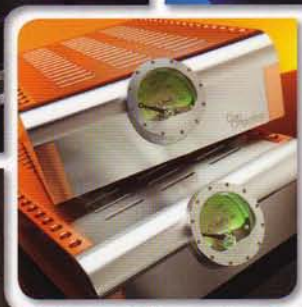


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Krell

S-350a

An entry-level model to herald a new era of high-end CD player affordability

£2,752
 Absolute Sounds
 020 8971 3909
 www.krellonline.com

The very idea of a budget Krell range is a kind of oxymoron, but even this manufacturer is not immune to what's happening in the wider world. If ever the time was ripe for an affordable range of Krell products, the current global economic slowdown has provided the perfect opportunity.

Tested here is the entry-level S-350a, which is a CD-only player. The closely related S-350av adds DVD playback (upscaled to 1080p) and the claim is that it does so without compromise to CD playback performance.

As a CD player, the S-350a is straightforward. It has all the usual search and repeat modes, a neat and very simple backlit LCD display and you can extract the analogue audio signal in single-ended or balanced forms, using XLR sockets on the back. But the player will deliver electrical digital outputs in (optical) TOSLINK or (electrical) S/PDIF form and it will also accept external digital signals, again both optical and electrical. It will even accept high-resolution signals – up to 96kHz anyway, which is the limit for the connector types used.

Internally, the S-350a is well specified, with a massive power supply section and solid build quality. It is also compatible with CD-DA, CD-R/RW and MP3 CD media. Having being made outside of the USA was not used as an excuse for second-rate construction.

The player takes advantage of hardware developments that were originally introduced to service the computer market. The most obvious of these is the player's slot-loading mechanism, which is becoming increasingly common instead of the more traditional loading drawer.

The S-350a is shockingly heavy – the only way to explain the 11.4kg deadweight in a CD player is the inclusion of a typically Krell scale power supply with a massive toroidal transformer of a capacity more appropriate to an amplifier than a CD player – though unusually robust external metalwork is also part of the equation. No one could reasonably claim that the player is anything less than immaculately built and presented.

As usual with Krell, the S-350a has a plethora of small control buttons, far too many to take in at a single glance, which for some will make operation using the supplied remote control more natural. But in its favour, the native control set is positive and gives good tactile feedback through the fingertips.

This player represents exceptional value. It is not just the most affordable way of joining the exclusive Krell owners' club, this is a player that delivers, well beyond what might have been expected.

SOUND QUALITY

The S-350a was supplied for test with a sample of the matching S-300 integrated amplifier and the prognosis is unequivocal; they work brilliantly, separately and together.

Both units – the CD player and the matching amplifier – achieve a very high standard, much higher, in fact, than we had anticipated. There are some obvious mechanical elements of the performance available from this player (and indeed the matching S-300 amplifier) that come across clearly at an early stage. The midband, for example,

is extremely smooth, even and articulate, and essentially free of the flatness and lack of perspectives endemic with many lesser players, as well as some of Krell's early disc-playing hardware.

By the same token, the treble sounds well integrated and highly detailed and the bass is more full-bodied than many earlier generations of Krell players. Discs are handled efficiently, with rapid track access and virtually no sound from the internal mechanism, or the spinning discs themselves. The additive result of these factors is that the Krell is easier to listen to for extended periods and is more believable, too.

Overall it does a fine job of CD replay and it extracts a commitment and passion that is unusual from compact disc. Imagery is handled in an unusually three-dimensional way. Image depths are fully painted-in and the players bass is particularly deep and potent, too. The Krell makes the best of well-conceived recordings and performances by adding a sense of air and presence that other replay systems often fail

“Sound quality to raise the hairs on the back of the listener's neck”

to resolve. This is the difference between plain good sound quality and a performance (with the emphasis on that word) that causes the hairs to rise on the back of the neck.

This skill also demonstrates another element of the S-350a: its ability to create a very precisely delineated stereo soundstage, with properly fleshed-out depth and a beautifully articulated sense of scale.

It was even more apparent, or at least more dramatically so, with some more obviously heavy-duty material, including a Signum Classics live recording (in London's Royal Festival Hall) of Schoenberg's massive oratorio *Guerre-Lieder*. The player's ability to bring off testing recordings like this without sounding excessively dense or congested, yet without loss of weight or impact, marks the S-350a out as special. By comparison, many other broadly comparable players tend to sound flat and are difficult to become involved in, but lack of involvement was not a factor with the Krell.

The S-350a speaks for itself. This is a practical player that supports balanced audio and is well-enough endowed to drive compact disc a long way towards the limits of the format. It looks as if the switch from West to East with this range has done little to upset the Krell reputation.

Alvin **Gold**

