

Karan Acoustics KA Phono Reference

By Roy Gregory



Not so long ago, phono-stages were small, anonymous boxes with one input, one output and little else. When the style and functionality of the ground terminal gets noticed in reviews you know you are in feature-thin territory. But now? Now they've blossomed into multi-box, multi-faceted devices loaded with inputs, features, and user adjustable settings – with price-tags (and one hopes) performance to match. These days, no line of serious electronics can afford to overlook a dedicated phono-stage and where a full-width, standalone chassis like the ARC PH5 was considered unusual when it first launched, there are now five such units in the ARC range, topping out with the two-box Reference Phono 10. But if you want to really appreciate the lengths to which designers of modern phono-stages must go, to marvel at the sheer range of facilities and adjustments required to tick all the boxes in this product category, then you can do far worse than look at the latest offering from Karan Acoustics, the unimaginatively monikered KA Phono Reference.

Housed in Karan's familiar slim-line chassis, this two-box unit features a heavy-duty external power supply and a separate audio box identified by a pair of large rotary controls

on its front panel. The one on the left selects between the three separate inputs, each offering a choice of single-ended or balanced connection and absolute polarity (0 or 180 degrees). The one on the right allows you to select replay EQ from a choice of five different curves (RIAA, EMI, Decca, Columbia, Teldec). The settings are displayed on the central screen, the discrete positions easily seen from a distance and thus ensuring that you don't lose your way, something that you'll definitely risk once you peer round the back. The long row of input sockets is arranged laterally and equidistant from one another, making it less than obvious which pairs with which. In fact, they are laid out in a dual-mono, mirror-imaged array, flanking the central single-ended and balanced outputs, so you really do need to check which socket is which when making connections. On a purely practical note, the mirror imaged layout means that the sockets for Input One are at opposite ends of the rear panel, so if you have a tonearm with a single output cable and tails for the plugs, those tails will each need to be at least 25cm long – and slightly longer would be better. Of course, Input Two and Three have their sockets progressively closer together, but this is one instance where a non-mirrored layout would have made more sense. ►



- However, the three centrally placed ground terminals use 4mm sockets, which is welcome indeed.

At this point you might well be wondering why anybody would need three phono inputs. The answer is simple. Just look at how many top-flight record decks offer the facility to mount a second tonearm – because serious record collectors (the ones who actually use the various EQ curves) will also want to have a mono cartridge available at all times, while for the less serious but well-heeled, the option to run a second exotic tonearm/cartridge combination is just too good to miss, especially when it looks so cool! Throw in a second deck and dedicated cartridge for 78s and there're your three inputs... Naturally, these each need to be independently configurable to optimize cartridge matching, so lift the Karan's lid and you'll find five banks of DIP-switches associated with each input channel (so that makes thirty in all!) allowing you to trim input capacitance from 50pF to 400pF in 50pF steps; input impedance from 450Ω to 47kΩ in 22 discrete steps, with a further two user definable options; gain from 48dB to 71dB in seven sensibly spaced steps (48dB and 52dB for high-output cartridges, 64dB for medium output and 67dB to 71dB for lower-output designs) again with the option of a discrete, user defined value. That's a lot of independently configurable control, which perhaps makes the absence of a remote handset a hidden blessing. In truth, you really don't need a remote control for any of these settings and given that you've got to get up to change the record, setting the EQ curve at the same time really is no hardship. On the contrary, I like the deliberate nature of the process – make your cartridge

optimization settings and then leave well alone. It saves the very real risk of fiddling 'in-play', distracting yourself from the performance and likely leaving the phono-stage set not quite right, especially given the way that input impedance and gain need to be balanced against each other.

Now tot up the parts and complexity involved in all that and you won't be surprised to learn that the KA Phono Reference doesn't come cheap. All the facilities in the world are a waste of time if the unit can't deliver a front-rank musical performance and working with the smallest and most fragile signals in the system, preserving their quality demands considerable care and quality parts – all adding up to a price-tag that's a fiver shy of £15,000. But what really shows the way in which this market has shifted is that a figure like that looks almost reasonable, compared to the competition. But does a unit like the KA Phono Reference sound that much better than cheaper alternatives, and do all those adjustments, and options add to or detract from the musical performance?

Karan's solid-state electronics have been around since 1987, quietly building a reputation as musically honest and rewarding. Notable for their transparency, ultra-low noise floor, and freedom from grain, the Karan amps have always produced huge, almost physically palpable acoustic spaces, peopled with naturally voiced, scaled, and stable images. Clearly these are all attributes that play directly into top-flight phono performance and perhaps it should come as no surprise that the KA Phono Reference doesn't just display the brand's traditional virtues but arguably extends them further than ever before. ►

► Fire up the Karan phono-stage and even as you run through the process of fixing and refining the various settings, that big, stable soundstage and familiar mid-hall perspective are immediately apparent. As you zero in on the optimum settings for gain and loading what emerges is a really convincing sense of stability, presence, and substance. That planted quality gives wide-ranging dynamics a real sense of jump but does an equally impressive job at the other end of the scale. Whether it's Basie's big-band brass, the lively cut and thrust of Britten's baton directing Mozart's Symphony No 40, or Argerich's deft control of phrase and tempo as she flows through Chopin's C Sharp Minor Scherzo, Op. 39, there's a sense of unforced authority and musical purpose to proceedings that brings with it a natural clarity and lucid musicality. The KA Phono Reference lets you hear both what is happening and, almost more importantly, it underlines why. It's faintly ironic that a unit that is so versatile, complex, and feature laden should also be the very definition of no-nonsense musical presentation, but that's exactly what the KA PR delivers. Nothing added, nothing taken away isn't exactly the most glamorous sales pitch, but when it comes to phono-stages – as the Karan so ably demonstrates – it's both the one that matters and the tripping point for so many other offerings. In part, that's down to the unit's superb technical performance and robust power supplies, but it's also down to the judicious adjustments it offers: 1dB gain steps might seem like overkill until you actually listen to what they provide in musical terms. Playing records is always a battle between realistic dynamics and intrusive noise. Those tiny shifts in gain allow you to wring every last ounce of dynamic range and authority out of the cartridge and your system, balancing the

gain in the phono-stage against the overall gain and sensitivity of your amps and speakers. That's a difference that really matters when it comes to getting the most from your records.

