

Harman Kardon HK-3490 Stereo receiver**Review: Harman Kardon HK-3490 Amplifier**

REVIEW OF THE HK-3490.

Initial impressions:

The Harman/Kardon HK-3490 stereo receiver is an interesting unit with some impressive features offering the listener solid value.

With a large choice of multi-channel surround receivers available today, one usually finds good quality stereo receivers to be limited in offerings and at times short of value and features most audio buffs look for. Harman/Kardon has made a very good attempt at giving an audio buff a quality unit with great sound for the dollar performance. The HK-3490 has gone a long way in giving good stereo playback with value.

Things that attracted me to the HK-3490.

(a). Quality two channel performance in a rather straight forward receiver. It has some good heft to it denoting a rather large power supply for a two channel receiver. This said in my personal situation the HK-3490 will be used as a preamp/tuner with its main pre-outs connecting to my Yaquin MC-10L (EL-34) tube amp. But for those who want to use the HK-3490's power amp section, in the price range of the HK-3490 it has good power and likely solid oomph.

b). Simplistic styling and general ease of use from the front panel. The HK-3490 has styling

that is understated but a bit quirky. The clean row of push buttons is easy to work though the lettering is a little small and dark if one has a dimly lit room. The quirky designed volume control knob with the indented design featuring a cool-white fluorescent lighted ring is easy to use but a bit plasticky in feel even if with lighting making using it easy in a dimly lit room. The dot matrix light blue display is clean and large in font size. It has a dimmable feature allowing full on brightness, muted brightness or display turned off.

(c). A fairly large number of inputs and outputs especially for a stereo receiver. Most stereo receivers are often short on inputs and outputs, the HK-3490 is a nice exception. No, it does not have as many inputs or outputs as most surround receivers but it has enough to get my rather well filled out equipment rack gear plugged in. These include:

1 - Phono input, said to be a high quality phono preamp section for a moving magnet cartridge (it is gold plated).

1 - CD input

3 - Video inputs with corresponding inputs for sound and picture along with video 1 having a loop (ins and outs) so that you can set up a video (or any other) recording device. I use my Pioneer CD recorder in the video 1 in and out section. Video 2 and video 3 are inputs only. I have a stand alone phono preamp and have it plugged into video 3 for audio playback from my turntable. Video 3 has a back input function and a front input function.

One can by double clicking on the Video 3 input button get front Video 3 inputs to turn on for any device you want to plug in the front of the HK-3490. My DVD player is plugged into the rear Video 2 inputs.

1 - Tape monitor input/output loop. This is good for say a tape deck especially if it has three heads and tape monitoring so that you can record off any other input and as a monitor loop hear your recordings in real time.

AM/FM/FM stereo tuner with 30 presets.

Here is the cool kicker with the HK-3490. It has a Digital Analog Converter with a digital processor. As such it offers the user TWO digital inputs both assignable, one is a Coaxial and the other is an Optical input. Though Harman/Kardon does not state in its literature what make of DAC and processor the HK-3490 has by doing some deducing online a story has it a tech told an online poster than the unit features an AKM, AK-4384 DAC which offers a 24 bit 192Khz setup design. It has a Cirrus Logic CS 48560 DSP. Why? because the HK-3490 features Dolby Labs, Virtual Dolby processing. This is a way of giving credible depth and surround effects via only two speakers or attached headphones. More on these items performance later.

1 - Wireless remote control. Though the remote offers the user all functions needed to operate the HK-3490 it is sadly not a universal/learning remote. Oh it will operate other H/K components but not other brands. It is fair in design and ergonomics but under dim lighting not easy to read with the grey on black fonts. Ideally the end user will likely invest in a better 3rd party universal remote such as those by Harmony.

The unit has under covered front panels both bass and treble controls along with a balance control. It also uses typical but solid multi-way binding posts for speaker cable hookup. All in all this is a well equipped stereo receiver that shall find good connectivity for most anyone who'd be interested in buying it. However a few other quirks to be noted.

QUIRKS.

Using the dimmer. If you are wanting to dim the panel while using sources connected to video 1 and video 2 you will not be able to dim the panel unless you select source video 3 on the remote control, then dim the panel followed by switching back to source video 1 or video 2. Harman Kardon's reasoning is having a suitable Harman Kardon product connected into video 1 (like a VCR or a DVD recorder) and another video source in video 2 the dimmer control will affect those sources panels if they allow dimming. It's a quirk but not too much of an issue.

Switching from a digital input to another source does not immediately give output from the other source. Such as going from a coaxial digital input on say video 1 to FM source, one seems to have to switch power off the video 1 source or switch off the digital input to analogue first before changing to another source

LISTENING REVIEW.

Ok, onto some listening thoughts and opinions.

