

## A Perfect, Good Sound Phono Stage



# Karan Acoustics KA Ph Reference

### Karan Acoustics KA Ph Reference Specifications :

- Inputs : 3×Balanced XLR, 3×Single-Ended RCA
- Outputs : 1×Balanced XLR, 1×Single-Ended RCA
- Frequency Response : DC-300 kHz +0 / -3 dB
- S/N Ratio : >90dB (MM) >81 dB (MC)
- Output Level : 12V Eff
- Intermodulation Distortion : <0.006%
- Balanced Input / Output : 2 + / 3 -
- Dimensions : 500mm (W) × 110mm (H) × 360mm (D) × 2
- Weight : 22kg

I wonder if you have ever imagined what to ask for a perfect phono stage. I have.

1. It should have a separate power supply.

Since the signal output of a cartridge is relatively weak, if the power supply is separately built, interference from the power line can be minimized.

2. The casing must be strong enough to withstand vibrations from the surroundings.

3. There must be two or more inputs. If there is only one input, why should I bother to buy a separate phono stage? There is a phono input in my preamplifier!

4. The inputs should have both balanced and single-ended sockets, because my cartridge has a balanced output. The single-ended input will be convenient for auditioning other devices.

5. Now that it has balanced and single-ended inputs, the outputs should of course be the same.

6. It should have a phase reverse switch.

7. There are adequate settings for different cartridges.

And finally, the sound suits my taste. It should be neutral, natural, powerful yet delicate.

## A Little Known, but Good Product

The Phono Amplifier I'm going to introduce is the KA Ph Reference by Karan Acoustics from Serbia. Karan Acoustics may be unfamiliar to you; it was established by Mr. Milan Karan in 1986 and was originally named K.A. DATA. Their business was mainly on maintenance of medical and TV broadcasting equipment. But since Milan Karan loved music, with his experience in electronic circuits, he decided to make his own Hi End sound equipment. By the end of 1987 his successfully launched his first amplifier, using the brand name Karan Acoustics. It was a Hi End grade power amplifier with a 100W X 2 output power. It was well-received by the audiophiles and music lovers and the company ran smoothly till now.

KA Ph Reference Phono amplifier was not my first encounter with Karan Acoustics products. The ASI Liveline preamplifier with separate power supply and the Grand Stereo Mono Power Amplifiers in our #366 issue (March 2012) cover were made by Karan Acoustics. Franck Tchang, the designer of ASI, and Milan Karan were good friends. Franck entrusted Milan to make the above mentioned amplifiers to his specifications. I listened to the products and was quite impressed. They were fast in response and mellow in sound. From then onwards, I began to pay attention to Karan Acoustics.

Amplifiers were the main products of KA. You could find on the KA website various series of pre, power and integrated amplifiers, and, of course, phono amplifiers. But I could not find any information about the KA Ph Reference which I was going to audition. It was not because the product was too new nor the website was not updated. It was because KA Ph Reference was not a regular product of KA. Here is the story.

One day, when chatting with Franck on vinyl records, Milan proposed the idea of designing a phono amplifier since their projects at that moment were all completed. The two vinyl audiophiles hit it off immediately. The target of the phono was not on the market, so price was not their concern. They designed it to suit their own requirements and tastes, and KA Ph Reference was the end product. Many friends of theirs, after listening to it, requested to have

one, too. For this reason, Milan decided to include it as one of KA's products. And that gave me the chance to listen to and share it to you here.

## All Began with the Power Supply

KA Ph Reference had a separate power supply. On opening the lid of the supply case, I found there were 3 individual toroid transformers for left, right channels and logic control circuits respectively. It looked a bit exaggerated for a low-powered phono stage to have the capacitance as high as a full-functioned preamplifier. When I compared it with the photo from the ASI Liveline preamp, there were 2 capacitors less in the logic control, other than that, those for the left and right channels were identically the same. You could imagine how adequate the power was. A power switch was installed beside the AC socket of the supply, no standby switch. That meant you could leave the power on all the time. That was what I did and the performance was very stable, the temperature of the chassis was not high. So users could leave



the power on. According to the agent, every time the power was turned on, it took over 48 hours for the sound to reach its best.

