



Just connect

Into the crowded streamer market comes Krell's new high-end Connect. But it's a design with a difference, says **David Price**

What the world needs now – to quote the great Burt Bacharach – is love, sweet love. Well perhaps, but there's a sizeable number of consumer electronics companies who think this is no longer quite so pressing, and instead we should all be given network music players to play with. So much so that now it feels like you can't move for the things. Love isn't all around anymore – as The Troggs once sang – audio streamers are!

Krell's new Connect needs to be special then. Indeed, the Connect has the additional burden on its shoulders of being a Krell, something it has to live up to rather than play down. This

great brand has long been a major player in high-end hi-fi, and it won't do for the Connect to be merely average. Fortunately, as we shall see, it is not.

The Connect comes in a choice to two versions. For £2,500 you can buy the streamer itself, and an additional £1,000 gets you a high-quality internal DAC fitted – making it a source component in its own right. Both variants play a plethora of files – the important ones being FLAC and WAV at up to 24-bit/192kHz, but ALAC, AAC, Ogg, WMA and MP3 are also supported. Our review sample comes with the DAC built-in, but the cheaper version simply has a digital

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Krell Connect
ORIGIN
USA
TYPE
Network music player/DAC
WEIGHT
8.1kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
433 x 88 x 427mm
FEATURES
● 6 to 24-bit, 44.1kHz to 192kHz PCM playback
● FLAC, Ogg, WAV, WMA, Apple Lossless, m4a, MP3 files
● ESS Sabre ES-9018 DAC chip
● RCA and balanced XLR outputs
DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds
TELEPHONE
020 89713909
WEBSITE
absolutesounds.com

output, making it ideal for those that already have a digital converter or DAC-equipped CD player.

The unit itself is based on the Stream Unlimited platform, and uses a Stream 700 board. The digital output signal from this is buffered with similar technology that was engineered for the Anti Jitter Module used in Krell's £12,000 Cipher SACD/CD player, no less. It then goes to a pair of ESS Sabre ES-9018 DACs operating in dual differential mode, and to a Class A, fully balanced, fully discrete analogue output stage, which uses Krell Current Mode topology.

Being a Krell it is compulsory for it to look big and bold, and so it does. The central section sports a long LED light that glows red or blue depending on the mode – standby or operating. To the right is a small 320 x 240-pixel, 90mm diameter backlit LCD screen.

In my view, additional fascia mounted navigation buttons would make a lot of sense here, so that it's easier to use. However, I'm sure the company would reply that there's a perfectly good Krell Connect (iOS or Android) app available for free download, and that is the best way to



control things. It's right, of course, but I know some customers would be happier with a method of operation that didn't require something else that could crash or get lost. The remote looks and feels lovely, but its tiny buttons won't win prizes from those with bigger digits. Still, at least the company has taken to the trouble to craft a bespoke controller out of two aluminium extrusions locked together by allen bolts. No plastic here!

Those big bold looks make it impossible to mistake this for anything other than a Krell

There's nothing unique about the way the Connect works; anyone familiar with anything from a Squeezebox to a Linn Klimax DS won't have trouble setting it up. As ever, wired connection is better but wireless works effectively, too. Setup is the normal process of entering your network password, after it has had a look around for wireless-enabled devices. The remote control is used to enter the code, and then you're off. I use it in conjunction with a UPnP-equipped RipNAS storage device and

The Krell doesn't just give a sense of the recording, it absolutely nails it

my MacBook Pro running the latest version of Twonky. The Krell Connect app is run on an iPad.

Sound quality

Unsurprisingly, there's a distinctive Krell family sound to the Connect – one that impresses and charms in equal measure. It's no shrinking violet, so you don't need to worry about falling asleep in the middle of your listening session. The powerful, percussive, fluid bass is a great help here, as Propaganda's *The Chase* proves. The synth bass line modulates up and down with heady aplomb, sounding wonderfully untroubled by what is going on further up the frequency scale. At the same time, the Connect cuts through this track's rather dense wash of synthesisers, throwing out loads of detail and a capacious soundstage. Treble is svelte and smooth too, and timed beautifully – the Krell manages to bring all of the music together in a believable, coherent and organic way.

At first listen, the Connect presents itself as a light, bright and tonally

spry device – you'd never confuse it with a rich, fat-sounding classic turntable, for example. But it's so much more than this, as it plays a clever trick of rendering the music in a very clean and detailed fashion, yet is never harsh or objectionable. Indeed, when it's been on for a few hours, it acquires a seductive creaminess to its tonality. Right at the beginning of its warm-up cycle it can seem a little matter of fact, but when the Connect gets into its stride it becomes a really beguiling performer with a knack of cutting right to the song's heart and soul.

For example, Steely Dan's *Deacon Blue* comes over in a beautifully lucid way; Donald Fagen's deadpan vocals sound unusually animated and tuneful, while backing saxophones and trumpet have a believable timbre to them that's rarely heard in a digital source component. Walter Becker's delicate guitar work is better etched than I am used to hearing, while at the same time it never once descends into brittleness. Indeed, the way the Connect allows all the elements in this very fine recording to play along with one another is a joy to behold – it manages the deftest of party tricks of enthralling yet never tiring the listener. Above all, the Krell doesn't just give a sense of the recording, it absolutely nails it.

