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SACD System

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SACD CD

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Krell SACD Standard

by Roy Gregory

If ever a product sent (or suffered from?) mixed messages, then this is it. Take the name for starters. Not only is the Krell brand synonymous with public perception of the high-end, the product's moniker itself suggests that it's designed to define what's possible from the SACD format. Clear enough then, you might think, until you take into account the \$4245 price-tag. Hardly cheap I grant you, but not even approaching the audio stratosphere occupied by Krell's more celebrated digital components. Take the range topping KPS-25sc, a snip at \$23498. Even the baby KAV280 costs close to \$4000. And these machines only play CD. So maybe we need to reassess the obvious first impression.

The finish too is sleek and sexy. Employing Krell's latest corner extrusion and bolted plate construction, there's no denying just how attractive and classy this player looks, especially in silver. But look a little closer and you'll see that despite the unusually high button count for a high-end machine, the actual facilities are bare-bones. In fact, there's just what you get on the donor machine plus the absolute minimum of frills required to survive in the SACD Standard's home market. That'll explain the balanced outputs and multiple multi-room type connections then.

Finally there's the weight. Despite the solid, foursquare looks of the machine it's far from overbuilt. Indeed, it's refreshingly manageable, perhaps suggesting that the US public have finally got over the assumption that massive, milled from solid aluminium casework guarantees good sound.

So, name and appearance aside, it seems that what we actually have here, if not exactly an entry level machine could best be considered the bottom

rung on the top ladder. I guess in this instance it's a case of Standard as opposed to Premium, suggesting that we might well see an all-singing, all-dancing (multi-standard?) player somewhere in Krell's future. Only time will tell.

However, having said all that, there is at least one respect in which the Krell sets new standards, and that's disc handling. Anybody who has endured the pedantic, tortoise like operation of the



Sony top-loading SACD transport will heave a

sigh of relief as soon as they put a disc in the Krell's conventional drawer mechanism.

It reduces loading times to near CD proportions. I mean, I'm a fan of top-loading, but the interminable process demanded by the Classé Omega SACD1 is ssooooooowwwwwwww that it simply drives me up the wall, especially when it ultimately fails to read the disc and you have to start all over again. No such problems with the Krell, which performed smoothly, swiftly and impeccably the whole time I had it.

I really like the way this player looks, although the red display looks pretty gaudy on the black model. Hey at least you can dim it, even if you can't switch it right off – and you'll want to, because the player sounds noticeably better that way. I also really like having a full

complement of controls on the front panel. No more trying to decipher which of the many black buttons littering a poorly labeled remote actually does what you want. And while we're on the subject of remotes (an accessory that I personally prefer to leave in the box) the one that comes with the SACD Standard is one of the nicer models I've come across. Slim yet solid, it offers all the functions on a nicely laid out membrane type control panel. The buttons offer nice, positive latching and are even luminous, meaning that you know that you've done something and you might even know what it is. Once again Krell have thrown off their macho image in favour of a far more intelligent solution.

So what exactly does the SACD Standard offer? Essentially, this is a straight SACD player, meaning that it will handle CD, two-channel and discrete multi-channel SACD. You get the choice of balanced stereo outputs, but multi-channel means single-ended – a reasonable compromise given the price of the machine and the multi-channel equipment it's likely to be used with. You get a full complement of 12V and infrared triggers, an RS-232 connector and 16bit/44.1K optical and co-axial digital outputs. You also get four user switchable digital filter profiles. These effect the roll-off frequency and rate of the converters, but also, confusingly, the level of the output, making comparisons confusing to say the least. Fortunately the digital volume readout on the Gryphon Sonata pre-amp used for balanced listening made precise matching possible and repeatable, making the whole process that much easier.

Besides the Gryphon electronics and speakers, I also used the Howland HP100/RADIA combination, with ▶

▶ either the Gryphon Cantata or Revel F50 speakers. Cabling was Nordost Valhalla throughout, with either Russ Andrews or Nordost power cables. I had the Classé Omega SACD1 and Wadia 861 to serve as benchmarks, the former representing the best two-channel SACD replay I've heard, particularly from its balanced outputs.

It quickly became apparent that if you wanted to extract the best possible performance from the Krell then you needed to pay particular attention to set-up. Specifically, you need to select the preferred filter from the four options available, dim the display as I've already mentioned, and finally you need to look at support options. Amongst the latter I found that either tall RDC cones, or Harmonix TU-202ZX tuning feet wrought clear benefits, even with the player supported on the finite element Pagode HD Master Reference rack. The cones delivered better resolution, detail, transparency and focus, opening out the sound which could otherwise sound rather murky. The large Harmonix feet offered better weight and more vivid instrumental colours at the expense of some separation, although either was clearly superior to the player's own rubber feet.