The size and appearance of the KA Ph Reference main unit were identical except for the two knobs. The chassis was made of thick aluminium. It had three Ceraball feet from Finite Elemente, two in front and the other at the rear. There were 2 big knobs on the front plate. The left one was for input selection. 3 inputs were available and each of them could select either 0 or 180 phase difference so that there were 6 selections for 3 inputs. The knob on the right included mute and different equalization curves. For general LPs, RIAA was alright, but for those records before RIAA was set as standard (approximately before 1954), they could be selected according to brand names including EMI, DECCA, Columbia and Teldec. If you were not sure an LP was made according to RIAA, choosing according to the brand name was the safest way. For stereo records after 1950, you could decide by listening whether or not to choose RIAA. For records of this period, it was hard to say if they were using

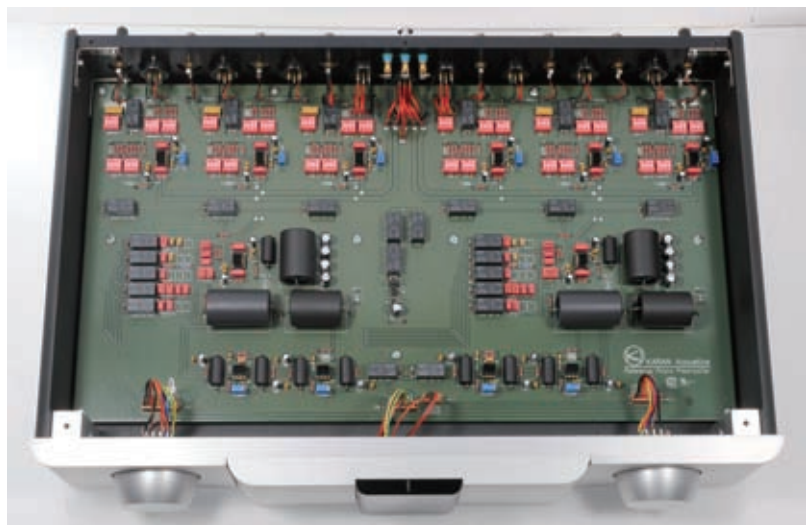
RIAA which was standardized by Recording Industry Association of America, and was not immediately adapted by all record companies, so one more choice from KA Ph Reference was more than welcome. Choosing RIAA for records after 1960 was probably right. The phase and equalization curve selections were shown on the display panel in the middle of the front plate. A customized cable came with the set for connecting the power supply to the main unit. The 3 sets of inputs included balanced and single-ended, as well as 3 ground terminals. The outputs also included balanced and single-ended. These should meet the requirements of most users.

Lifting open the top plate carved with the company name "KARAN", one could clearly see the two channels were separated from each other. Each input could adjust its own gain: 48, 52, 64, 67, 69, 70 or 71dB. Each also had 8 capacitances to choose from for MM cartridges. As for MC cartridges, there were as much as 22 different matching impedances. As the left and right channels were independent, be reminded to adjust everything for both channels!

KA Ph Reference was using a super strong power reserve to supply a relatively simple circuit, it was fully balanced, no overall feedback, pure class A, DC coupled, minimum power supply internal impedance. Milan said all these were to achieve the fastest transient, lowest distortion, biggest dynamic range, highest analytical and musical sound.

