

Krell SACD Standard CD/SACD Player

How one player changed a critic's mind about the SACD format.

Fred Kaplan



At the turn of the decade, when the first SACD players made their debuts at the hi-fi shows, I remember wondering what the fuss was about. The specs looked great, but the discs sounded weirdly antiseptic. As recently as a couple years ago, a manufacturer whose expensive amp I was reviewing loaned me the same company's five-figure SACD player. I thought: Better, but the high frequencies are still odd. They were smooth but flat, uninflected; cymbals, for instance, all sounded the same. Around this time, TAS published a forum, in which some critics wondered if this was an inherent flaw in the format, which offers vast bandwidth and ultra-fast sampling speed but single-bit signals.

I wondered so, too, until I heard the Krell SACD Standard. Is it flawless? No, but its sonic shortcomings are extremely slight. At the very least, it redeems the format's technical promise. It makes recorded music a pleasurable experience, to a degree that few digital machines in this price-range approach.

About those oft-problematic high frequencies, listen to the piercing purity

of Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's excursions on Handel arias [Avie] or the shimmer of Philly Joe Jones' cymbals on the Miles Davis quintet's *Relaxin'* [Acoustic Sounds SACD]; they're airy, even ethereal; you hear their distinct tones and resonances, and the ambience around them. The highs don't stick out—neither as too bright nor too veiled—as digital highs often do.

I was about to write “sensationally,” but that’s not right; it does so naturally, seamlessly, without calling attention to itself.

The midrange is also sweet and natural, if a bit on the warm side (which I don't mind). The bass goes staggeringly deep and stays tuneful. If your speakers are fairly seamless from top to bottom, this digital machine won't spoil the illusion.

The main appeal of most SACD players (even the cheap ones, for instance Sony's first-generation model, which I

bought for \$200 a few years ago) is that they project the sound into your room; you sense the music breathing forth from the speakers, three-dimensionally, in a way that PCM digital just can't manage (and in a way that good analog does routinely). The Krell Standard pulls off this feat...I was about to write “sensationally,” but that's not right; it does so naturally, seamlessly, without calling attention to itself.

On the Academy of Ancient Music's SACD of Bach solo and double violin concertos, Andrew Manze and Rachel Podger's violins waft into your room on a wave and their overtones float up to the ceiling. The level of detail is extraordinary, including the “inner detail” of specific instruments. You can distinguish the thickness of the six guitar strings that Gene Bertoncini picks and strums on *Quiet Now* [Ambient Music]. I hadn't realized the cellist was bowing every beat on “Ruby Tuesday,” until I listened through the Krell to the Rolling Stones' *Hot Rocks* SACD.

The Krell Standard also tosses up a soundstage as wide and as deep as the recording and the rest of your equipment allow. Listening to Michael Tilson

Thomas' series of Mahler symphonies, especially the Ninth, on the San Francisco Symphony's own label, you can "see" precisely the position of the various instruments and sections.

It's fair to ask why you should buy an SACD player at all. Only a small number of labels are still producing in the format. The rush of jazz and pop SACDs, which so excited audiophiles a few years ago (the multi-disc series of the Stones, Dylan, and so forth), has slowed to a near-halt. I have two replies. First, the labels still putting them out—Harmonia Mundi, SFSA, Telarc, Deutsche Grammophon, Songlines, Acoustic Sounds, among others—put out quite a lot of great recordings. Second, and more to the point here, the Krell Standard also does a superb job of playing standard Red Book CDs. Everything I've said about it as an SACD player also holds for its performance as a CD player (allowing, of course, for the differences between the two formats).


How does the Krell hold up to vinyl? Not at all badly, but, hey, it's not a miracle worker. Listen to Acoustic Sounds' reissues of Bill Evans' *Waltz for Debby*. On the title tune, Paul Motian's hard-brushed snare-slaps sound a bit less dynamic, a bit more softly slapped, on the SACD than on the 180-gram LP. In general, transients are softened, dynamic contrasts are shaded—noticeably, but not dramatically, not much more than the effect you'd hear by lowering a phono cartridge's VTA by a few hairs.

When TAS editor Jonathan Valin

reviewed an earlier version of the Standard a couple years ago, in Issue 145 (more later on what's different about this revised version), he praised, in particular, its "exceptionally rich and powerful bass" as well as its "midband bloom and sweetness." At the same time, he compared it unfavorably with two much costlier models (EMM Labs' DAC6e and EMM's modified Philips 1000), finding the Krell "less extended and incisive in the treble" and for softening transients "more than a tad, as if it were...a tube unit."

I haven't heard the EMM units (except at a Consumer Electronics Show too long ago to remember). But I have heard the old and new versions of the Krell Standard, side by side, and can report that I agree with JV (as this review bears out), although the new model is still deeper and tighter in the bass and slightly crisper on the treble transients.

What is different about the new model—which, on the outside, looks exactly like the old one—is where some qualms come into play, though they're strictly ergonomic qualms. The main difference between the two is a new servo-drive—a change necessitated when the supplier, Philips, suddenly stopped producing the old one. In most ways, this turned out to be good news. Judging from a few online high-end chat sites, the old drive had notorious reliability problems. (An earlier version of the unit, which I started to review, went haywire, as did one purchased by a friend.) However, by all accounts, the

new model is functioning fine. Still it, too, has some idiosyncrasies. It's noisy, though not noisy enough to be heard when music is playing, as long as you're sitting at least five feet away (except I should add for two discs in my collection that for some reason produce a very loud grinding). It takes a long time to load a disc (15 seconds for SACDs, 25 seconds for CDs). And after the first few seconds of a track, the track number disappears from the display panel. (If you like what you're hearing on a CD and wonder which song it is, you'll have to start the track over to find out.) Apparently, these problems are built into the drive; there's nothing to be done. Krell's technical people say they decided to use this drive anyway, because it sounds so much better than any other they've tried. I have no reason to doubt them. The machine is a bit of a drag, like cuff links on a sleeve. But, at least to my mind (yours may be to calculate costs and benefits differently), the pleasures outweigh the foibles. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Stereo and multichannel CD and SACD player with 24-bit/192kHz DACs on each channel

Analog outputs: One balanced XLR connectors, six single-ended RCA connectors

Digital outputs: One S/PDIF RCA connector, one EIAI optical TosLink connector

Dimensions 17.3" x 5.72" x 16.5"

Weight: 25 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Krell KAV-280p linestage and FPB400cx amplifier; Verity Audio Parsifal Ovation and Krell Resolution 2 speakers; Nirvana cables; Bybee Technologies Signature power purifier and Monster Cable AVS-2000 voltage-regulator (though not for amp)

Inside the SACD Standard

The Standard's servo-mechanism—including separate lasers for CDs and SACDs—is unusually stable, so as to focus the beam onto a disc's pits with minimal error. The chassis is actually a chassis-within-a-chassis—a steel plate inside an aluminum enclosure—to dampen vibrations. (This is one of the few CD players, or pieces of electronic gear generally, that doesn't benefit from TipToe-type cones or pucks.) The transport and the analog circuits draw on separate power supplies; the analog stage's is a hefty toroidal transformer. As with much of Krell's electronics line, the Standard's circuitry employs a balanced topology, which boosts the signal-to-noise ratio by 6dB. It also manipulates current instead of voltage all the way through the signal chain up to the output stage, a possibly unique approach that, Krell's tech people say, expands bandwidth, increases speed, and greatly minimizes distortions caused by impedance interactions. **FK**

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

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