Talking of Argerich and musical authority brings us to the contentious issue of replay EQ. There are those who will claim that every record pressed after 1958 used the RIAA replay curve, but frankly, even a cursory listen to Deccas from the '60s or just about anything from DGG, a Columbia pressing of *Kind Of Blue*, or a 'Postage Stamp' EMI pressing, will quickly demonstrate the folly of that argument. Compare the sound of these 1960's and 1970's pressings replayed with RIAA EQ as opposed to the correct replay curve and ask yourself two questions: which one offers the more natural, coherent, and convincing stereo stage and which sounds like a performance you'd pay to attend? This goes far beyond the realm of simple tonal balance, cutting right to the heart of what makes a performance, a recording, and ultimately your system worth listening to. Replay the Argerich LP on the RIAA setting (as opposed to the preferred Teldec) and it's not just brash and strident; it loses all sense of grace and phrasing, musical flow or expression. Likewise, RIAA replay renders the Britten Mozart muscular and mechanical, sharp and edgy, rather than agile, joyous, and brilliant. But perhaps the most telling example was a Barbirolli/LSO recording of Ireland's London Overture. Where the RIAA setting delivered a scattered, disjointed, and baffling barrage of conflicting instruments, switching to the EMI EQ setting instantly restored order, pattern, and purpose to proceedings, producing a performance full of Barbirolli's characteristic dynamism, swagger, and humour – from unlistenable to unmissable at the flick of a switch. And that's the real beauty of the KA ►



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- PR: once you've set the various parameters for its individual inputs, the things that you need to adjust on a record-by-record basis (absolute phase and replay EQ) are centered on the two front-panel rotary controls.

Who needs to have access to switchable replay EQ? That depends on your record collection. If you only listen to post-'80s pop and 180g re-pressings then you'll rarely encounter anything other than RIAA EQ, although the absolute phase facility will still come into its own. But listen to earlier pop, especially mono Beach Boys or Dylan, or just about anything from the broader classical and jazz repertoires on earlier (for which read secondhand) pressings and you'll soon come across records that are clearly cut for other replay EQs – and once you've heard what switchable phase and EQ can contribute to record replay, you won't want to be without it.

How does the KA PR compare to the competition? There are other phono-stages (mostly tubed, mostly considerably more expensive) that may offer a shade broader tonal palette or greater harmonic definition and textural insight, a bigger picture, or a warmer sound. But none of them do all of those things and none of them can match the absolute transparency, focus, and stability of the big Karan, while anything that does risks straying into the realms of the cold, flat, or sterile. It's this ability to combine impressively natural stereo perspective, separation, and the warmth of its mid-hall balance with its spatial stability and confident, expressive dynamic range that makes performances so vivid and musically rich, the Karan so neutral in the best sense of that oft-abused term. Linear enough to sit happily alongside digital sources in a wide-bandwidth system, honest enough to clearly reveal the differences between different pressings or

performances, it establishes what is an effective benchmark for high-end record replay, categorically demonstrating just why the complex adjustments necessary for cartridge and EQ optimization are so essential to getting the best from your record collection. The next time a would-be designer asks what facilities he should include in his new, world-beating phono-stage I'll have the perfect response: I'll just point him at the Karan (with a *soto voce* sub-text that runs, “Beat that!”)

In the fickle world of audio systems, the product that is all things to all men is yet to be built, and this Karan phono-stage doesn't change that reality. There will always be those who want more glamour or cuddles, or less components and more hair for their shirt. But unlike a lot of products that get tarred with the benchmark label – with its somewhat ‘worthy’ overtones and suggestions of technical rectitude – the KA PR comes out fighting. It's engaging, demonstrative, and uncluttered presentation makes so much sense that it simply slaps a musical gauntlet across the face of competitors and skeptics alike, allowing the recording to state its case. Then you discover that it does all this other, clever stuff too... If you want to know just how much music is stored in those grooves on your records, the Karan Phono Reference is a great place to start – and pretty good place to finish. Ultimately you might find an alternative product you prefer, but if so, I can guarantee that whatever it is, it'll have to go some. I'm not sure the safe choice has ever sounded so good. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state phono-stage

Inputs: 3x balanced XLR; 3x single-ended RCA; All independently configurable

Gain: 48dB – 71dB + one user definable setting

Loading: 450Ω – 47 kΩ + two user definable settings

Capacitive Loading: 50pF – 400pF, Replay EQ: RIAA, EMI, Decca, Columbia, Teldec

Absolute Phase: Switchable 0/180 degrees

Outputs: 1pr balanced XLR; 1pr single-ended RCA

Dimensions WxHxD: 500 x 110 x 390mm ea.

Weight (combined): 2kg

Price: £14,995