



Introduction

I still remember the day the iPod came into being just as clearly as I remember walking the halls of my first tradeshow and hearing all of the naysayers -think manufacturers -dismissing the diminutive player as little more than a “fad.” My how times have changed. Now you’re viewed as “archaic” if as a manufacturer you don’t offer some form of portable or streaming music device; a device that also must play “nice” with Apple. Ironic, huh.

One of the last to the media streaming party -not counting their somewhat ill-conceived iPod dock -is Krell, a formidable name among the high-end elite. Krell marches into the battle for media streaming supremacy with their new Connect, a two-channel only media streamer that retails for \$2,500 in its digital transport configuration. \$2,500 is a lot of money considering some similarly equipped or should I say capable media streaming players can be had for between \$300 and \$1,000. But then again, for Krell, \$2,500 represents a new “low” and an opening salvo for those seeking to achieve a measure of high-end performance but with plug-n-play simplicity. The question that remains is whether or not the Krell Connect delivers?



The Krell Connect as seen from the front. Image courtesy of Krell.

The Connect is a stylistic departure for Krell. Gone is the all silver facades of yesterday, replaced instead with a tri-color scheme of black, silver and blue. From the outside the Connect looks similar to Krell’s new Foundation processor, which apart from its looks is making headway for Krell based on its performance and relative affordability. The Connect itself is rather standard sized component, measuring roughly 17 inches wide, by 17 inches deep and 3.5 inches tall. Weight isn’t given but if I had to venture a guess I’d say it’s somewhere in the vicinity of 15 to 20 pounds. Needless to say, for a

media streamer, the Connect is colossally overbuilt -as is the Krell way. The front panel is rather Spartan featuring only a standby button on the left and the Connect's 3.5-inch LCD display on the right. The center is dominated by a silver piece of machined aluminum that is accented by a upward facing blue LED that not only shows off its curves but draws your eye to the somewhat large Krell logo scrawled across the base.

Around back, again, in its transport configuration only, the Connect possesses only a handful of input/output options. Incoming files arrive either via the Connect's Ethernet port or WiFi antenna (included). Digital outputs are relegated to coaxial and optical. In its non-transport only configuration, the Krell Connect is fitted with an internal DAC that utilizes 32-bit ESS Sabre chips that run in discrete, direct-coupled configuration to either its balanced or unbalanced analog audio outs (optional). Throw in a standard AC power receptacle and a few 12-volt triggers and you have the Connect's back panel all sewn up.



The Krell Connect as seen from the back. Note, my review sample did not possess a built-in DAC module, so the analog outputs, both balanced and unbalanced, were not present. Image courtesy of Krell.

Behind the scenes the Connect is capable of playing back music files up to 24-bit/192kHz. The Connect does have a little party piece that it borrows from its costlier sibling, the Cipher SACD/ CD player, which is a anti-jitter module that Krell claims "reduces jitter to a virtually immeasurable level." More on this in a moment. It also has the ability to connect to many of today's most popular Internet radio stations -including high-res "broadcasts." Supported file formats include; FLAC, Ogg, WAV, WMA, Apple Lossless, MP-4a and MP3. All network or wirelessly accessed files and/or Internet radio stations are able to be browsed via the Connect's 3.5 inch, QVGA (320×240) full color display. A note about the Connect's network attached prowess, it is DLNA compliant, meaning any DLNA network attached storage should be visible to the Connect simply by attaching both to the same network.

Which brings me to the remote. The Connect's included remote is typical of Krell. The remote's large, all-aluminum construction and small, non-backlit buttons make it functional, but not inviting. I joke sometimes and say that all Krell devices have anti-theft technology built-in, meaning one could easily

take down a would be baddie by simply hurling a Krell remote at them. While the Connect is able to be used via its included remote and its attached 3.5-inch LCD display, it's not really the *preferred* method. For that one must turn their attention to Apple's App store and download the free Krell Connect App.

Not wishing to jump ahead too much, but half of the Connect's "performance" lies in its App's ease of use and functionality, for this is what sets it (the Connect) apart from other media streamers -at least those not using similar platforms to the Connect. In truth, the allure and simplicity of the Connect App is largely what is going to sell the Connect to the masses, which I'll get into in greater detail later. Krell does state that the Connect App is available for both iOS devices as well as Android, however as of this writing no such Android support exists.

Application

Integrating the Connect into my reference system was about as straightforward as I could have hoped for. My custom built NAS drive(s) are not currently configured for DNLA so I went ahead and migrated all of my music over to an out-of-the-box DNLA NAS drive in the form of a Western Digital 1TB drive. With the files transferred I simply attached the drive to my network and turned my attention to the Connect itself.

