

The 2027 Editors' Choice Awards

the absolute sound

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NOVEMBER 2026

Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO Amplifier



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the absolute sound

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Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO Amplifier

The Balkans are probably not the first place you think of when you think of world-class solid-state electronics, but once you've heard the Karan Acoustics' POWERa MONO, that's going to change. JV reports on a Class A monoblock from Serbia that may well be the best solid-state amplifier he's reviewed.

IN ANOT C





HER COUNTRY

Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO Amplifier

By Jonathan Valin
Photos by Matt Wright-Steel

ON

the heels of three of the best power amplifiers I've heard (the Class A solid-state Vitus Audio Signature Series SM-103 Mk.II monaural amplifiers from Denmark, the [mostly] Class A solid-state Soultion 7

Series 717 mono/stereo amps from Switzerland, and the Audio Research Reference 330M monoblock tube amplifiers from the Good Ol' U.S. of A.) comes a solid-state powerhouse, the Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO amp from Serbia (of all places), designed and perfected over a 10-year period by an extraordinarily gifted, music-loving, former medical-equipment engineer, the late Milan Karan.

Even though I recently spent several delightful days enjoying Piliu electronics (which come from Bulgaria) in Alon Wolf's superb Hayward, California, listening room, Southeastern Europe and the Balkans are not the first places that come to mind when I think of high-end electronics. Indeed, the POWERa MONOs are the first amplifiers (the first components of any kind) that I've reviewed from a country southeast of Germany or Austria. And it's not just its place of origin that sets this Karan amplifier apart. Even though it is also biased Class A, the POWERa MONO is far removed in design from the Soultion 717, less so from the Vitus SM-103 Mk.II but still substantially different. One thing is certain: Neither of its two competitors approaches the amount of RMS power the POWERa is capable of generating. This Serbian monoblock is rated at 2100 Class A watts into 8 ohms, 3600 Class A watts into 4 ohms, and an astounding 6000 Class A watts into 2 ohms.

These numbers are simply unparalleled in my experience. Then again, they're only numbers. Most of us no longer make purchasing decisions based on such specs. A component has to prove its worth in playback—in its fidelity to sources, its proximity to the sound of the real thing, and the pure musical pleasure it affords the listener—to give its measured behavior real-world meaning. Happily, with good recordings, the Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO serves up all three of these things (fidelity to sources, absolute-sound-like realism, and sheer listening delight) at least as well as and in many respects considerably better than any other solid-state amplifier I've reviewed or auditioned.

Before I go deeper into its manifold sonic virtues, let's return to the question of how the Karan differs in design from its illustrious solid-state competitors.

Putting aside the facts that, like the Soultion and the Vitus, it is hand assembled from highest-quality components mounted on carefully designed, multi-layer, thickly copper-coated circuit boards decoupled via custom-made mechanical parts from its massive (231-pound), CNC-milled aluminum chassis, the POWERa MONO maintains Class A bias in a way that is different than the Soultion 717's traditional "high" (so high, in fact, that after a few minutes of play the top of its chassis becomes too hot to touch) Class AB biasing or the Vitus' SM-103 Mk.II's push-pull Class A biasing.

Unlike the Vishay MOSFETs Cyril Hammer uses in the Soultion 717, Milan Karan chose very fast, very high bandwidth, very linear and stable RETs (Ring Emitter Transistors) as output devices. (Vitus Audio also uses Sanken RETs in its SM-103 Mk.II amps.) In the Karan Acoustics amp, the RETs are biased in Class A via proprietary "sliding bias" technology (famously invented by Nelson Pass in the 1970s at

Threshold Audio), in which the amplifier dynamically monitors the incoming audio signal from the preamplifier and instantly adjusts the power transistors' bias level, keeping roughly 20% more current flowing at the output stage than what the signal demands at that millisecond.

