

**JOHN DOE
OF X**

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AS WE SEE IT BY JIM AUSTIN

THIS ISSUE: Most punk rock wasn't recorded to sound real. That doesn't mean that audiophiles can't enjoy it.

Punk rock's wild gift

This month's music feature, by Mike Mettler, is an interview with John Doe, best known as cofounder, in 1977, of the legendary punk band X. During X's long recording career, Doe's urgent voice has offset the starkly contrasting voice of co-lead vocalist (and songwriting partner) Exene Cervenka, who was Doe's girlfriend before she joined the band; it's one of the most recognizable sounds in punk. Over 45 years, X has continued to record (sparingly) and to evolve, from the literate punk of *Los Angeles*—to me one of the great albums ever, in any genre—through *Wild Gift*, which leans toward country, to *Under the Big Black Sun*, which went in several directions at once: rockabilly, funk, folk, pop, and beyond.

Meanwhile, Doe has maintained a career as a solo and collaborative artist, with a dozen or so albums to his credit, including collaborations with prominent artists like Eddie Vedder and Aimee Mann. In one of the weirdest matchings in movie-music history, it's Doe's version of "I Will Always Love You" that plays on the jukebox in the 1992 film *The Bodyguard* as Whitney Houston and Kevin Costner dance.

Punk, with its intentionally crude musicianship and homebrew aesthetic, isn't exactly known for the quality of its recordings. During his interview with Mettler, Doe takes a moment to diss Steely Dan in a non sequitur: "There's just not a hair out of place on those records. You wind up thinking, 'What the hell? Where's the juice? Where's the messiness?'" One man's meticulous care is another man's soullessness.

To me, Steely Dan's music has plenty of juice; it just takes a different form. Still, as a generalization, "audiophile" recordings tend to show off sound, not music—polish, not juice. Dismissing juicy music—music with life and spirit—because it doesn't sound great worries me.

I love a lot of punk music—though not all of it—because of its energy, spirit, and anger. *Let It Be* by the Replacements and *A Different Kind of Tension* by the Buzzcocks are among my all-time favorite albums. So is *Los Angeles*, X's debut. I like country music, too—the good stuff. I chose Jerry Jeff Walker's *Viva Terlingua!* as one of my Records to Die For in 2017.¹

Most nights, though, I listen to jazz. Sometimes it's classical, especially chamber music or solo piano. The world is blessedly full of varied and distinctive music and musical taste.

In 2020, I asked Jason Victor Serinus to write a piece on the classical voice. When it was published in late 2020,² it featured (as

I anticipated) many recordings in what's often called "historical" sound; that's something it shares with a large quantity of classical music and much jazz. Should we restrict ourselves to recordings made in the last few decades, which rules out some of the greatest music on record? Should we ignore Charlie Parker because the sound of his records is typical of the era when they were recorded? What about Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Hot Sevens? What

I stand with those for whom music is the sole (soul?) rationale for assembling a good stereo system.

about those great Duke Ellington bands through the 1940s and early '50s? What about Caruso? I'm not gonna ignore these masterpieces.

Do we need high-end systems to appreciate such recordings? Apparently, it helps. In his review this month of the very expensive Karan POWERa monoblocks (see p.37), Jason found himself drawn *not* to the latest perfectionist recordings—although he listened to some of those, too—but to a 1952 mono recording by contralto Kathleen Ferrier and pianist Frederick Stone. Why? More juice. "To my astonishment, the POWERa monos brought newfound clarity to Ferrier's singing and conveyed all of its magic," he wrote.

There are some unfortunate clichés about audiophiles. That we listen to the same half-dozen records over and over because they make our systems sound great. That we use music to listen to our systems instead of using our systems to listen to music. Such people, I've learned, *do* exist,

and that's fine. Our tent is large; there's room for them. I stand, though, with those for whom music is the sole (soul?) rationale for assembling a good stereo system. I invest in hi-fi to extract from music as much juice as possible. Better system, better music, more juice.

Punk rock, early jazz, classical voice—it may not be your cuppa, but juice it's got. The first step to appreciating such music is to set aside that silly "absolute sound" nonsense. Sure, when it comes to evaluating a system, well-recorded acoustic music has clear advantages, but an album shouldn't *sound* like live acoustic music unless it was *recorded* to sound like that. Every album should sound like itself.³ Appreciating this obvious fact—embracing it—can contribute greatly to our enjoyment of this hobby.

Some people maintain that a good hi-fi system makes bad recordings sound worse. That has not been my experience. A good hi-fi system, rather, can make bad recordings *make sense*. It can sort them out, allowing me to hear more clearly the various contributors to each recording's signature sound, including faults. Occasionally, that new insight turns a recording I thought was poor into one I enjoy. But even if that clearer view fails to redeem a recording—even if it's just bad sound—there is pleasure to be gained from listening through those flaws to the music, which is easier to do when the flaws are well-resolved.

Great-sounding recordings form a tiny fraction of all recorded music, and they rarely intersect with the very best music. What's more, listening only to the best-recorded, most natural-sounding music excludes the use of recording technology to create specific moods and impressions; X's *Los Angeles* is a fine example of that. No one will mistake it for live or for the state of the recording art, but it sounds exactly as it should. ■

¹ See stereophile.com/content/records-die-2017-page-2.

² See stereophile.com/content/classical-voice-finding-your-way.

³ "In the great majority of cases, there is no original musical event that a record records or reproduces," wrote Evan Eisenberg, in his book-length essay *The Recording Angel*; John Atkinson quoted Eisenberg in his March 2019 *As We See It*. "Instead, each playing of a given record is an instance of something timeless. The original musical event never occurred; it exists, if it exists anywhere, outside history."

JASON VICTOR SERINUS

Karan Acoustics Master Collection POWERa Mono

MONOBLOCK POWER AMPLIFIER

It began with a bad outlet. Perhaps two weeks after my husband and visiting friend created several delightful holiday light displays in the living room, one of the living room outlets died. Every time I tried to plug in part of the light show, it, along with the living room sound system and reading lights, lost power. If the Grinch didn't exactly steal Christmas, he sure tried to guarantee it would arrive silently under the cover of darkness.

Evil Grinch proved no match for the visiting electrician. While our savior was here, I tapped his knowledge of the eccentricities of Port Townsend's electrical grid. When queried about the underground wiring to our house from the transformer across the street, he said, "Given the age of your house [1992], I am more than 99% certain that the wiring to the meter and your breaker panel is aluminum." After opening the panel, he shattered all illusions by declaring that the underground wiring from the main house to the second breaker panel in the detached music room was also aluminum.

