



TEST.

KECES S4 Stereo

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With its spanking new S4, KECES is launching an affordable high-tech preamplifier with a special feature: an optical input for DS Audio cartridges. In addition, it impresses with its consistent overall concept from A to Z, which even a tube aficionado like me is entirely enthusiastic about.

Are you familiar with KECES? Probably you already are, but unlike you I really didn't know anything about this brand until now. An unforgivable lack of knowledge on my part, as I finally had to realize in the course of my intensive studies of this device. The KECES brand was founded in 2002 and belongs to the Huikang Electronic Co, Ltd., which is based in New Taipei City in Taiwan. On their website, the individual letters of the brand name are assigned the attributes Key Components, Elegant Design, Cutting-edge technology, Excellent Acoustics and Superb Quality. However, I was unable to find out whether this is the official derivation of the brand name or rather a marketing effort, as most manufacturers would surely consider these characteristics to be appropriate for their products. However, very few hi-fi manufacturers on the market have the ability to produce the essential key components of their devices themselves - unlike KECES. Those who understand what they are doing naturally have great advantages with a high level of vertical range of manufacture and the associated ability to customize components to their own requirements.

KECES' claim is to produce high-end hi-fi devices that are "value for money" in the best sense of the word. The KECES S4 retails for 4000 euros, for which the buyer is actually offered quality and features that are the exception rather than the rule among competitors at this price level. The power supply is externalized and housed in a separate enclosure, which technically makes perfect sense in order not to expose the sensitive phono



To my taste, the KECES S4 comes up with an almost perfect industrial design, both visually and haptically, paired to an outstanding build quality

section to any stray fields emitted from the power supply. Both enclosures have identical dimensions and can easily be stacked on top of each other, which is visually very well-done. The three-and-a-half millimetre thick aluminum sheet metal of the front panel and the side panels is made from a single piece. To the left and right of the front, the aluminum plate bends with a radius of around one centimetre and continues as a side panel to the rear edge of the housing. The tactile appeal of the two housings and their general workmanship are of vault quality! There is no rattling at all and the housings are torsionally very stiff. You could almost think that mechanical engineers, not electrical engineers, were at work here. And visually, these thirty centimetre narrow enclosures with their elegant design (sic!) are exactly to my taste. Hats off! Incidentally, the KECES S4 is still so



Headphone fans are offered a high-quality 4-PIN XLR output. The regular preamp output can be switched on or off using a toggle switch



The volume control is realized in a very complex way via an R-2R network. Eight R-2R resistance levels are used to realize 128 logarithmic volume levels of equal impedance

new that the S4 is not yet listed on the website of the German distributor (kecesaudio.de) at the time of publication of this review. Anyone looking for more background information should therefore visit the company's own website (kecesaudio.com).



The solid and heavy all-metal remote is conceived to control all available functions apart from adjusting the settings for the cartridges and echoes the design of the S4's front panels with its rounded edges at the top and bottom. In addition to the tactile pressure feedback, each button press provides also visual feedback via the integrated blue LED



The clear arrangement and visualization of the various inputs and outputs by means of the imprinted frames and clear labelling is very well done. Unfortunately, this is not a matter of course for every manufacturer

I'm not exactly a nitpicker, but if I could make one wish, it would be this one: I would like the housing feet and the volume control to be gold-coloured instead of silver, to match the gold KECES logos in the centre of the front panels. And the LEDs and the volume display on the preamp would be red instead of blue, like the power light on the power supply housing. But that's the only fly in the ointment. I promise.

When it comes to connectivity, the KECES S4 leaves nothing to be desired: In addition to two balanced XLR line inputs, there are RCA sockets for a line input as well as for MM or MC phono signals and a phono input for optical cartridges from DS Audio. Practice-oriented values for terminating the cartridges can be set via DIP switches. There are also two RCA line outputs and a balanced XLR line output. Regarding the optical cartridges from DS Audio, I am not going to test this input due to the lack of a corresponding cartridge, so I will limit myself to the MM or MC phono sections. But don't worry: Dirk Sommer will take a closer look at the headphone output and the section for optical cartridges from DS Audio in an upcoming second review.

