

your guide to hi-fi & home cinema

ISSUE
3

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What's better than two channels of Krell sound? Try five channels!

STAND-BY

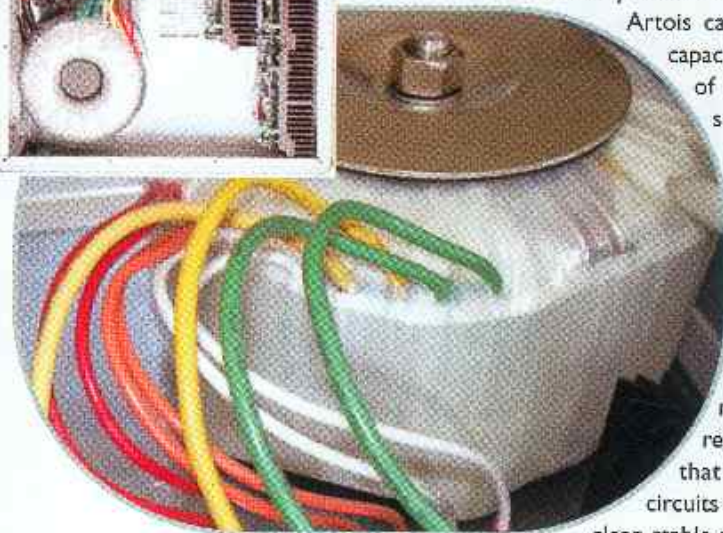
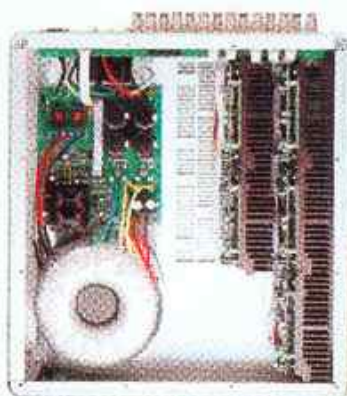
POWER

KRELL



I recently heard Krell's Showcase Processor and Power Amplifier driving the audio system during a demonstration of, as I recall, "The Fellowship of the Rings". Although the surroundings were less than ideal I was immediately struck by the accuracy and detail of the sound which appeared to dissect the entire soundtrack whilst pinning the audience to their seats with the sheer "oomph" of the sound. My first thought was "Wow!" and my second thought was here was a system that "Your Guide" needs to take home. The months have passed but finally pen has been put to paper and we have set out to explain the virtues of Krell's Showcase 5 multi-channel amplifier.

The Showcase Series of products is part of Krell's HEAT (High End Home Theatre) range and comprises the processor and a choice of either a five, six or seven-channel power amplifier. All the power amplifiers are basically the same but vary with the number of amplifier modules fitted inside. We tested the five channel model which can be upgraded to six or seven channels at any time simply by adding the extra modules; the necessary input and output connectors being already in place on the back panel. Krell give the distinct impression that these products are at the "budget" end of their product line and thus hardly to be considered high-end. However it's all a matter of perspective and certainly there is no indication that this product is anything other than a top-class model. The exterior finish is totally up to Krell's usual standards with brushed aluminium panels with smoothly radiused corners and edges creating a purposeful yet elegant style.



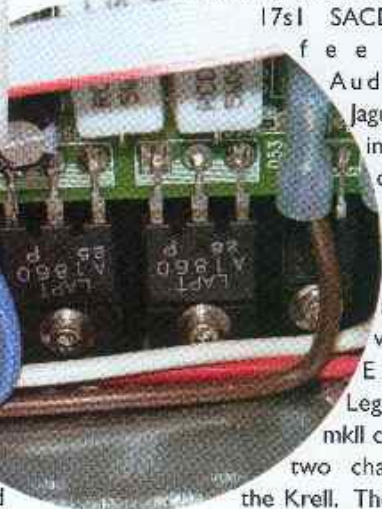
Inside the amplifier modules sit in rows between the ventilation slots in the top & bottom panels and there is a huge toroidal transformer feeding a small power-supply board. Traditionally Krell amplifiers have always had such big transformers and they normally feed a large bank of "Stella Artois can" sized reservoir capacitors in something of a "brute force" supply arrangement. However the Showcase has a almost insignificant reservoir capacitors because each module has its own regulators to ensure that the amplifier circuits are working from clean stable supply lines.



and thus burns a few bob's worth of electricity in the course of a day.

Now we know that the Showcase is a home cinema amplifier and as such can probably get away with sounding less than perfect but it is still a Krell and we wanted to know if it would live up to our expectations of this brand. I've appreciated the virtues of Krell amplifiers ever since the first KSA-50 way back in 1980 and I always expect nothing but the best from their products. Would this amplifier deliver?

