

HEAVY METAL

How do high-end brands deal with making their products more affordable? **Ed Selley** thinks these two have got it sussed



COMPONENTS

KRELL K-300i £9,000

Krell's smallest integrated (a relative term) can be ordered as an analogue-only device or, as here, with a comprehensive add-on board that offers a selection of digital inputs, UPnP streaming and full Roon compatibility, effectively making it an all-in-one system.

MAGICO A1 £10,000

Magico's smallest speaker is a two-way standmount that takes the company's very specific design philosophy – that includes aluminium cabinets, beryllium tweeters and graphene-infused carbon drivers – and brings it to an almost terrestrial price point.

Picture credit: Shutterstock.com

Let me start by presenting two contradictory statements. The system you see here represents the entry level for the brands involved. It also costs £19,000. This might seem rather peculiar, but it is the asking price to join two very exclusive clubs and while the cost might feel high, it is what's required when the engineering is this involved.

Take the Magico A1 standmount speaker. This is the most affordable stereo model that the company makes in a range that extends to the point where "POA" begins to appear in the price list in lieu of a number. You might question why a two-way standmount can ever cost £10,000, but even though the A1 is the simplest speaker Magico makes it possesses some extraordinary engineering. The

tweeter is a 28mm beryllium dome and the mid/bass driver is made of layers of carbon fibre weave bolstered by XG Nanographene to further stiffen and dampen it.

Incredibly, this is but the tip of the iceberg. The cabinet is made entirely from aircraft-grade aluminium that would ensure that judged by any normal standard it would count as enormously stiff and rigid, but Magico

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM KRELL/MAGICO



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proceeds to brace it anyway. As well as the drivers, it houses a crossover that uses a design process the company terms 'Elliptical Symmetry' – making use of components from German company Mundorf that cost enough to buy a seriously capable speaker in their own right. The A1 incorporates everything that the company holds to be important and might be seen as the irreducible minimum of those ideals.

Well connected

Krell's K-300i exhibits a similar philosophy, but the execution is slightly different to the point where I'm going to say with a straight face it represents strong value for money. You can buy it as a purely analogue amp with balanced and unbalanced analogue inputs for £1,000 less, but adding the digital board gives the K-300i an impressive spread of extra functions. As well as coaxial, optical and USB inputs, you can connect it directly to a Roon Core and it handles MQA too. More unusually, there's a pair of HDMI inputs with Audio Return Channel to make collating a wide spread of sources easier than on almost any other amp I've seen.

It's still very much a Krell, though. Peer through the top cover and you'll see a toroid the size of a melon that helps it produce 150W into 8ohm, which proceeds to double into four. Thanks to other refinements, it produces this power with exceptional linearity across an extremely wide frequency response. By dint of being a relatively compact, sealed cabinet, the Magico is not an easy speaker to drive

If this is entry level, what on earth can the more expensive products do?

so here is an amplifier that's well equipped enough to get the job done.

In the here and now though, what this system does as a combination is more remarkable than any single facet of its specification or engineering, and what it does is disappear. If that sounds weirdly anticlimactic, like a firework that explodes only with black light, the reality is that as a means of listening to your music there's little I've ever

Above left: Beryllium tweeters are the tip of the tech iceberg

Above: The Krell is an extensively specified powerhouse of an amplifier

Above right: The only thing more impressive than the build is the sound quality

heard that comes anywhere near it. Pinning standard descriptive phrases on it seems almost pointless because they barely scratch the surface of what it's capable of.

Vanishing point

This vanishing act is a combination of transparent amp and source acting on drivers that are entirely free of coloration and distortion and then mounted in an enclosure that is completely inert. It sounds easy and it is the ideal of anything that genuinely aspires to be described as hi-fi, but to encounter equipment that actually does it perfectly is the audio equivalent of cold fusion. It has been a listening process that has redefined some boundaries for me.

Take the opening of *The Trinity Sessions* by Cowboy Junkies, which is Margo Timmins singing *Mining For Gold* solo and unaccompanied. It's a simple recording made on a DAT recorder with a single microphone. Played here, none of the usual technical limits apply. Timmins is unambiguously there, stood in the Holy Trinity in Toronto, which is so tangible in the performance it is

effectively the only other instrument. This is not a snapshot of the event so much as a holographic reproduction, and the chances are you'll have to listen to the 92-second track a second or third time to overcome the shock of its tangibility. I certainly did.

Upping the ante

Of course, a single female vocalist isn't the hardest of challenges. When you select something rather more complex like *Release* by Afro Celt Sound System with its dense overlaid percussion and soaring vocal turn from Sinead O'Connor, this combination ups the ante by delivering that same unembellished view on the music. This isn't a live performance, it's a concoction of the studio where the performers were stitched together in the edit. Here, it's a presentation that's as cohesive and together as it would have been if it were a live recording.

It would be easy to chalk much of this up to the Magico and work on the principle that so long as it is fed a clean signal by a competent amplifier this is what it does, but that simply isn't true. Some brief testing with



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other equipment demonstrates that the K-300i is absolutely integral to the performance. For starters, it imbues the Magico with truly astonishing bass. I confess my understanding of the laws of physics pretty much end with agreeing to be bound by them, but I'm not sure this system signed up to the same rules. There is no bass port on the A1 and the cabinet is a

Standard descriptive terms barely scratch the surface of what it's capable of

whisker under 40cm tall, but there are points where the low-end extension borders on subsonic.

It's no blunt instrument either, it integrates perfectly with the upper registers and even taking this system on a spirited blast through Mark Lanegan's latest album, *Somebody's Knocking*, reveals a speed and cohesion that makes it essentially in-flappable. Logic dictates that this modern, slightly glassy and congested recording should be torn to shreds by

equipment this revealing, but this simply isn't the case. The pairing does suggest that there are limits to the mastering, but it still focuses more than anything else on the music itself. Would I suggest feeding this combination a diet of MP3 files? Probably not, but I do give *Raspberry Infundibulum* by the Shamen a blast and the sheer proto-dance strangeness of it is captured perfectly.

Setting the standard

Summing up this system is not an easy task because it does things that even at the lofty asking price are beyond almost anything else I've ever listened to and it does beg the question that if this is the entry level, what on earth can the more expensive products do? We become so used to the idea that choosing a setup we like is a case of finding devices where the coloration and character that best meet our preferences and then using them to balance one another out. To find a system that dispenses with that idea entirely takes more than a little getting used to – but having experienced it, I think I'd be more than willing to give it a try ●