



# KARAN ACOUSTICS KA S 180

*A slimline, dual-mono power amp that's built like a tank. Who could ask for more?*

PRICE £3,850 CONTACT Audiohooks, 15 Link Way, Horn, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7DT ☎ 020 8948 4153 www.karan-acoustics.com

**K**aran Acoustics is the big secret in high-end hi-fi. Based in Serbia and Montenegro – it says Yugoslavia on the back of the amplifier, although technically that country no longer exists – the company makes an 11-strong range of products spanning from a small integrated amp right up to a whopping great set of 1,200-watt monoblocks and everything else in-between. But this, Karan's entry-level power amp, is perhaps the most interesting.

It's a fully dual-mono design, sharing only a plug and a transformer between the channels. (As you rise up the Karan ranks, the degree of channel separation becomes greater and greater: the next model up doesn't even share transformers; the one after that has two mains leads; and then it's separate chassis.) That's no small issue though, because that mighty transformer is more than enough to help the KA S 180 turn out a healthy 180 watts per channel into eight ohms.

Karan's secret reputation is built upon a throw-it-downstairs-and-break-the-stairs-bild quality. The thick black anodised case is desperately heavy for a relatively small amplifier design. Not that you'd consider such barbarity with an expensive amplifier, but you'd have to key the amp to scratch it and you'd probably break the key in the process.

Under the hood, it's just as solidly put together. The amplifier modules are beautifully constructed, with a brace of Karan-sourced polystyrene reservoir capacitors on each side driving the over-specified Sanken bi-polar output devices. Internal wiring is Cardas throughout. Connectors – both XLR and phono, along with beefy speaker terminals – are from WBT. The whole shebang reads like an audiophile's wish list of the best possible components.

In common with all Karan products, it's ultra minimalist in its approach. Power it up from the switch at the back and you get a glowing red logo in the centre of the amplifier front panel. That's it. That's the whole extent of user interface technologies. On the other hand, it's a power amp, so what more do you need?

Look, it's time to stop thinking of the KA S 180 as a stereo amp. Yes, it has two channels and yes, it's in one box, but it's a pair of monoblocks that just happen to share the same chassis and power supply. Thinking of this as a stereo amplifier will not do, because it has the stereo separation of monoblocks, the freedom of power delivery of a pair of

monoblocks and the dynamic scale of monoblocks... but built into a single chassis.

And, like any decent, self-respecting pair of monoblocks, the Karan demands to be well fed. It needs to be driven from an extremely good preamp and source components; ideally (but not exclusively) Karan's own two-box preamp. Fortunately, the choice of speakers and speaker cables is far easier. The amplifier is one of the least speaker cable fussy around – although the better the cable, the better the sound – and it presents such a clean, excellent load, that you can use it with almost any loudspeaker on the market today. Naturally, those speakers designed to work with one-watt triode amps or those needing a small power station to drive them will not be so comfortable with the KA S 180's power

potent, cavernous bass without sounding ponderous in the process.

It's not a product to hit you in the face with its performance. Like a fine Anderson & Shepherd suit, it bespeaks quality quietly, never garishly. So, it's polite, refined and controlled, yet can deliver a healthy thwack from its tightly furled Swain Adeney Brigg umbrella. In other words, the KA S 180 is the power amp that never draws attention to itself and instead just does the job, brilliantly.

Like its bigger brother, imagery is first-rate, although the KA S 270 betters it. It's a very tough image to describe, because it's how it comes out of the preamp with little detectable additions or subtractions. It's not wide of the boxes, deep or tall; it merely responds to the music. Similarly, the KA S 180 gets inside the

**“The perfect power amp, it manages to combine a chocolate-smooth delivery without sounding ‘dark’ or laid back”**

delivery envelope, but the other 99 per cent of speakers on the market will lap up a powerful, no-nonsense amp like the Karan.

Those who have past copies of *The Collection* will find the test of the Karan KA S 270 to be remarkably similar to this one. There's a fraction less dynamic headroom here, and the microdynamics and stereo separation are ever so slightly less impressive, but otherwise everything that applied to the KA S 270 applies to the KA S 180, too. In fact, unless you had the two side by side or chose to use loudspeakers of 85dB or lower efficiency, you'd be hard pressed to tell one from the other.

Those without a library of previous editions of *The Collection* may not know what they are in for, but the Karan is the perfect power amp. It manages to combine a chocolate-smooth delivery without sounding artificially ‘dark’ or laid back. It delivers a fine, extended treble without shouting high frequencies and a

music wonderfully, presenting a sense of both coherence and insight into the tiny changes of dynamic scale that make a recording seem like the real thing.

Curiously, there is so much information on tap here, you tend to turn the music down, not up. Or, perhaps more accurately, you turn the music to the right level for that particular piece of music. You can only do this with an amplifier with near infinite headroom, though, and that's another bonus of the KA S 180.

Ask yourself a simple question – what do you want a power amp to do? Do you want it to impress your friends with big VU meters or LED displays? Do you want it to shape and colour the sound? Or, do you want it to sit there understated and deliver music as accurately as possible? If the last is your goal, you'll keep coming back to the Karan KA S 180. It's a tough act to follow. ■

Alan Sircom