What? Back in the spring of 2015, when we designed the music room, I spent a lot of money installing a dedicated line with two legs. One led to a single AudioQuest duplex outlet and a second, on a different breaker, led to a double-duplex AQ outlet, with four receptacles. We used 10-gauge copper conductors in metal-clad cable, the hot, neutral,

and earth ground conductors twisted around each other instead of running parallel as they do in typical cable (think Romex). Twisting the conductors helps with common-mode noise cancellation, the grounded metal sheath shields noise, and the large, 10-gauge



SPECIFICATIONS

Description Solid state, fully balanced, sliding bias class-A, mono power amplifier. Inputs: 1 single-ended (RCA), 1 balanced (XLR). Output: 1 pair binding posts. Power output: 2100W into 8 ohms (33.22dBW), 3600W into 4 ohms (32.55dBW), 6000W into 2 ohms (31.76dBW). Peak power output: 2400W into 8 ohms (33.8dBW). Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz, ±0dB (DC–

300kHz, –3dB). Voltage gain: 36dB. Input sensitivity: 2.0V RMS (for max output). Input impedance: 30k ohms (balanced/unbalanced). Rise and Settling time: <450 ns. Slew rate: 1500V/μs (amplification stages). THD and IMD: 0.03%. Signal/noise: >120dB (unweighted).

Dimensions 19.8" (504mm) W × 11.5" (292mm) H × 23.7" (603mm) D. Weight: 231lb

(105kg). Crate dimensions: 28.3" (720mm) W × 16.1" (410mm) H × 32.3" (820mm) D. Shipping weight: 286lb (130kg).

Finish Silver aluminum.

Serial numbers of units reviewed 005 and 006. Designed and built in Serbia.

Price \$106,000/pair. Number of dealers: 5. Warranty: 5 years parts & labor.

Manufacturer

Karan Acoustics, Danila Kiša 5, Novi Sad 21000, Serbia.

Tel: +381 63 507729.

Web: karanacoustics.com.

USA/Canada distributor: Wynn Audio Corp., Unit 31, 20 Wertheim Ct., Richmond Hill, ON, L4B3A8 Canada.

Tel: (647) 995-2995.

Web: wynnaudio.com.

conductors reduce the resistance of the circuit.

Nearly eight years later, I'd discovered that my entire dedicated line was fed by aluminum, which is notorious for adding noise to the line and muddying bass.¹ No wonder that time and again, amplifiers sounded smoother, warmer, and more musical when they were plugged into an AudioQuest Niagara power conditioner or Stromtank battery power source rather than directly into the wall.

Knowledge is power when it leads to action. I moved fast. Distributor Wynn Wong would arrive from Toronto in less than a month, to install two Serbian-made Karan Acoustics POWERa monoblocks (\$106,000/pair) for review. These monoblocks weigh an astounding 231lb each, with a shipping weight of 286lb; each contains two 2700VA toroidal transformers and a 210,000uF bank of custom capacitors. Each monoblock requires two 15A power cables, one for each amplifier stage.

I doubted that the Stromtank S 2500 Quantum MKII was equipped to handle such a big power draw while conveying the full dynamic capabilities of these amplifiers.² I needed a viable alternative; there was no way I was going to compromise sound quality by plugging the POWERa's into outlets mostly fed by aluminum wiring.

First, Hans Frederickson of Frederickson Electric—a man (and a company) that understands the needs of audiophiles—made room in his schedule for the two-stage wiring upgrade. Second, Wong agreed to travel to Port Townsend and install the amps with his as-

sistant, Kenneth, ensuring that David and I would not be crippled for life by our attempts to haul them into place. Wong also agreed to bring a 6-outlet Acoustic Revive RTP-6 Absolute power box to help plug everything in.

Before electrical work began, I enlisted the assistance of power expert Ed DeVito of Audio Ultra in Sumner, Washington, near Seattle. I also consulted Garth Powell of AudioQuest. Rather than go with Audio Ultra's full AU3000 power package, which would have necessitated more electrical and structural changes than time and bank account allowed, we took a more modest approach. We replaced the music room's existing breaker panel with a Square D QD 100-amp subpanel that uses bus bars of tin-plated copper³ rather than aluminum. We added a UL-approved EP2050EE surge protector/noise filter from Environmental Potentials, Audio

¹ From a practical perspective, the main problem with aluminum wiring is that, because its resistivity is higher than that of copper, it heats up more than copper does, and when it heats up, it expands. Over time, this can cause electrical connections to lose integrity and fail. This led to many house fires in the late 1960s and early '70s, especially in houses rigged with a certain aluminum alloy. Any 1992 installation performed by a qualified electrician should be safe. So what are the consequences of aluminum wire in a hi-fi system? Other than increased energy dissipation per unit length (for the same gauge of wire), I don't know. —**Jim Austin**

² By email, Stromtank's Wolfgang Meletzky confirmed that the S2500 Quantum MKII can deliver peak power up to 2800VA/3s. "If the continuous consumption is -12A or below then it is no problem with dynamics with 8-ohm speakers. If you are using a 4 or 2-ohm speaker, we recommend using a higher performance Stromtank like our S4000 Pro Power or our top model S5000 High Power." The Wilson Alexia V's nominal impedance is 4 ohms.

³ Silver-plated copper is even better, but it costs substantially more.

MEASUREMENTS

I measured one of the Karan POWERa Mono amplifiers that JVS auditioned, serial number 005. Because the amplifier was too wide to fit through the door from my listening room to the corridor that leads to the test lab, I performed the measurements in my listening room. To ensure that this very powerful amplifier wasn't starved of wall current, I ran two long, heavy-duty extension cords to the Karan from the 20A circuit in the test lab. I measured the amplifier using my Audio Precision SYS2722 system,¹ plugged into one of the extension cords. Following distributor Wynn Wong's recommendation, I performed the measurements with the DC filter on the amplifier's rear panel switched on; however, I didn't measure any

differences with this filter on or off. (I live in a lightly populated—for New York City at least—residential neighborhood, and DC is rarely present in the mains voltage here.) Other than voltage gain, polarity, and input impedance, all the measurements were performed using the balanced input. When testing the single-ended input, I followed the manual's recommendation of shorting pins 1 and 3 of the XLR jack.

Out of its crate, the amplifier was ice-cold from its air trip from Washington State, so I ran the Karan at a few watts into 8 ohms for two hours before examining its measured performance. I then followed the CEA's recommendation of operating it at one-eighth the specified power of 2.1kW (!) into 8 ohms for 30 minutes. At the end

of that time, the ventilation holes on the top panel over the internal heatsinks were very hot, at 124.4°F (51.4°C). The side panels were even hotter, at 144.6°F (62.6°C). However, when I repeated some of the tests the next day without the preconditioning, I noted that amplifier ran very cool to the touch even after driving 1W into 8 ohms for an hour.

