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Why Karan Acoustics'  
new stereo power amp  
is a MASTERpiece!



# Karan Acoustics Master Collection POWERb STEREO power amplifier

Alan Sircom

**W**ith the 450W POWERb STEREO, Karan Acoustics completes its eight-strong Master Collection range. Or is it 'ranges?' The Master Collection comprises two lines – 'a' and 'b' – each featuring

a line preamplifier, phono stage, mono and now stereo power amplifiers. The entire Master Collection represents the distillation of decades of audio amplifier design by Milan Karan, replacing the entire previous products in the process. The 'a' range was first, an uncompromising amplifier engine. The 'b' line is equally sonically steadfast, built to a more 'manageable' domestic level.

Why do you need so powerful an amp today? The history of high-end audio is overcrowded with theories in almost every imaginable area of the subject. Some hold water, some a pure consequence of one's aspirational creativity, where the mind wanders more than it should. Remember the infamous water treated in a manner that changes the sound in our rooms?

## Less is much more

One school of thought emanating from the Far East (and Japan in particular) claims that "less is much more" when power ratings of amplifiers are discussed and considered. And, this approach does have some merit, as it is possible that fewer watts can deliver more subtlety, minute detail, superior resolution, transparency, and overall musical pleasure. Of course, partnering those flea-powered amplifiers with hulking great horn loudspeakers with 100dB+ efficiency ratings helps!

But what do you do when you prefer having ample amplifier power in almost any loudspeaker load without losing all or most of the good properties of the low-power designs? Well, you need to look further afield and put your trust and confidence into a small number of very creative and present designers of 'proper', high power stereo and mono power amplifiers and their respective brands.

Milan Karan of Karan Acoustics is most certainly one of those at the forefront of contemporary audio electronics (well, audio amplifier) achievements, whether valve or solid-state. We have been reporting extensively on Karan's Master Collection designs as a pinnacle of his many decades of work and presence within the global high-end audio world. With the Master Collection POWERb STEREO, we have come almost to the end of the present road and are doing the "less is more" thing as well (at 450w into 8 and 800w into 4 Ohms) his smallest amplifier in the range.

Small? Smallest? OK, the POWERb chassis is 24kg lighter and 82mm shorter than the POWERa models. It is also true that 450/800 watts of power is less than 800/1100 watts offered by the larger POWERa STEREO model. Still, the definition of comparative statements is somewhat blurred within this perspective.

## Entry level powerhouse

Be that as it may, Master Collection POWERb STEREO amplifier remains the 'entry level' powerhouse of the range and, as such, could be seen as the natural partner (together with the POWERb MONO monoblocks if so desired) to the LINEb line/PHONOb preamplifiers. Thankfully, reducing chassis size, weight, power, and price relative to its bigger brethren, will deprive the prospective owner of absolutely none of the design and execution principles we have witnessed in the bigger (biggest) stereo and mono models. True differential (balanced) circuit topology down to the bone uses the very same highest quality passive (Vishay resistors, Karan Acoustics proprietary capacitors), active (proprietary Sanken bi-polar output devices) components, WBT Nextgen RCA inputs and speaker binding posts and Cardas Audio wiring throughout the input and output signal path). Last, but certainly not least, an extremely effective mains supply DC treatment and line conditioning is built into the POWERb STEREO for good measure. Then, there are the excellent Critical Mass Systems CenterStage feet. These have a well-known bedding-in period where they sound good, bad, good again, dreadful, and then stunning.

EQUIPMENT REVIEW  
Karan Acoustics Master Collection POWERb STEREO

After a few days of foot-performance oscillations (I think that was the name of an album by The Fall), for this review, the POWERb STEREO has been evaluated within a system that already punches up. The partnering and comparison amps were the POWERa MONO amplifiers receiving the signal from the flagship LINEa and PHONOa preamplifiers. So, if anything, the POWERb STEREO has been surrounded by ancillaries of its own kind that would easily expose all the eventual shortcomings and illuminate differences relative to the best...Is less truly more? Is it better or worse? Is it at least 'different'? Or none of that...? Read on...