The filters are more complicated. Generally speaking (and after careful comparison at matched volume levels) I preferred the player set to the No. 1 position. With the requisite care paid to support and set-up, this delivered a beguiling combination of detail, delicacy and dynamics. Pace, rhythmic expression and the shape of melodies were all beautifully portrayed, as were instrumental colours and textures,

making the music at once clear and engaging. In contrast, the No. 2 filter sounded muddled, thick and congested, with clumsy and crude dynamic discrimination: Definitely a non starter. Likewise, the (much louder) No. 3 filter, which is richer and adds significant weight and body, but at the expense of a hurried feel coupled to limited dynamic expression which seems to push things permanently to the loud end of the scale. In fact, pushy is a good word to describe the overall effect.



Initially impressive, don't be suckered. Long term listening soon reveals the lack of expression. Which brings us to filter No. 4, and the only really viable alternative to No. 1. Again, it's a warmer and slightly richer sound, coupled to an expansive soundstage and sweeping dynamics. But it's also softer and less focused. Indeed, it reminds me of the sound of the LP12, with its combination of warmth at the bottom end and easy, rhythmic sweep. The conclusion has to be that the original is still the best, although No. 4 might offer relief from relentlessly bright or over dynamic discs (or systems). I stuck with the No. 1 filter for the rest of the review period, but

the ability to switch filters from the remote means you can fiddle to your heart's content.

Which only leaves the issue of balanced versus single-ended connection. Here, even with the fully-complementary Gryphon electronics, I marginally preferred the single-ended stereo outputs to the balanced option. They gave a slightly livelier and more vivacious performance, not holding on quite as tight as the balanced outputs. Ultimately your choice of connection will probably be dictated as much by circumstances as anything else, but if you have that option it's well worth experimenting with both.

Once you've got the SACD Standard up and running, the first thing you'll discover, and perhaps the most surprising, is that it's a darn fine CD player. Comparisons with the Wadia 861 leave the Krell a tad bowed but unbroken. Whilst the bigger and much more expensive machine betters it in terms of information, textural

definition and transparency, as well as the clarity and ease of its overall picture, the SACD Standard delivers a credible facsimile of that whole. It may not match the Wadia but it's only a little behind in each important regard, placing it on a par with the likes of the cheaper 302 and the Ayre CX7. The Krell might exceed the price of those players, by around a grand in fact, but remember that it does SACD and discrete multi-channel too. The fact that it does that and makes a better than fair fist of CD replay as well, makes it unique in my experience.

Interestingly enough, the sound from CD, characterised by stability and control allied to a nice, open ▶

► mid-band is cut from the same cloth as the player's SACD sound. The bottom-end is reasonably weighty, although lacking a little definition compared to the excellent separation of the mid. But it's the ease and evenness of the presentation that makes it so impressive with wildly varying musical forms. The space and presence of Dolly Varden's 'Apple Doll' is conjured from the darkness between the speakers, Miles's horn is all subtle restraint on the opening phrases of 'Surrey With A Fringe On Top'. Removed from the confines of comparison and standing alone, it's an engaging and convincing performance.

Which makes the clear superiority of its SACD replay all the more impressive. You need to be careful in making direct comparisons, the hybrid CD layer of SACD discs being far from ideal in this regard. They differ in level as often as not, as well as equalisation. Safer instead to compare different discs of known quality: I normally rely on the DCC and XRCD versions of Miles Davis's *Steamin'*, recently re-issued on SACD by MoFi. (There's even Analogue Productions' 180g version for completist!) Each of these discs is a fair representative of their format's optimum performance. Compare them on the Krell and the SACD has far more body, clarity and tonal and spatial separation (and yes,

I know it's a mono recording). It emerges, much more vividly from a blacker background, with wider dynamic range and better dynamic discrimination as a result.

How does the Krell's SACD replay compare to the Classé? Running the latter in its preferred balanced output/fully balanced electronics mode it betters the Krell by a fair margin, with a bigger stage, better separation and transparency, better weight and definition in the bass. The whole thing is just far more stable and solid. In its defence, the lighter, defter touch of the SACD Standard makes for a quicker and more rhythmically explicit presentation that's not without its own appeal. However, change the ground rules and you change the result. Switch to single-ended output and the Krell gains a little while the Classé loses – disastrously. Now the Krell matches or betters the definition and stability of the bigger machine, while running rings around its leaden, stolid low frequencies. Suddenly that extra weight becomes an embarrassment rather than a virtue.

The sound of the Krell replaying SACD mirrors its performance on CD. The bass lacks a little definition compared to the crystal clarity of the mid. The highs are clean and extended. It delivers the performance that the

format promises and it does it on everything from the Florestan Trio playing Faure to Tilson-Thomson's Mahler, McCoy Tyner to *Dark Side Of The Moon*. (Yes, I know – but it had to get in there somewhere and there's still a vicarious pleasure to be had from switching all the lights off and playing it REALLY LOUD!)