Move from CD-quality to high-resolution recordings, and unlike some streamers I've tried, the Krell doesn't suddenly get a personality transplant when you ramp up the resolution. There's a proportional increase in sound quality, just as it should be; the music acquires extra energy, detail, drive, power and precision right across the frequency range. Treble becomes slightly smoother and a lot more sparkly, bass is firmer and fuller and the midband widens out even more and drops back, showing the Connect's ability

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Wi-fi antenna
- 2 RCA line outputs
- 3 Balanced XLR outputs
- 4 12v trigger sockets
- 5 Ethernet connection
- 6 Coaxial digital out
- 7 USB socket

Q&A

Peter Mackay

International sales & marketing VP



DP: Why wait until now to do streamer?

PM: Consumer interest in downloading and storing music (standard and high resolution) is at an all time high, so it made sense to introduce the Connect and offer streaming capabilities with enhanced sound performance to music enthusiasts who are moving away from the silver spinning disc.

Why didn't you fit any control buttons on the Connect's fascia?

In the majority of cases consumers prefer remote operation using a tablet or smart phone for control. This affords a clean and uncluttered front panel for the Connect, and the online app allows for ease of use and control with a tablet or smart phone.

So why go to the trouble of making that beautiful remote control?

We must acknowledge the select few customers who may not have a tablet or smartphone and rely on a supplied remote control. In most cases, the supplied remote will never be used. However, if we didn't include one we would soon hear about it!

Why did you make the Connect so big and so bulky?

The industrial design and scale of the Connect matches perfectly with our new Foundation AV Processor and Illusion Preamplifiers. Although the streaming engine is relatively tiny, the remaining area inside the chassis is taken up with a massive power supply section and fully balanced/fully discrete analogue output stage, which is an under-spent area in most other brands.

Why doesn't the Connect have DSD compatibility?

During development of the Connect, music storage devices and/or music streamed over the internet were not DSD decoded. This is now changing and DSD compatibility is under review in engineering.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Digital/analogue converter board
- 2 Motherboard
- 3 Wi-fi/Ethernet board
- 4 Display and microprocessor control board
- 5 Toroidal transformer
- 6 Fully regulated multi-stage power supply



Costing just short of £3,500, Marantz's NA-11S1 is a direct rival to the DAC-equipped Krell Connect. The finish is better than the Krell's and the fascia with blue ambient lighting is interesting. The display isn't as good, but the Marantz's nav is straightforward enough for this not to matter. The Krell's remote puts the NA-11S1's to shame. Sonically the Marantz is beautifully smooth, silky and sophisticated, with oodles of low-level detail. It's a joy to listen to, but the Krell delivers a more tactile sound that communicates on an emotional level better; it's a fraction less refined, but considerably more fun. Both are excellent, so go listen for yourself.

to create a superbly spacious recorded acoustic given half the chance. Wings' *Band On The Run* is an unalloyed pleasure; it's a great album that to my mind has never quite sounded right on vinyl or CD, but at 24/96 via the Connect it comes over as tonally fulsome, spatially three dimensional and musically gratifying. Once again the Krell's basic character shines through; things are fast and thrilling with fantastically dynamic pan rolls crashing their way across the soundstage, left to right then back again. Denny Laine's multi-tracked guitars are beautifully carried, and his and Paul McCartney's vocals smooth and intricate. Suddenly the track comes alive.

Extended listening reveals the Connect to be a fantastic companion, then. Unlike several rivals that make all the right hi-fi noises but never inspire you to listen all night – whisky and water in one hand, guilty cigarette in the other – you develop ever more respect for this machine. And if you can put your drink down long enough to grab your iPad and reach for The Who's *Won't Get Fooled Again*, you'll find yourself aghast by Keith Moon's electrifying, machine-gun snare drum work and Townshend's glorious power chords. The Krell is consummately neutral and transparent, letting all the richness of recordings come out while capturing their full visceral impact – it's quite a thing to experience. This means that unlike some rivals, which seem to have been voiced in one way or another, this streamer works uniformly well across a wide range of source material – whether it's the louche soul grooves of Isaac Hayes'

Theme From Shaft or Bob Marley's *Smile Jamaica*, the Connect just, you know, connects!

Conclusion

You would expect Krell's new streamer to be something special, and sure enough it is. Its sonics are outstanding at the price; I have tried many different machines at the £4,000 price point and the Connect can hold its own with any of them, or better. Of course, it's always a matter of taste, but the great thing about this is that it's so neutral, open and transparent that it doesn't tie itself up in knots trying to flatter one type of music or another. As any digital audio designer knows, this isn't an easy tight rope to balance on. Personally, I'd like to see a slightly more comprehensive user interface and a larger screen, but it's fair to say most folk will barely bother with the old fashioned 'hands on' approach, as the app is excellent. Overall, an essential audition if you're lucky enough to be in the market for such a product ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Naturally musical sound with power and punch; build quality

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Some may want fascia controls and a larger screen

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Superb sounding, high end streamer with real musical appeal

FEATURES



OVERALL

