



Krell

KAV-280p/KAV-2250

pre-/power amplifier

With all the hallmarks of the brand, this combination will have wider appeal than ever

Krell KAV-280p/KAV-2250

PRICE £3299/£4490

There is no single supplier that owns the high end, or even a small group of suppliers of whom the same could be said. The audiophile community tends to prize individuality, and often looks for components with a particular personality, which on the whole is not something that mainstream products have in abundance. This said, the one high-end name that always comes up in discussion with almost monotonous regularity is Krell. Such is Krell's ubiquity at this end of the market that this in

itself has for some become a matter of criticism, almost as though by aiming and often hitting that sweet-spot beloved of audiophiles, it necessarily cannot be regarded as being entirely credible.

My personal take on this matter is that Krell started on a high note with its original amplifiers, the KSA-50 and KSA-100 in particular, and then went through a dip in subsequent product generations before recovering in style with classic products like the (now sadly discontinued) KPS-25 – which is one of the finest CD players ever developed as well as being a world class pre-amplifier – and of course the FPB series of heavyweight power amplifiers.

The KAV series opens out a completely new front. For the most part the series has been aimed at the quality end of the multichannel market, headlined by the Showcase pre/processor and the matching power amplifiers. It may be going too far to attribute lifestyle elements to these: this is definitely Krell, but with a lighter and more approachable mood.

The entire range features a new and highly individual aesthetic scheme which is also a departure structurally, based on what Krell describes as the 'Architect set of mechanical design parameters'. Smooth satin aluminum panels on all six surfaces, as well as the wide

yet that smells remotely like an integrated multichannel amplifier.

If anything, the centre of gravity of the KAV range is drifting in the other direction. The two components reviewed here are stereo: one, the KAV-280p, is a pre-amplifier, the other, the KAV-2250, is a stereo power amplifier that can be bridged for high power mono application. However, these units do not completely turn their backs on the world of multichannel. The KAV-2250 for example is one of two identically powered power amps, the other a three-channel version of the same thing, which combined with the KAV-3250 makes a formidable back end for a discrete three-box multichannel amplifier.

The other reference to home cinema operation is in the pre-amplifier. This has a 'Theater Throughput' mode in which the volume control is bypassed, allowing an external processor to

small proportion of real-world systems will have more than a single balanced source, so this compromise, if that's what it is, is a perfectly practical one.

Outputs include fixed (tape) and variable (main) outputs in single ended form, and a balanced-mode pre-amplifier output. The last two are mirrored on the power amplifier, which also features one input of each flavour, with shorting links in the XLR sockets that are to be removed before use, and replaced if the single ended input is used. Switchable balanced/unbalanced circuitry would have been nice, but this is a minor point.

Operationally, the two components could hardly be more straightforward. The power amplifier is equipped with a single standby power switch, surrounded by a circular indicator that shows operating status, and a full power switch on the

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control the gain of all channels in a multichannel system. Input switching is by sealed relays.

It is Krell practice to provide balanced as well as single-ended in and outputs and, unlike some brands, to use a fully-balanced internal topology. This ensures that the balanced interface is more than just a convenience (or inconvenience, depending on your point of view) and has the wherewithal to deliver direct sonic dividends. The KAV-280p has five inputs, all at line level, one of which is balanced and the remainder – three line inputs and a tape circuit – single ended. It is highly improbable that more than a vanishingly

back, plus two 12V trigger sockets, one an input, the other an output. The pre-amplifier is just as purposeful. Each input has its own selector and LED indicator, and another control button takes care of muting. A rotary encoder provides a volume or balance control (the latter only via the remote handset), with a numerical scale on an adjacent LED display. Further LEDs indicate power and standby status. Around the back there are two 12V trigger outputs, one of which could be used to switch the power amplifier, and an RC-5 input for an external remote infra red sender or a hard-wired system controller (AMX, Niles,

radius rounded corner extrusions with their contrasting polished finish, give the components a light, contemporary feel completely at odds with the dark and rather sharp-edged monoliths of old.