So before we got to the movie room we put together a two channel system comprising the Marantz SA-17s1 SACD player



feeding Audioquest Jaguar cables into my own design of passive pre-amplifier which fed Ecosse Legend SE mkII cables into two channels of the Krell. The outputs

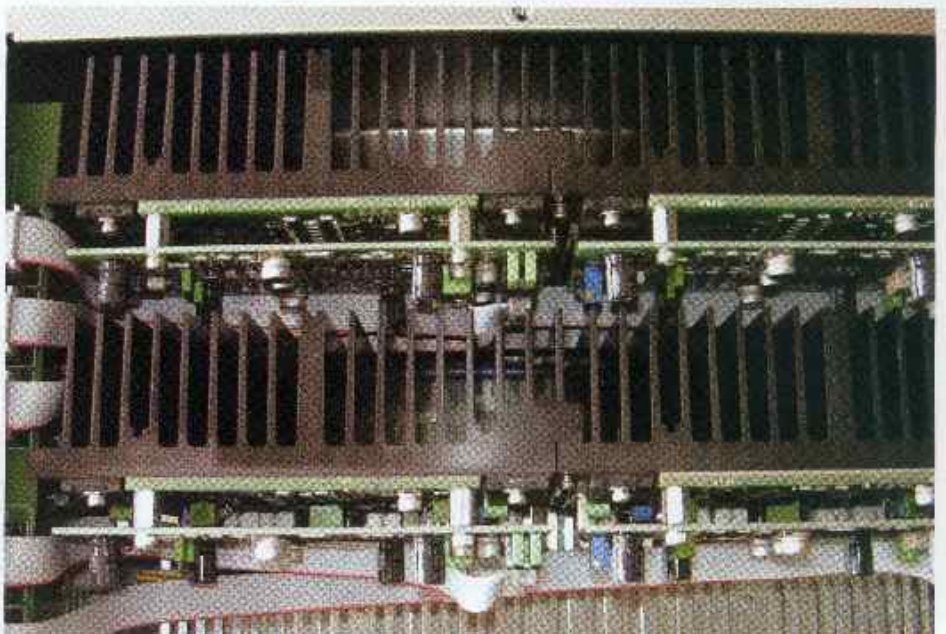
were wired to a pair of Eclipse TD512 loudspeakers via the new Chord Signature cables; the latter are reviewed elsewhere in this issue. This was a system which, on paper at least, should extract just about everything there was to hear on a CD.

And it did! Eleanor McEvoy's "You'll Hear Better Songs (Than This)" sounded slightly lean but all the emotion in her voice was there; open and exposed.

These modules incorporate circuit designs sourced from the Full Power Balanced amplifier technology previously only incorporated in Krell's reference level components. The circuit topology uses Current Mode circuitry with a balanced configuration to give the lowest noise. Nearly all the circuitry is constructed using surface mount technology which gives the maximum circuit density and hence the widest bandwidth possible. The input, pre-driver, and driver stages all work in the desirable Class A mode. As always the components are of excellent quality and the constructional standard is best described as "immaculate".

As with most power amplifiers the installation of the Showcase 5 is very straightforward. The only decision is whether to use the balanced XLR inputs or the single ended RCA socket inputs and that decision depends upon the specification of the source equipment. With a full Krell system most users would adopt the fully balanced configuration. The connectors are of excellent quality and thankfully the output binding posts are of a sensible design which accepts banana plugs and grips them tightly. The front panel has a tiny power button which switches the amplifier from standby (red indicator) to idle (blue indicator). The manufacturer recommends the standby setting when the amplifier is not in use, possibly because this amplifier runs on the hotter side of warm

Incidentally the reason that Krell provide such a massive toroidal transformer is to ensure a rock solid power delivery under any demand. The company claims that the advantage of a single large transformer is that individual channels have access to the entire capacity of the power supply whereas a design using smaller individual transformers, whilst cheaper, limits each channel to its own transformer's lower capability. If a channel's demand exceeds its own power supply's capability, the music suffers. With one oversized transformer, there is additional power available when a channel needs it.

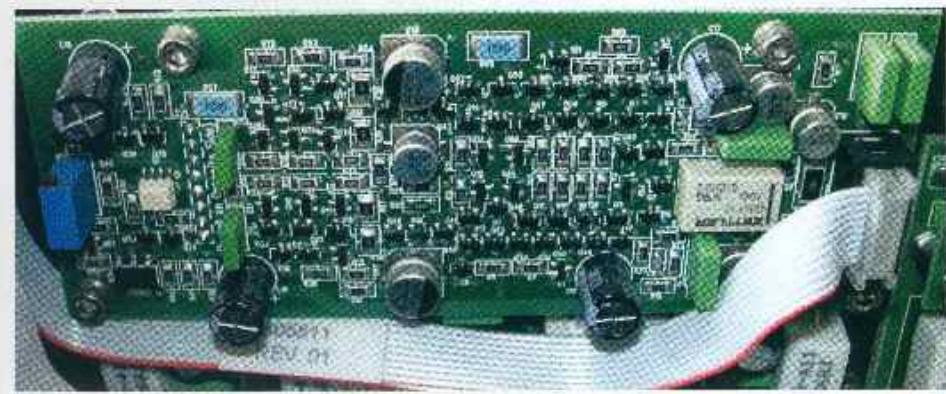




After listening to no end of music I returned to my office computer and wandered the web before stumbling across an advert for The Shadow's Farewell Tour. Stimulated into reliving my schooldays I found a recording of "Apache" and put it on.

