



KRELL HOME THEATER STANDARD II PROCESSOR ♦ £7,000 (APPROX) ♦ KRELL THEATER AMPLIFIER STANDARD ♦ £9,000 (APPROX) ♦
0208 971 3909 ♦ www.krellonline.com

5th February 2007



A game of two halves

THEY LOOK LIKE THE PERFECT MATCH, BUT STUART M ROBINSON THINKS THAT KRELL'S PROCESSOR/AMP COMBO IS THE ORIGINAL 'ODD COUPLE'

When it comes to brand recognition, there are few companies who can compete with Krell Industries. After a string of award-winning, no-compromise amps, Krell is often considered to be the Rolls Royce of audio companies. It was inevitable that sooner or later Krell would turn its attention to the lucrative and expanding home theatre market, so along came the Audio + Video Standard in 1996. It was quickly followed by the more realistically priced Home Theater Standard and its most recent incarnation, the Home Theater Standard II which is accompanied for the purposes of this review by the Theater Amplifier Standard, a typically ostentatious five-channel power amplifier.

One of the most striking differences between the original and updated HTS II is its appearance, which has undergone a radical cosmetic overhaul; the HTS II and its amplification partner are now unarguably stunning. The silver and chrome livery is gorgeous and should instantly become the envy of all those with competitors' dull black boxes.

When it comes to features, this no-frills approach is not in Krell's favour, however. While Pro-Logic, Dolby Digital and DTS are all supported, the HTS II is not THX certified, nor does it offer Surround EX, DTS ES (neither discrete nor matrix), or Pro-Logic II.

FORWARD-THINKING

Although the Krell HTS II ships in basic form, it is by no means a dead-end product. Thanks to the nature of its internal layout, upgrades are planned for the future. The HTS II is somewhat modular, as each primary element is mounted on a discrete board that plugs into a central motherboard. The three analogue output boards (in one assembly) are all individual entities so in theory any one can be replaced in order to offer some of the features currently absent. While that may sound attractive, the sheer scale of the upgrade may make it impractical. To simply add matrix Surround EX support, the entire digital processing board would have to be replaced, as would the entire analogue output board. If you want extra features, it might be worth waiting for the upcoming Krell HTS III in the spring.

The HTS II utilises a pair of Cirrus Logic Crystal CS492505, an unusual arrangement since in contemporary designs, only a single DTS/Dolby Digital processor is required. I spent some time hunting around for a set of esoteric digital to analogue converters befitting of a high-end processor, but to no avail. All the Krell's digital to analogue converters, plus the analogue to digital conversion and optical receiver reside on a single IC, the Crystal CS4226, a component common to budget priced AV kit. The CS4226 is a huge limiting factor to performance, because it can't accommodate 96kHz sample rates or 24-bit word lengths. The Krell can't process any signals of a resolution higher than 48kHz 20-bit and can offer no more than 96dB dynamic range. I hope that next year's HTS III upgrade dispenses entirely with the CS4226.

The Krell's rear panel is able to form the hub of all but the most complex of installations. There are single-ended (phono) and balanced (XLR) outputs for all six channels, together with a DB-25 interface for suitably equipped power amplifiers such as the Theater Amplifier Standard. Video terminals are a little thin on the ground, but component/RGB video is supported.

The most significant absentee is a 5.1 analogue input array, which means **LAB REPORT** that it cannot accept multichannel signals from a DVD-Audio or an SACD player.

THEATER AMPLIFIER STANDARD POWER AMP

Installation is straightforward, due to the lack of any complex processing modes or innovative technology. Loudspeakers are specified as either 'Full-Range' or 'Limited' (the equivalent of large and small) with a single, 80Hz fixed crossover being available. There are no constraints, however, as to the combination of these values, you can run bandwidth limited front channels with a full-range centre or rears.