The KAV series is also less expensive and to a degree less highly specified than many previous Krell products. But by normal standards these remain exotic components, still very highly priced and specified, and in many cases drawing on the same technology, though they don't use Krell SPB (Sustained Plateau Bias) or CAST interface technologies. Yet it is hard to tell where corners have been cut. Despite the preponderance of multichannel for example, there has been nothing



The balanced approach

The entire KAV-280p audio chain from input to output is fully balanced, with a wide operating bandwidth direct coupled Class A circuit, and it uses KCT (Krell Current mode Technology) gain stages. This is also true of the balanced mode volume control, which sets gain by a series of fixed resistors under microprocessor control. Meanwhile, there are separate fully regulated discrete power supplies for analogue and digital circuit sections. Much of the pre-amplifier uses surface mount technology, and all power regulation is discrete.

The power amplifier is rated at 250W/ch into 8 ohms, doubling in traditional Krell fashion to 500W into 4 ohms. In bridged mode, 8 ohm power output is 1000W monaural. The output stage operates in Class AB using 14 bipolar output devices per channel in parallel. The amplifier is powered by a massive 2000VA toroidal transformer, which is a major reason for the 29.5kg all-up weight. Negative feedback levels are said to be very low. With the whole exterior structure of the amplifier acting as a heatsink (there are no ribbed heat exchangers), the KAV-2250 runs moderately warm rather than hot.



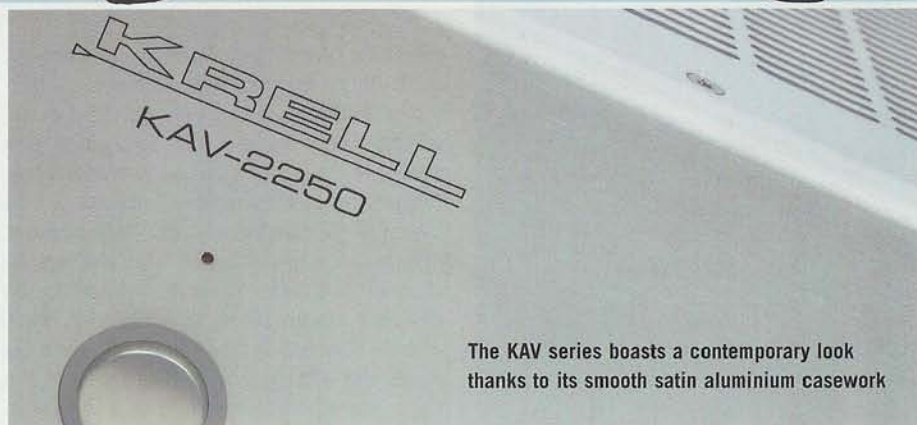
Crestron, etc). Completing the package is a slim membrane-type system-remote handset, which has controls for an FM tuner and a disc player.

SOUND QUALITY

I confess that the Krell KAV-280p/KAV-2250 combination is peculiarly difficult to read, in the sense discussed in the introductory comments about the character of high-end components.

There is a distinction to be drawn here between the pre-amplifier and the power amplifier. First impressions of the KAV-280p are of a product with a rather lean, even cold tonality, which tends to make for a listening experience that is informative, but which is not always very likeable. I have heard this quality with some older Krell equipment, but here the problem appears to recede after some hours, and stays so as long as it is kept under power. Leaving the pre-amplifier in standby goes a long way to keeping the sound in top form, but the amplifier needs to be in full operating mode with the blue power LED showing, to keep the sound on song.

The power amplifier appears to be less sensitive to warm-up traumas. It does need to be



The KAV series boasts a contemporary look thanks to its smooth satin aluminium casework

recedes, and the whole effect becomes more open, expensive and transparent. There is even a touch of warmth to the sound – not much, and certainly not as much as with some of its more obvious rivals, but just enough to ensure that extended listening is comfortable and rewarding.

This is a lean-sounding combination on the whole. Tonally the sound is cool and a little dry. Detail resolution is very strong, but don't imagine for one moment that it lacks guts in the engine

The warmth referred to earlier is more implicit than explicit, it is there as a structural part of the music rather than as an overlay or overhang.

All this is old news for Krell watchers. The only real surprise was to find the balance of qualities so finely judged at this price level. It brings to mind Krell's fabulous KAV-400xi integrated amplifier, and sure enough when I went back to my old notes for that amplifier, it really does seem to have very similar voicing, the big differences of course being power output and price.