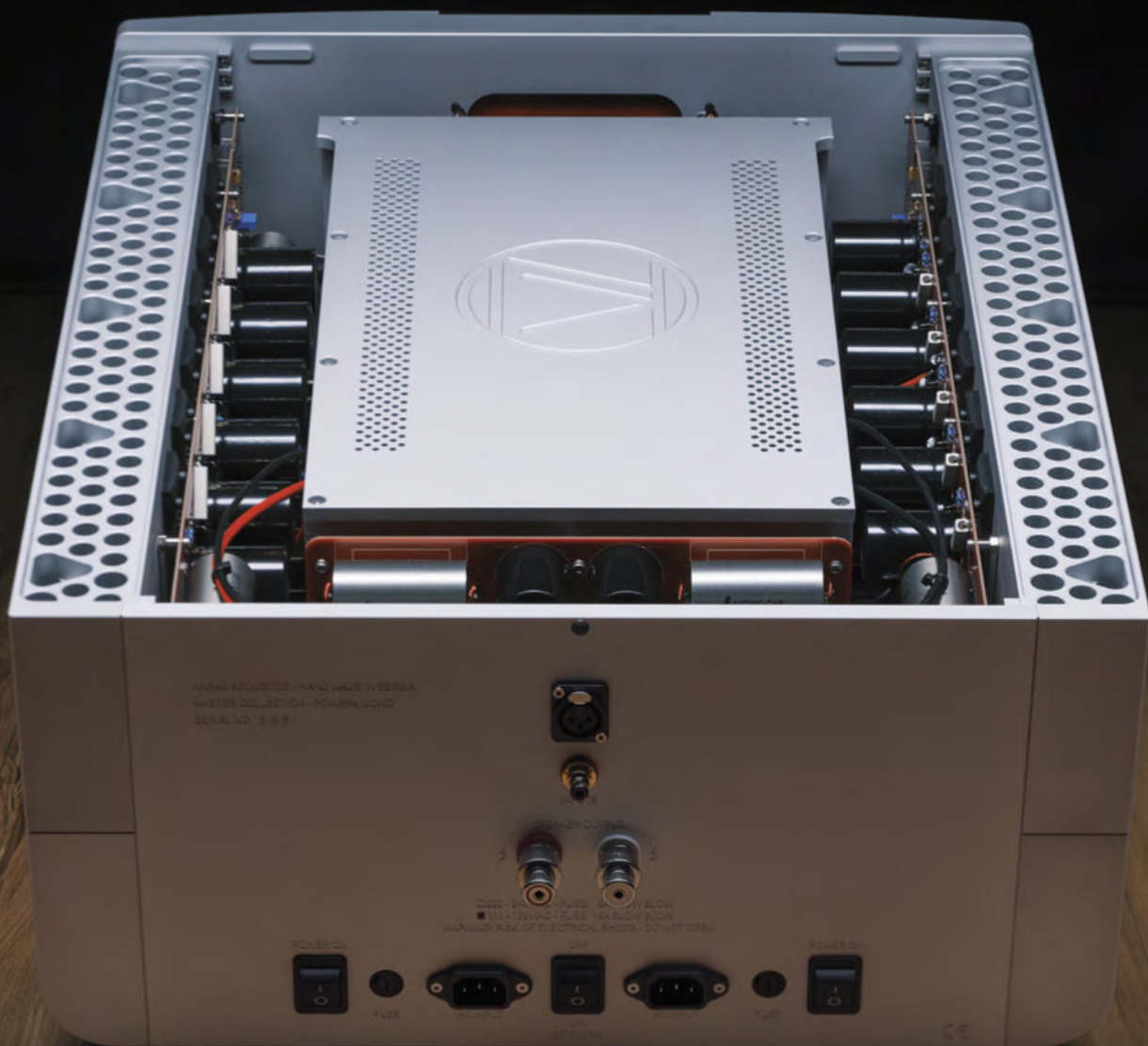
One of the results of using RETs and sliding-bias tech is that unlike the Soultion 717 and in spite of its phenomenal power-output specs, the POWERa MONO never runs hot. At average-to-high loudness levels, it just seems to coast along at a pleasant ambient temperature. The Vitus SM-103 Mk.II also ran cool, but I'm not sure it ran as cool as the Karan.

Another difference between the POWERa and its Swiss competition is that the Karan amp uses no global feedback. Zero. Where The Soultion 717 is designed around and for the use of oodles of global and local negative feedback—the very high-speed application of which Soultion engineers Cyril Hammer and Fabian Morant view as the key to the 717's standard-setting low noise floor—the POWERa (like the Vitus SM-103 Mk.II) uses local feedback only and sparingly. As a result, the Karan doesn't boast the astoundingly low distortion figures of the Swiss amp. At 0.03%, its THD and IMD numbers are average at best for top-line solid-state. (With THD+noise rated at <0.01%, even the less expensive Vitus out-specs it.)

