

Three for all

Roksan's K series has just been refreshed. **David Price** samples the new K3 CD player and integrated amplifier



► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roksan K3 CD
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
CD player
WEIGHT
9kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 102 x 380mm
FEATURES
• Burr Brown PCM1798 DAC
• 1x coaxial digital output
• 1x Toslink optical digital output
• 1x Balanced AES/EBU (XLR) digital output
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roksan K3 Amp
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
14kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 105 x 380mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power output: 2x 140W into (8ohms)
• 5x line inputs
• 1x MM phono input
• aptX Bluetooth
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs
TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk



Though its products have been very well received over the years, every five or so years the time comes to refresh the range, and that's what Roksan has done here. The K2 series was excellent, but the company claims the K3 is even better, with improved technologies and design.

Starting with the source, the new K3 CD player gets updated circuitry and improved components. A Burr Brown PCM1798 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC is fitted, and this works with a high-precision master clock with less than 150ps of jitter, the company says. The disc mechanism has a front-loading CD drawer; unlike some Roksan has not chosen to go to a slot loader. The K3 CD nails its colours to the mast with a 75ohm RCA coaxial digital output and a 110ohm balanced XLR digital out. Perhaps the company views it as a 'last ever CD player' and has kitted it out with serious transport functionality, rather than trying to make it a DAC with a disc drive inside like so many rivals.

The K3 amplifier has five line inputs, moving magnet phono stage and aptX wireless Bluetooth, but no DAC

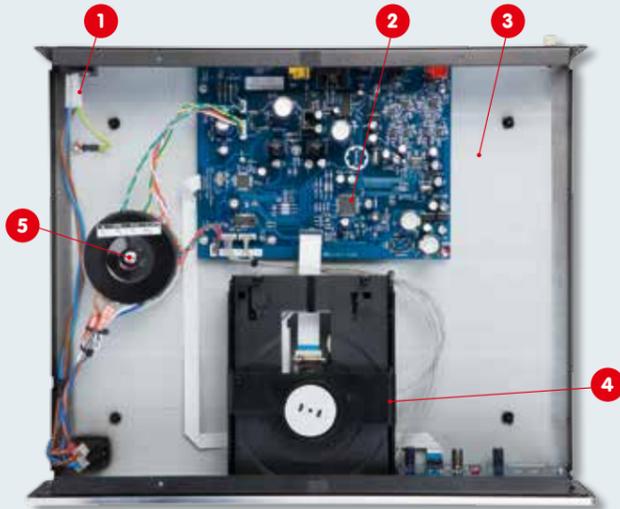
The K3 is surely the most musical amplifier on sale at or near its price

functionality. Inside, the amplifier has been the subject of a substantial redesign; laid out symmetrically, it uses new op-amps, audio and power supply circuits. High-quality signal output relays are fitted, and the new chassis gets better ventilation for cooler running. The power amplifier section is directly powered from the mains supply, via a 550VA toroidal transformer with five regulated supply rails. The manufacturer claims 140W RMS per channel into 8ohms, and over 220W into 4; suggesting a robust power supply. This is a lot of power from an amp of this relatively average size, although it's a little heavier than some at 14kg.

Down to business

The K3s are very nice to use and generally pretty intuitive, although one oddity for those not accustomed to either is that the main power on-off switch on both units is underneath; the fascia has a 'mode' button to flick between on and standby. Supplied with both is the new system remote, an impressive metal-framed device that's nice to use and offers total

ROKSAN K3 CD PLAYER



- 1 Mains inlet
- 2 CD processor
- 3 Zinc-plated steel chassis
- 4 CD mechanism
- 5 Toroidal transformer