Coming from the direction of other comparably priced hardware, both the Krell integrated and the pre/power amp combination are exquisitely detailed, exceptionally refined, but they don't suffer inadequate systems gladly. If your speakers are bright or your source components grainy, Krell provides no camouflage, and my guess is that the KAV-280p and KAV-2250 (and indeed the KAV-400xi too) were developed with much the same systems that were used to develop the company's flagship products.

With one exception perhaps. More than any previous Krell hardware I can recall, this pre-/power amp responds unusually well to

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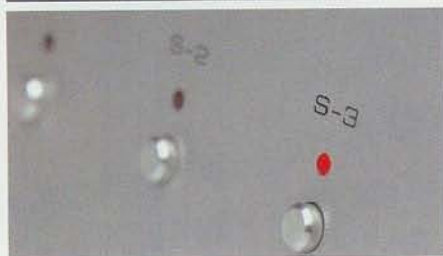
on for an hour or so before it sounds at its best, but even from cold, the sound never offends. It simply doesn't sound as good as when it is thoroughly warmed up. And that is the difference between the two: from cold, the KAV-280p is a much less appetising experience. But it certainly becomes one. The cold steely quality quickly

compartment. When the occasion demands, the Krell is more than capable of stoking up a strongly corporeal and muscular quality, a physical quality. You don't get that slightly droning undertone that some solid state amplifiers seem to specialise in, or a related quality, a slightly slurred warmth and overhang that you will often hear from valve amps.

The KAV-280p offers five line-level inputs, one of which is balanced, plus a tape circuit

withstand any reasonable use over the long term. It certainly made short shrift of demanding loudspeakers like the B&W Nautilus 800, whose potentially powerful and well-integrated, but sometimes understated bass was beautifully controlled, producing exciting results when the occasion demanded.

At the same time small-scale material that doesn't stretch the capabilities of the speaker retained a strong sense of poise and control. And the single word that most nearly encapsulates the qualities of the Krell is that last one: control. The KAV-280p and KAV-2250 are supremely disciplined, and notwithstanding any lack of likeability in the KAV-280p pre-amplifier especially when first fired up from cold, the



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wide-bandwidth, high resolution material from DVD-Audio and SACD. In all probability, the KAV-280p/2250 were designed around Krell's own SACD Standard or something quite similar. I did not have one for this test, but I did have access to a Denon DVD-A11 universal SACD player, which with its Pure Direct video bypass feature engaged performed well as a CD player, but was clearly on a different plane with some of my better SACDs. The recently released Nikolaus Harnoncourt Mozart *Requiem* for example [Deutsche Harmonia Mundi] is an unusually colourful recording on CD, but from SACD it is sharper, cleaner and more dramatic still, and the singing more expressive and immediate in a way that was not equalled through other amplifiers

available during the test period, at least one of which costs considerably more than the Krell combination here.

Balanced connections between pre- and power amplifier yielded a more dynamic, expressive sound, and although noise was inaudible in practical situations when wired with single ended connections, the balanced combo nevertheless appeared to provide a more forceful result and greater internal controls.

The same cable type, Nordost Valhalla, was used in both cases, and the source components (Denon, Advantage, etc) were unbalanced as no balanced mode player was available.

In the end the Krell has an unusual, and perhaps unique, set of attributes. First, it is exceptionally well built, and appears qualified to

musical essentials quickly triumph thanks to the Krell's ability to handle the reins – very much a house quality – and its transparency. Any of the occasionally sterility or heavy-handedness of certain older Krell designs seems to have been banished, and the test combination has superb timing, and a refined liquidity and grace in the way it handles complex and simple material alike. Bigger Krell amplifiers have more power and an even more solidly architectural quality, more substance and structure to the sound, but probably little if any more resolving ability or refinement, and little more control.

Tying up a few loose ends, the two Krell components do appear to belong together. They have broadly similar voicing, which is on the lean side, but in both cases very disciplined and open, with real refinement, and allow the kind of propulsive timing that is such a central component of many jazz recordings. I was able to interchange the Krell units with (more costly) counterparts from Hovland (the Radia power amp and HP200 pre-amp), but in both cases the native combinations in their quite different ways were more convincing. ■

Alvin Gold

Supplier

Absolute Sounds Ltd
020 8971 3909
www.absolutesounds.com, www.krellonline.com

Hi-FiNews verdict

Control is the key word here, with characteristic Krell bass grip, but without heavy-handedness. The 280p is the less immediately likeable of the two, but this duo combines power with poise, liquidity and grace.

