

hi-fi news

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Distilled Krell

KRELL S-300i (£2400)

It boasts technology from the company's flagship Evolution series, packs iPod connectivity, and growls like a hot-hatch... meet Krell's killer compact amp



A debate that's been raging since the dawn of hi-fi, Integrated vs Separates boils down to this: the former's benefits over the latter include the removal of a pre-to-power cable connection, the need for one less AC outlet, less shelf space and – above all – the knowledge that the two sections are optimised for each other. Separates, however, counter with truly dedicated power supplies for each section, as well as isolation of the pre and power amp stages for less potential for undesirable interaction. Traditionally, the higher you go up the price scale, the more likely you are to opt for separates.

Over the decades, milestone integrateds would appear that upset the formula: Sugden's A48, specific models from Rogers, McIntosh, AR, *et al.* And now, most assuredly, Krell's integrateds are so good that they could afford the entry-level separates.

Here's what you get for £2400 with the S-300i integrated, compared to three times that for the least-expensive (but admittedly more powerful) pre/power combination: a fully-balanced, Class A preamp section and a 2x150W stereo amplifier, employing the Current Mode technology found throughout the range, right up to the nut-case EVO models.

Your first realisation that this is no ordinary integrated is its weight. Although compact at 438x101x444mm (whd), it tips the scales at nearly 20 kilos. A good portion of that is a gigantic, typically Krellish 750VA toroidal transformer, supported by 38,000 microfarads of storage capacitance. This is not your normal integrated amp's power supply.

FEATURE PACKED

Because Krell, early on, realised that some audiophiles live in the real world, this unit is bereft of nothing, features-wise. The S-300i has an iPod/iPhone interface (with a cable included) that derives audio from the fully differential output included in iPods and iPhones; according to Krell, no other manufacturer does this. A hefty solid aluminium remote operates all functions, including those of a connected iPod or iPhone, as well as Krell CD, SACD, and DVD players. But you'll love the feel of the machined aluminium volume rotary and the



KRELL'S BEST INTEGRATED YET?

Krell earlier integrateds, the S-300i's predecessors, were all 'genuine' Krell products with few evident compromises. But what we have here is a weird paradigm shift in attitude, as if Krell saw the credit crunch looming. I asked Ricardo Franassovici how he, as the distributor, was dealing with this time-bomb of a bargain and he said, 'most manufacturers would restrict the performance of an entry-level product not to impact on the more expensive units. Dan D'Agostino isn't like that. He set out to build the best integrated amp he could, and it turns out that the price is right for the times we're in.' Too bad Dan isn't running our banks.



tiny press buttons, so it may spend less time in your hand than you'd expect.

The S-300i features a number of control menus, viewed via the front-panel display, for accessing customisable parameters and functions including balance, input trim, input naming and muting level. Also included is a home cinema pass-through for unadulterated two-channel integration into a surround-sound set-up.

At the back panel are three single-ended RCA, a balanced XLR input, the socket for the iPod/iPhone cable and genuine WBT speaker terminals. Even though this handsome, silver-finished baby stands shorter than a CD jewel box, some may choose to hide it in the sort of equipment rack used by custom installers; generously, Krell supplies a pair of 'ears' for rack-mounting.

Also on an installation-friendly note, the S-300i talks to after-market, upscale touchscreen controllers such as those from AMX and Crestron, while the back panel also includes 3.5mm jacks for IR input and 12-volt trigger input and output, as well as an RS-232 connector.

ABOVE: One balanced (XLR) and three single-ended (RCA) inputs are joined by a multi-pin iPod connection. An unbalanced preamp out is joined by single sets of 4mm speaker binding posts. Full trigger and RS232 control is also offered

'Such wallop! Such extension! Such mass! The S-300i is like a small dog unafraid of some big, loping hound'



SOUND AS A HOUND

Slipped in between the Restek Epos and Marantz CD-12 CD players, and Rogers LS3/5As-plus-A1 subwoofer or Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor Elipsa, connected with Acrolink cables, the S-300i made itself known from the get-go with a sound so full and so rich that I would have believed you if you said it was an EVO in drag. I'd used enough of the Krell flagship models to appreciate their commanding lower registers. I simply didn't expect it from a unit so compact and so relatively affordable.