TRANSPORT MATTERS

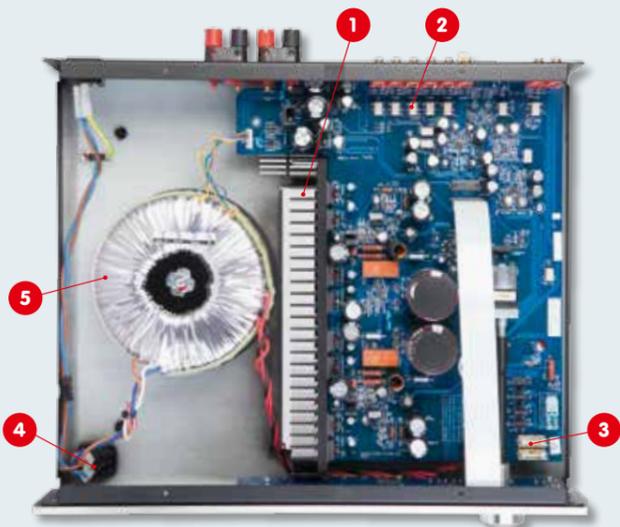
The Roksan K3 CD player is surprisingly 'old school' in a number of ways, not least because it doesn't have DAC inputs, or indeed any USB connectivity. Either or both of these has become *de rigueur* over the past two years for any newly launched silver disc spinner, so it's a little odd to see that they are missing here. Whether this is actually

a problem, of course, is very much down to personal preference; many buyers will already have a decent digital-to-analogue converter, or will just want to play their compact discs.

The slightly retro feel of the unit extends to its display, which has 'music calendar' – last seen on nineties Sonys – and other features including elapsed

time and track and disc time remaining. Random play and 10-second 'intro play' facilities are a blast from the past, too. Track access is pleasingly brisk and the disc drawer – again a slightly old-fashioned touch – goes in and out smoothly and unlike some is made of decent quality plastic that doesn't feel flimsy or fragile in use.

ROKSAN K3 AMPLIFIER



- 1 Heatsink
- 2 Input control relays
- 3 Protection fuses
- 4 Power switch
- 5 Toroidal transformer

WIRELESS WORLD

Like the CD player, the K3 amplifier is also devoid of a lot of features that you might expect from a new product of its type today. And again, I am not so sure that this is a problem; indeed you might argue that you're spending more of your money on the important bits inside that make it sound better, as opposed to fripperies. The Roksans'

one concession to modernity is aptX Bluetooth, which allows – in theory – transmission of near CD-quality digital music wirelessly over short range.

I find it sounds pretty much like all other implementations of this technology, which is good but not great. It's an extremely handy thing to have if you just want to squirt some

decent quality music to your amplifier for casual or background listening, but it lacks detail, depth, dimensionality and general musicality and tonal accuracy compared with its matching CD player. I like Bluetooth music, but the trick is treat it like we used to cassette, and use it when convenience is the order of the day.

control. Together the duo is a neat visual match and exudes an air of quality that the previous K2 series didn't quite manage.

Sound quality

The K3 integrated proves to be one of the most enjoyable amplifiers I have heard at this price in a very long time. I find myself wondering why rivals costing three or four times its price don't sound so much fun. It has the unerring ability to make music magic – and it doesn't matter what music it is. Whether it is the brilliant *Electric Café* by Kraftwerk or the rather ropey 2009 remaster of The Beatles' *White Album*, somehow the K3 cuts to the musical quick. It has the special ability to lift you beyond the recording, so you're no longer concerned with it and instead find yourself lost in the music.

It goes beyond normal considerations of a £1,250 amplifier. It has its faults yet they never get in the way. *Mother Nature's Son* by The Beatles seems to take on a life of its own fed from a high-end CD transport and dCS Debussy DAC. Via one of its line inputs the song floats and emotes; the amp throws out an amazingly wide recorded acoustic, seemingly unaware of the loudspeaker boundaries. Tonally it is sweet and smooth, perhaps with a slight accent on the upper midband, but bass is very strong and slightly warm by its rivals' standards. Dynamically it's superb, really going out of its way to signpost the music's accenting.

With Kraftwerk's *Telephone Call*, the stereo soundstage seems to expand TARDIS-like when you step into the song. It sounds vast, and fills up with crashing electronic percussion, infectious drum breaks and wonderful sequenced keyboard lines. Drum machine cymbals shimmer, electronic baselines grumble, and snares thump. Vocals are beautifully pure, just like you're standing in the vocal booth with Ralf Hutter. I never find myself thinking how good it is at the price; instead I sit there totally immersed in the majesty of the mix. This is a rare talent for any solid-state amplifier, let alone one that costs £1,250.