The audition was conducted at my place. In order to get the best from KA Ph Reference, I tried to place it in the best position. Since space was limited, I had to put aside my CD system to accommodate KA Ph Reference. So, during the audition period, I had only LPs for source. The equipment included:

- Dr. Feickert Analogue Firebird turntable
- Acoustical Systems Axiom tonearm
- Lyra Atlas cartridge
- Burmester 808MK5 preamplifier
- Burmester 909MK3 power amplifier
- Ktema Loudspeakers
- MC3 phono stage from Burmester 808MK5 (For reference)



Cables:

- Burmester Silver balanced interconnects
- Burmester Silver speaker cables

Power cords:

- Audio Note Sogon for KA Ph Reference
- ASI Liveline Reference for 808
- Burmester Power cord for 909

## Huge Sound Field

KA Ph Reference gave me an impression of possessing a sound of large scale. It could easily produce an extremely wide and deep stage, without losing its density. In the Lyrata record "English Dance" conducted by Malcolm Arnold, the wide and deep stage was vividly displayed. This was a well-known LP among



audiophiles, yet in my past listening experience, it seldom gave performance as good as that. In the midst of the silky string tutti, the woodwinds and brasses were still distinctly heard. If the phono lacked analytical power, these might be unnoticed. I could hear clearly brasses were at the rear to the right, drums were in the middle, and other percussions were to the left. The sound field was beyond the boundary of the listening room. It was so lifelike as if you could see it. After listening to this LP through KA Ph Reference, I understood why it was regarded as an audiophile record.

KA Ph Reference was the gear that besides sound effect, it was musical. It was the musicality that made me re-discover the record "Fairytale" which was recommended to me by a senior audiophile friend. It was the recording of the Norwegian singer Radka Toeff who died in the autumn the same year after the recording; so this was her



last record. All the time, I didn't realize how special this record was until I played it with KA Ph Reference. There were one piano and one female vocal, but the reproduction was so real, it made my hair stood on ends, especially when I listened to it late at night. The density of KA Ph Reference was real fantastic, the lips were floating in the middle of the two speakers, focused and the height was just right. The piano behind was clearly 'seen', brilliant and clear piano sound emitted from the middle of the listening room, filling the whole space. I felt the record dull before, but then I found the problem was not on the recording or performance, it was the equipment didn't bring out the musicality of the record. I had to say many thanks to my friend who recommended me this LP, only till now I understood what a great record it was.

## Magnificent and Musical



Besides big orchestras and vocals, I also listened to some popular LPs. KA Ph Reference could reproduce very punchy basses. Pink Floyd's "The Wall", for example. When I turned up the volume, I could feel the thrilling effect of the approaching of the helicopter from a distance until right in front of me! This was obviously due to



the strong power supply of KA Ph Reference. Then followed the drums, fast, relentless and powerful; they were just stunning! If the phono stage had high noise and distortion, the effect would be noisy. Obviously, that was not the case for KA Ph Reference.

I bought a newly issued LP not long ago. It was very good when played through KA Ph Reference. It was sung by Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett in a jazzy style. There was no special sound effect in the whole record, and because of that, it was more difficult to impress the listener. To make the listener feel comfortable



when playing this record, the system should have the ability to show its attractive musical atmosphere. That required tonal balance, but not exaggerated in a certain frequency band. KA Ph Reference showed a charm from its perfect balance. Although the two singers were of different ranges, the proportion was very good, it would not get unbalanced due to exaggeration on a frequency band. This record was very lifelike, I could hear the singers sang out their feelings without any reservation.

Lastly, I tested the polarities of KA Ph Reference. With different phases, there were obvious distinctions. Yet I was not 100% sure if this record was in phase or out of phase, because that depended on the correct phases connections of the whole system which included phases of power cord and interconnects. The user manual of KA Ph Reference listed the phases and equalization curves of different record companies. But it was only for reference. The final decision was always from listening.

## Epilog

I mentioned my requirements for an ideal phono stage at the beginning; the KA Ph Reference not only meets, but exceeds my requirements. The sound is real Hi End. Its functions satisfy all that I want. With 3 balanced and single-ended inputs, it won't be a problem playing multi arms and cartridges, and settings for different cartridges are adequate. Finally, the phono is very sensitive, any adjustments are reflected. For instance, when I put it on a Vibraplane platform, the sound field is immediately expanded! That shows the phono stage has a high plasticity. KA Ph Reference is an answer to LP audiophiles of the highest demand. 音