any volume level. The sheer density and breadth of the music is always compelling, as is the driving nature of the bass.

Listening to *Soul Insight* from The Marcus King Band [Evil Teen] the amplifier has the sort of taut rhythmic impact that is so much a part of his music. With shades of the Allman Brothers, this draws its influence from the southern states. Its robust and solid bass and drum-propelled driving rhythms are intensely ‘live’ in feel, and King’s voice has that smokey throated soulful sound offset by his thick and honkey Gibson 345 guitar. For someone in his early 20’s King plays with an attack and a ferocious depth of technique that is remarkable. The Krell has an air of relentless push when confronted with this and kicks the rhythm section into the room, giving the drummer plenty of leeway to charge around the kit while the bass is so pervasive and articulate.

The amplifier has a fantastic grip and shows the recording for what it is. The music reminds me of rock bands of the ‘70s and ‘80s but in the right way. It’s electronically tight and rhythmically loose at the same time and the Hammond organ that feels like a real throwback is tasteful and often used as a thickener for the overall weight and density of the music. The K-300i shows it to be brim-full of flavour. The sound is ►

▶ completely integrated and rhythmically to the point and on this album maintains the raw feel that is so absolutely essential for it to work. When listening to this through the Krell, I didn't want to sit back and peel the audio layers away, and I never felt like examining anything in minute detail. The performance is all about freedom, soul and impact and the joy and musical exuberance of just playing together. In other words, the Krell can get down and dirty and listening to it is genuinely an exciting and compelling experience.

Flip that musical coin and take a listen to Madison Cunningham's latest album *Who Are You Now* [Verve Forecast, MQA version] and you will hear how the Krell, tasked with a very different set of musical challenges, becomes an entirely different animal indeed. Madison is one of those singer/songwriters who comes along rarely and again, for such a young artist, seems to have accumulated a lifetime's experience from who knows where? Shades of Joni, Shawn and Rikki are all there, hanging in the harmonics and the Krell's intimacy is gentle yet persuasive with a beautiful separation between the vocals and the beautifully arranged instrumentation. Now, this is the kind of music to walk in and investigate so you can take your time and look closely at the components and small details that slot together so well to make the whole. You can listen to the poetry of the pieces and find their meaning and appreciate how the various reverbs have been so masterfully judged to bring the words to life. Of course, you get a front-row seat to the production and the way the producer has given the material life. It's the sort of

joined-up performance that one usually associates with high-end pre/power combos.

When I think back through the amplifiers that have left their mark, I tend to recall them through a single listening session or even a solitary piece of music that brings together their technical abilities and their ability to connect emotionally. With the Krell, this happened for me after watching the TV presentation of Joni 75, the celebration of the wondrous Joni Mitchell's 75th birthday. Her songs, performed by various artists have become etched in my mind over the years. I thought I knew them and their secrets but this celebration gave them new relevance for me. It's not the greatest of live recordings, and MQA hasn't transformed it into such, but the respect that the artists show to these gems is fantastic. Seal's take on 'Both Sides Now' has a fragile delicacy and a poignancy within those lyrics that is incredibly moving, while Marisol (backed by Los Lobos) singing 'Nothing Can Be Done' shows these songs live on and find new meaning for each generation. The intimacy of the Krell-based system took the listening experience to memorable level and surely we are all looking for systems that can do that.

John McLaughlin's live version of the flowing river that is 'Lotus Feet' from the astonishing *Remember Shakti* album [Polygram] is so crammed full of the most delicious tonal and rhythmic suggestions. Yet, it merely drifts by on so many systems. Even some ultra-expensive set-ups that I have heard render it as a series of percussive events linked by some noodling bits of Bansuri (bamboo flute) and guitar.

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The Krell showed its tonal deftness. With a drone instrument throwing a distant sheet of shifting shade and light, the band work the meandering and elusive melody in and out of the themes. It has the space and time to be understated and yet to draw you in.

Jackson Browne's 'Live Nude Cabaret' from *Time The Conqueror* [Inside] is where the Krell shows its uncanny ability to grow very wide image-wise. It describes a different and even deeper musical landscape and acoustic with depth and a rock-solid bass line rolling underneath the whole event, creating time and ambience. Not every amplifier has the gentle confidence of the Krell on this song, but its overall clarity and taut power always work to bring the music alive. The production is sparing with nothing superfluous in the mix. It was delicious through the Krell, which is very fine at controlling musical perspectives and gentle dynamic shifts as well as tonal landscapes.

Drawing on its well of power and coupling it with notable resolution proves to be a winning combination for the K-300i. It has even found favour with Naim Audio die-hards (no easy task), who view the K-300i as something akin to a 'SuperDuperUniti'. So, purely as an integrated amplifier, the Krell-300i is a winner. The Krell has an excellent taut tonality that stays this side of 'lean', has power to burn and can deliver it into all sorts of speaker loads with speed and sure-footed dynamic stability. Like all good amps, it imposes itself on the music yet never gets in its way and the 150 watts into 8 ohms is going to be ample for all but the more extreme systems and locations. So far, so good, but the K-300i becomes a different proposition entirely with the addition of the digital board, and for the extra outlay, it is well worth it. Audiophile-grade streaming is a growing area of the market and incorporating all the electronics into a single component is going to be attractive to many people. If you're one of them, you should certainly put the Krell K-300i on your audition shortlist. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Integrated amplifier with optional digital board which is retrofittable

Power Output: 150 watts -8 Ohms, 300 watts – 4 ohms

Analog Inputs: 2 x XLR, 3 x RCA

Digital Inputs: 2 x USB, 2 x HDMI plus 1 x HDMI output, 1 x Optical, 1 x coaxial

Remote Control:

Damping Factor: >228

Gain: 25dB

Dimensions: 105 x 438 x 457mm (HxWxD)

Weight: 23.6 kg

Finishes Available: Black or silver

Price: £7,500. Optional digital Module £1,300

Manufacturer: Krell Industries

URL: krellonline.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

