

Astell&Kern AK300 £749



IRIVER RUN

Astell&Kern is a subsidiary of electronics giant iriver, founded in 1979 by seven ex-Samsung employees. Based in South Korea but with facilities in the US, China and Japan it employs 1,000 people and has a total manufacturing capacity of some 10 million units a year. As well as portable audio devices, it also makes tablet PCs, e-dictionaries, smartphones and healthcare devices.

From early, reputation-forging days making the sexiest, priciest DAPs in a fledgling market, Astell&Kern is having to run much harder now, facing off against the constantly swelling ranks of rivals at more affordable price points. Its most obvious move in this direction came with the atypically slender but fine-sounding AK Jr (*HFC 401*), giving the company a portable player price span from the Jr's entry-level £399 to the eye-watering £2,999 required for its AK380 flagship.



The cool alloy chunkiness is impressive

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Astell&Kern AK300
- ORIGIN**
South Korea
- TYPE**
32-bit/384kHz & DSD-capable Digital Audio Player
- WEIGHT**
205g
- DIMENSIONS**
(WxHxD)
75 x 112 x 15mm
- FEATURES**
 - Quoted battery life: 10 hours
 - 64GB internal storage
 - MicroSD slot (128GB max)
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Computers Unlimited
- TELEPHONE**
0208 2008282
- WEBSITE**
astellnkern.com

Few would deny that the South Korean brand Astell&Kern is king of the hill when it comes to portable hi-res audio, responsible not just for setting and regularly raising the performance bar against which others are judged but also for giving the sector an aspirational, luxury sheen that has inspired many imitators.

The AK300, which made its debut at this year's Munich High End Show, is another strategically placed and priced addition to the lineup. It effectively replaces the ageing AK100 (*HFC 370*) but is just under half the price of the next model up in the range, the £1,499 AK320. In their chiselled, cool alloy chunkiness and distinctly high-end feel, the two are hard to tell apart. But the spec, while incorporating many of the features seen on AK's pricier models, has been trimmed back to just one AK4490 DAC rather than the dual-configuration on the AK320 and AK380.

That said, the AK300 can accept high-resolution audio files up to

32-bit/384kHz and 5.6MHz DSD – both down converted to PCM for play back – and uses an extremely accurate VCXO Reference Clock to minimise jitter. A 20-band parametric EQ and wireless streaming via the AK Connect app also figure, and the unit can be used as a USB DAC. Internal storage is 64GB, but there's only one microSD slot for adding up to a further 128GB, whereas even the least expensive model here, the Opus 1, sports a pair capable of accepting 200GB each.

On a more positive note, there can't be many DAPs that are nicer to use. Its snug palm fit and precise click-step volume thumbwheel are a joy, the full-depth touchscreen bright, crisp and responsive. And if the OS isn't the slickest here, it is at least logically structured and simple to navigate.

Sound quality

This is a massively accomplished player that wouldn't know how to put a foot wrong if it was told. Whatever I play sounds just right: tonally, temporally – almost tangibly. Notably free from artifice and undue emphasis, it nails the neutral ground with such cool confidence that you're allowed to relax into the music and forget about the machine playing it. Wherein lies the path to many a long, unflagging listening session. I'm not usually one for headphone marathons, but its extraordinary uncoloured clarity and even handedness are so persuasive I find myself drifting way beyond the time I've allotted for the test tracks.

But perhaps the AK300's talents are shown to best effect with Joe Sample's supremely funky *All God's Children*. His distinctively percussive Steinway tinkling has real bite and harmonic structure yet is allowed to mesh seamlessly with the rhythm section of Marcus Miller's bass guitar, Lenny Castro's percussion and Omar Hakim's drums that, as a combined force drives the track along so powerfully. Add the multi-layered synth elements and it's a piece that can easily seem fussy and overwrought. What the AK does so well is preserve the musical impetus ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Style; build; superb sound quality
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not the slickest interface
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Pricey yes, but it oozes quality on all fronts
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL

