

Krell Evolution 525a (£12,000)

Recent additions to Krell's Evolution range include this impressive CD player. But does it do enough to justify its price tag? And what on earth are all those buttons for?

Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Krell's first non-amplification component was the SBP 64X digital-to-analogue converter, launched in 1989. Its first one-box player was the KPS20, which was followed by the amazing KPS25s of 1998. This extravagant top-loader offered state-of-the-art CD replay and a built-in preamplifier, but more importantly, it mesmerised audiophiles everywhere with a gorgeous hinged clear-acrylic lid, which magically became opaque when playing.

By then, Krell had initiated its KAV home cinema electronics, and the relatively bland but still impressive-looking DVD Standard player was added in 2001. Two years later came the SACD Standard player, and two years after that, a truly high-end CD/SACD player, the Evolution 505.

VARIATION ON A THEME

The successor to the 505 is the new Evolution 525. Or rather, 525s, plural, as there is a range of four variants. These are the 525t transport, the 525v DVD player, the 525a CD player reviewed here, and finally the fully-loaded 525av.

I spoke with Krell's president Bill McKiegan. He explained the 525 hierarchy:

'The very basic unit, the 525t, is a transport having only the standard S/PDIF digital audio output. Typically, somebody might be using the Evolution 707, our flagship processor, and they're looking for the best in their CD playback. With the great D/A conversion and analogue output stage they have in the processor, there's no need to duplicate that in the source unit.

'For folks who also want to add DVD performance, we do find that in many cases, DVDs look better on a dedicated DVD player, rather than a Blu-ray player. So for those with a large collection of DVDs, or even a modest collection, and the desire to play them, the 'v' version still gives the

standard digital audio output, but now adds 1080p upconversion and a better video playback.

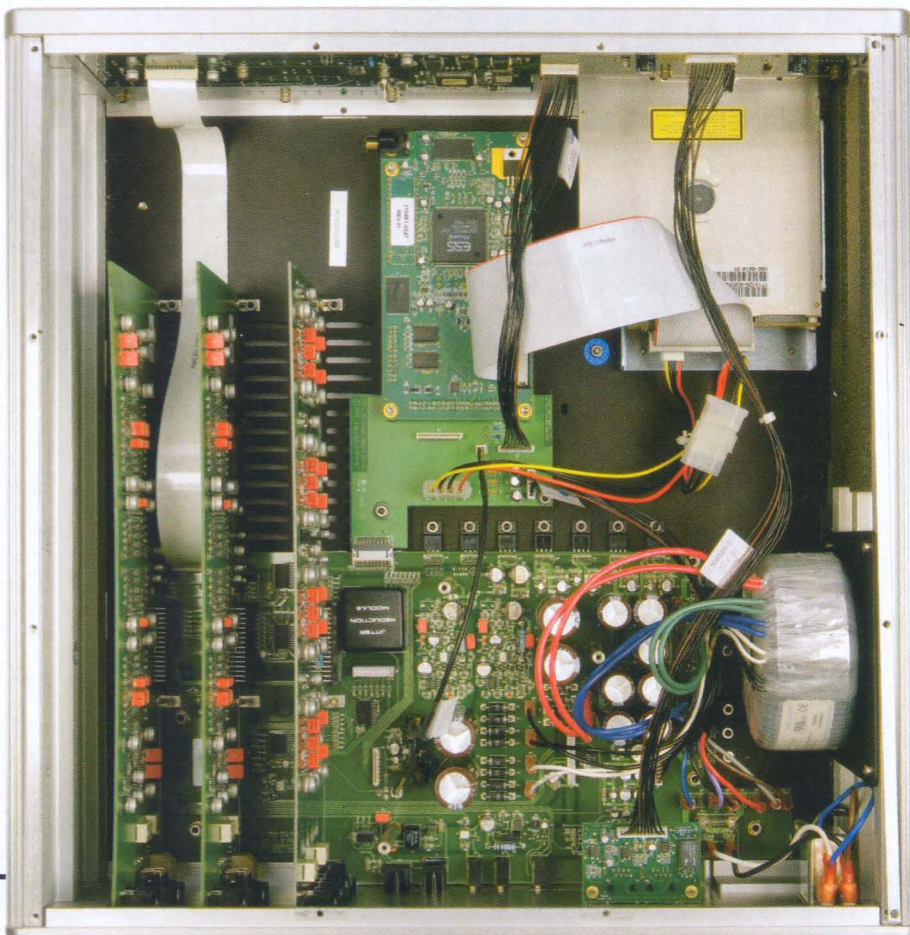
'The most popular of the units at this point is the 525a, which is the classic CD player, audio-only. It has the analogue output stage. The multichannel playback is really because that drive inside is a DVD drive, it will play DVD discs, and you can do multichannel analogue output. We had that on the previous generation of the platform, the 505, and we could continue it, so we did that with the 525a. But the most popular usage of it is in a standard two channel system, either with our CAST [Current Audio Signal Transmission] and the rest of the electronics from us, or via the balanced outputs.