Inside, the design is kept strictly symmetrical: The preamplifier boards made in SMD technology are designed in double mono construction and piggybacked on top of each other for the left and right channels. A real treat is the elaborate volume control realized using an R-2R network. The 128 logarithmic volume levels are switched by relays and acknowledge the control process with corresponding clicking switching noises. Incidentally, this is particularly fun with the high-quality all-metal remote control, which has all the control functions at its command: When the volume button is pressed, the relays click through the individual volume levels at high speed. Just for fun, I let the relays click up and down a few times without a pending signal, simply because it made such nice clicking noises. Just then I remembered a sentence I had recently read somewhere: No matter how old you are, you remain a child forever...

The power supply features a generously dimensioned, low stray field toroidal transformer. Even though KECES is known to be a power supply specialist, I didn't notice any special features here. However, the most important thing is that the phono section is protected from any interference on the part of the power supply by the separate housing.

For the listening test, I had no reservations about daring a technological crossover, if you like. As the EternalArts OTL Mark III transformerless tube power amplifier is currently making a guest appearance at my place, this old-school tube amp was just right for me to form an alliance with the modern high-tech KECES S4 preamplifier.



For MC cartridges, practice-oriented impedance values of 56, 100, 220 and 470 ohms as well as 47kOhms are available. The parameters of the optical input are fixed, the layout was carried out in close co-operation between KECES and the Japanese specialist for optical cartridges DS Audio

And in practice, it actually worked out quite splendidly, both in terms of the amplification factors and the general sound characteristics. For the listening sessions I used the MM system Ortofon 2M Silver and the MC system Ortofon Quintet Red.

In general, I was somewhat surprised that I experienced a burn-in phase with this device, which I usually only know from tube gear. After switching on, the KECES S4 always took about ten minutes to get "to the point", but over a total period of about thirty hours of operation, I noticed constant small changes in the sound until the curtain was completely lifted, so to speak. I assume that my device was a fairly new one straight from the factory.

After just a few pieces of music, I realized that I was dealing with a very balanced, harmonious and neutral sounding preamplifier. The KECES S4 had no inherent sound signature whatsoever. Somehow this preamplifier was tonally invisible, in the best sense without a specific signature, extremely permeable to everything on the record and thus very close to the ideal of the amplifying piece of wire. I identified no interference artefacts, perceived an extremely low noise floor level and a black background against which the musical performance contrasted perfectly.

The AC/DC track "Hells Bells" (Back in Black, Atlantic Records, 1980) immediately reveals any weakness in the low frequency range, which is why I always like to listen to it for testing purposes. Both via MM and MC, the massive "hell's bells" at the beginning of the intro clattered in a really fat, black and fundamental manner, which only very high-quality phono preamps can come up with in this form. Guitar riffs, drums and Brian Johnson's vocals were always crystal clear and cleanly separated from each other, never smudging tones or impulses or even creating a "tonal swamp". Hence the KECES S4 always maintained control and overview of the sound. If I wanted to, I could follow even the smallest, most subtle instrumental arborizations and noises. In general, the entire sonic image seemed to me to be slightly characterized by a silvery timbre, which seemed to emphasize the high differentiation capability of the S4.

AC/DC's rock ballad "Ride on" (Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap, Atlantic Records, 1976) then raised goosebumps again. The (artificial) extraordinarily generous recording image gave every instrument enough room to breathe and, above all, conveyed the characteristic lightness in Bon Scott's voice with natural authenticity. Scott's powerful vocals were loaded with a lot of energy, this being for me a further proof of the spotlessly clean electrical



The interior of the preamp captivates with a super-clean design featuring separate SMD boards for the left and right channels in double-mono design, which are arranged piggyback on top of each other

and circuitry design of the S4, especially with regard to the phono section. Basically, the soundstage happened to be more wide than deep.