As already noted I did not connect the power amp section to my speakers, I again use a Yaqin MC-10L tube amp as my stereo power amp. Listening was confined to the following:

Phono input and the built in preamp in comparison to my Cambridge Audio 640p stand alone phono preamp.

The CD input using the analogue connection and the coaxial digital connection to the HK-3490's internal DAC.

Some movie watching and listening using Dolby " Virtual Dolby " setup.

Tuner performance.

AUDIO PLAYBACK REVIEW.

Music used for Phono (LP) listening was Sultan's of Swing by Dire Straits (LP). Turntable is a Technics SL-1200MKII with Cardas internal arm rewire and Ultralink "audiophile" interconnects all played via a Denon DL-110 high output moving coil cartridge.

My ways of listening tests follow as such, play about 1 minute of a section of music via the item you are testing, stop and compare the same section through your reference piece of gear used, stop again after 1 minute and replay the music through the item you are testing again to use in a way an A-B-A series differentiator. I find I'm able by using this method to find out the often subtle but noticeable differences between a reference piece of gear and the item I'm testing. So in the case of testing the phono section I played about 1 minute of Sultans of Swing through my setup and the Cambridge Audio 640p connected to the HK-3490 Video 3 stereo audio inputs. This give me a base reference point as to sound I am more use to. I then stopped the music, connected the turntable's interconnects to the HK-3490 phono section to then re-cue the song.

Now I was listening to the HK-3490 phono preamp. The music ran about 1 minute with another stop and reconnection back to my Cambridge Audio 640p. Re-cue the song and listening for the differences I found between what I now hear and what I heard previously.

Results, well the phono section in the HK-3490 is competent and quiet. It offers smooth sound with a good crispness to it. In comparison to the sound via my Cambridge Audio 640p well it lacks the same level of depth and width in soundstage via playing through my Paradigm Studio 20 v4 speakers and Paradigm DSP-3100 powered sub setup. It also lacked a level of texture and air in comparison to the 640p. BUT! honestly it sounded pretty nice and will definitely make anyone's vinyl sound friendly and pleasing enough to become a more bona-fide devotee to vinyl playback. Obviously a more astute hi-fi buff will likely add later on a dedicated phono preamp but if one does not choose to do so the phono section of the HK-3490 was pleasing and nice analogue sounding giving true hi-fi results.

Onto CD playback. The unit I used as a playback piece and reference was my Pioneer PDR-555RW CD recorder. I used this because I connected it to the HK-3490 via both analogue connections and a digital coaxial connection to the HK-3490's internal AKM DAC. I also have a top line vintage Technics SLP-S70 CD player connected via the analogue CD inputs but did not use it here as I know it sounds better via analogue than my Pioneer CDR does. The CDR is a decent vintage cd recorder but its playback via analogue connection is only average in my opinion so I figure the differential between it and the internal DAC of the HK-3490 will be greater this way.

Music used was from Annie Lennox's Medusa CD. Two tracks about 1 minute total playback into each. "No more I love you's" and "Whiter Shade of Pale". I find this a good red book cd for sound. Again the playback went like the phono test did, A-B-A. First the coaxial digital of the HK-3490, then the analogue out of the PDR-555RW (played through the video 1 inputs) then back to the coaxial digital input. Just a note, to switch between analogue and digital on the HK-3490 you select the input you are using, in my case video 1 hold the video 1 button down on the receiver's front panel and then tap the TAPE MONTOR button to get either coaxial, optical or analogue connections.

The music played via the (reported online) AKM DAC and Cirrus Logic DSP sounded as I expected via DAC's built into receivers if not slightly better than I thought. Both song clips were clear and smooth with a nice recessed soundstage as compared to the PDR-555RW analogue out.

The PDR-555RW has a very forward soundstage and edge in details via its analogue out through its own 1 bit DAC's. This makes it an average mid-90's made in Japan cd player. The HK-3490 DAC via the coaxial connection is superior sounding DAC in reference to the Pioneer's DAC. CD playback is pleasant and high quality with a nice bit of air, the recessed soundstage and better overall texture. All in all a nice cd playback result. Again it is not an esoteric DAC but a musical one and one that can allow me many hours of satisfying cd playback. But just a note, I find analogue playback especially via vinyl or my own high quality cassette tape recordings off vinyl or dubbing cds to be superior in overall sound quality and pleasure to most if not all red book CD's I have heard.

Playing movies. If one wants to assemble the best in surround sound playback and can invest in better gear including matching speakers, setup and utilize to a better performance a 5.1 or 7.1 set up then you will likely not choose a stereo receiver even if it has Dolby Virtual Surround. I have found that once I bought my Hitachi LCD projection t.v. that for daily t.v. watching using both SRS and BBE along with the t.v.'s 30 watt amp to get very pleasing surround effect in any seat in my living room. The t.v. offers me enough pleasure watching a number of shows or sporting events without having to fire up an H/T system. It also keeps my household power consumption down too. But in playing DVD movies I need the system on with my setup. Running now only two speakers and a sub well was a concern for me with movie playback but I do not watch too many movies as most Hollywood movies made in the last decade or so are simply awful in my opinion. But I chose the HK-3490 for its virtual Dolby over other stereo receivers I could have bought.