'The 525av version does give you the full analogue output stage as well as the

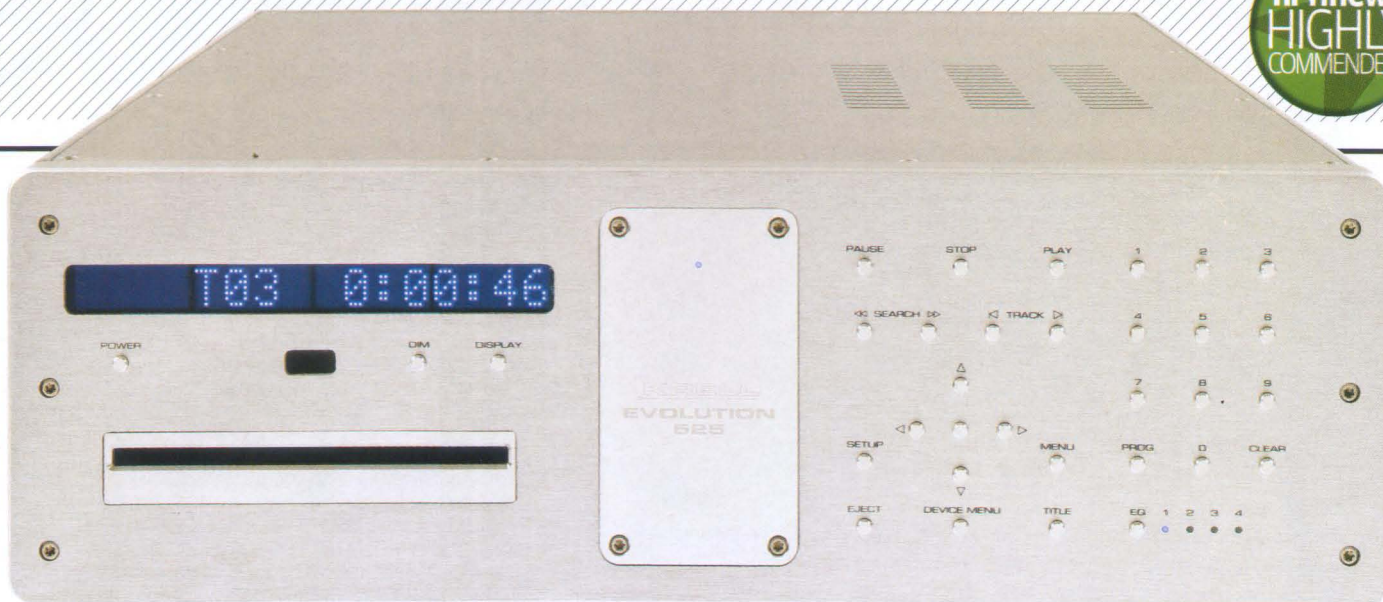
full video output stage. Typically, we see that being used with one of our older processors, or somebody else's processor that doesn't have quite the analogue or digital stage that we have. It gets your analogue back up to the stage you'd be looking for. Coming down the road is yet another machine, and that's the 555, our fully-fledged Blu-ray player. Most folks who are looking for video are not going down that road with us via the 525, they're waiting for the 555 to take advantage of the full Blu-ray performance as well.

