



Krell SACD Standard 5.2

Krell has updated its SACD player – does this latest model set a new Standard?

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The Krell SACD Standard is discontinued... long live the Krell SACD Standard! The new Standard 5.2 is identical to its earlier namesake except for three things. First, it sports an updated version of the previous Philips disc mechanism, which has now been discontinued. Second, there is a new front panel display, which has larger and more widely spaced characters. Finally, the filter buffering has been improved at the analogue output stage for enhanced sound performance.

You may have read that SACD is yesterday's news. But while this may make for great headlines, it simply isn't true. There are uncertainties concerning SACD's future that will be resolved one way or another, probably within the next 12 months. But unlike DVD-Audio, SACD as a format has already reached critical mass. If they stopped making the discs tomorrow, a substantial demand for players would continue for years to come, from classically-oriented hi-fi buffs in particular. More interestingly, no-one has told the equipment manufacturers. The last year has seen an unprecedented number of ambitious new players, some in a 'new' category – stereo CD/SACD – which appear to have been developed to address a demand for high performance, purist players that exists in the Far East – Japan in particular. The Krell SACD Standard is multichannel, but it is aimed squarely at the same audiophile market.

The basic construction of the SACD Standard was covered in our earlier review of the original version. Its feature set broadly parallels the much more costly and more elaborately engineered TEAC Esoteric X-01, which is reviewed on p102 of this issue. It plays stereo CD or SACD through single-ended or balanced outputs from a differential discrete output stage. The other channels are in single-ended form only from slightly simpler electrical clockwork, though processing internally in the Krell is DSD using hybrid Burr-Brown digital chipper, and all channels use Krell's current mode circuit topology. Internal processing is in balanced mode for the entire circuit path, and Krell recommends using the balanced outputs to take advantage of the common mode rejection available this way. Note that neither the Krell nor the TEAC offer digital outputs from SACD, though as usual both provide a digital output in optical or electrical form from CD. One important feature of the Krell is the provision of two CD mode and four SACD mode output filters, which have broadly the same characteristics as their predecessors, despite the fine tuning that has taken place.

Construction of the player is not quite in TEAC Esoteric class. The Krell is based on a standard OEM Philips engine, where Teac uses something altogether more exotic and impressive. Construction also mirrors the price differential, but it's a close run thing, thanks to Krell's customarily superb non-ferrous 'Arkitek' construction (described in the Krell KAV-280P/KAV2250 review on p110) and 'Krellcoat' silver or black finishes. In common with the Esoteric, the player is compatible with SACD, CD, CD-R and CD-RW discs, but Krell explicitly warns about CDs with Copy Guard which are not compatible, and which do not comply with Red Book standards – in other words, they are not strictly CDs at all.

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(Readers should note that the CD side of DualDiscs can be objected to on the same grounds.) An IR input, 12-volt triggers and an RS232 interface provide the support necessary for custom installation.

Operationally, the Krell is disadvantaged by a remote control that is not quite as ergonomic as some, though it makes up for it by looking really, really cute, and by a front panel layout which uses a surprising number of poorly differentiated controls. In the longer term, it is hamstrung to an extent by extended finger-twiddling times before the disc starts playing (about 23 seconds, which is two to three times as long as the Esoteric, depending on disc type).

SOUND QUALITY

We auditioned the SACD Standard 5.2 though a Krell pre/power amp (alternating with a pair of Theta Enterprise monoblocks), with both Revel Ultima Studio and MartinLogan Summit speakers, and in the main the findings are not too different to the comments made of the original version of the player. It could of course be that the new model is incomparably better than the old, though gut feeling suggests they're closer than that, but as is the way when held up against more costly alternatives like the Esoteric, the comparison tends to highlight mainly what is wrong with the less ambitious model. The reality, of course, is that very many fewer people will be able to afford the Esoteric even if they want to, so the comparison is not altogether valid.

Nevertheless, tiptoeing between the landmines that any such comparison is bound to throw up, the new SACD Standard seems to be close to the original in spirit, though perceptibly cleaner, more transparent and agile. The same attributes fell out of the listening as were noted previously when we exhumed the original review text. The Standard is a superb engine for CD and SACD replay, one that slightly underplays the muscle and authority of a recording and instead majors on transparency, liveness and articulation. It has a slicker, more fine-grain quality than most, especially with SACD, which leaves the X-01 (twice the price, remember) sounding more muscular and architectural in its responses.

With SACD sources the SACD Standard clearly outstrips CD, with a sound that is more complex, smoother and more organic, and less grainy and mechanical, though on the whole CD replay by the Krell avoids falling into the normal traps. Each format (to the extent it allows) is exquisitely refined and detailed when played on the Krell, both in the way it permits individual instruments to be followed even though dense, complex mixes, and also in its ability to convey subtle expressive changes in the way music is performed. This is the kind of cue that is often lost in the woodwork when well-recorded discs are played on lesser machines.

With the Krell you can, as already noted, roll your own sound by invoking one of the various filters, each of which stays in force once selected until overridden with a new selection. For our money, Filter 1 was preferred on balance with both disc types. It sounded more open, airy and also consistent between recordings. But this is largely a matter of personal preference as different aspects of overall performance are traded against each other. In practice it may also partly depend on the partnering amplifier, some of which will not be happy with the ultra-wideband signal available from SACD with this filter.

The bottom line is that this is an excellent audio disc player, though at the price it should be. It resoundingly makes the case for SACD, and shows that this format, which involves no video element, need not compromise CD replay. **HFC**

Alvin Gold