**Krell KAV-300iL**

**Integrated Amplifier**

**Great Things Do Come in Small Packages**

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Krell’s KAV-300iL integrated amplifier is a brilliant piece of audio engineering. It is compact, superbly styled, highly functional, and provides some of the best sound quality available at any price. Best of all, it is a true high-power amplifier that can provide 200 watts into 8 ohms and 400 watts into 4 ohms. It will drive even demanding speakers to provide the kind of bass, dynamics, and peak listening levels that make music truly exciting and involving. Its predecessor, the KAV-300i, was a very good amplifier that provided “Krell sound” at an affordable price. The KAV-300iL is a great amplifier that deserves to be an audio classic.

I am, in fact, having trouble putting this amplifier in perspective. It retails for $3,250. This level of dollar outlay makes it an expensive product by most standards, but a cheap one by the top-of-the-high-end price standards set by Krell. I’m not sure whether to say that it sets a new, if expensive, standard for integrated amplifiers or is a “bargain” Krell.

At the same time, the KAV-300iL performs as well as some outstanding separate preamps and power amplifiers, and provides an extraordinarily compact size for anything approaching its sound quality. It has a matching CD player, the KAV-280cd, and in any space-limited system, there is nothing I know of that can touch it in terms of providing superb styling and superb sonic performance in a small package. The KAV-300iL weighs a hefty 30 pounds, but only measures 17.25 inches wide by 3.5 inches high, and 17 inches deep. It provides true high-end quality that you can easily
carry under one arm or put discretely on a small shelf. Even the remote is one of the smallest and best-styled remotes I’ve ever encountered; it’s designed to control both the KAV–300iL and a CD player.

What I am sure of is that this is not just another very good audio product that I am hyping because I happen to be having a good day! The KAV–300iL is a far better design than the KAV–300i that Krell introduced around five years ago; here are a few reasons why:

1) The surface-mount technology first used in the Krell Current Tunnel (KCT) designs allows more components to be fitted into a smaller space and accounts for its more compact size.

2) The KAV–300iL builds on Krell’s experience with its new Full Power Balanced (FPB) amplifiers and seeks to provide the same kind of speed, detail, and control.

3) The KAV–300iL adds 50 watts per channel. More importantly, it now employs a much more robust power supply with an 800-VA transformer to ensure it has outstanding dynamic and bass performance.

4) The KAV–300iL uses the fully differential complementary output circuitry used in the FPB amplifiers.

5) The gain stages use what Krell calls the Krell Current Mode, a proprietary Krell circuit that operates the audio gain stages of the KAV–300iL in the current rather than the voltage domain. This is circuitry Krell developed for its reference Class-A preamplifiers, and Krell says that it helps explain the outstanding speed and detail of the KAV–300iL’s sound.

6) The preamplifier section is fully balanced from input to output, including the volume control.

7) The volume control operates in the analog mode, but a convenient digital readout is provided.

No one who listens to the KAV–300iL is going to treat it as a downscale product. Instead, it is clear that Krell has taken technology from some of the most respected separate components in the high end and “integrated” them into its integrated amplifier.

The KAV–300iL also provides a very good assortment of features for a product of its size without giving up simplicity or overcomplicating the signal path. Aside from a convenient remote control that operates slowly enough to allow precise volume settings with considerable ease, the KAV–300iL offers several worthwhile features:

A) One set of balanced XLR-type inputs;

B) Three sets of unbalanced RCA inputs;

C) One set of unbalanced inputs and outputs for use with a tape recorder;

D) A set of RCA outputs so that it can be used as a separate preamplifier;

E) Front panel volume, input selection, and tape selection controls;

F) Mute switch and LED indicator;

G) Front panel display of the volume and channel balance levels;

H) Level up and down switch buttons;

I) A tape processor loop and tape-select switch button for tape playback and comparison with the original signal source (the inputs to be taped can be selected separately from the input being amplified);

J) A theater throughput mode that allows the sound from a home theater A/V preamp or processor to be passed through the amplifier with no change in gain;

K) Unusually good shielding; it is relatively insensitive to hum from nearby components;

L) Handy 12-volt trigger inputs and outputs for remote power on and off switching;

M) RC-5 input for ease of custom installation., and

N) A standby mode to ensure full performance immediately after the unit is turned on.

I should also note that the visual styling of the KAV–300iL is also exceptional. As most audiophiles know, Krell is designed, manufactured, and marketed (especially marketed) by an extinct race of aliens from the Forbidden Planet. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that Krell is famous for thick front panels, brooding gray and black colors, massively sized cabinets and heat sinks, and a sense of dark mystery. The KAV–300iL has a burnished aluminum/stainless-steel look that gives it real distinction. It has a lightness and openness to its design which is a real departure for Krell — a little like a sudden conversion

The Krell KAV–300iL's sound stage is impressive, with 3D imaging that is stable and realistic.
from Mahler to Mozart. Seriously, it is a truly attractive new look.