Like I said earlier, the Connect used in this review was in its transport configuration only, meaning any and all digital to analog processes were handled by my reference DAC -Emotiva's XDA-2. I connected the Connect to my network via an Ethernet cable, then to my XDA-2 via a 1 meter optical cable courtesy of Monoprice. My XDA-2 was then connected to my reference two-channel preamp, Emotiva's XSP-1, via a pair of 1 meter balanced interconnects (XLR) also from Monoprice. Sticking with the balanced theme, I connected my XSP-1 to my Emotiva XPA-1L Class A monaural amplifiers that were charged with powering either my reference Tekton Design Pendragon or Bowers & Wilkins CT 8.2 LCR loudspeakers -depending upon my mood.

With everything connected and powered on I configured the Connect via its 3.5 inch LCD display, starting with getting it up and running on my network. The process is very straightforward and is accomplished in as few as three steps. Your experience may differ slightly, but for me, it was as easy as 1-2-3. Once connected to my network, the Connect was able to "see" my DNLA compatible NAS drive from Western Digital and subsequently all the music stored locally on it. In a matter of minutes I was able to scroll through folder after folder of music, saved in a variety of different formats. Selecting an album's folder, lead me to a list of tracks, whereby selecting a track caused music to play -almost immediately. But this isn't how the majority of folks will likely experience the Connect.

For that, one must own an iPad/iPhone.

Prior to reviewing the Connect I didn't own an iPad, partially because I'm not a Mac user (anymore) and because I have a few Android-based tablets. Since Android support for the Connect is somewhat overstated I went out and purchased an iPad Mini for the purposes of this review. With an iPad Mini in hand, I downloaded the free Connect App and upon its auto install I was able to get it (the App) and the Connect communicating simply by following the onscreen prompts. Once connected, the somewhat drab PC-looking folder structure of the Connect's 3.5-inch screen was replaced with a decidedly HD graphical interface on the iPad. Gorgeous. I had full touch screen control of both the Connect's basic and higher functionality (90 percent of it at least), as well as full cover flow, meta data etc. support of my network attached media files.

It was at this point that the Connect, really "connected" with me.

Personal Impressions

One cannot critique the Connect's "performance" without viewing it through the lens of the free iOS App, especially in its transport configuration. For if the App were to fail on a user interaction level - so would the Connect. Fortunately, the App proves to be worth its weight in gold in my humble opinion and not only elevates the perceived performance of the Connect greatly, it all but makes it. Browsing 750GB of music files via the App is not only simple, it's fun. The rendering of the menus and subsequent artwork of the selected albums is brilliant. Moreover, your choices for how you chose to browse said media is also a welcomed touch.

The App to Connect "communication" was snappy and rock-solid. I also appreciated the App's ability to allow me to browse my library at will while another track played in the background. One of the "features" the Connect affords you is the ability to create a favorite's folder -this is separate from a playlist mind you, but equally useful. You can add tracks or entire folders or genres etc. to your favorites folder for easy browsing, however this functionality -the ability to add to it -is missing from the App, though it's present on the Connect's factory remote. Once you've created a favorites folder via the Connect's factory remote, you can access it via the control App, but you cannot add files on the fly via App itself. Likewise you cannot make playlists via the App, nor can you via the factory remote either. This is what I meant earlier when I said the App affords you 90% control of the Connect's feature set and/or functionality.

The Internet radio functionality and search ability via the Connect App is very nice and I especially liked how high-res or high-quality Internet Radio Stations were called out from lesser ones. Stations like Linn's own Jazz Radio station were especially nice. While not a power listener of Internet Radio stations, I found myself gravitating towards them due in no small part to the Connect App's ability to make accessing them a breeze. One caveat worth mentioning has to do with the speed in which the Connect transitions between Internet Radio playback and network stored media -i.e. my music.

Going from one “format” to the next was sluggish at best, though always able to be accomplished with zero connection errors. In fact at no point in my brief two week period with the Connect did I encounter any sync or network issues as it related to the Connect specifically. On one occasion my Western Digital drive dropped off my network, but that wasn’t the fault of the Connect. Better still, when the drive came back online, the Connect re-connected to it without any prodding from me.

So how does it sound?