So onto some listening.

Movies I used to test were Top Gun and Terminator 2. Setting my DVD player to PCM stereo output and selecting Dolby Digital on the movie menus (this will mix down to Dolby Digital 2.1) I then proceeded on to watch first Top Gun. With Dolby Virtual Surround. One can select Virtual Reference or Virtual Wide and the user should try both as one or the other may work better for any given movie. On Top Gun and Terminator 2 I preferred Reference in my room. Wide gave it more spaciousness but for these two movies in my room too diffuse, but it's a personal choice. The sound was great in the sweet spot, it was as if I had a full 5.1 setup while listening to Top Gun. The worry is those who cannot sit in the centre sweet spot. I worried about that in a stereo receiver setup but the soundtrack played well even as one sat off centre on my viewing seating There was no terrible off side or out of kilter left/right issues. Center info sound was not as well locked on as if one had a 5.1 setup with a dedicated centre speaker but any seat on my main seating still sounded full and clear with good imaging and simulated surround info. Ironically the sound way off center via my smaller wing chair sounded very good too and given its angle had a front image to be pleasing even if it began to fall out of my t.v. picture's sweet spot for image quality.

Playing back Terminator 2 re-enforced what I heard in Top Gun. Its soundtrack too was full and clear with good centre imaging again especially in the sweet spot but not unobtrusive as one moves out of the centre viewing sweet spot. The full effects of the bass was played properly through my powered sub woofer. Simulated surround effects were quite thick and pleasing too.

Obviously if one wants a full 5.1 or 7.1 effect and can properly set up all the speakers in a room for full effect and have a need to use said setup often enough to justify the expense well then the HK-3490 is not for you. But if you mainly listen too your audio system for music but want to be able to play movies or t.v. trough it all and have still good effect along with maybe not wanting to have all the speakers/cabling or to invest in the time and money to set up a proper 5.1 or 7.1 setup then the HK-3490 may be a receiver for you.

As to the tuner. I did not test AM as its going to be mediocre, the FM tuner is connected to my home cable provider so stations will be only as clear as my cable company can send the signal. This said FM performance is solid and clear, good frequency response and not too much background noise. Stations that better send out their signal even via my cable connection are quite pleasing and quite good hi-fi. I prefer a good FM signal over the usually low or in my opinion over rated quality of digital radio. I find digital radio generally sounds lifeless and flat but that a said the HK-3490 allows you to connect XM Radio if you subscribe to it.

The HK-3490 can allow you to preset 30 stations. If you choose auto preset the unit will scan the FM tuner and lock in the first 30 stations it finds. If you go manual preset you can tune via the up and down buttons to then make your presets or you can if you know the frequency of the stations punch in via your remote the call frequency numbers to then preset the stations in order you want them to be.

Another connection via H/K's bridge docking is for your iPod if you wish to integrate it to the setup. I am a user of physical media (vinyl, cd and cassettes along with DVD movies) and prefer such over downloading music so I am not testing said option but noting it is available to those who want it.

CONCLUSION.

Well much can and has been said on this receiver. In realizing a simplification of my A/V system noting that I use it about 85% of the time for music playback via vinyl, cassette, cd and FM and only maybe 15% for movies I wanted to simplify it all with a good but affordable stereo receiver. There are not too many choices out there and none that offer Virtual Dolby.

Had I not wanted Virtual Dolby there are other good choices too via Denon, Yamaha, NAD, Outlaw Audio and Onkyo that I liked. Each offers strengths and weaknesses and likely good stereo ability.

I am pleased with the HK-3490. It's far from perfect, it has some quirks and I wish it came with a true universal/learning remote but that said it has enough connections/inputs for me. It is a clean rather easy to use unit. It offers good performance though again I did not use its built in amp. For many of us who are audio buffs, audiophiles and audio hobbyists who have real world budgets and can't or refuse in reality to spend what can be seen seemingly silly amounts of money on gear that we may even drool over the HK-3490's performance to price is a steal. It can provide a good receiver and used as a preamp setup as I use it here too. It sounds good and looks good. It hefty and not short on requirements to most who will buy it.

If you need or want Virtual Dolby then it is the only choice among current stereo receivers. If not it will stand up well against its peers but you will have to cross reference it with each other choice and investigate if the HK-3490 is for you. I am pleased with its value to me. It's not an esoteric piece of gear and it's not perfect but it will serve me well at this time in my audio enjoyment life, well enough until I wish to move on from it to one day something else. All in all a good stereo receiver and a cool product for a very nice price.

:-)

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