Other SACDs came and went until it was the turn of Barbra Streisand and "The Movie Album" about which the less said the better unless you particularly like that sort of thing. "Survivor" from Destiny's Child almost demolished the loudspeakers and so we changed to a pair of Mission Elegante e83s and even they struggled to handle the pile-driving bass offered at the levels of which the Krell was capable. Finally it was back to the Eclipse speakers and a collection of Opus 3 recordings burned onto a disc for me a few years ago. We plugged the CD player directly into the power amplifier via the Ecosse cables to ensure the most direct signal path; yes this reviewing lark can be a lot of fun sometimes.

Everybody remarked on the apparent absence of any noise and the clarity of the sound although a hint of sibilance and added sparkle was now heard. So finally we were close to defining the sound of this amplifier. A lean sound free of any softening around the edges; tremendous power delivered with ease; open and transparent; with just a hint of hardness but no more than a hint. At one stage my wife came home and wandered into my listening room with a mug of tea and to my surprise said; "Is that a Krell amp?" She explained later that the sound she heard had that elusive combination of smoothness without any loss of the musical detail. How right she was.



Originally recorded in mono at Abbey Road's Studio 2 on a two-track EMI recorder it is almost a "straight-line" recording with an absence of electronic processing apart from the use of the echo chamber. On this system the recording acquired a life of its own with Bruce Welch's semi-acoustic strumming giving a backdrop to Hank's Fender Stratocaster (the first in the UK) whilst Jet Harris's bass lines almost create a second lead guitar counterpoint. Suddenly it was June 1960 again and a smile a foot wide was born. But back to reality and it was time to hump 60 pounds of amplifier to our home theatre set-up. This is a heavy amplifier so to spare your back I'd recommend that you negotiate hard to get your dealer to earn his money by doing all the carrying.

We tried the Showcase 5 with the resident KEF home cinema system and also with the Tannoy Fusion AV4 system featured in the magazine this month. It might seem strange to couple an amplifier costing four and a half grand with a speaker system costing less than a quarter of that price but let me say right now it was a marriage blessed from above. I think it would be fair to say that the use of this Krell amplifier allowed the speakers to perform almost beyond their best. This system really flew. We dug out "The Fellowship of the Rings" and our earlier impressions were confirmed. When the soundtrack is loud it can get very loud but with no apparent change to the character of the sound. This is an amplifier that appears to sound the same even if you are mouthing words soundlessly across the room surrounded by the cacophony of a full scale war between the armies of Orcs, Trolls and sundry other oddities. In the extreme

the sound could turn from "crystal clear" to harsh but that was not any fault of the amplifier which just churned out everything it was given. Our review of the Tannoy speakers describes some more of this system's performance but I should mention that someone recommended that we should watch "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" with the Mandarin soundtrack. It just so happens that I've previously lived in China and "enjoyed" a viewing diet of Chinese middle-era soaps so I knew what to expect. Even if you speak no Chinese you can get the gist of what is going on and you'll find yourself being drawn into the movie to a degree you never expected. Again this Krell amplifier just handled everything so well that the sound was never a matter of discussion; it was just there.

I really can't find anything of consequence with which to criticise this Krell Showcase amplifier. If there are any imperfections in the sound they are barely audible whilst the effortless power delivery; smoothness of tone and total transparency are attributes you could find it difficult to live without. Yes, the only caveat I'll include will be that an audition will almost certainly convince you to buy so disinherit the children; sell the lawnmower and buy the best.

FACT FILE

- Output Power, Each Channel Driven: 8 ohms, 125 watts
- 4 ohms, 250 watts
- Output Voltage: Peak to Peak, 90 volts
- RMS, 32 volts
- Frequency Response: 20 Hz to 20 kHz, +0dB, -0.15dB
- 0.2 Hz to 95 kHz, +0dB, -3dB
- Signal to Noise Ratio: > 110 dB ("A" weighted)
- Total Harmonic Distortion: 1 kHz < 0.03%, 20 kHz < 0.2%
- Gain: 26.2 dB
- Input Impedance: 45 kohms
- Input Sensitivity: 1.55 volts rms
- Power Consumption: Stand-By, 90 watts
- Idle, 150 watts
- Max, 1600 watts
- Inputs: 5 single ended (RCA connectors)
- 5 balanced (XLR connectors)
- Outputs: 5 (5-way binding posts)
- Remote Connectors: 2 dc outputs (12 volts trigger)
- Dimensions (W x H x D): 17.3 x 5.7 x 19.8 inches, 439 x 145 x 503 mm
- Weight (amplifier only): 60 pounds, 27.1 kg
- Price: £4495.00