The whole SACD format, and the machines that play it, is a rapidly evolving market sector. Who is to say what will happen next? But for now the Krell SACD Standard represents an important benchmark. At a third of the price of Classé's standard setting Omega SACD1, the Krell delivers credible high-end sound with far greater versatility and in far more circumstances. And it does it from both CD and SACD, in two channels and six. It may not deliver standard setting performance in either case, but then it doesn't cost a standard setting price either. More importantly, it meets or beats its price peers on both formats, which makes it the first bargain of a new product generation. There are undoubtedly better CD players out there than this Krell. There are also players that can do a better job of SACD under their preferred circumstances. But this is the first player to do it all and do it well. It may not stretch the envelope but the Krell SACD Standard represents an enviable standard nonetheless.

Extending the horizon...

by Alan Sircom

I always wanted to be a rebel, kicking against what everyone else says to be right. Imagine my pleased surprise at discovering the multi-channel performance of the Krell SACD Standard wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Then, imagine my dismay to discover that it really was all it was cracked up to be; both I and my system were at fault.

You see, there are two obvious issues

with the Krell. First, it needs a lengthy warm-up; not only as initial burn-in, but after any lengthy time away from a mains power source. This affects no small change on the performance of the player - cold Krell, bad; warm Krell, wonderful.

Even more important, however, is the system itself. No 'make do' home cinema hybrid multi-channel affair will

suit; this needs a dedicated multi-channel music system, laid out exactly as a good multi-channel system should. No half measures allowed; all five main speakers need to be exactly the same model and all need to be the same distance from the listener. Fail to reach these heady heights of multi-channel and you still get a good sound, but nothing so remarkable as the Krell ►

► can produce when all the cards are in its favour. Unfortunately, we are so used to 'make do' multi-channel that most systems will only show a fraction of what the Krell can really provide.

That's where I began with the Krell. Listening through a system geared toward home cinema first and multi-channel second. The SACD Standard offers a good, clean and dynamic performance, one that's a fraction better than the Sony and Marantz players of this world. That already places the Krell in a class of its own, but the level of improvement hardly makes the player's high price justified. After all, a four grand player should sound a lot better than a one-and-a-half grand player.

But, that's only the starting place. Redesigning the system to give it a more natural multi-channel sound spin, and the Krell really comes to life. Suddenly, that good dynamic performance becomes extraordinarily natural. Multi-channel SACD quickly becomes the standard to reach for. It's actually very hard to write about the performance of the Krell in a properly matched system, because it sets a reference point that regular multi-channel DVD-Audio or SACD have to go a long way to match. Disc after disc gets played; not to criticise the sound of the Krell, but to discover what they really sound like on multi-channel SACD. With classic re-masters like Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*, you get all the unforced naturalness of the original, but with that extra multi-channel component.

Overall, this better-than-the-rest quality makes the Krell hard to pin down. It's very detailed, especially at the top-end: just the right side of brightness. It is also the most dynamic multi-channel SACD player around; most multi-channel SACD spinners sound a bit flat and thin. This is the exception. But most of all, it's

the musicality that shines through; possessed of a clean, brisk and dynamic sound, it has none of the bland character that can make the format appear a bit lifeless.

Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* highlights the big difference between Krell-flavoured SACD replay and everyone else's.



These tracks are so well known to most rock listeners that the slightest deviation is spotted readily. And, in most cases, the multi-channel SACD sound is precise but entirely music-free. It's as if the player is just going through the motions and the disc sounds almost unexciting. The Krell redresses the balance; it manages to keep the information levels at maximum, but also reintroduces a sense of musical information and excitement lost in the multi-channel battle.

Our Beloved Leader has passed comment on the Krell's two-channel performance, but there is a relativistic comment worth making. In CD mode, this player is up there with Wadia-lite (how's that for disparaging one of the finest CD players around at the moment?). Through single-ended outputs, the stereo SACD sound has no effective challenger, but how does the multi-channel sound match up to these heady levels? Very well, in fact; the multi-channel sound doesn't undermine the two channel sound quality in absolute

terms, but nor does it seem compromised by a wonderful two-channel performance. It simply offers the best multi-channel audio sound you can get this side of a recording studio today. That's all. You can happily play SACD in stereo and never once make the move to multi-channel, in the knowledge that if you did decide to cross the great divide – and do it properly – the multi-channel performance is every bit as good as the two channel sound. There's not even a 'perhaps' here, it does multi-channel as well as it does stereo, and in most cases better than the system it is played through.

In a way, no matter what multi-channel system you can put together, if it has the Krell at the front, it will benefit. You will hear the Krell advantage, even if it fronts a home cinema in a box system. Ask not what the Krell can do for your system; ask instead what your system can do for the Krell. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	SACD Player
Compatibility:	CD and discrete multi-channel SACD
Outputs:	1 x balanced stereo 1 set single-ended stereo/surround 1 x co-axial digital (RCA) 1 x optical digital
Dimensions (HxWxD):	439x145x419mm
Weight:	11.4Kg
Finishes:	Silver or Black
Price:	£4250

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Krell Industries Inc.
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