Well, in theory a transport should be a transport right? Stands to reason that any and all sonic comments that I could make about the Connect would be less a critique of the Connect itself and more a reflection of my associated equipment’s sound. And yet, the Connect sounded a bit different when compared to other digital devices I had on hand. For example; music via the Connect had a slightly smoother, more refined presentation (in my opinion) than it did via my Dune-HD Max. Keep in mind both devices were used as transports and were playing back the same digital file while feeding the same DAC and preamp -and yet the Connect sounded -to me -a touch “better.” I’m not going to blow sunshine up your backside and say the difference(s) were night and day, but never the less there was a slight difference. But it was the only difference, for it wasn’t as if the high frequencies were higher, the bass lower and the midrange less “colored” -it’s just that the presentation on a whole felt “smoother.”

If the recording possessed a natural tone, with strong dynamics and separation throughout, as was the case with Peter Cincotti’s “Bali Hai,” than the Connect conveyed that with zero editorializing. It’s only when comparing a well recorded track such as “Bali Hai” did the Connect’s subtle lack of grain, slightly lower noise floor and smoother linearity become more readily apparent. Does that make the Connect better? In my humble opinion I preferred it to that of my Dune-HD Max when playing back two-channel music files, but you may feel differently. Suffice to say, the difference was subtle, but at the Connect’s asking price of \$2,500 it may be a performance difference worth paying for.

For me the real testament of the Connect’s effectiveness came down to its ease of use and the brilliance of its App. Had there not been a sound difference at all compared to my other components I likely wouldn’t have cared. The fact that there is a slight one -emphasis on slight -is but icing on the cake.

Things to Consider

The Connect all but assumes that you’re going to be an Apple user for its Android support, at present, is non-existent. Also, you’re going to want to make sure that your network stored media files are on a DNLA compatible device as that seems to be what the Connect prefers. These aren’t outright downsides as most modern AV devices and/or network attached media call for similar concessions.

Also, I wish files could be added to the Connect's Favorite's folder via the App rather than just via the factory remote and I wish there was a way to create playlists on the fly via the App. Alas, neither is possible at this time. Outside of these small caveats I found the Connect's performance and day-to-day livability to be exemplary.

Lastly, I would be foolish not to note that while the Connect may be the king of the hill among its peers at this moment, its lack of support for larger, subscription-based music services could become its Achilles heel. For as we migrate to more and more cloud based services the Connect could appear somewhat outdated in relatively short order. Moreover with devices like Apple TV etc. already scattered across the landscape, the Connect's laser focus on music files only could also be viewed as a hindrance.

Comparable Products

There are no shortage of media streamers and/or players on the market today, some even have similar functionality to that of the Connect. A few examples that spring to mind are Pioneer's N-50 Network Player (\$699), Musical Fidelity's M1CLIC (silly name) (\$1,999) and of course Meridian's Sooloos. While I have not spent considerable one-on-one time with any of the before mentioned options, I have spent some, and the Connect is on par with, or every bit as good and in some ways superior to its competition. That being said, the Pioneer and Musical Fidelity offerings appear to be based on a similar, if not identical, platform as the Krell Connect -meaning it likely stems from a third party.

Of course, those willing to venture into DIY waters can put together a similar experience to that of the Connect for less, though admittedly, your average consumer is looking for a plug-n-play, out of the box solution, which the Connect is and the DIY-route is not.

Addendum:

The Google Chromecast was not yet on the market at the time of this review's initial writing. That being said, while the Krell, at present, trumps the Chromecast in terms of its high-res audio support and audiophile-oriented credentials, I've found the user interface and feature set of the Chromecast, specifically Google Music, to be superior and more well-rounded than that of the Connect's own iPad app.

Of course which product and/or solution is right for you will come down to your personal system needs and budget.

Conclusion

\$2,500 for a music only media streamer isn't inexpensive, it's relatively affordable coming from Krell. While I cannot say definitively that the Connect's performance is unmatched at its price point,

it doesn't take away my affinity for it. As an elegant, high-end appealing, plug-n-play solution the Krell Connect Media Streamer is first rate and exceeded my expectations when you get down to it.

While I'm sure some will question its proposed value, I will not, for at the end of the day I found myself wanting to listen to music via the Connect thanks in no small part to how simple and trouble free it made the process given the massive library I've amassed over the years. While value will always be in the eye of the beholder, the fact that I made time for my music collection once again when the Connect was present and connected to my system is reason enough for me to believe it might just be worth it.

You may feel differently and that is okay, but if you're at all in the market for an elegant, easy to use, high-end appealing, streaming music solution, the Krell Connect should be on your short list of products to consider.