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KRELL SACD STANDARD MKIII

Third bite of the SACD cherry for Krell's entry-level player

PRICE £5,400 CONTACT Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.krellonline.com

Krell has had a hard time with its SACD Standard player, the base model – although it is priced at the bleeding edge for most mere mortals. The company has remained true to the format, but the SACD Standard has been through a succession of versions in a comparatively short time; this is the third.

The original model suffered at the hands of Philips when the transport was peremptorily discontinued. You might think, once bitten, twice shy. But for reasons currently unknown outside the Krell boardroom, when faced with the task of re-engineering around a new mechanism, it chose to use another from Philips. No wonder SACD often gets such a bad press.

As I, and some others, have long predicted, SACD is unchallenged as a high-resolution carrier, but many remain sceptical. The reality is that if you are not into classical or acoustic music in a fairly big way there is probably no compelling reason to change format.

Unlike DVD-Audio, SACD compatibility does not appear to have an

adverse impact on CD performance. As long as CD remains the main carrier of high-quality music, which it is, SACD is a fairly seamless addition – especially given the trend for Japanese players, in particular, to be stereo only.

This, however, is a multichannel player, the sole concession to putting two-channel on the throne being the ability to drive a stereo system – but not a multichannel one – using an XLR-based balanced output, which gives 6dB higher gain and lower noise. The unbalanced outputs used for the C, SW, LR and RR channels are discrete, have a wide signal bandwidth and operate in Class A over the full bandwidth, but can only drive analogue audio to the outside world using single-ended phono-based interconnects. The internal circuits are fully balanced, and use Krell's Current Mode topology which claims wide signal bandwidth and high linearity.

What you don't get is the final link in the chain, CAST, the current-mode balanced interface used on some of the high-end Krell disc players and on various Krell pre and power amps.

The SACD Standard MkIII is equipped with three Burr-Brown PCM1738 dual channel D/A converters so that, in multichannel mode, all channels get equal treatment.

The mechanism in this player is lifted straight out of the Evolution 505, which is responsible for much of the increased ticket price for this version of the Standard. The positive part is that this mechanism is not thought to suffer from reliability problems

and runs more quietly than was sometimes the case with the previous mechanism. Oh, and its future is apparently assured.

Front panel controls, which appear to have been disposed at random, include CD and SACD switching – the latter now defaults to stereo – and four filters (two for CD, four for SACD), similar to those on the preceding models. In CD trim, filters 1 and 2 offer a flat output to 20kHz, and a brick wall roll-off above the audio band (filter 1), while the other filter offers a more gradual in-band roll-off. SACD filter 1 operates like the CD filter 1, but all the way to 180kHz. Filters 2, 3 and 4 have a more limited HF output.

DISTINCTIVE VOICE

Rear panel features include the analogue outputs, optical and electrical digital outputs, a 12V trigger, an IR selector for front and rear panel emitters and an RS232 for external system control.

There is also a redesigned credit card remote control.

I ran the player with Krell's 202 preamp, and 600 monoblocks, through MartinLogan

Spire speakers, using mostly filter 1. I failed to hear any advantage in the other filters, though this is largely a matter of taste.

If I am not mistaken the new player sounds much like the old SACD Standard. There is even less of a sense of listening to a mechanical simulacrum than with previous models, both on SACD and on CD. This is a top-ranking CD player in its own right, and recommended even to those without high resolution discs.

The SACD MkIII does have its own distinctive voice. It is sharp clean, percussive and suffers none of the lethargy or excessive warmth of some lesser SACD players. But this is never translated into aggression or grain. The Krell steers a well-judged central path between maximum information and euphony, but it would be hard to say that it throws musical information away. Imagery is very precise and clean, but again there is no sterility. It is simply very open, very musical and better with SACD than with CD, provided the SACD was recorded with DSD.

This player confirms the benefits of good-quality SACD replay, and particularly with natural acoustic recordings, rather than the unpleasant studio-generated mishmash that too often results from recordings mastered using Pro Tools and similar technologies.

I am sorry to see the price has increased so substantially, but I am convinced that despite this you really are getting value for money. One of the great SACD players, this model would be near the top of my personal shortlist. ■

Alvin Gold

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