The funny thing is that in the listening, the Karan's higher distortion numbers don't seem to matter a jot. The amp offers superb low-level resolution from top to bottom at any volume, astonishingly lifelike three-dimensional imaging of soloists (and just as astonishing separation of ensemble voices and instruments, as if the spaces between, around, and among these groupings were suddenly made as near-visual and dimensional as the instruments themselves), and transient impact, pitch definition, duration, and tone color that set a new standard of realism for recorded bass, power-range, and lower-midrange instruments and assemblages (narrowly beating out—for the first time—the previously unchallenged Soultion amplifiers in the bottom octaves).

Like its competition, the POWERa MONO is a pure dual-mono design, DC coupled in Class A (differential) mode without any capacitors in its signal path. Unlike its peers, however, each "polarity half" (each separate leg or phase) of the balanced signal pathway has its own independent 2700VA toroidal transformer and a dedicated power-supply infrastructure with 210,000µF of capacitance. Because the two halves of the differential circuit are completely indepen-

It is almost as if musicians are being imaged close-up in slow motion...



AMPLIFIER - HAND MADE IN ENGLAND
WATER COLLECTION - POWER SUPPLY
SOUNDING & 8

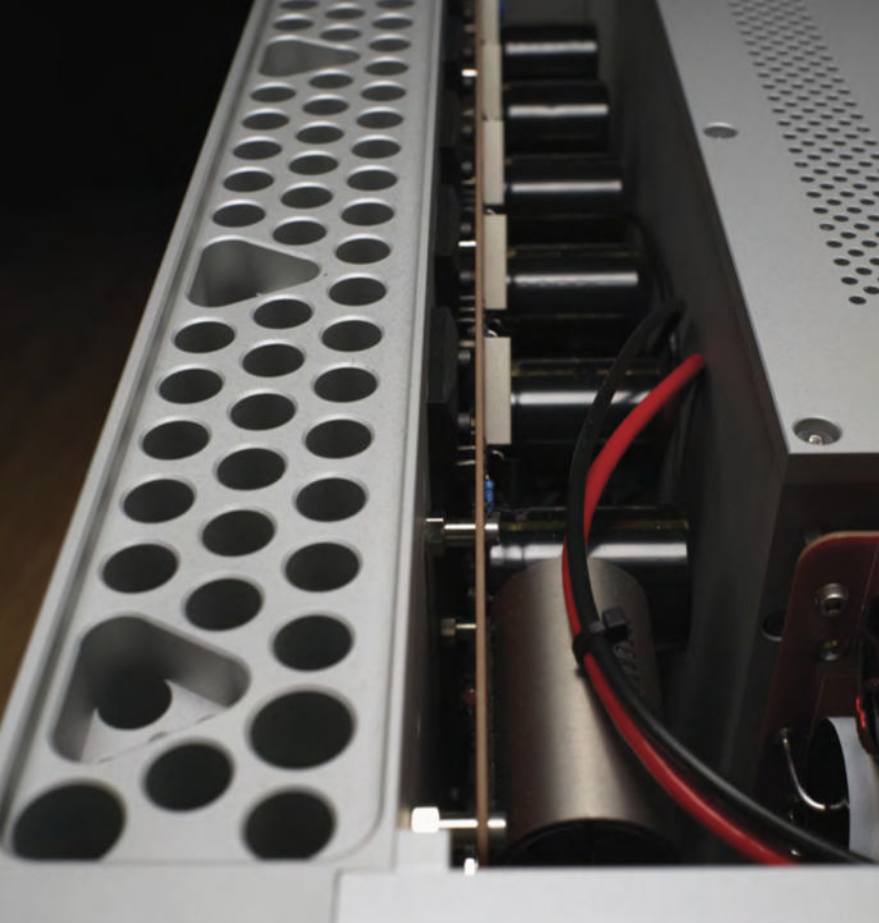


SPEAKER OUTPUT

CEC - 12VDC - FUSE 1A 500mA BLOW
110V - 120VAC - FUSE 1A 500mA BLOW
WARNING: RISK OF ELECTRICAL SHOCK - DO NOT OPEN



CE



**...designed by a man
who was obviously an
engineering genius.**

dent, each Karan monoblock requires two separate 15-amp AC-mains power cables.

One might suppose that the use of completely separate and separately powered circuits for the positive and negative legs of a signal might improve channel separation and common mode rejection (which it does) at the risk of slight phase imbalances engendered by tiny disparities in the voltage and current passed by the component parts of each leg (which it doesn't). The matching and quality of parts here is at an extraordinarily uniform level of excellence—a testament to Milan Karan's fanatical pursuit of the absolute sound.

