

stage III

Kraken AC Power Cord as

reviewed by **Name withheld**



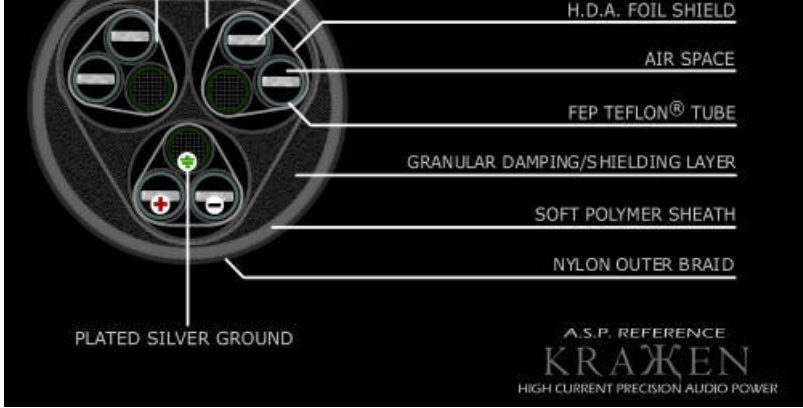
The last time I auditioned some Stage III PCs, I was most impressed with their jewelry-grade visuals—build quality was out of sight. But this new, top-of-the-line Kraken takes the cake; I've never seen the likes of this quality in a power cord.

It's not just the girth, although invariably this requires explaining to visitors. It's the meticulous attention to every detail of construction and finish. They don't look like other PCs and, indeed, most of the parts are freshly conceived.



Build Quality and Construction

The Kraken is a new design and "represents the culmination of 16 years of research, materials evaluation, testing..." Like Stage III's previous flagship power cord, the Zyklop, both use patented AeroStrand Ultra™, solid-core conductors. However, those



Kraken schematic

The cross-section shows each conductor bundle comprised of a single positive and negative ribbon conductor, plus a ground with multiple wires. Each individual conductor floats within an FEP Teflon air-tube.

The cable has an unusual degree of shielding, starting with HDA (High Density Alloy), a unique, solid foil material developed for medical and military use. A silver-plated copper braid surrounds the HDA layer. Then a layer of powdered silica/ceramic/ferrite material provides high levels of mechanical damping in addition to more shielding. (I noticed a drop off in volume level when I put a Kraken on the mbl 6010D preamp—possibly due to all the shielding?)



Silicone Molds for Insulators

Everything is fabricated in house. All of the plugs and housings are designed on a 3-D CAD program. A 3-D printer produces a silicone mold, which is used to make the cable and plug housings. The AC and IEC plugs have a handmade carbon fiber/polymer composite exterior housing. Within the housing, the body of the plug is a ceramic-filled polymer formed by the silicone molds.



The cable is wider in the middle and stepped down at the ends because the oversize gauge is too thick to fit into the plug housing. (The conductors and shielding are the same throughout the length of the cable: the stepped-down section is only missing the granular mechanical damping/shielding layer.) Cryo-treatment is used wherever possible.

The Sound

"Karina sounds very good." Yes, I agreed with Lynn, hers is a first-rate talent. Listening to *Prima Donna*, a new CD featuring the Canadian soprano Karina Gauvin (ATMA ACD2 2648. This is another Red Book CD that boasts "recorded at 24/96 media." Could this be a trend?), it made me wonder why we've never heard of her. It's just more evidence of how provincial we are: we assume the worlds' best artists appear in our concert halls, yet many great ones never tour the U.S. and their CDs are never sent to American music critics—you have to leave the country to hear about them.

A close-up portrait of Karina Gauvin, a soprano, with a green parrot perched on her shoulder. She is wearing a dark, high-collared garment. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with a blue sky and distant buildings.

Karina Gauvin
PRIMA DONNA

ARION ORCHESTRE BAROQUE

ALEXANDER WEIMANN

ATMA Classique

We were struck by how coherent and even Karina's voice was across her range, especially the jumps to high notes. Most systems create a jarring disjunct at the point when a singer breaches the high treble in a forte passage. At these times, it seems like a singer of lesser quality has stepped in front of the mike.