The POWERa Mono's voltage gain was 34.7dB for both the balanced and unbalanced inputs, which is higher than usual. The Karan preserved absolute polarity (ie, was non-inverting) with both input types. (The XLR jack is wired with pin 2 hot.) The specified input impedance is 30k ohms for

¹ See stereophile.com/asweseeit/108awsi/index.html.

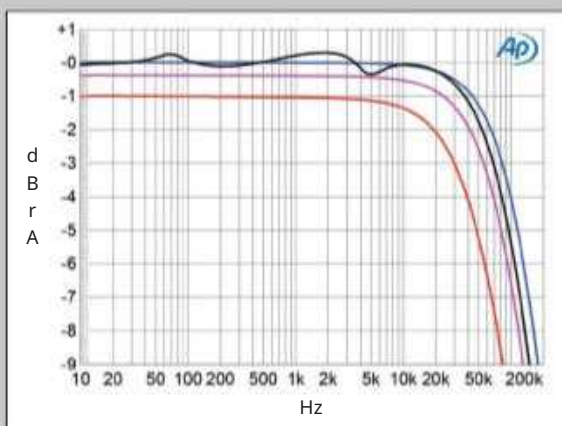


Fig.1 POWERa Mono, frequency response at 2.83V into simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red) (1dB/vertical div.).

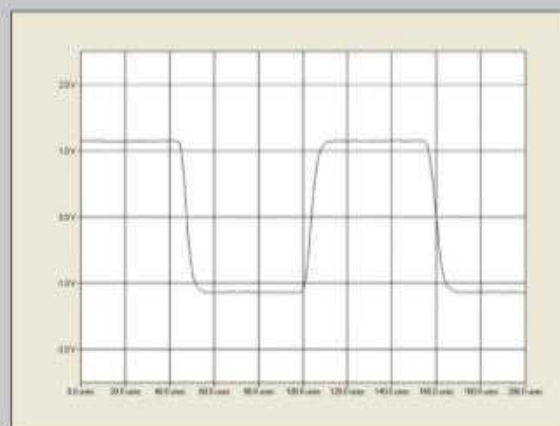


Fig.2 Karan POWERa Mono, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

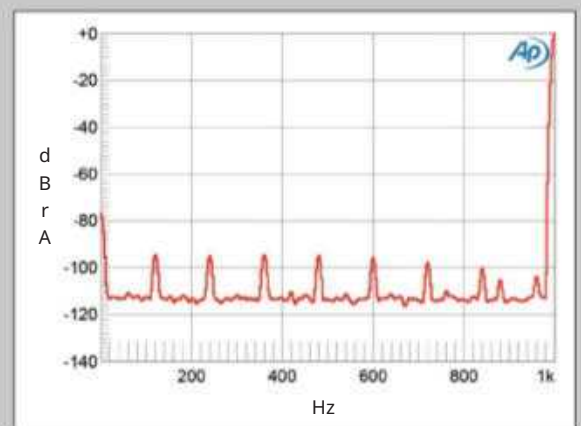


Fig.3 Karan POWERa Mono, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC-1kHz, at 1W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).



Ultra's affiliate company, to provide, in Ed's words, "non-sacrificial protection from transient voltage surges and spikes" and to "optimize system performance by absorbing ... noise between 3kHz and 1MHz without shunting energy to ground."⁴ We tested grounding, examined panel loads, and ensured that we met Ed's specifications as we created two in-phase 20A branch circuits to feed the audio system's dedicated outlets. Having two circuits allowed me to separate the amplifiers from the front-end components. We could do nothing about the aluminum wiring that ran underground from the transformer across the street to our meter, but most everything else was changed.

Some of this work took place two weeks into the review. The listening report that follows covers sessions conducted after everything was in place, settled in, and performing optimally.

Previewing the main character

What is this beast of an amplifier? Here's what I can share about the POWERa, from information provided on the Karan Acoustics website, by distributor Wong, and responses to questions sent to company founder and chief designer Milan Karan in Novi Sad, Serbia.

Karan, 57, initially made his living designing "sophisticated medical equipment" while building audio equipment on the side "just because of my passion for music." A guitar player for the joy of it, he created Karan Acoustics in 1986 after his musician friends kept saying "good things" about the amplifiers and preamplifiers he had built. A music lover who tests his equipment with all kinds

⁴ Translation: The EP2050EE helps filter out noise from appliances, heating units, computers, dimmers, LEDs, and more.

measurements, continued

both input types. I measured 29.6k ohms from 20Hz to 20kHz for the balanced input, half that value for the unbalanced input.

The Karan's output impedance was 0.5 ohm at 20Hz and 1kHz increasing to 0.67 ohm at 20kHz. (These figures include the series impedance of 6' of spaced-pair loudspeaker cable.) These impedances are higher than I expected from a solid state design, presumably because the output comprises two amplifier stages in series, a topology used to obtain the POWERa's very high specified power. The modulation of the amplifier's frequency response, due to the Ohm's law interaction between this source impedance and the impedance of our standard simulated loudspeaker,² was ± 0.25 dB (fig.1, gray trace). The response

into an 8 ohm resistive load (fig.1, blue trace) was down by 3dB at 81kHz, a lower frequency than the specified -3dB at 300kHz. The increased output impedance at 20kHz means that the -3dB frequency was somewhat lower into 4 ohms (magenta) and 2 ohms (red). However, the POWERa Mono's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms (fig.2) was superb, with no overshoot or ringing.

Measured with either the unbalanced input or the balanced input shorted to ground, the Karan amplifier's unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio was a very good 71.8dB ref. 1W into 8 ohms. This ratio improved to 79dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to 22Hz-22kHz and to 81.3dB when A-weighted. While

even-order harmonics of the 60Hz power-supply frequency were present in the Karan's noise floor (fig.3), these were very low in level, at -94dB and below ref. 1W into 8 ohms.

