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Krell KAV-280p and KAV-2250

Pure pre/power class from the doyen of high-end solid state electronics

PRICE: KAV-280p: £3,259; KAV-2250: £4,490 CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 @ www.krellonline.com

These two Krell products are both two-channel components: the KAV-280p is a preamplifier and the KAV-2250 is a matching power amp, with the common criteria being as much aesthetic as electrical. But both can play a role in a multichannel audio or home cinema system. The preamp, for example, is fitted with a feature called Theater Throughput which fixes the gain setting and allows an external processor (such as the matching Krell Showcase) to control all speakers together. Similarly, the KAV-2250 is just one of two matching power amplifiers. The other is the KAV-3250, which is identical in power output per channel, but has three channels. Along with one or two KAV-2250s, the KAV-3250 can be used to meet the power demands of a very classy 5.1 or 7.1 system.

In other respects, the feature set is much as you might expect. The preamp has five inputs, of which four are single-ended, and one of which is a tape circuit, all at line level. The final input is balanced. There are two outputs, one single-ended and one balanced, and the power amp has matching inputs of both types. Other circuitry includes an external infrared input on the preamp, which may be used with touch screen controllers, and both units will respond to an external 12-volt trigger, or generate a trigger signal to wake up an external system component. A remote control is included with the preamp – a slim, compact unit with domed membrane switches. It's capable of controlling a complete stereo system, and it accesses the balance control, which cannot be adjusted in any other way.

The power amp is specified in typical Krell fashion as doubling in power output when the load impedance is halved, which indicates that current starvation is unlikely to occur in practice. The KAV-250 is rated at 250 watts per channel into eight ohms, and 500 watts into four ohms.

The internal architecture of the two Krell components is balanced, which suggests that optimum performance will be achieved when using the balanced option. As expected, both units are well endowed, the power amp tipping the scales at an impressive 29.5kg, a large part of which is devoted to a massive 2000VA toroidal transformer, and there are two sets of 14 parallel bipolar output devices to drive the load. The preamp circuit configuration is Class A as well as balanced, and employs Krell Current mode technology (KCT) gain stages. Fully discrete power supplies are available for the analogue and digital control circuits.

Physically the KAV-280p and the KAV-2250 follow standard KAV practice. The structures are fabricated entirely from alloy (non ferrous) panels, with the rounded corner blocks adding a distinctive touch.

We have had access to these two Krell components intermittently over several months and have been able to use them with a variety of loudspeakers and source components, including in recent times the new MartinLogan Summit and the latest version of the Krell SACD Standard player, both of which are covered elsewhere in this issue. The latter is a superb high resolution source, and gives the amp no excuse for getting it wrong, and the Summit is by far MartinLogan's finest speaker to date, and a searching test of the rest of the system.

“Imagery is deftly handled, with the usual measured transparency that is so much a part of the ongoing Krell legacy.”

The only operational caveat I noticed was that the power amp puts a heavy instantaneous load on the mains supply, which 'ducks' momentarily, dimming lights and the like when switched on, but it didn't blow any fuses. In normal use, the KAV-2250 will remain connected to the mains supply, and switched to and from standby using the front panel power switch which avoids the massive inrush of current. The other point to notice is that both products need to be run in over a long period, some tens of hours at a minimum, and a lot longer to reach their peak. The power amp is less critical in this respect than the preamp, and its probably best to leave the latter switched on if possible – it runs cool and is not power hungry.

SOUND QUALITY

The reality is that it is difficult to differentiate between the two components sonically; the pre and power amps appear to be of like mind. They're tonally cool and clean, nothing less than exquisitely detailed and just a tad on the lean, dry side of neutral. It is a balance that works very well with many larger systems, including those involving Krell's own Resolution 2 speaker, which is also reviewed in this issue. It also works well with other wide bandwidth speakers, generating a sound that scales naturally according to the instrumental and vocal forces involved, so

that a solo singer, for example, sounds agile and relatively small, as in real life. It may not always be ideal with smaller, bass-light loudspeakers, however, where the results sometimes sound rather small scale overall.

Tastes in amplification tend to vary with the individual, and to each his own. This amp won't appeal to the valve aficionado, but its cool clarity has a cerebral kind of appeal. In a good system, and properly warmed up at the beginning of a session, we found it unusually transparent, in fact it was very difficult to latch onto its character at all. However, its ability to resolve fine detail is also apparent, and so is the superb bass, always a strong point with this marque. Although it may sound lean in balance in some systems, bass extension seems to go

almost subterranean. There is a texture and a feeling of understated power that is almost in a class of its own. Needless to say, there are no issues concerning tunefulness, and none of the subliminally perceived 'tugging' of pitch, or the detached, slow quality that you will hear from some even quite exotic amplifiers.

Imagery is also deftly handled, with the usual measured transparency that is so much a part of the ongoing Krell legacy. The Krell images with precision, with a clear idea of image depth, often forward of the speaker plane, though this seems to depend more on the character of the loudspeakers than the amplifier.

Make no mistake, this is a truly first class amplifier pairing. Its qualities are arguably a little too analytical to suit everyone's tastes, and it doesn't have the smoothly rounded quality that makes almost everything listenable. It does nothing to sanitise or cover inadequacies. On the other hand it is a particularly good tool for exploring high resolution recordings, and to this extent the pair make an obvious partner for the Krell SACD Standard player. What it does have is the lightning fast reflexes that allow it to track changes in musical and dynamic expression with great accuracy, and this is also an amplifier that is very difficult to drive beyond its musical capabilities. **HFC**

Alvin Gold