

Krell KAV-400xi Integrated Amplifier

Wayne Garcia

If you think tubes are just too damn fussy, or maybe too romantically colored to be “accurate,” then brother (or sis), Krell’s KAV-400xi is your kinda amp. This powerful integrated loves to rock, blossoms most fully with all styles of high-energy music, and is at its most comfortable

of Johnny Cash and Joe Strummer (who, rather poignantly, died last year within a few months of each other) on Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song” [*Unearthed*, American]—but also with Martha Argerich’s piano on Ravel’s *Gaspard de la Nuit* [DG Originals], where her stunning trills in the upper registers have a crisp-

higher-end technology to a very attractive \$2500 price point.

Large-scale symphonic and operatic recordings can be very exciting with the 400xi, as its speed, dynamic power, and bottom-end wallop lend themselves to the leaping climaxes of a Mahler symphony, or full-on orchestral and choral



once the volume level starts to hit and exceed middle stride. For instance, while playing Neil Young’s “Falling From Above” from last year’s brilliant *Greendale* [Reprise], this Krell sounds nice enough at low-to-moderate playback levels, yet the excitement of this raw, live-sounding disc is missing—Young’s grinding, overdriven guitar amp sounds too tame, the solidly chugging bass line too square, the syncopated toms too...uh, Herman’s Hermits? Push the thing however, and, like a sports car taken from the confines of city traffic to the freedom of the open road, the 400xi really starts to hum. Dynamic freedom improves noticeably too, as does that elusive combination of rhythmic precision and dynamic flow that add up to what we often call “pace,” so we sense that not only are the musicians playing together as a group but they’re loving every minute of it, which naturally makes the music that much more involving.

Articulation is another hallmark of the 400xi’s sound, not only with vocals—check out the strong suggestion of physical presence and ultra-clear annunciation

ness I’d never heard before. This holds true in the bottom octaves as well, where bass drums and guitars, acoustic basses, and reed instruments such as bass clarinet and sax are exceptionally well-defined, though arguably overly-taut in the way we hear with reproduced music more than with live (and in transistors more than tubes).

A no-nonsense integrated amp with a Spartan faceplate (a handful of input select buttons, the illuminated level indicator, and a volume control knob are its only adornments), the 400xi is available in “Krellcoat” silver or a new “luxurious” (satin) black. Like all Krell components, solid-as-a-tank build quality, a massive power supply (800 VA toroidal transformer, 55,000 microfarads of capacitance), and first-rate parts are to be found here, as is the cutest and slimmest remote control I’ve ever seen (just a quarter-inch thick, it runs off a 3V photocell). Power output is an impressive 200W into 8 ohms/400W into 4 ohms, and the Class A, direct-coupled, fully balanced circuit design derived from more expensive Class A-series products brings much of Krell’s

forces of Puccini and Wagner dramas. When it comes to the most hard-driving recordings, this slim-bodied Krell has seemingly limitless power in reserve. While channeling the full-on assault of Nine Inch Nails’ *Broken* [TVT], with its unrelenting synths, chop-through-concrete electric guitars, and runaway percussion, the 400xi not only never cracked, it just kept getting louder while staying clean and uncompressed (kudos as well to the Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor speakers reviewed last issue, as their volume and dynamic capability—in my smallish room, please note—stayed apace with the Krell, stride-for-stride).


Now, all of this power, clarity, and precision does come with a price: just as the KAV-400xi is tailor-made for those who dislike tubes, it brings with it some of solid-state’s sonic shortcomings. To start with, delicacy is not this Krell’s forte, as further listening to the Argerich disc shows. *Gaspard de la Nuit* is a floating, circular, dream-like composition (it is based on a series of phantasmagoric poems after all) that, despite moments of

dynamic explosiveness, is just as frequently whisper soft. These are the moments, the gymnastic runs, feather-light shifts of dynamic nuance, mist-like air around individual notes, where the 400xi falls short when compared to the real thing. Notes seem altogether *too* solid, without the air, harmonic layering, or decay they ideally would have. There's also a consistent darkening of the tonal palette, particularly noticeable in the midrange through the top end, audible from recording to recording, no matter its provenance or style of music. In other words, like all components the 400xi has its own character—and in this case it is decidedly masculine. Or to draw another analogy, if the 400xi were a wine it would be like one of the Northern Médoc of Bordeaux—upfront, bold, powerful, tannic, and proud of it—as opposed to say a more come-hither, rounder, earthier,

rather feminine offering from Burgundy's Côte de Beaune.

Imaging is very good, as the 400xi holds a very tight focus on everything from a small jazz ensemble to large-scale works, and the amp does a terrific job of individualizing instruments playing in a very crowded field, as with, say, Michael Tilson Thomas' reading of the Mahler First [SFS Media]. Don't expect layers and layers of depth, however, as the 400xi suggests more than delivers in this area, or the accompanying sense of three-dimensional body. On the other hand, image height and width are quite good, with instruments appearing to extend beyond and above speaker boundaries.

As with wine and all things in life, there's room in audio for any number of ways to interpret recorded music, as those of us fresh from this year's CES have been reminded yet again. The Krell

KAV-400xi has enormous strengths in many areas as well as accompanying and unavoidable trade-offs (as does every other piece of gear I know of in this price range). I personally prefer a somewhat lighter, rounder, airier presentation, but that's the romantic in me. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Power output: 200Wpc (8 ohms); 400Wpc (4 ohms)

Inputs: Three RCA, one XLR

Dimensions: 17.3" x 3.5" x 17"

Weight: 31 lbs.

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