When I tested the POWERa Mono's maximum power into 8 ohms, the THD+noise reached 1% (our standard definition of clipping) at 1.85kW into 8 ohms (fig.4, 32.67dBW). While this is lower than the specified 2.1kW into this load (33.22dBW), the AC wall voltage had dropped from 120.6V with the amplifier idling to 114.5V with the amplifier clipping. The Karan's maximum power into 4 ohms is specified as 3.6kW (32.55dBW). I measured 2.5kW

² See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

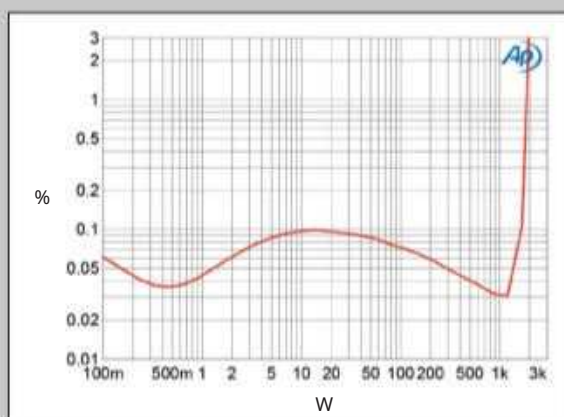


Fig.4 Karan POWERa Mono, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

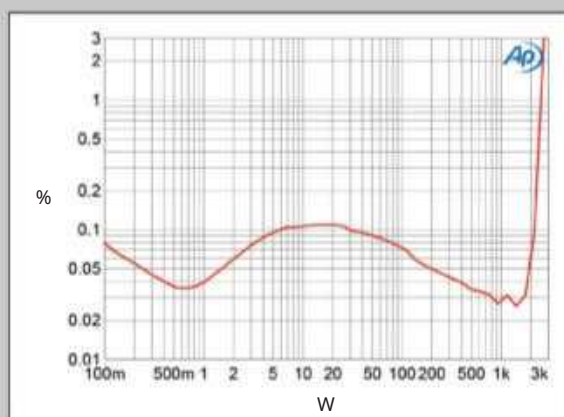


Fig.5 Karan POWERa Mono, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

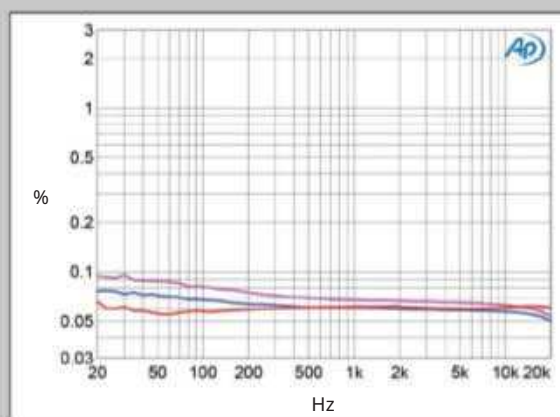
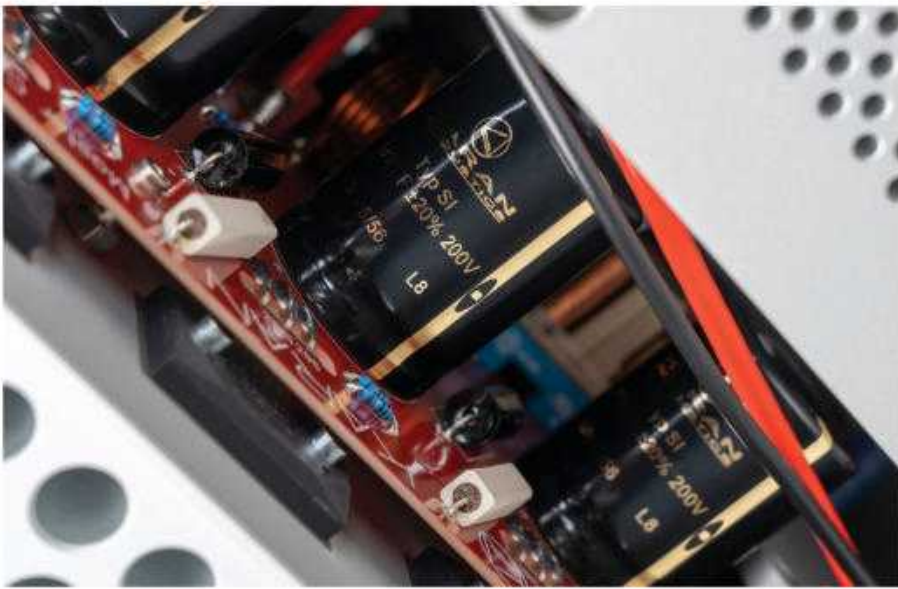


Fig.6 Karan POWERa Mono, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 12.67V into: 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red).



of music but prefers live jazz and classical, Karan regularly attends concerts during travel to other cities and countries, and his nine employees are all music lovers who listen to designs together and compare prototypes, testing out small changes.

Karan Audio has been distributed in Europe and Asia for more than 25 years. North American distribution began five years ago after Karan met Wynn Wong.

“My goal was to make the POWERa the best sounding amplifier, without compromising anything,” Karan wrote in an email. “I wanted to achieve a natural sound as close as possible to live music and build an amplifier that would not change the input signal in any way, ... just deliver a lot of power to ensure there is enough headroom to drive any speaker while providing air/transparency, separation among the instruments, etc.”

measurements, continued

into 4 ohms at 1% THD+N (fig.5, 31.0dBW). Again, the wall voltage had dropped by several volts at the clipping power.³ I didn't test the maximum power into 2 ohms because this would have tripped the wall supply's circuit breaker.)

Figs.4 & 5 indicate that actual distortion lies beneath the noise floor below 1W, rising to a maximum around 20W then dropping again, reaching a minimum value just before actual waveform clipping. I therefore examined how the percentage of THD+N changed with frequency at 12.67V, which is equivalent to 20W into 8 ohms, 40W into 4 ohms, and 80W into 2 ohms (fig.6). The distortion remained below 0.1% into all three impedances and was lowest in level at low frequencies into 2 ohms (red trace). Commendably, the distortion

doesn't rise at high frequencies.

I was having some issues with my digital oscilloscope at very high sample rates, so fig.7 shows my analog oscilloscope's screen with the POWERa Mono driving 1kHz at 100W into 8 ohms. This photo reveals that the distortion at high powers occurs at the waveform's zero-crossing points. This will be due to the output stage lacking sufficient bias at this power, perhaps as a result of the sliding bias mechanism. While the third harmonic is the highest in level, at -66dB (0.05%, fig.8), the crossover distortion is, as always, accompanied by higher odd-order harmonics. When the POWERa Mono drove an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones with a peak level of 100W into 8 ohms (fig.9), the second-order difference product at 1kHz

lay at a very low -106dB (0.0005%), though higher-order intermodulation products are higher in level. These products dropped by around 3dB at the same peak voltage level into 4 ohms.