Each leg of the circuit also benefits from a unique “extra” built into the POWERa MONO (and other Karan Acoustics Master Collection amplifiers)—an in-house-designed line conditioner that is so effective that one reviewer wondered in print whether it might not be offered as a stand-alone device. The inevitable vagaries in the wall current supplying each leg of the Karan's output circuitry are audibly reduced when the line conditioner is switched on. (It can handle 60A of current, which is a good deal more than the amp's power supply can generate.) DC-related artifacts are eliminated and so are the mechanical vibrations and resonances that DC artifacts can cause.

Sonically, the difference between the sound of the POWERa MONO without and with Karan's built-in line conditioner is, almost literally, night and day. Without the conditioner, the amplifier is more bottom-up in balance, darker sounding though not at all veiled, and quite beguilingly beautiful in timbre. With the conditioner, the amplifier comes closer to a dead-center neutral balance, rather like the Audio Research REF 300M tube amplifier (though without the tubey bloom of the AR amp). Imaging also tightens up, staging is clarified, resolution and dimensionality are increased, and tone colors are more faithful to sources (and to the absolute sound, when sources permit).

The Karan monoblock also shares an “extra” with the Soullution

717: the use of Critical Mass Systems (CMS) feet to eliminate the transmission of vibrations from the stand, shelf, or flooring on which the POWERa MONO sits. As one reviewer noted, the CMS feet are a bit of an acquired taste. Until they “break in,” he wrote, their effect on the sound ranges from good to, well, awful. (The reviewer's experience mirrors my own.) Once broken in, however, they are quite effective at isolating the Karan from floorborne noise and vibration, augmenting the clarity and neutrality the POWERa is capable of delivering.

Finally, a word more about the Karan's unique-for-Class-A power ratings.

In all my days in this *farabadat* biz, I've never come across a power amplifier that is theoretically capable of delivering 6000 *Class A* watts into a 2-ohm load (which is close to what the MBL 101 X-Treme MKII represents when it isn't being bi-amped). Of course, no 15- or 20-amp breaker in a home is going to supply enough current to the POWERa's transformers to reach that 6000W limit, but the amp is still going to deliver a uniquely high amount of Class A power to whatever it is driving. The question then becomes: Who needs that many watts?

After listening to the POWERa MONOs and appreciating all they can do driving a tough load, my answer to that question is: *You* do.

It isn't their ridiculous power limit that makes these beasts sound so distinctively lifelike. It is the ease and inexhaustibility that such a reservoir of voltage and amperage sup-

Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO Amplifier

plies that makes the POWERa MONOs sound unfailingly continuous, stress-free, finely detailed, and shockingly holographic. That and the Class A biasing, which brings with it an octave-to-octave liquidity that can make any speaker sound more holistic, sonically more “of a piece,” folding immense detail into near-visible wholes that have the three-dimensionality that used to be the sole province of tube amplifiers (and Soultion solid-state).

As I said earlier, the POWERa MONOs not only deliver this quasi-tangible presence with instruments, but they also deliver it with the spaces surrounding those instruments. It is an uncanny effect that makes, say, Leonard Cohen’s marvelous trio of female backup singers (Sharon Robinson, Charley Webb, and Hattie Webb) on *Live In London* (Columbia) sound both distinctively apart and harmoniously together, freestanding in and conjoined by the ambient space of the O2 arena where they performed and were recorded. Frankly, I’ve never heard a solid-state amp pull this trick off—making you aware of how the space around and among a group of backup singers serves to define them individually and as a group by making the distances between them more audible.

Of course, the POWERa’s way with timbre and dynamics—the natural ease and pace with which it handles the dynamic/harmonic envelope—is also playing its part in this tube-like individuation of voices and instruments. On Tom Waits’ “Way Down in the Hole” from Hans Theessink’s great *Jedermann Remixed—The Soundtrack* (Blue Groove), the