What I find most impressive about the KAV–300iL, however, is the sound. I auditioned it at length with my own reference Revel Salons and Thiel 7.2s, and with a friend’s Quad ESL-63. I also tried it with the Spendor BC-1. These are very demanding and revealing speakers, and the Thiel 7.2 and Spendor BC-1 are moderate to demanding loads. The power of the KAV–300iL is not a matter of test bench figures. It can easily handle very demanding orchestral, rock, and classical material at very high volumes, even into demanding loads. Dynamics are excellent, and even the deep bass of the KAV–300iL comes surprisingly close in power and extension to Krell separates.

The KAV–300iL does not have quite the ability of Krell power amplifiers to make music seem as if it appeared out of total silence with a combination of sweetness, air, and immense detail and do so without adding either warmth or brightness to the sound. It does, however, come surprisingly close. If you are familiar with the sound of the Krell preamps and amplifiers costing well more than three times the price of the KAV–300iL, you will recognize all of those same basic characteristics that make up the “Krell sound.”

The sound stage is very impressive. It is both wide and deep, and the KAV–300iL is capable of depth that is rare in components of any price. The imaging is three dimensional, stable, and as realistic in placement and the size of voice and instruments as the recording permits. I was comparing SACD, DVD-A, 96-kHz/24-bit, and CD sound during the time I was reviewing the KAV–300iL and I was repeatedly struck by how good the sound stage in the KAV–300iL really was and how close it came to the performance of my reference components with even the best reference recordings and source units. (For what it’s worth, the KAV–300iL’s combination of detail, transparency, and a highly revealing sound stage helped convince me that most currently available DVD-A players and software do not come close to living up to the technical potential of the medium, while the new SACD recordings seem to be getting steadily better.)

I’m always leery about mentioning specific recordings in reviews. I don’t really judge equipment by a few recordings or even in terms of performance with reference quality recordings. I judge by extended listening to a wide range of material of varying quality because I believe this is how most listeners actually use their equipment. At the same time, I was reviewing an extremely powerful separate power amplifier from another manufacturer while I was reviewing the KAV–300iL, and I heard the same degree of problems in the Credence Clearwater Revival Chronicle LP (Fantasy Records, 1976). The same nasty touch of equalization or natural boost to the upper midrange, the same studio bass with too much upper bass energy and too little deep bass. At the same time is a lot of detail and complex sonic interplay on this record and the KAV–300iL brought it out even in the loudest passages. Just for fun, I made a similar comparison of the Krell KAV–300iL to its high power competitor in auditioning some of the late Bert Whyte’s recordings on Everest. The Krell KAV–300iL proved to very musically involving with zero listening fatigue. Its performance with such recordings may sound slightly warm, and have a middle of the hall soundstage perspective to those audiophiles who like a bright, forward, and open sound. To me, it was intensely natural and came very close to its competitor even in reproducing very high power contrasts. (A key recording at issue was the Stokowski and the New York Symphony’s performance of Strauss’s “Don Juan,” “Til Eulenspiegel,” and “Salome” (Elektra/DCC LPOZ 1002) The same was true of the KAV–300iL’s reproduction of the deep bass and dynamic contrasts on bands one and eight of Jennifer Warnes’ recording of The Hunter (Private Music 01005-82089-2). Are there some downsides to the KAV–300iL? Of course, there always are to every product! But, its limitations are minor compared to its virtues. The bass performance is a little short of amazing for a product of its size, but it does not provide the truly awesome deep bass of Krell’s massive Class-A power amps. Dynamic contrasts and high power transients are not quite as clear as those reproduced by Krell power amplifiers or other top power amplifiers. There is a touch less sweetness and air in the sound of the KAV–300iL than in Krell separates.

Speaking myself, it would be nice for the KAV–300iL to include a phono stage, although phono stages seem to be vanishing from virtually all modern U.S.-made integrated amps and most preamps. I guess I’d like another balanced input but largely because I do a lot of A-B testing, but I can’t think of a reason why the average real-world audiophile would really need one.

I also encountered a few more hum problems than usual with the kind of trick audio interconnects that float or partially float the ground at one end, although these will not occur in most systems or with any of the interconnects I regard as top quality and technically serious designs. The KAV–300iL dealt easily with any speaker cable I could throw at it and got the best out of each design. It’s a really good product in terms of real-world immunity to amp-cable-speaker interaction problems.

No, you don’t get 12 grand’s worth of Krell sound quality for slightly over 25 per cent of the price, although you probably do easily get more than 80 per cent of the sound quality. (The editor will explain the scientific rationale for quantifying these percentages in an extensive sidebar with full color graphics). [Editor’s Intrusive Note: Only after the reviewer explains the recent Iranian election with full color photos of Imam Khatami.] You also get a superb product that even the most demanding high-end audiophile must both respect and enjoy. The KAV–300iL is a minor masterpiece even by the extraordinarily demanding standards of today’s high end, and it really deserves a close audition. A lovely piece of gear!

the audiophile voice