

## Krell KAV-300R

The very first stereo system I owned had a receiver in it. I wonder if anyone but a fossil like me even remembers what a receiver is.

W'all, young buckaroos, back in the late Sixties, when the transistor was king (and I started audiophilin'), darn near *ever-body* had him a receiver. Yessir, we'd sit out there on the front porch and listen to our radios and our records (warn't nothing like no "compact" disc back then), and we'd listen to 'em using just one piece a gear. You had you your tuner, your preamp, your phono, your aux (never did use that aux much), and your amplifier – all in a single box. Called it a "ree-cee-ver." Hook that son-of-a-gun up to a pair a speakers, and you was set, buddy.

Yep. That was how it was before magazines like this one started me on the road to financial ruin. A single box, a pair of loudspeakers, an automatic turntable, 20 feet of zip cord – and I was a happy man. Kinda makes you wonder what the hell happened, doesn't it?

Well, wonder no more, because Krell (yeah, *Krell*) has brought single-box stereo back, and brought it back with style.

I don't know who put this particular bug in Dan D'Agostino's ear – maybe it's just a sign of these down-sizing times (or of the world-wide success of the Krell KAV-300i "integrated" amp) – but Signore D's certainly brought fond memories back to this old stereo hand. Hell, I haven't even owned a tuner, much less a receiver, since the mid-Eighties. Until the 300r, I'd relegated radio stations to options that came with my car.

'Course, what we've got here is a *latter-day* receiver – a \$3,450 High End receiver, for the conophile with champagne taste and a (premium) beer pocket book. Actually, save for its tuner section, the Krell KAV-300r is identical to the KAV-300i integrated amp, which has been widely praised since it was released a few years ago. (The 300i was recommended by Robert Harley in *Fi*.) The 300i/300r may not be the last word in Krell technology, but, jeez, a 150 Class AB watts into 8 ohms, 300 into 4, plus a Class A line stage that, among other things, lets you "throughput" an A/V controller, and, with the 300r, a tuner, to boot – all of it (including source switching and the tuning of the tuner) remote-controlled via a handheld remote, all of it in a single chassis the size of one of Brightstar's medium-sized sandboxes. As my friend Ray Andrews used to say: How good does real ice cream have to get?

Let's start with the preamp – and you *can* do that with the 300r because it has separate gold-plated preamp-out jacks (plus a wide assortment of balanced and single-ended inputs). Just for the fun of it, I used the 300r as a preamp/tuner with my reference amps and reference front-end components (Clearaudio turntable, Koetsu Onyx Platinum cartridge, C-J Premier Fifteen phono stage, Goldmund Mimesis 20 transport/Mimesis 36 DAC, Audio Note DAC-4 Signature, Lamm ML-2 amplifiers, all hooked up



with wire a single meter of which costs about half-again more than the Krell). The results? Surprising.

As a preamp, the 300r is smoother (in the sense of more homogenized), less front-to-back transparent, and quite a bit less detailed and "airy" than my reference, but, Vishnu, my reference preamp costs 14 grand all by itself! What you get for the preamp part of your \$3,450 is a clear, quiet, spacious, highly listenable presentation, with superb bass extension, definition, and "authority," excellent large-scale dynamics from the midrange to the bottom, good small-scale dynamics from the midrange to the bottom, good soundstaging, good inner detail, and a tonal balance definitely on the warm side of neutral.

What the Krell's preamp section reminded me of more than anything else was the sound of the Grado Reference Platinum cartridge – a rich, robust, romantic presentation. I don't know if this turn-of-events is as much of a shock to you as it was to me, but I've always associated Krell with a cool, dark, rather relentlessly aggressive sound – high in speed, detail, and impact, but scarcely *gemütlich*. And yet here we have a Krell preamp (and, as you will soon see, an amp) that is, well, *gemütlich*. What gives?

Apparently what has given is D'Agostino's long-standing commitment to lab-grade analytics. I am told by Robert Harley, who has considerably more experience with the Krell than I do – I believe he's actually lived on Altair 4 and taken the "brain boost" – that the 300r's warmer, sweeter, (dare I say it?) more musical balance is typical of the last few generations of D'Agostino's babies. Krell's "sustained plateau-biasing" (introduced in their KAS series amplifiers) evidently made a large and altogether salubrious difference in the "character" of its Class A models; but since the amp section of the 300i/300r isn't biased Class A, I'd hazard a guess that the renovated sound of Krell is also a matter of the voicing of its parts, including its proprietary output and driver transistors, its silicon-steel transformers, and, in the case of the 300r's preamp (which *is* biased Class A), its exceptionally quiet, digitally-controlled, fixed-resistor volume pot.

Like the lovely Grado cartridge, the 300r's preamp section does a slightly better job from the waist down than from the waist up, sounding its best with brass, low-to-mid-octave piano, guitar, low-pitched strings (including string bass), drums, and bass-to-

contralto voices, which are present and lifelike, though a bit pared of the fine detail that tells you how the performer is performing. Violins, winds, upper octave piano, soprano voice, and other instruments that have a good deal of upper-mid-to-treble harmonics fare less well in absolute terms – sounding just a bit bright and even more plenary of low-level harmonic/dynamic detail, though plenty sweet and large-scale-dynamic on all recordings.