The Karan POWERa Mono amplifier's measured behavior reveals that it copes well with low impedance and offers extremely high power, though the level of distortion at moderately high powers was not as low as I was expecting.—John Atkinson

³ Observant folks will notice that even though it's below the amplifier's specified maximum power, 2.5kW is more power than a single 120V, 20A service should be able to supply. But the Audio Precision's procedure raises the input voltage quickly before terminating the input signal the moment the distortion reaches a pre-established target, in this case 3%. It takes a while for a circuit breaker to trip, so presumably, the current from the wall exceeded 20A momentarily—too briefly to trip the breaker.—Jim Austin

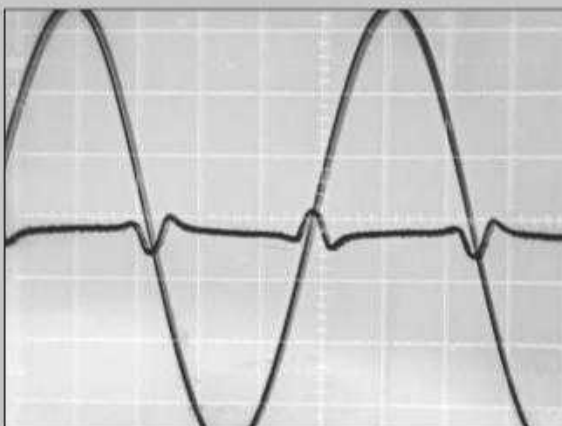


Fig.7 Karan POWERa Mono, 1kHz waveform at 100W into 8 ohms, 0.051% THD+N; distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (not to scale).

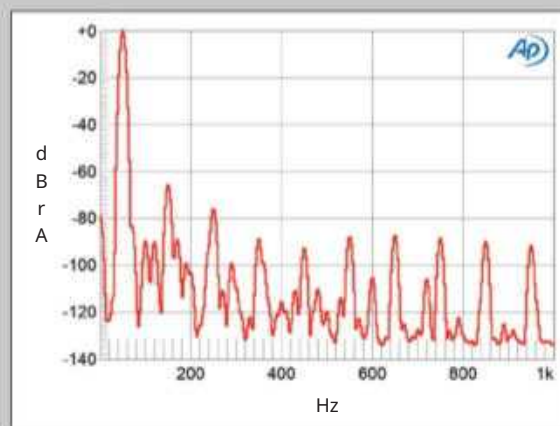


Fig.8 Karan POWERa Mono, spectrum of 50Hz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 200W into 4 ohms (linear frequency scale).

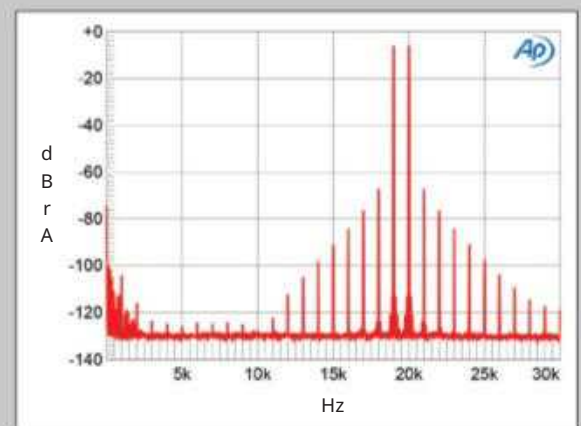


Fig.9 Karan POWERa Mono, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-24kHz, 19+20kHz at 100W peak into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

Karan began designing his top-line Master Collection (topped by the POWERa) 10 years ago. “It’s a huge, cost-no-object step up from its predecessors,” he continued. “I put everything I learned from 30 years of medical and audio engineering into it.

“I would love to make the POWERa lighter without compromising the sound, but it’s otherwise impossible to achieve a high output power capability like its 2100W into 8 ohms, 3600W into 4 ohms, and 6000W into 2 ohms.”⁵ Peak power is even higher, at 2400W into 8 ohms, he noted. “The weight comes from a high quality chassis with good acoustic and vibration isolation, overbuilt internal heat-sinks, and high current/low-noise transformers. To achieve a natural, precise, focused, dynamic sound, the heatsinks are designed to eliminate acoustical and vibrational feedback to electronic components. You cannot have dynamics if the vibration affects the sensitive components. The PCBs are decoupled with a special kind of spacer and copper discs to allow the musicality and harmonics to flow.”

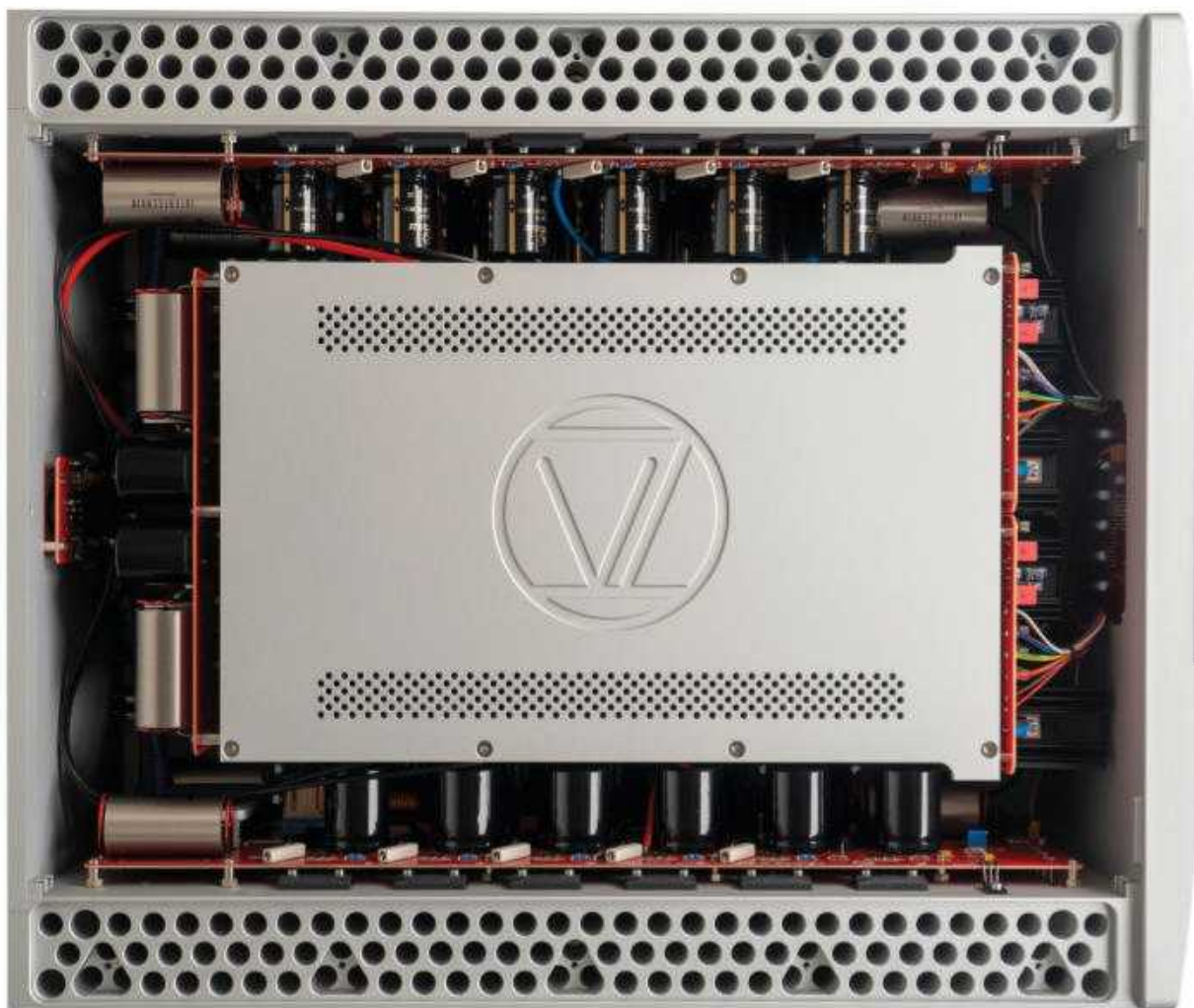
The POWERa neither runs too hot to touch nor heats the room to an excessive degree. As Wynn Wong explained, “Karan amps may be class-A, but they don’t run hot like traditional class-A amplifiers, which run a constant high bias. Because of the POWERa’s ‘sliding class-A bias circuit,’ the bias level is adjusted based on the signal (from the preamp) in real time.”