Such wallop! Such extension! Such sheer mass! The S-300i is simply pugnacious, like a small dog unafraid of some big, loping hound. But that's not to say it's scrappy or yappy, merely that it punches above its weight.

With big bands, from Jools Holland back to some classic in-house capitol sessions from the 1950s, this amplifier conveyed the requisite majesty with both realistic levels and convincing dimensions. My 'Vistavision' references – the McIntosh MC2120, Quad two-eighty and the like – matched it rather than beat it, the Krell again playing Tardis.

What is it with this amp? It's as if it has a Napoleon complex and needs to keep proving that it can hang ☺

AUDIO FILE

Stereo integrated amplifier. Rated at 150W/8ohm

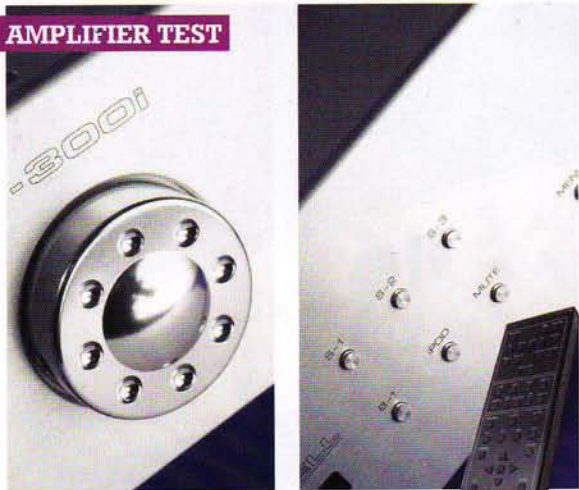
Made by: Krell Industries

Supplied by: Absolute Sounds

Telephone: 020 8971 3909

Web: www.krellonline.com

AMPLIFIER TEST



ABOVE: No simple volume control but a rotary encoder that navigates through the input, balance and volume menu options

with the big boys. Small, delicate works like the Buffalo Springfield's gorgeous 'Sad Memory' offered the realistic scale required to reproduce a single vocalist and an acoustic guitar, with all of the woody harmonics present and accounted for with chilling veracity.

And when the Neil Young solo – 'recorded across town' – came in, the tremolo effect was as liquid as I've ever heard it.

AND DETAIL TOO...

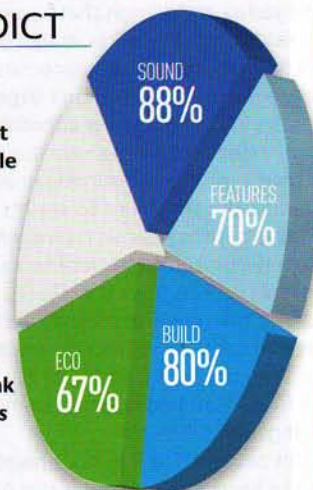
Then came the layering of the guitars in 'Bluebird' – 'all 11,386 of them' – and the S-300i flexes its muscles in another area: retrieval of detail. Because the sound space is so huge, wall-to-wall and stretching into the sonic vanishing point behind the speakers, you can listen in to layering, imagining the studio wizards who applied guitar after guitar. Fuzz-tone, banjo, acoustic, and thunderous drums and bass. The smallest Krell shifts gears from gossamer romance to rock-hard hard-rock with the grace of a Bentley leaving a motorway for a windy road.

Throughout this drama, there's an overwhelming sense of composure, the amp never putting a foot wrong. No buzzes, no noises, no clipping-related nasties. True, I didn't try this with the sort of speaker aimed at its beefier siblings, but a part of me believes that this wouldn't balk at big Wilsons or Magicos or corner-filling Tannoys or the mightiest Thiels.

But this is, after all, a sanely-priced integrated and as such will be paired with similarly-priced speakers. Tack it on to some Quad ESLs, or like-priced MartinLogans, and you will know the meaning of 'bargain'. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

We find ourselves with a product that challenges accepted wisdom: this isn't merely a solution for people short of shelf space, or lacking a spare AC outlet. The S-300i is so good that it will cause problems for Krell, not just its rivals, because it behaves like a £5000 pre/power combo. The distributor won't thank me for saying that, but this is an inexplicable, insane give-away. I love it.