To put the 300r's line stage in perspective, it is about on a par with the Goldmund SR-P, a \$2,000 stand-alone solid-state line stage that I like. The Goldmund holds an edge in transparency; but the Krell kills it (and just about everything else) from the lower midrange down.

The Krell's tuner is also a most impressive item. It may not be the most liquid-sounding tuner I've heard – that would be your Marantz 10. But the Marantz, if your can find one that still works, runs, oh, about ten grand on the used market. So I guess you'll have to settle for the Day-Sequerra tuner that's in the Krell.

You heard me right – *a Day-Sequerra tuner!* Of course you don't get that ultra-cool oscilloscope that came with the original D-S, but, hey, you're still getting the innards (and let me remind you that you're getting them along with a High End line stage and amplifier for \$3,450).

The Krell version of the Day-Sequerra sounds like the original Day-Sequerra – slightly sweet, dry, and aseptic in balance, like a Monterey County Chardonnay; unusually clear, clean, and transparent overall. This tuner will definitely tell you about the quality of your FM source; indeed, it is sensitive enough, sonically and in receptivity, to demand an indoor antenna – ideally, an outdoor one. (In other words, don't use the folded 300-ohm dipole antenna that comes with the 300r if you want to hear this thing at its best.) A good station, like the University-run NPR station on which I'm listening to the Empire Brass playing Copland's *Rodeo* as I write, sounds like good FM always sounds – a somewhat softer, warmer, less extended-in-the-treble version of an LP.

Very good preamp, excellent tuner. That leaves the amp – and the way the other two “components” mesh with it. The short answer is everything in the 300r sounds of a piece. As I mentioned earlier, unlike big Class A Krell amps, the 300r's 150wpc gain stage is biased Class AB, and, sonically, that means you'll lose some of the low-level detail and dynamic nuance of a Class A gain strategy. But if you're thinking that the 300r is a coarse brute, like one of those big Adcoms from years past (though not, be it noted, from years present), think again. The 300r's amp isn't the final word in inner detail, but it is, like the preamp, sensationally good in the bottom octaves, beguilingly smooth and warm through the heart of the midrange, a bit bright and “cottony” in the upper mids, and fast, sweet, but slightly soft and “closed-in” on top.

If you're expecting see-through transparency from the 300r's amplifier section, you'll be disappointed. A well-recorded vocalist, like Nina Simone singing “My Baby Don't Care” on *Uptown Lounge* [Right Stuff 98809], sounds solidly present through the Krell, albeit slightly warmed and brightened up in timbre, but the reverb on her voice and the subtle little inflec-

tions of her delivery are somewhat diminished. In other words – and this is typical – you get most of the singer but less of the place in which she is singing and slightly less of her style. Once again, in absolute terms the 300r is sonically reminiscent of the \$1,750 Adcom GFA-5802, which is also a somewhat warm, round, and romantic amp, but not as bottom-line exciting as the 300r. (Oh, that Krell bass!)

Speaking of which – those of you who use your two-channel stereo amp for double-duty in a home-theater system will find the 300r a delight. This thing is phenomenal on movie soundtracks. Because both the amp and preamp excel in large-scale dynamics and bottom-end authority, sound effects, like the crashing wave in *Barton Fink* [Fox LD], explode on you with sensational impact; at the same time the 300r is clear and dynamic enough through the midband and treble that you don't miss a word of whispered dialog or a jot of less dramatic Foley effects (such as those Earle Hotel-room doors which shush incessantly and insistently every time they're opened or closed, like the kitchen door in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*).

Bottom line? If you were careful and knowledgeable enough, you could put together a system – amp, preamp, tuner – out of separates for close to this same money, and it might even sound as good, or better in certain areas (although I'm not sure you could get this kind of bass response for the same dollar, or this quality tuner). But sonic equivalence in three chassis kind of misses the point of shopping for a receiver. The 300r was designed for the audiophile who doesn't want (or have room for) three separate boxes (and two sets of interconnects and power cords) cluttering up the condo. For that guy (or gal) – or the one looking for a High End stereo receiver to do double-duty in a two-channel home-theater set-up – the Krell 300r is a textbook example. Mate it with a pair of super-sexy mini-monitors from Sonus-Faber or a floor-stander from Hales or Thiel or a hybrid from Martin-Logan, something lean and lively in a CD player, and 20 feet of – well, I guess zip cord's out, but Discovery's “Essence” interconnect and cable isn't – and you'll have you a “ree-cee-ver” system that'll blow the socks off the ones we used to listen to, back in the day, out on the porch.

Okay, at \$3,450 the KAV-300r may not be front-porch material – or “Downstairs,” for that matter – but it certainly fits the “Landing” to a tee. (And, Dan, as long as you're into integrating components, how 'bout a five-channel A/V-receiver with this kind of sound and functionality?)

HONEST JON VALIN

#### MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Krell Industries, Inc.  
45 Connair Road  
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Net: www.krell.com  
Source: Manufacturer loan  
Price: \$3,450

#### SPECIFICATIONS

Output Power: 150Wpc at 8 ohms; 300Wpc at 4 ohms; Input Impedance: 210 k/ohms  
Inputs: 1 balanced, 3 single-ended; Outputs: 1 pair speaker outputs via five-way binding posts; 1 single-ended preamplifier output