The phono stage is also good, but you can do better if you spend a serious amount of money on an offboard one. Fed by a Michell GyroDec/TecnoArm tracking a Goldring 1042 moving magnet, I became completely at one with the music. I cue up an old pressing of Supertramp's *Breakfast In America* and soon am absorbed in *Child Of*

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Analogue outputs
- 2 AES/EBU digital outputs
- 3 4mm speaker binding posts
- 4 CD player inputs
- 5 Moving magnet phono inputs
- 6 Pre outputs

Vision, marvelling at the vast amounts of detail, 'walk-around soundstage' and the ease with which all the instruments are able to play independently. The music sounds so unconstrained that I have to keep pinching myself to remember that I am listening to an affordable integrated. Indeed the K3 is able to cheekily fool the listener into ignoring its failings – which admittedly are relatively minor – and celebrate the music like it's my 21st birthday party. The only downside is its slightly limited tonal palette; everything sounds a fraction on the warm side, whether it was originally recorded that way or not. Also, while it is brilliant at throwing stereo images left to right, it doesn't hang them back quite as far as it could.

The matching CD player is also excellent, but struggles to match the brilliance of its partner. Moving from my reference (and very expensive) dCS DAC highlights where it is lacking; there's a little fall off in low-frequency power, midband precision and depth, and treble definition and space. Still, the K3 CD player sings like its life depends on it; here's a mid-price silver disc spinner that gets into the groove as well as many good vinyl sources. It somehow manages to come over as sounding a lot less processed than most digital disc sources and again has that wonderfully easy rhythmic quality about it. I find myself engrossed by a Deutsche Grammophon recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, focusing on the way the orchestra plays and the emotion of the music in general. It's an extremely good performer at the price, and difficult not to like.

Conclusion

As someone that was impressed by the previous K2 range, and someone with a lot of respect for Roksan in

general, I expected much from this new K3 pairing and it really doesn't let me down. The integrated amplifier in particular is quite exceptional; it is surely the most musical amplifier on sale at or near its price and is never less than cracking fun to listen to.

The CD player is an incredibly strong partner, and well worth having if you intend to buy the amplifier to accompany it, or indeed if you're looking for a good, 'old-school' silver disc spinner. Together, they're a dynamic duo the likes of which you rarely see anywhere near the price. Heartily recommended ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT CD player

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT Amplifier

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

HOW IT COMPARES

Cambridge Audio's Azur 851C/851A (HFC 359) combo (£2,400) is the closest rival. It is better specified, in the sense that the amplifier has a sophisticated programmable display and the CD player is more like a DAC with a CD drive built in. The Cambridge combo also feels a lot more sophisticated and slick to use. It is excellent sonically, with a powerful, tight, detailed and open sound. The K3s are much more beguiling, enchanting and enriching to listen to; music seems to breathe and flow better, bringing an immersive quality to the listening experience. That's just how special the Roksans are.

Q&A

Tufan Hashemi
MD, Roksan Audio



DP: What were the design aims of the new K3 series?

TH: To take the very best attributes of the K2 series, such as punch and power, and develop them to a higher audiophile standard. This includes particular attention to the bass depth and grip, increased detail and the transparency and air of the soundstage. Of course, all this had to be coupled with the new aesthetic design and range of finishes, which are elegant, modern and understated.

What made you decide to fit Bluetooth to the K3 amplifier?

Our experience with high-quality Bluetooth in the flagship Oxygene range and the K2 BT has shown that customers welcome the flexibility that this aptX option brings. The module has its own internal digital-to-analogue converter with a differential signal as part of its integrated codec, it therefore outputs two differential analogue signals. We have taken these signals to an external circuit to convert into a single signal. Thus we have been able to leave behind any noise or disturbance present on the differential signal and only the clean signal is amplified through the board.

Why is the K3 CD fitted with a balanced XLR digital output?

Bearing in mind that the mechanism used is the same as that in the reference Caspian M2 series, the K3 CD acts as a supremely confident and solid standalone transport with true high-end performance. Our players have always been renowned for their genuine reference-quality performance and the K3 DAC is to be launched soon. Actually, many of our overseas customers still utilise the transport/DAC configuration and the inclusion of the new K3 DAC will make this an attractive option.