Somewhat lighter fare was provided by a number of iconic 12-inchers performed by electro-pop celebs Depeche Mode with tracks such as "Precious" (Mute Records, 2005) or "Shake the Disease" (Mute Records, 1985).



Toroidal power transformer, rectification and filtering were relocated and exiled in a separate housing

The stable low-frequency foundation provided a massive, powerful bass that was nevertheless agile and never puffy, thereby ensuring quite a high enjoyment factor. Things continued a little more subtly with the Cranberries. Dolores O'Riordan performed "Ode to my Family" (No Need to Argue, Island Records, 1994) and "Linger" (12", Island Records, 1993) and it quickly became clear that the high frequency spectrum and the mid-range, which is so important for rendering voices, were in no way inferior to the lowest octaves. Only really good (phono) preamplifiers can achieve the finest high-frequency resolution without any hint of harshness and with cleanly articulated sibilants.

I would tend to settle the tonal colours across the entire listening spectrum more on the silvery-cool side than on the golden-warm side, although overall it was characterized by extreme neutrality without pronounced individual sonic attributes. Clean rhythms and a certain playful lightness were further distinguishing marks that I ascribed to the KECES S4, as was also evident in "All I want is you" by U2 (Rattle and Hum, Island Records, 1988). This magnificent piece from U2's Joshua Tree phase is delineated by an incredibly intense inner tension and the KECES S4 managed to convey this in an excellent way.

In terms of quality, the MC and MM sections catch up with each other and the differences in the performances of the Ortofon Quintet Red and the Ortofon 2M Silver only differed in marginal nuances. At most, the finest ramifications in the high frequencies were rendered in a little more silky and subtle way through the MC section, while the MM section made use of a somewhat coarser brushstroke here and there.

Below the line, the KECES S4 steps up as an exceptionally good preamplifier in every respect, offering in my opinion an outstanding value for money. Such a mature sonic performance combined with great, exceedingly solid workmanship and such comprehensive, practice-oriented features are hard to find on the market for 4000 euros.

STATEMENT

The KECES S4 is a technically highly advanced and sophisticated preamplifier which, in addition to line, MM and MC signals, also processes signals from DS Audio optical cartridges as a special feature. The outstanding build quality, comprehensive features and, last but not least, the neutral, no-frills and sparkling clean sound are a combination that is extremely rare to find in this price range.

LISTENED WITH

Power amp	EternalArts OTL Mark III
Turntable	Pro-Ject Debut PRO + Plattenpuck PRO
Cartridges	Pro-Ject Pick it PRO, Ortofon Quintet Red
Loudspeakers	Dynamikks! Model 12
Accessories	Dynamikks! Speakerlink I, Pro-Ject Connect-it RCA-E phono interconnect
Furniture	Hi-Fi Racks Ltd

MANUFACTURER'S SPECIFICATIONS

KECES S4 Stereo Preamplifier

Device category	Pre-amplifier with MM/MC/optical phono sections
Gain	MM: 52dB; MC: 72dB; optical: 32dB
Total harmonic distortion (THD)	MM: <0,02%; MC: <0,05%; optical: <0,04%; RCA: <0,0015%; XLR: <0,0015%
Signal-to-noise ratio	MM: 78dB (A-weighted); MC: 70dB (A-weighted); optical: 75dB (A-weighted); RCA: 110dB (A-weighted); XLR: 110dB (A-weighted)
Inputs	1x RCA MM/MC; 1x RCA optical; 1x RCA Line; 2x XLR Line
Outputs	2 x RCA Line; 1x XLR Line; 1x 4-pin XLR for headphones
Input impedance	MM: 47kohms; MC: 56/100/220/470 ohms / 47kohms; optical: >10kohms; RCA/XLR: 170kohms
Housing colour	Black (Material: Aluminum)
Dimensions (W x D x H)	300 x 279 x 66mm (both devices)
Weight	4,5kg (Power supply); 3,5kg (Pre amp)
Max. power consumption	90W; 0,5W (in standby mode)
Others	Remote control
Price	4000 euros

DISTRIBUTION

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