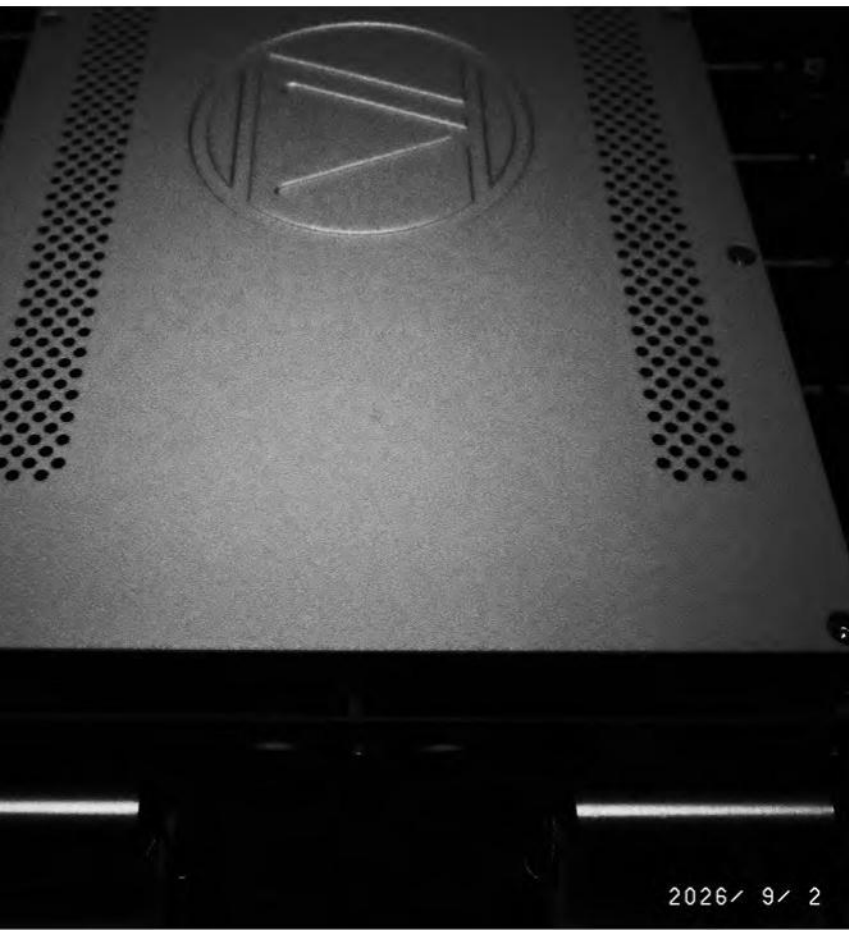
Karans deliver the sound of Theessink’s single-cone National Resonator guitar—the sharp attack, metallic reverb, and bell-like tone—with a completeness that is breathtakingly realistic. And they do the exact same thing with his bass-baritone voice, Brigitte Guggenbichler’s backup singing, and Tobias Tautscher’s double bass.

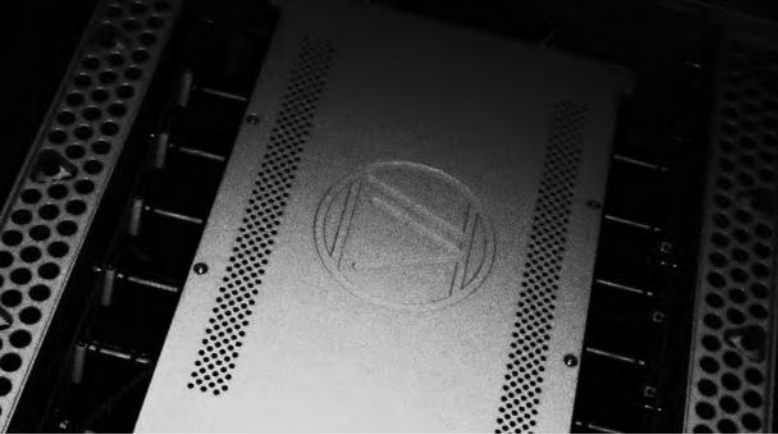
Speaking of which, outside of Soultion amplifiers, I’ve never heard bass-range instruments reproduced with more lifelike tone color, clearer delineation of pitch, more effortless, stressless speed of attack (which is never sharpened into an icepick jab but is still ultra-quick and highly detailed—just listen to standup bass pizzicatos like the ones on Concord Jazz’s marvelous 15ips R2R *Tape Sampler No.1* if you want to hear how much musical information you’re missing, even with other great amplifiers), more natural duration of steady-state tone and decay, and better reproduction of the instrumentalist’s or vocalist’s articulation, which determines the length of each note, the shape of its dynamic/harmonic envelope, and the way that length and shape affect pitch, timbre, and dynamics. The Karan amps’ bass isn’t ever overblown (with or without line conditioning); it doesn’t add cloak-like opacity to the midrange and treble the way a poorly integrated (or, sometimes, even a well-integrated) subwoofer so often does. Once again, it is the POWERa’s magical way with the space between and around double basses, kick drums and kettle drums, Hammond organs, pianos, bass clarinets, cellos, Fender basses, you-name-it that boosts their presence by enhancing their location vis-à-vis the other instruments playing beside them, outlining their shape and clarifying their articulation.