Now I'm curious how much of her "good sound" can be attributed to that single Kraken on the mbl 6010D preamp? When I take it out, Karina reminds me of Cecilia Bartoli in three particulars (as played back on my system). Don't get me wrong, Cecilia is wonderful, but many find her machine-gun vibrato annoying. Second, her breathy quality clues us that hers is predominantly a head voice. Third, she occasionally displays that edgy disjunction when breaching high notes.

The Kraken balances that head voice with chest resonances and removes the edginess. Karina's vibrato becomes less prominent and sounds less forced. Yet, even as it smoothed out her voice by playing down differences, the Kraken dredges up new information. We are privy to the mechanics of her vibrato—its velocity, amplitude and speed.

Solid and Beautiful

The middle of the note is packed with vitality. With many presentations, if they give you a sustain at all (and I don't take that for granted), it is a held note with little modulation or inner life.

The Kraken transient is nearly perfect. The note just appears—its onset is not heralded by any pre-echo or shadowing event—and it is totally non-fatiguing. Nowadays many products are voiced to be non-fatiguing; this appears to be a trend. The thing is, it's not easy to do right and most designers are using sleight of hand, employing rounded transients to achieve non-irritating results. The Kraken does this to a minor degree, but it comes very close to a sharp edge.

The tail is, again, a beautiful thing. It doesn't seem short, nor long, but just right to fit what's needed. Neat!



I'm All For You (Blue Note 91950) features a quartet with two of my favorite jazz artists, Hank Jones on piano and Joe Lovano on sax. The rhythm section is rounded out with bassist George Mraz and drummer Paul Motian. The recoding was done live to two-track analog tape in 2003.

I had been wondering if Hank Jones was using an electric keyboard, but I knew it was unlikely. With the Kraken, I have no doubt it is acoustic, and most likely a grand piano. Soundstage dimensions inflate radically. The image of Paul Motian's cymbals has spread to occupy the entire right side of the stage. Lovano's sax owns the left side.

Each image is fully realized in tone, timbre, size, weight and dynamics. You can focus on any instrument or step back and take in the whole quartet. Subtle events buried deep on the sides and rear of the stage emerge, and it doesn't matter where—the Kraken treats the image the same whether it's at the speaker position, behind the speaker, or in the center. Sometimes they are in locations beyond the speakers. That's new: while I've gotten imaging outside the speakers before, they've never been as solid and tangible as this.

Just like in an intimate jazz club, instruments get very large when you're up close and you have a choice of which one to focus on. The presentation with the Kraken is nudging close to that.

Caveats

This could get out of hand if you already have a correctly sized soundstage for your room. But how many of us have that? Most audiophiles would be delighted to own this problem. I can see a big smile break out with news of this "downside."

I must also caution you about how your amps will get all charged up and excitable. The Kraken boosts your amp's dynamic energy level such that they act like they're on a high protein diet—your amplifier will love it.

Something else to be bothered about: Your presentation will gain weight. Since the tone of the Kraken is deep, saturated, and a bit dark, you will need to lighten up somewhere. I imagine most of us would be delighted with this effect as well.

One real concern is the sheer bulk and physical weight of the cord. Running them to the top shelf of my rack, I feared they would stress the IEC jack of the component.

Power Conditioning

It struck me more than once that the Kraken does so many things associated with power conditioning that it makes conditioning redundant. Doesn't that whole cluster of effects I described above read like it could have been cribbed from a power conditioner review? All of the benefits of conditioning are built-in.



To fill out the description, the Kraken is smooth, grainless and warm—almost caressing. It makes the sound a tad more beautiful in a manner akin to tubes. It has a polished sound—just be careful not to remove too many of the burrs.

Conclusion

The Stage III Kraken is a statement power cord and it is a monster. Let's make that a handsome monster, like Arnold the Terminator. Physically, it is one of the bulkiest I've seen. Cosmetically, it is constructed like a piece of jewelry.

There are many PCs that can do parts of what I've described above. What distinguishes the Kraken is that it does them all. This PC will satisfy both the analytical enthusiast and the music lovers among us.

Just one Kraken will be enough to alter your sound in startling ways. Singlehandedly, it can take your system from very good to outstanding. Its effects are so noted, it really has me thinking it should be considered a component—in particular, a power conditioner.

The Kraken is another world-class power product from Stage III and gets my top recommendation. **Marshall Nack**

Kraken Power Cord
Retail: \$8400 1.5 meter