Distortion @ 50W: 0.013% (8ohms, 1kHz)

Within the 'Configure Devices' menu, you can specify the audio and video



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terminals assigned to a specific source name, the default mode and the Frequency response: 20Hz-20kHz \pm 1.2dB trigger operation. Unfortunately, the Krell must be specifically set up with either a digital or analogue source assigned to each name, it cannot automatically drop back to an analogue link if a digital signal is not present. Further menus let you adjust everyday options such as the colour of the menu, the duration of OSD activity and the type of 'DSP' processing assigned to the two music modes.

THE POWER AMP

£9,000 might seem to be an exorbitant amount of money for a power amp, but it is here that Krell's strengths lie, not just in terms of cosmetics and enclosure construction, but also where it matters, in the box itself. The Theater Amplifier Standard is a hybrid design, part modular (each of the five amplification elements sits on its own dedicated board) and part shared, the power supply capacitance and transformers serve all five output elements. The TAS is exemplary from a technical standpoint: components are beautifully arranged and highly specified.

The TAS is only equipped with five channels, but there is room within the chassis to accommodate two more, although the rear panel would also need to be replaced in order to add the required input and output terminals. In its current guise, the TAS offers both single-ended and balanced XLR inputs for all five channels, along with a DB-25 terminal and 10 five-way binding posts.

RATINGS

Highs: A true powerhouse, but also an amplifier with finesse and grace

Lows: Hurts like hell if you drop it on your toe

Sound *****
Build *****
Features *****
Overall *****

FEATURES

Connections: 5x banana-capable binding post pairs; 5x single-ended phono line-level inputs; 5x XLR balanced line-level inputs, DB-25 terminal; 12V trigger input.

Other features: 5x 200W (into 8ohms all channels driven); 5x 400W (into 4ohms all channels driven) and 5x 800W (into 2ohms all channels driven); Adjacent channels can be bridged.

Dimensions: 438(w) x 248(h) x 438(d)mm

Weight: 45.4kg.



When the time comes to use the Krell combination, the processor draws attention to itself in curious ways. There is noticeable sub leakage even when the remainder of the channels are set to 'Full-Range' and the subwoofer output has been disabled in the loudspeaker configuration menu. The master volume control increments are also too coarse: there are just 34 non-calibrated steps between minimum and maximum but you'll never be able to increase the level beyond around 15 or 16, at that point the output is deafening. This essentially means the Krell has only 15 volume increments. There are bugs too: the volume control is sluggish when no digital signal is present and it often takes a few front panel button presses before the HTS II responds.

Most irritating, is the way the Krell reacts to incoming digital signals. When a CD or DVD player is idle, the processor enters a 'No Signal' state, muting its outputs, an operation which is always accompanied by an audible 'pop'. When the Krell does receive a valid Dolby Digital, DTS or PCM signal, there is a delay of, on average, four seconds before it is recognised and audio produced, once again preceded by a loud 'pop'. On a few occasions it took the HTS II upwards of 30 seconds to recognise the incoming 44.1kHz PCM audio from my Toshiba SD-900E. This, to my mind, is totally unacceptable behaviour at any level. Not only is the omission of audible content annoying, but the procedure, complete with pops and relay clicking is also repeated between DVD menus, and before the trailers and the movie itself.

As a musical performer with a digital input, the HTS II is nothing special, I found its character claustrophobic and veiled, instruments and vocal elements are presented in a balanced way, but without the clarity a product at this level should provide. One could almost describe it as 'dull', there's nothing to make you sit up and listen. Fine recordings like Mark Knopfler's 'What It Is' do little to grab your attention.

If you want to enjoy two-channel sources through the HTS II, then there is a solution: use its true analogue bypass and the DACs in your CD or DVD player, they're likely to be far superior anyway. By pressing a key marked 'Pre-amp', the Krell becomes a straightforward stereo pre-amplifier, which greatly benefits the playback of CD and two-channel SACD material. However, there is no bass management available in the 'Pre-amp' mode so you'll need full-range front loudspeakers, and unfortunately there is no way to accommodate multichannel SACD or DVD-Audio.