Over and above its inexhaustible reservoir of power and its dense

Class A timbre, liquidity, and holistic resolution, I have to attribute the POWERa’s as yet unsurpassed holographic presentation—its, as I just said, magical way of individuating, three-dimensionally defining, and conjoining instruments in large choirs (such as the New York Phil’s string, wind, brass, and percussion sections on the great Acoustic Sounds 15ips R2R tape of Stokowski’s *Rhapsodies*) by adding clarity and audibility to the space between, around, and behind solo instruments and instrumental choirs—to the Karan’s unique dual-mono topology, wherein (as noted) each leg of a signal is individually powered and processed. This complete separation of phases has to be adding clarity, presence, and substance to the soundfield, the instruments within it, and the ambient air between and around those instruments. It is almost as if musicians are being imaged close-up in slow motion, so clearly audible, finely detailed, and holographic is the POWERa’s presentation, and yet there are no losses of transient speed or perspective with these amps, which are high among the easiest to listen to and most musically enjoyable components I’ve heard.

The spell the Karan POWERa MONOs cast on me somehow extended to previously less listenable tapes, LPs, and CDs/SACDs/streams. For instance, that Karan magic rather transformed several 15ips R2Rs that I’d previously found a bit on the bland





Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO Amplifier

SPECS & PRICING

INPUTS: 1 balanced (XLR) and 1 unbalanced (RCA)

INPUT IMPEDANCE:

30k ohms (balanced/unbalanced)

INPUT SENSITIVITY: 2.0V/

RMS (for max output)

GAIN: +36db

XLR pin layout: pin 1, ground; pin 2, positive signal; pin 3, negative signal (when using RCA input, you need to insert XLR shorting plug)

POWER OUTPUT:

2100/3600/6000W at 8/4/2 ohms (peak power output: 2400w at 8 ohms)

FREQUENCY RESPONSE:

20Hz to 20kHz ± 0 dB (DC to 300kHz, -3 dB)

DISTORTION: THD, 0.03%;

IMD, 0.03%

SPEED: Rise and settling time < 450 ns; slew rate 1500V/ μ s (amplification stages)

SIGNAL TO NOISE RATIO: > 120 dB (unweighted)

POWER SUPPLY: Two 2700VA low-noise toroidal transformers, 210,000 μ f custom-made capacitors bank

AC VOLTAGE: 115 v or 230 v (nominal line voltage)

AC VOLTAGE RANGE: ± 10 % (from nominal line voltage)

WARRANTY: 5 years, parts and labor

DIMENSIONS: 19.8" x 11.5" x 23.7"

WEIGHT: 231 lbs. (each)

PRICE: \$139,200/pr.

WYNN AUDIO CORP. (North American Distributor)
Unit 31, 20 Wertheim Ct.
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Canada
(647) 995-2995
info@wynnaudio.com
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JV'S REFERENCE SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS: MBL 101

X-Treme MKII, Magico S5 2024, Metaxas & Sins Emperor, Magnepan LRS+, 1.7i, and 30.7

SUBWOOFERS: JL Audio Gotham (pair)

LINESTAGE PREAMPS:

Soulution 727, Audio Research Corporation Reference 10, MBL 6010 D, Siltech SAGA System C1, Vitus Audio SL-103

PHONOSTAGE PREAMPS:

Soulution 757, DS Audio Grand Master EQ

POWER AMPLIFIERS: Audio Research Corporation 330M, Soulution 717, Vitus Audio SM-103 Mk.II, Soulution 711, MBL 9008 A, Siltech SAGA System V1/P1, Odyssey Audio Stratos

ANALOG SOURCE:

Clearaudio Master Innovation, Acoustic Signature Invictus Neo/T-10000 Neo, TW Acoustic Black Knight/TW Raven 10.5

TAPE DECK: United Home Audio Ultima Apollo-Z, Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon and Papillon

PHONO CARTRIDGE: London Reference Type II, DS Audio Grand Master EX, DS Audio Grand Master, DS Audio DS-W3, Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement v2.1, Air Tight Opus 1, Ortofon MC Anna, Ortofon MC A90

DIGITAL SOURCE: Kalista Mantax and DreamPlay XC, MBL C41, MSB Reference DAC, Soulution 760, Berkeley Alpha DAC 2

CABLE AND INTERCONNECT: Synergistic Research Galileo SRX (2023), Crystal Cable Art Series da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream

side. There was nothing really wrong with these transfers; they just weren't as excitingly and transformatively natural-sounding as, oh, several of Acoustic Signature's R2R offerings (e.g., *The Buena Vista Social Club*, *Rhapsodies*, etc.).

