

# THE ULTIMATE HI-FI GUIDE

# HI-FI CHOICE

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## *The Collection*

IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF THE WORLD'S FINEST HI-FI







# Krell Evolution Two and One

*Krell's new eight-box 'statement' stereo amplifier is a snip at ten grand... per box!*

PRICE £80,000 (approx.) CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.krellonline.com

**T**hat's right, *around* eighty grand! The price of the Evolution Two preamp and Evolution One power amp system fluctuates in price in accord with the ups and downs of the dollar and pound.

Both the preamp and power amp sections are magnificent-looking four-box affairs. Both supply a separate chassis for signal handling and another for power supply duties for each channel – that's four boxes per channel, eight in total... just to amplify a stereo system! This makes for a potentially huge amp footprint, but in reality the preamp can stack four-high and the amps can sit atop their power supplies.

Cleverly though, cleaving the preamplifier in twain doesn't mean you have to endlessly tinker with left and right channels. Unless you don't want 'em to, the separate volume controls move as one. It's all seamless, whether you physically operate the preamp or use the paratrooper-hard remote handset.

The Evolution Two preamplifier quartet is a zero-feedback, line-only affair, with an open loop bandwidth that stretches up into the megahertz region. All signal gain in the Evolution Two is in the current, not voltage, domain – this is the key to Krell's CAST ethos (see p36 for more on CAST). The switching of the four single-ended or XLR inputs are handled with optically coupled switches, thereby limiting noise and potential damage to the precious audio signal. Even the volume control differs from the norm; it's a digitally controlled analogue circuit, with 216-step resolution.

The Evolution Two power supplies are extensively electrically and magnetically shielded. Internal line conditioning circuitry filters RF noise on the AC power, and compensates for asymmetric power waveforms and DC on the mains. Power for the analogue stages comes from a large 170VA toroidal transformer, driving four bridge rectifiers and 39,600 microfarads of filter capacitance per channel, the sort of power supply that wouldn't look out of place in a 200-watt power amp. The driver and output stages in the main analogue regulators use five pairs of power transistors, again the sort of delivery often seen in power amplifiers. A second dedicated 90VA toroidal transformer with three independent secondary windings powers the Evolution Two digital control circuitry. This isn't just overkill in a preamplifier – it's positively thermonuclear-grade overkill.

The Evolution One is the power amp section of the eight box, er, duo. It delivers 450 watts per channel in Class A and features all the

latest Krell developments, including its own Current Mode layout, Sustained Plateau Bias drive and CAST 2 connections to the Evolution Two preamp. Where the Evolution Two is over-engineered for a preamplifier, the Evolution One has the subtle touch of a preamp designer applied to every circuit. The output impedance of the final gain stages is one hundredth that of most power amplifiers. It also shuns global negative feedback, with only 8dB of local, nested negative feedback in the final gain stages. Everything is twice engineered, such as the regulation on the power rails. This means the power amp effectively receives power from the nearest you can get to battery operation when dealing with 450 watts.

**“What marks this amp out as being better than *all* the others is not easy to pin down, but when you hear it, you know it.”**

Once again, those separate Evolution One power supplies are shielded. The overall design of the PSU is similar to the preamp power section, only on a massive scale, so the low-level stages feature a 165VA transformer and the gain stages sport a mighty 2,500VA transformer, delivering the juice to eight 35-amp bridge rectifiers and 120,000 microfarads of filter capacitance and on to 14 pairs of high performance power transistors.

## SOUND QUALITY

It can be summed up in just six words: “This is the best amplifier ever”. But why?

Well, for a start, it sounds endless. There's so much power and so much control on offer here, your ears will run out of steam long before the amps or speakers do. Especially the speakers: we need to redefine those maximum SPL and power handling ratings in the light of the Krell Evolution. Of course, turning these amplifiers to the max will reduce the drivers of a 50-watt power handling speaker to a smoking ruin in seconds, but more realistic high-end designs will be positively transformed.

The Krell's huge, exquisitely detailed sound will bring the best from the most demanding of speakers, hoisting their sound up several more notches. We auditioned these amps through the Wilson Sophia 2 speakers; no small potatoes, but far down the Wilson food chain. Yet, with these amplifiers, the Sophia 2 suddenly became the best speaker Wilson Audio makes.

A part of this comes from the Evolution's prodigious bass, adding octaves of depth and ambience-defining solidity to the sound. This manifests itself by taking a grip over the music at all points on the frequency compass with hitherto unheard honesty.

There's almost no point running out the usual descriptors about soundstaging, intelligibility, detail, dynamics or neutrality; this amp system eclipses all former reference points by a substantial margin. The Krell Evolution is fundamentally honest in approach, but not to the point of sounding stark or etched. It lacks the warmth of many valve-based systems, but this seems like an artificial injection to the sound by comparison.

Krell of old sounded very detailed, very big,

but with a steely top end. Krell products of the last 10 years or so have done much to overcome this, but there was a worry... if this is the best of Krell, will it mark a return to the big, steely sound? There was no need for worry – this lays the ghost of old Krell sound so thoroughly, the steel's all melted down now.

It's a very hard call, running out of defining terms. They've all been used up, applied to all that went before. But they've been applied erroneously. There's something not going on here that goes on in every other amplifier that will mark out the Krell Evolution as something truly spectacular. And it's something not intangible but not easily describable. We can now sympathise with the judge who, when asked to define pornography said: “I can't, but I know it when I see it”. What marks this amplifier out as being better than *all* the others is not something easy to pin down, but when you hear it, you know it. And everything else sounds just a little dull afterwards.

But there has to be a way to sum up the Evolution system. Imagine a power amplifier that is as reactive as a five-watt, single-ended triode amp and as powerful as a kilowatt design. Now imagine a preamplifier that manages to combine the best elements of the best preamps around with none of the downsides. Now put these masterworks in eight boxes and stick an eighty grand price tag on them. Go on – dare to dream! **HFC**

*Alan Sircom*