“The design is fully balanced, very high speed, and extremely quiet,” Karan wrote. “I used the best possible components; some are custom-made for my company. I also selected the best PCB conducting and isolation material. The thickness of the copper on our PCB is much higher than usual. I tried many samples of different thickness and chose the right one by listening. The design of the PCB, the architecture, and component placement also affect the sound. I had to make small adjustments to further improve performance and ensure that components would not interfere with each other.”

One of the POWERa’s unique features is “a proprietary, in house designed, built in Line (mains) Conditioner.”⁶ Activation is by a toggle switch located on the bottom center of the rear panel, directly below the speaker cable outputs and the single-ended and balanced inputs. Counterintuitive though it may seem, power conditioning is engaged when the switch is in the “0” position and disengaged in the “1” position. (It’s the opposite turning the amps on and off.) Karan claims the Line Conditioner acts in part as “an efficient DC ‘eliminator,’” and that its rating of 60A or more can cater to “at least three times more” than the maximum current and voltage flow required from the main power supply.

Each POWERa contains two toroidal transformers, one for each amplifier stage; each requires its own 15-amp power cable. Their IECs are located on each side of the rear panel, each beneath its power switch. There is no standby button. Asked the rationale for this two-cable, two-switch design, Karan replied, “It’s not possible to connect two big transformers to one switch/fuse because they draw too much current. We did a comparison, and it sounds much better with two switches/power cords, one for each stage.”

The POWERa’s front consists of a central black glass panel on which the Karan logo and name are tastefully and moderately illuminated in red. Flanking the black glass are silver-colored aluminum panels. The buffed silver aluminum top continues the front’s geometric layout, with a large logo engraved in the center



flanked by panels covered with small, heat-releasing holes. The CS2M footers, too, are “safe,” being tall enough to enable the amp to be lowered and raised without crushing your fingers. Hernias are another story.

I asked Karan what setup he considers optimal. “The amplifiers will sound noticeably better with amp stands, but you still get decent sound placing them on the floor,” he replied. “The CS2M footers are the latest model from Critical Mass Systems. Wynn distributes Critical Mass Systems, and he suggested a few years ago that I try their footers. They have greatly improved the sound.”

Karan is currently developing prototype speakers that include a matching sub tower with active crossover. It takes six POWERa mono amplifiers to drive them. Prepare your mansion now!

Onward

I thought the POWERa monos sounded mighty fine powered by the Stromtank, sounding best when their power conditioning was turned off, but I was also aware that current limitations imposed by the S 2500 Quantum MKII might squash dynamics. Not that I expected to use anywhere near each monoblocks’ 3600W into 4 ohms in my 16’ x 20’ x 9.25’ listening room.

With wall power, the POWERa monoblocks sounded best with their internal power conditioning engaged. It’s not that they didn’t sound quite good without power conditioning—my wall power provides far smoother sound than it did before the wire upgrade, and bass is tighter. Nonetheless, engaging power conditioning made the sound even smoother, the noise floor lower, the top-to-

⁵ Such a high power rating is not achievable with US household power, even if each of the two power cords is on its own circuit branch, with its own 20A breaker—that’s four circuit branches altogether—two for each monoblock, for amplification only. Karan specifies the input power at 115V, so the maximum continuous power, with two 15A power cords and two independent circuits, is $2 \times 115V \times 15A = 3450W$ per channel. If we assume that the amplifier can draw the full 20A, despite the 15A-rated IEC connector, then each monoblock is capable of putting out 4.8kW of continuous power.

⁶ The quote is from the website. As I learned from distributor Wynn Wong while editing this review, the “power conditioner” in the Karan is really just a DC filter. No doubt, it’s a very well-executed DC filter.—Jim Austin

bottom focus tighter. The POWERa's internal power conditioning allowed the inner glow of instruments and voices to emerge with no sense of dynamic constraint.

I reserved the double bank of dedicated duplex outlets for the POWERa's, plugged the Stromtank (which continued to feed front-end components) into one of the other outlets, and used the Acoustic Revive RTP-6 to power several other products. This was as close to my usual power setup as I could get.

The discovery

My first listen came within an hour of installation, before power cables had settled in and wiring changes were complete. Setup was less than ideal, with no attention paid to whether the internal power conditioners were on or off. Nonetheless, my first impression proved accurate.