This changed with the Karans in the MBL 101 X-Treme MKII system—and with the advent of Greg Beron's newest tape deck, the United Home Audio Apollo-Z, which might very well be the most lifelike playback component I've heard (its only competition being the Metaxas & Sins Papillon and Greg's own SuperDeck). Tapes that had previously been rather on the staid side (such as The Band's *Stage Fright*) were suddenly energized top to bottom, blessed with newfound power, performance detail, and that magical holography that, along with its effortlessness and liquidity, is one of the Karans' supreme virtues.

The same held true with certain LPs (via the London Reference Type II cartridge and the Soulution 757 phonostage). In the treble, for example, the POWERa's turned instruments like drummer Ed Blackwell's cymbal set on *Eric Dolphy At The Five Spot* (Prestige/Analog Productions) into a little model of newborn color and detail. Once again, it was as if the sound of his instruments was unfolding in slow motion, though of course there was no loss of transient speed. The clarity of the air around each cymbal strike seems to extend to the actual sound waves they produced, as if they, too, were riding on audible cushions of air, neatly separated in time and space, effortlessly detailed, and so holographic that I did a double take. Same with the bright, sharp sound of Javier Mas' bandurria and the deeper, warmer sound of his laud on *Live In London*, which sounded so distinctly like themselves rather than like a generic mandolin or 12-string acoustic guitar that I did another double take. (Be prepared: The Karan Acoustics POWERa MONOs are virtual double-take machines.)

Traditionally, it is time for me to discuss the sonic weaknesses of the component under review. But for the life of me, with the POWERa MONOs I can't think of a single one. Oh, I suppose the solid-state Karans don't have the lifelike bloom of the tubed ARC 330Ms, but that is a little like complaining about a dog because it isn't a cat. Yeah, these amps are expensive. And yeah, they weigh a ton (well, taken together, a quarter of a ton). But the Karan Acoustics POWERa MONOs are without question great amplifiers—in some key ways, uniquely so—designed by a man who was obviously an engineering genius. It is a pity that he is no longer with us, but happily his son, Emil, and the engineers Milan trained and worked with for several decades are still very much around, so the future of the brand is assured.

Do yourself a favor: If you've got the dough and enough pliable friends to whitewash your fence and do the heavy lifting and carrying, go—no, run—to Wynn Audio and arrange a long listen. Prepare for a sonic treat (and a bunch of double takes) and quite possibly a fresh, \$140,000 hole in your bank account. You won't be sorry. Trust me.

Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO Amplifier

Jonathan Valin Talks with Wynn Wong, President of Wynn Audio and Karan Acoustics' North American distributor; Emil Karan, Milan Karan's son and current CEO of Karan Acoustics; and longstanding members of the Karan Acoustics design team

JV: Karan Acoustics offers two Master Collection monoblock amplifiers, the POWERa monoblocks (under review in this article) and the POWERb's. What are the sonic attributes of each? And what is the POWERa's current price per pair in U.S. dollars?

WW, EM, et al.: The POWERa MONO is Karan's reference-level power amplifier and represents the most ambitious execution of the company's design philosophy. Compared with the POWERb, there is a greater emphasis on the power supply, component selection, mechanical construction, and overall implementation.

Sonically, the goal with POWERa is maximum transparency and resolution without any sacrifice in tonal density or naturalness. It is designed to combine very high control and dynamic capability with the dimensionality, harmonic richness, and ease that you have already been hearing.

The current U.S. retail price of the POWERa MONO is \$139,200 per pair.

The POWERa MONOs are biased in Class A. It is my understanding that Karan uses so-called "sliding bias" technology. Can you explain the technical differences between "sliding bias" Class A and "standard" Class A? And also speak to the sonic advantages of Class A, however achieved, as compared to AB.

With conventional fixed-bias Class A, a very high bias current is maintained continuously, whether the amplifier is reproducing a demanding musical passage or simply sitting idle. As you know, the result is considerable heat and power consumption at all times.