KRELL INDUSTRIES S-300i AMPLIFIER / £2400

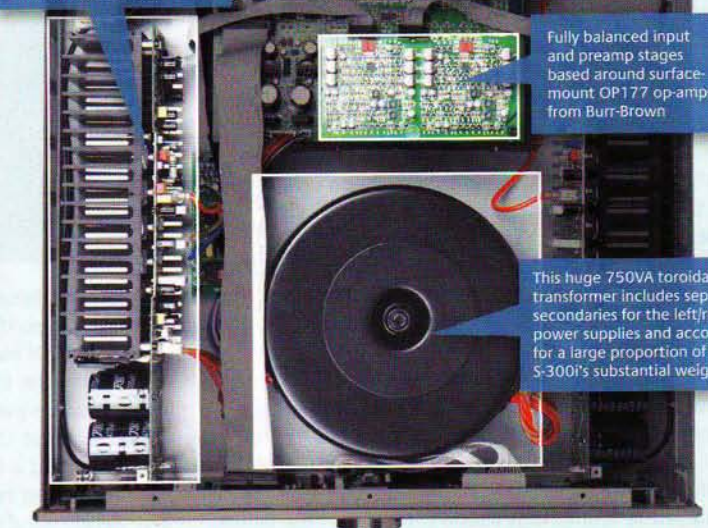
hi-finews
**LAB
RESULTS**

Each (mono) power amp channel incorporates four pairs of high current output devices and its own localised power supply smoothing (Left channel highlighted)

Hard-wired speaker outputs with the return 'star-earthed' directly into the power supply

Fully balanced input and preamp stages based around surface-mount OP177 op-amps from Burr-Brown

This huge 750VA toroidal mains transformer includes separate secondaries for the left/right power supplies and accounts for a large proportion of the S-300i's substantial weight



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

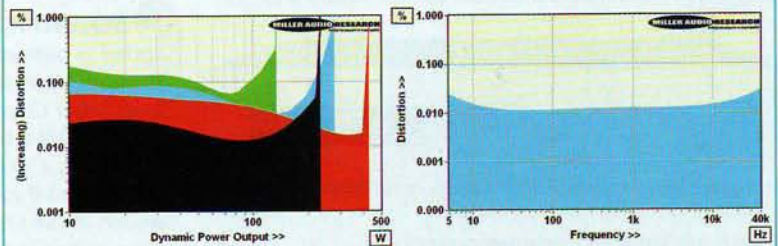
S-300 by name and S-300 by power, this slim but incredibly heavy amplifier does indeed deliver a 'Stereo' 315W/4ohm and 195W/8ohm. At its rated 2x150/8ohm, the S300i is drawing some 595W from the wall, a figure that falls to 65W at idle and a not insubstantial 45W in standby mode. Under dynamic conditions [see graph, below left] the amplifier has sufficient headroom to muster 235W and 435W into 8/4ohm before falling back slightly through current limiting to 280W and 135W into lower 2/1ohm loads. This is equivalent to a 10msec current rating of 11.6A at <1% THD, so the S-300i is evidently not quite as load tolerant as its bigger Krell brothers!

As ever, Krell has managed the S-300i's distortion with commensurate skill, keeping it very consistent at around 0.015% from 100Hz to 10kHz and only increasing very slightly at the bass/treble extremes [see graph, below right]. Distortion also

decreases slightly with increasing output, from 0.04% at 1W/8ohm to 0.026% at 10W and 0.011% at 100W. The amplifier's response is also subtly tailored from -0.18dB/20kHz to -2.5dB/100kHz and, in the deepest bass, rolled slightly away to -0.6dB at 5Hz. There's a minimal change in this response to loading, falling to just -0.55dB/20kHz when driving just 1ohm for example, in line with its moderate ~0.085ohm output impedance.

If the S-300i has a 'character' then this is manifest in the 74.5dB A-wtd S/N ratio, about 10dB below that of the 'average' integrated amplifier and composed of a smooth white noise rather than a hum. Will this have the effect of an innocuous dither?

Readers are invited to view an extensive QC Suite report for Krell's S-300i integrated amplifier by logging onto www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE LEFT: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) loads; ABOVE RIGHT: Distortion versus frequency at 10W/8ohm from 5Hz to 40kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	195W / 315W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	235W / 435W / 280W / 135W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.082-0.125ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz, 8ohm)	-0.04dB to -2.53dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/150W)	65mV / 800mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/150W)	74.5dB / 96.3dB
Distortion (10W/8ohm, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.0075-0.026%