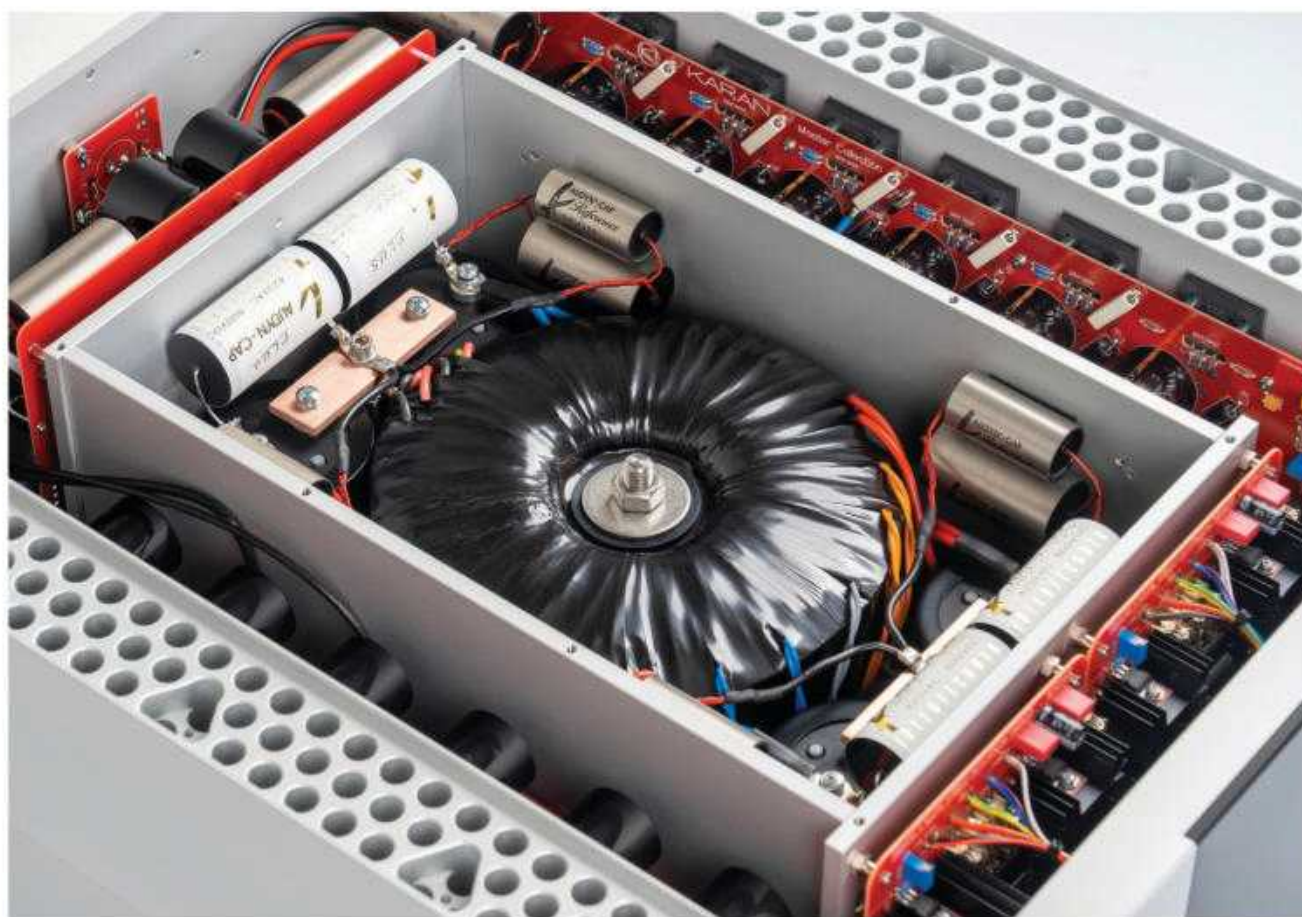
The sound was as natural as I've come to expect from D'Agostino, Audio Research, VTL, and a host of other top-flight companies that specialize in amplification, if perhaps a little closer to neutral than some—but there was something that set them apart. "These amps give me more of everything I value from the D'Agostino Progression M550," I thought. "There's greater color saturation, more presence, and stronger bass. There's more *there* there."

As I got my power act together and fine-tuned the system (as I always do, as a matter of course), the POWERa monoblocks surpassed that initial assessment. By a lot. I queued up an old standby, Yello's "Electrified II" from *Toy* (Tidal 24/48 MQA, Polydor 0602547879851). Whoa! Even more than the soundstage, which covered the width of the room and extended far up, what stood out was the strength and solidity of deep bass—and beyond. Everything from the pounding beat to Dieter Meier's recitation and Malia's vocals seemed to have greater presence. For visceral impact, swiftness of attack, and sheer, apparent accuracy, the POWERa monoblocks top every other monoblock, stereo amp, or integrated I've reviewed.⁷ Ditto for color saturation, shading, dynamics, and the ability to portray the most complex passages without a hint of compression.

Another, far more system-trying test of bass is the second movement explosion in Shostakovich's Symphony No.11 as performed by Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony Orchestra on their award-winning live recording, *Shostakovich: Symphonies Nos. 4 & 11* "The Year 1905" (24/96 MQA, DG/Tidal). I've heard this recording on many systems, including those with speakers far bigger than the Alexia V's. But never have I heard a huge bass drum portrayed with such convincing realism: The virtually instantaneous transition from the initial sharp attack to the forceful resonance and decay; the size and weight of the sound; and the depth of emotional impact felt true to the source.

I cannot recall when I've heard this 11th's churning conveyed so clearly, so musically, with so much devastation. To repeat descriptors already invoked, the sheer presence and weight of the sounds, along with the degree of resolution, consistently brought me closer to the live symphonic experience than anything else I've heard.⁸

This "presence" was not limited to large-scale works. Listening to the deeply moving second movement of Franz Schubert's Piano



Trio No.2, on the recording *Schubert: Chamber Works* with cellist Tanya Tetzlaff, her violinist brother Christian Tetzlaff, and the late pianist Lars Vogt (24/96 WAV, Ondine 1394), I was struck as much by the cello's rich, haunting eloquence as by the piano's poetry. Dynamics were tremendous, and Schubert's mix of pain, resignation, and affirmation was more shattering than I have heard it.⁹

Never before had recordings of the marvelous mezzo-soprano Marianne Crebassa displayed such convincing warmth, so much fullness in the core of her voice. (I listened to several of her albums.) Never had soprano Julia Bullock sounded so soulful, so rooted in her open heart, as on her performance of "Brown Baby" from her treasurable album *Walking in the Dark* (24/192 WAV, Nonesuch 695267).

It may seem strange to cite a mono recording from 1952 in a review like this, but I found myself turning to contralto Kathleen Ferrier's recording of Ralph Vaughan Williams's "Silent Noon," made with pianist Frederick Stone at the BBC Broadcasting House on June 5, 1952—one of many high points in the 10-CD remastered *Kathleen Ferrier Edition* (16/44.1 FLAC, Decca/Qobuz).

Ferrier's performance of this song stands apart from all others. The metronome imposes no restraints on her treatment of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's lyrics. "Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass," she sings with rapt stillness. After intoning the words "'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass" as though they were the holiest of revelations, she pauses. Universes of meaning, the wisdom of the ages, the confessions of countless lovers—all resonate in that silence.

She continues. "Oh! Clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower / This close-companioned inarticulate hour / When twofold silence was the song of love." It is impossible to listen to this great perfor-

⁷ To the naysayers and cynics who think, "Oh sure. Serinus sees the POWERa price tag and how much it weighs and immediately proclaims it 'the best,' I respond: If you have the means to visit a Karan dealer or audition these monoblocks at a show at which setup constraints do not compromise sound quality, please go and listen for yourself. I fully expect you to discover that the POWERa deserves the accolades.

⁸ I've heard the BSO under Nelsons perform Shostakovich live at Philharmonie de Paris.