Karan's sliding-bias approach adjusts the bias according to the demands of the musical signal. As more output is required, the bias increases accordingly. The objective is to preserve the sonic qualities associated with Class A operation while avoiding the need to maintain maximum bias continuously when it is unnecessary.

From a sonic standpoint, Milan's view was always that Class A, when properly implemented, gives a particularly natural sense of continuity, tonal purity, liquidity, and low-level resolution. Compared with a conventional Class AB design, the intention is to minimize the sonic effects associated with the transition between output devices and preserve a more continuous and effortless presentation.

Of course, the topology by itself does not guarantee the sound: the circuit, power supply, parts selection, thermal stability, and implementation all play equally important roles.

What can you tell me about the parts, boards, and construction techniques used in the amplifier, its chassis, its power supplies, and its dual mono circuitry?

A tremendous amount of development work went into the POWERa, particularly in the selection and matching of individual components.

Karan's philosophy has never been to choose a part simply because it is expensive or has a particular reputation. Components are evaluated both technically and, importantly, by listening to how they work together within the complete circuit. Among the components used are Audyn Cap Reference capacitors, Cardas internal wiring, WBT connectors, and Neutrik XLR connectors.



Key Kim, Milan Karan, Franck Tchang of Acoustic System, and Wynn Wong of Wynn Audio.

Karan Acoustics POWERa MONO Amplifier



Emil Karan and Milan Karan.

The POWERa's aluminum chassis was developed specifically for the amplifier. Mechanical rigidity, resonance behavior, thermal management, and internal layout were all treated as part of the amplifier design rather than simply viewing the enclosure as a box around the electronics.

Internally, the POWERa is constructed as a true dual-mono amplifier, with a very high degree of separation between the two channels, including their power supplies and signal circuitry.

I haven't run across a lot of amplifiers that need two power cords to function. This requirement reflects the fact that each leg has its own identical power supply and input, output, and bias circuitry, does it not? How does this rigorous separation of each leg of the signal affect the sound?

Yes, the two AC connections are directly related to the POWERa's dual-mono architecture and the enormous power supplies used for each channel.

Each side of the amplifier has its own power supply as well as its own input, output, and bias circuitry. The large transformers can demand substantial current, particularly at switch-on, so providing an independent AC feed for each side is a more appropriate solution than asking one connection to supply the entire amplifier.

The purpose of taking the dual-mono concept this far is to minimize interaction between the two channels and allow each channel to operate as independently as possible.

Sonically, this contributes to channel separation, stability, dynamic freedom, and ultimately the sense of space and dimensionality that you are hearing. It is one of the reasons the amplifier can create such a large, stable, and holographic soundstage while still maintaining very precise image placement.

The amplifiers come with built-in line conditioning—an unusual addition. What are the technical and sonic advantages of this built-in conditioner and of the CMS feet that come attached to the chassis?

The POWERa incorporates a switchable DC filtering circuit. Because of the size and power of the transformers, DC contamination on the AC mains can become significant. Even a relatively small amount of DC on the line

can cause a large transformer to become mechanically noisy and can affect the way it operates.

The built-in circuit is designed primarily to prevent unwanted DC from reaching the transformers. Depending on the quality of the incoming AC, there can also be a sonic benefit.

Karan made the circuit switchable so the listener can compare the amplifier with and without the filtering engaged and determine which works best with the particular AC supply in the system.

Regarding the Critical Mass Systems footers, they were selected after extensive evaluation. Mechanical energy and vibration control are taken very seriously in the POWERa, especially given the size of the transformers and the mass of the chassis.

Karan felt that the CMS products performed exceptionally well and were consistent with the level of mechanical engineering we wanted to achieve in the amplifier. As with the internal components, the

decision was performance-driven rather than simply another additional feature.

It is my understanding that the author of these wonderful amps, Milan Karan, passed away in 2024. Who will be handling the design and engineering of Karan products now that Mr. Karan has passed on?

Sadly, yes, Milan passed away.

The company is now led by his son, Emil Karan, together with the existing technical and design team responsible for the development and engineering of Karan products.

There is a great deal of continuity within the company. The intention is very much to preserve Milan's fundamental engineering principles and sonic philosophy while continuing to refine and develop the products.

The team is constantly evaluating new components, materials, and technical solutions, but our philosophy is not to change a product simply to create a new model or generate a new version. Any change has to result in a genuine improvement in performance.

That is probably the most important part of Milan's legacy. **tas**



Emil Karan as a young child at the old factory.