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# HI-FI CHOICE

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## *The Collection*

IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI





# Krell FBI

*Krell's big-league integrated stereo amplifier offers plentiful power and poise*

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**A**hh, the FBI. Elliot Ness. Mulder and Scully. Clarice Starling's cheap shoes. And now... Krell. According to Krell, the FBI (Fully Balanced Integrated) started life as separate pre and power amplifiers, but during the development programme, it became apparent that, in their words, "the synergy of the two components demanded that they reside in the same chassis".

It's basically a FPB-300cx power amplifier with a custom-designed preamplifier built in. The big integrated was introduced largely in response to European requirements, offering cost and space savings over a FPB-300cx and separate preamplifier.

Until now, Krell's forays into integrated amplifiers have culminated in the KAV-400xi. That model was a more or less all-purpose integrated amplifier, with a generous power output (a very solid 200 watts into eight ohms, increasing perfectly to 400 watts into four ohms) from a well-filled but slimline enclosure. This model takes the same formula one and a

The list of fixtures and fittings is not dissimilar to its less powerful sibling. Inputs are available in relative profusion, though there is no internal phono player provision. What you get are three line-level inputs, a tape circuit and a CAST (ultra wide bandwidth Current Audio Signal Transmission) input, which is Krell's proprietary current-mode, line-level interface – previous experience suggests that this is capable of delivering superior sound quality.

In addition, the Krell has a balanced-mode (XLR) input. This is entirely appropriate for an amplifier which is internally balanced from stem to stern, and a preamplifier output to drive an external power amplifier.

Two pairs of speaker terminals are available for bi-wiring, but you'll need to use spade terminations, or as we did for this test, 4mm spade adaptors. Other facilities include a 'Theatre' throughput, which allows any input or group of inputs to be volume or balance controlled by an external processor, a prerequisite in a multichannel system.

competing models from another brand), but whose discrimination in matters audio we have good reason to trust. For this, the Krell was set up against another high-quality integrated, but there was never any doubt about the outcome for him. Once again, it was overwhelmingly better, literally from the very first note.

This is not to say it sounds like other Krell amplifiers, although there seems to be an affinity with the sound of the Evolution One and Two, tested on page 106. Krell has been through a number of hardware generations, each of which has had its own distinctive voice, perhaps reflecting the evolving tastes of its designer. The current generation, exemplified by the entry-level KAV-400xi and developed prior to the FBI, has a particular quality, a leanness and precision that made it less than forgiving with some source material, and which meant it sometimes tended to lack body in some combinations. The FBI is not like this. From the outset, it was apparent that it offers a new level of neutrality. It has a strong sense of presence, and it is open and lean. The bass is deeply extended, but always unfailingly pitch accurate and musical, while the treble is a near perfect mirror at the far end of the audio frequency band, but without ever sounding intrusive. However, it is much less characterful than the KAV-400xi can sometimes be.

The FBI is a solid, muscular amplifier, clearly more so than the '400xi. Its power output is virtually without limit for all practical purposes. It thrives with difficult loudspeakers – the Sonus Faber Grand Piano Domus turned out to be one such – and it excels with very transparent speakers, which tend to throw a spotlight on what the amplifier is doing. There are few better examples of this than the Martin Logan Avant, which is reviewed on p78 of this issue. It's a transparent sounding amplifier, but perhaps above all else, it is unusually easy to listen to. The only sense of strain is the tension in the music, if it is that kind of music.

Yes, the price will take some swallowing. But this is without question a superb amplifier, one that easily matches or exceeds the performance of other pre/power amplifiers within its price category, and which in Krell's case significantly undercuts some of its own models on price. It delivers true power and stamina, a stable, layered and articulate midband and an unfailingly detailed, refined treble. In short, Krell's big boy integrated aptly lives up to the 'Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity' motto, used on occasion by that other FBI. **HFC**

*Alvin Gold*

**“It was apparent that the FBI offers a new level of neutrality. It has a strong sense of presence, and is open and lean.”**

half stages further. It is rated at 300 watts per channel into eight ohms, and it too doubles in output with each halving of load impedance, up to a massive 1,200 watts into two ohms.

Perhaps this power dissipation is responsible for the enormous form factor. Another issue is the massive 3kW custom-designed transformer – a completely separate isolated power supply and transformer are used for the preamplifier section – and yet another is the claim that it operates in full Class A. To help minimise heat, the FPB architecture allows the power supply to be ramped up in discrete steps as power demands ebb and swell. It still runs warm, despite large-area heatsinks that run from front to back on both sides of the amplifier, but not antisocially so – though it needs to be run at a moderate level at the start of a listening session before it hits its stride.

In common with most Krell designs, the FBI is beautifully screwed together, and immaculately detailed, though there is no attempt to conceal the devastating authority it is intended to bring to bear. Check out the case fixings, and volume control detailing and be your own judge. Electrically it is essentially free from hum and noise.

The mains input is a 20-amp socket, and there are various provisions for multiroom (but not multisource) operation, including 12V trigger in and outputs, and an RC5 (Philips command set) remote control input.

#### SOUND QUALITY

It was not possible to test operation of the CAST mode interface, because of the lack of availability of a suitably equipped disc player during the period allotted for this review, but past experience suggests it should be safe to expect better performance than via the standard single-ended phono or even the balanced-mode XLR line-level inputs.

With the increasing resolution of high-end audiophile electronics, it is normal to expect that it will take some time for a new product to settle in and deliver. In this case, however, it was different. From the very moment the FBI was let loose on its first task, freshly decanted from its box, and within about a minute of being connected to the mains, it was obvious that it was simply an overwhelming and exceptional amplifier. We even second checked this by playing it to a visitor who has no special affinity for Krell (in fact, he distributes