There are nine 'DSP' modes on hand, but accessing them is far from straightforward. Instead of just scrolling through the list, Krell makes you assign a mode to each of two remote keys labelled 'Music 1' and 'Music 2'. If you'd like to change your selection then you have to do so via the setup menu.

As a home theatre processor, the HTS II fares better but falls significantly short of the performance of a Tag, Lexicon or Meridian. While Pro-Logic decoding is precise and steers away from obvious artefacts, its dynamic range is seriously limited and it does little to create a sense of realism.

Dolby Digital and DTS decoding suffer from the same problems as two-channel optical material, the processing is competent enough but

the delivery uninspiring. Even the best DTS music recordings, for example Seal's 'Prayer for the Dying', are conveyed in such a lacklustre fashion as to be almost unrecognisable. The Krell's traits do suit some material, the over-bright opening of Tarzan (Region 2 DVD) for one. Low frequency conveyance is competent, forceful and highly integrated, one of the few areas of performance that did not disappoint, likewise the Krell's reaction to Dolby Digital 2/0.0 software, it is correctly identified and Pro-Logic loaded when the matrix encoded flag is set. Non-flagged DTS material is free of spurious noise, but the HTS II displays says '5.1' even if the bitstream doesn't contain six channels.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

While the Krell processor leaves me cold, the Theater Amplifier Standard is an entirely different story, it's an outstanding amp, one capable of delivering huge amounts of dynamic power into any load.

Driven from the XLR outputs of a Lexicon MC-12B, a processor which does boast dual differential DACs and a true balanced architecture, the TAS conveyed movie soundtracks with a thunderous force that is rarely experienced with an average receiver or multichannel power amp. But the Krell is not just blood and thunder; it can also deliver subtle musical events with finesse. In fact, although I was thoroughly impressed by its capability with movies, it was the delicate instrumental events that really caught my attention. It's not an exaggeration to say that one can feel the 'air' around instruments or vocalists, such is the Krell's penchant for fine detail. Translated to even the most raucous of soundtracks, this character enables dialogue to be clearly defined, as are subtle surround events, even when the remaining channels are raising the roof.

To sum up, the Home Theater Standard II is not my cup of tea. It's lovely to look at, but that beauty is skin deep. The technology on offer and the way it is implemented fall short of that offered by a moderate receiver. The bugs and the lack of features make it impossible for me to recommend it. The Theater Amplifier Standard on the other hand, is in a different league. Although it is very expensive, it is a class above many of its most prominent rivals and it can provide a level of performance that is nothing short of exemplary.

RATINGS

Highs: Visually attractive piece of hardware

Lows: Limited features; frustrating performance; operational bugs

Sound



Build



Ease of use



Features



Overall



FEATURES

Connections: Inputs: 7x analogue phono pairs and 1 balanced XLR analogue input pair; 2x TOSlink optical and 6x coaxial electrical digital; 4x composite video and 4x S-video; 2x component/RGB video; 12V trigger input; RC-5 remote IR input. Outputs: Main room 6x analogue phonos and 6x balanced XLR; DB-25; Zone 2 pair; 2x analogue record/output pair; TOSlink optical and coaxial electrical digital output; 2x composite video; 2x S-video; component/RGB video; 4x 12V trigger outputs. Others: Crestron I2P and Panja-P3 (PHAST Link) RS-232 serial port.

Sound formats supported: Dolby Digital; Dolby Pro Logic (Dolby Surround); DTS; PCM via optical (maximum sample-rate supported 48kHz).

Other features: Remote control; dual-zone capability; nine 'DSP' music modes (Full-range + Sub, Mono, Party, General Admission, Front Row, On Stage, Enhanced Stereo, Orchestra, Mezzanine); analogue bypass and onscreen displays.

Dimensions: 438(w) x 143(h) x 417(d)mm

Weight: 8.75kg.

Stuart M Robinson, Home Cinema Choice, December 2001

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