⁹ Admittedly this is a new recording, so I haven't heard it on very many systems—but I did hear it with the very different sounding Esoteric Grandioso MIX monos, which I reviewed in the April issue.

mance without sensing that Ferrier, who was mortally ill, must have realized she had limited time left to share her gifts.

I've listened to this recording countless times, in various remasterings. In every instance, the limitations of the fuzzy transfer, which apparently derives from early pressings with groove noise and occasional high-pitched ticks, left me feeling bereft at what had been lost from the original recording. To my astonishment, the POWERa monos brought newfound clarity to Ferrier's singing and conveyed all of its magic.

As I discovered how much sound and pleasure the Karan Acoustics POWERa monos could deliver, I found myself going back in time to some of the greatest vocal recordings I've been privileged to hear. Some readers may think someone crazy to spend \$106,000 to better extract information buried in old mono recordings, but those who value great art will sense the gifts these monoblocks can deliver. They may delight even more when I recount that playing Ferrier's recording of Hubert Parry's "Love is a Bable" from the same broadcast session brought out her restrained, oh-so-English humor to a greater extent than I ever thought possible. The POWERa laughs, cries, longs, and loves with equal honesty.

Other kinds of music? The John Coltrane Quartet's "Nancy (with the Laughing Face)," from *Ballads* (24/96 MQA, Impulse!/Tidal), sounded gorgeous, Coltrane's tone warm, round, and smooth, even when he moves fast between notes. James Blake's "There's a Limit to Your Love," from his eponymous album (16/44.1, Polydor/Qobuz), may be well known amongst audiophiles—I play it often, and the bass never sounded more convincing than with the POWERa's—but I often treat it as a throwaway cut: Check out the bass and begone. This time, I found the sound so interesting that I listened all the way through.

A shout out to the immersive deep bass on Ryuichi Sakamoto's "20210310," from *12* (24/96 FLAC, Milan Qobuz), which sounds fabulous through the POWERa's. So do the distinct colors of original instruments on the Chiaroscuro Quartet's recent recording *Mozart: The Prussian Quartets* (24/96 WAV, BIS 7318599925585). I listened to this recording carefully when I reviewed it a few months back, but it never displayed colors as convincing, distinct, and realistic as through the POWERa's.

Returning to voices: If you want to hear how a great singer projects radiant sounds high in their range, go no farther than soprano Elisabeth Schumann's 1934 recording of Josef Strauss's "Sphären-Klänge" (Music of the Spheres), from the invaluable ICON box set, *Silver Thread of Song* (16/44.1 FLAC, Warner Classics/Qobuz), where the POWERa's convey her infectious joy, glowingly sweet, disembodied high notes, and boundless personality like no other amps I've heard.

I said goodbye to the Karan Acoustics POWERa monoblocks with two selections: Julia Bullock's heart-opening rendition of Connie Converse's "One by One" and the Chiaroscuro Quartet's performance of the sublime *Larghetto* from Mozart's String Quartet No.22 in B flat major, K. 589. Both were heavenly. I sat, transfixed.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC, Vivaldi Upsampler Plus, Vivaldi Master Clock; Innuos Statement NextGen Music Server; Uptone Audio EtherRegen, AfterDark Giesemann Emperor Double Crown Master Clock, and Nordost QNet Ethernet Switch, all powered by Nordost QSource linear power supplies (2); Synology 5-bay 1019+ NAS, Small Green Computer Sonore Deluxe opticalModule, Linksys mesh router and Arris modem, all powered by HDPLEX 300 linear power supply; Apple 2017 iPad Pro and 2017 MacBook Pro laptop with 2.8GHz Intel i7, SSD, 16GB RAM.

Preamplifier Dan D'Agostino Momentum HD.

Power amplifiers Dan D'Agostino Progression M550 monoblocks.

Loudspeakers Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia V.

Cables Digital: Nordost Odin 1, Odin 2, and Valhalla 2 (USB and Ethernet), Frey 2 (USB adapter); AudioQuest WEL Signature, Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet), OM1 62.5/125 multimode duplex (fiberoptic). Interconnect: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon. Speaker: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon. AC: Nordost Odin 2, Valhalla 2; AudioQuest Dragon and Firebird. Umbilical cords: Ghent Audio Canare for HDPLEX 300 LPS and NAS; QSource Premium DC cables with Lemo terminations for QSources.

Accessories Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack and amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform; Symposium Ultra Platform; Nordost 20-amp QB8, QKore 1 and 6; Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; Stromtank S 2500 Quantum MKII power generator; AudioQuest Niagara 7000 and 5000 power conditioners, NRG Edison outlets, JitterBugs; ADD-Pwr Sorcerer X4; Wilson Audio Pedestals; A/V RoomService Polyflex Diffusers; Resolution Acoustics room treatment; Stillpoints Clouds (8) and Aperture 1 (2) and 2 (2) acoustic treatments; HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates; Stein Music Blue Suns; Bybee Room Neutralizers; Absolute Stabilians; Marigo Aida CD mat.

Dedicated listening room 20' L × 16' W × 9.25' H.

—Jason Victor Serinus



The not-really rival

In recent amplifier reviews, I've often omitted direct comparisons due to major price discrepancies. Here, such discrepancies are unavoidable, but I'll make a comparison anyway. My reference D'Agostino Progression M550 mono—the least expensive monoblock in the D'Agostino line—cost less than half the Karan POWERa monoblock's considerable price. Nothing in the D'Agostino line, short of the top-level Relentless Epic 1600 Mono Amplifier¹⁰ (even more expensive at \$349,500/pair, rated at 3000W into 4 ohms), can come close to matching the POWERa's output.

Power for its own sake means little, however; what matters is the ability to harness power to achieve higher musical ends. Here is where the POWERa excels. Even without amp stands or a silent battery power source, the POWERa outperformed the Progression M550 in my system. More transparency, more resolution, more midrange and low-end weight and substance, more color saturation—the ability to harness power to reach deeper into the musical fabric and extract emotional truth—more and better are the bywords of the POWERa.

The clincher

The Karan Acoustics POWERa monoblocks are big, heavy, extremely powerful, and extremely expensive. Yet, thanks to their sliding-bias class-A design, they will likely not tax your power grid every time you turn them on.

What they give you in return for your investment, in the context of a similarly high-achieving system—I should say, what they've given me—is sound that has taken me closer to the transformative visceral, emotional, mental, and spiritual impact of great artists performing great music than anything I've heard in my system pre-

viously. The Karan is a phenomenal achievement, a benchmark for what can be achieved, at least in my modestly sized listening room.

If you treasure greatness in audio reproduction and have the means to purchase a pair, seek them out. If you do not have the means, be careful: I, for one, do not wish to get their sound out of my head. ■

¹⁰ I have not heard any D'Agostino Relentless product in my system.



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