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Krell

Evolution 525a

Superb dynamic capabilities ultimately set this top-of-the-line CD player apart

The days of the dedicated single purpose disc-spinner are almost over except at the affordable end of the market, but it's a different story at the high end. The 525 is a modular disc player which is available in various forms, all of which have two things in common: they all say Krell on the front panel and they're all reassuringly – almost ruinously – expensive.

The subject here is the 525a, the suffix indicating that it's a CD-only player. There is also an audio transport version – the 525t – and a DVD-capable player called the 525v. These two versions are limited to a digital output and are intended for use with an outboard D/A converter, or streamed through an external system.

The 525a has an S/PDIF digital output as standard, alongside balanced and single-edged analogue outputs, though any D/A converter it is used with will have an analogue output by definition. The next version upstream is the 525v, a DVD player, though it will also cope with compact disc. Finally, there is the all-singing, all-dancing 525av, which can also be used as a CD player. CD replay is the baseline ability of any version of the 525s, which is also a universal player and includes SACD in the mix, with all audio and video options (standard-definition for now). That said, a Blu-ray player – the 555 – is in the works. Naturally the 525av is rather more expensive still, at £14,298.

This test covers the baseline CD-only model, the 525a. With the existing models, each can be converted or upgraded to senior models from the list above. Unless and until you do, many of the front panel controls, which serve all the different 525 versions, are redundant and won't be of any use to you.

As is its wont, Krell describes the 525a as being suitable for reference-calibre playback, and it comes equipped with a CAST output – Krell's high-performance proprietary analogue interface that can be matched to the CAST input found on a number of the brand's upmarket amplifiers.

An impressively machined full function remote control is included with the player, similar to those supplied with older Krell players. The front panel of the remote is festooned with a complete set of user controls, which has the perhaps unintended effect of making the player look intimidatingly busy at first sight.

A good-quality and comprehensive blue dot-matrix display is also included and the disc transport has an impressively smooth-running slot loading mechanism. Naturally, the player will cope with all the standard variations on the Red Book theme: CD-R/CD/RW, 48k WAV files and MP3 compilations using either of the (re)writable media.

Apply the can-opener to break inside the superbly presented case and you will find a Krell multi-section linear PSU rather than a switching power supply which is fed from a high-capacity toroidal transformer. CD conversion is performed by one 24-bit/192kHz DAC per channel, avoiding the usual current-to-voltage conversion stage, which, using the Krell CAST topology, reduces

the number of voltage gain stages for a complete system to one. In the absence of a CAST-equipped amplifier, the player was used with balanced connections, (with Nordost Valhalla wires), but from previous experience the CAST interface works extremely well, with no tradeoffs other than cost.

This is Krell's top-of-the-line CD player, inhabiting a rarefied price area for which the end user is entitled to demand something truly special. And the Evolution 525a certainly is that. We have had some experience with an earlier flagship model, the fabulous KPS25, a class-leader in its day. Its aural character was quite different; powerful and muscular, with tremendous resolving power, very much Krell house qualities.

SOUND QUALITY

The Evolution 525a has an incredibly powerful and architectural bass, and its midband and treble resolving power is simply in a class of its own, but there is none of the warmth and slight softness of the earlier model. The 525a gets to the heart of a musical argument with laser-like precision but without even a hint of the harshness that could be an issue with previous player generations.

But it's the 525a's dynamics capabilities that really set this player apart. Full scale orchestral material is reproduced with passion. Orchestral basses are layered so that each

“Krell's flagship CD player gets to the heart of the music with laser-like precision”

instrumental group has its own identity preserved and this is in the context of what sounds for all the world like a fully formed, three dimensional sound field.

Human voice at best has a ravishing beauty that at times (and not so rarely either) causes the hairs on the back of the neck to stand on end and you will be left in no doubt that the piano is a truly percussive instrument. And yet there is an underpinning warmth and grace here that tells you that this is a performer of rare pedigree whose musical performance comes from the heart, and is in no sense just another mechanical copy. CD replay has truly come a long way.

AlvinGold