### It's a Family Affair

There is a strong family resemblance in all the Karan Acoustics Master Reference products. That they get physically bigger or smaller and more or less powerful doesn't change the end result too much. In a sane world, Karan Acoustics might be rightfully troubled that products like the POWERb STEREO could cannibalise sales of the POWERb and POWERa mono models. High-end audio doesn't work like that. No matter how good a stereo chassis might be, 'go big or go home' is a truism.

In most systems, the POWERb STEREO is all you need. More nets you greater stereo separation (obviously, but we

are talking scintilla of improvement, especially given the twin power cords gives a hint as to just how dual-mono the STEREO is in reality). Moving further up the Karan Acoustics Master Reference ladder also brings greater dynamic headroom and grip. But, and I can't overstate this enough, we're very much in 'nuance' territory here.

Granted, if you have opened that window wide, that nuance becomes more noticeable. If you look at the POWERb with the two-box LINEa preamplifier or PHONOa phono stage from Karan, you are more likely to hear what passes for 'shortcomings' in the POWERb STEREO. Place this with the LINEb and PHONOb and the match is nigh on perfect. And that word 'shortcomings' is questionable at best. This is taking a half-step back from the POWERb MONO, which is itself taking a half-step back from the POWERa models. This isn't a 'compromise' either. In terms of transparency, tonal balance, resolution, stereo staging, vocal articulation, dynamic range, shade, separation, solidity, and an ability to disappear and let the music do its thing, the POWERb STEREO approaches peak performance. It's just that when you get to the peak, the flag was already planted by the POWERa models.

While we strive to recommend products with as neutral as possible performance, even the very best have some



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» tonal characteristics. The Karan is no different. The sound is refined and free from that harsh, electronically, hashy upper-mid and treble 'glitz' that often plagues otherwise good performers. This was always a Karan feature, but previous models could slip into an almost relaxed presentation. The Master Collection shifted that into a neutral balance. It will never be a forward-sounding presentation, but unless you use the POWERb STEREO with soporific loudspeakers and some extremely laid-back dinner jazz, it will be one of even-handed honesty.

### The Good Victorian

This is a Victorian Child of an amplifier, in a good way; seen but not heard. Like its bigger brothers, the Karan Acoustics Master Collection POWERb STEREO has so little imprint on the music that it portrays it as honestly as possible. And like its bigger brothers, the Karan performance is primarily defined by the limitations of other designs. It doesn't emphasise any aspect of performance, and those who focus on a particular characteristic as their musical trigger might be overwhelmed. For example, those who think good audio begins and ends with a forward and immediate presentation of rhythm will find an amplifier with excellent detail and dynamic range. Those who only view good audio through a filter of stereo separation will find the detail and rhythmic properties vying for position in their heads.

Ultimately, the sense of overall musical balance wins out in those who aren't pathologically welded to an amplifier brand. Yes, there will still be those who want a more forward presentation, but many good amps already do that. The Karan Acoustics Master Collection POWERb

STEREO scores highly because that other side isn't so well catered for. If you listen to one of the Anointed Ones and say "it's good... but a little forward" there are few amplifier systems that can still deliver all the other sonic benefits of top-table power amplifiers and still make that even-handed sound. The POWERb STEREO, like its bigger brothers, is a welcome force for musical good. +

### Technical specifications

Type Stereo solid-state power amplifier  
Power output 2x 450W into 8Ω, 2x 800W into 4Ω,  
2x 1,350W into 2Ω  
Peak power output 600W at 8Ω  
Inputs 2 balanced (XLR) and 2 unbalanced (RCA)  
Input impedance 30kΩ (balanced/unbalanced)  
Input sensitivity 2.0V/RMS (for max output)  
Frequency Response 20Hz–20kHz ±0dB, DC–300kHz, -3dB  
Gain +30dB  
Distortion THD/IMD 0.03%  
Signal to noise ratio >120dB unweighted  
Dimensions (W×H×D) 50.4 × 29.2 × 52.1cm  
Weight 103kg  
Price £34,995

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Manufacturer Karan Acoustics  
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