'So although, if you buy a 525a, you can have it upgraded later to 525av, there isn't a Blu-ray option in this series. It's going to stop at the four versions we have.'

So, the Evolution 525a looks pretty much like the preceding Evolution 505, but is a different beast, most obviously



RIGHT: Multi-platform disc drive feeds two-channel DACs on the two leftmost vertical (analogue output) cards. The Centremost board is equipped with DSD1793 DACs for the centre, surround and sub channels



because it won't play SACD. Front panel layout is virtually unchanged, though the 505's transport drawer is replaced by a disc loading slot. Above this orifice is a big, blue-lit dot matrix display, bold and bright enough for the average baby-boomer to read across the room.

THOSE BUTTONS...

By contrast, the control buttons seem tiny. The lone one on the far left is the power switch which brings the machine, once powered up by the main rear-panel switch, out of Standby mode, turning the centre-panel pilot light from red to Krell blue. The other two buttons in the left field are Display, to cycle the readout between elapsed and remaining time and disc type, and Dim, which cycles the display through bright, dim, or off.

To the right is a more plentiful scattering of small, widely-spaced buttons, a bit like a big version of those Braille panels installed in lifts. Somewhere among them you can find all the usual CD transport keys. Top right is a set of numeric keys for direct track selection.

Filling out the constellation below is a cross-shaped array centred on a Menu button, but the DVD navigation functions which these provide are only implemented on the 525v and 525av models. Along with the Setup and Title buttons, they

are inoperative on the 525a. Naturally, all the fascia controls are duplicated on the chunky metal-cased remote, which also adds single track and whole disc Repeat.

On the back panel, for two-channel audio output, you can use Krell's CAST connectors if the player is feeding a CAST-equipped Krell preamp, or otherwise choose between balanced (XLR) connectors and the usual single-ended phonos. Four additional phono sockets, labelled for L and R rear, centre and sub channels, complete the set of 5.1 analogue audio outputs.

In practice, though the 525a would play sound from DVD Video and DVD Audio discs, I could only get it to produce two-channel sound, so it seemed that the rest of the multichannel set were redundant. There is no video output, of course. Where the 525v and 525av have an array of video connectors, the 525a has just a blanking plate.

However, the control connections you'd expect in an AV context are present. There is a 12V trigger input and output, RC-5 wired remote input and an RS-232 comms port, as well as CANLink connectors to provide a control link to other Evolution components. What you don't get, though, is a USB or S/PDIF digital input.

ABOVE: Many of the buttons seen here are inoperative on the 525a CD player. They only come into use if the player is upgraded to AV operation as the 525v or full 525av versions

So, although the 525a will read data discs containing MP3 files, it won't help you use your computer, server or set-top box as the audio source.

TRULY GRIPPING

Anyway, I couldn't wait to hear what the Krell could do for my favourite CDs. I started with Keith Jarrett and Charlie Haden, *Jasmine* [ECM 273 3485], and found this fabulously immediate-sounding

'The Krell could make those dance beats truly hypnotic'

recording more gripping than ever. Each piano note was allowed to bloom with real body after the initial and completely natural attack of hammers hitting strings. As for the bass, Haden's full

sound and rhythmic perfection was revealed from the start, and even more so when he unbuttoned his sound a little more for a solo. Above all, the Krell 525a seemed to lead you on to enjoy the way the two musicians connected with such breathtaking rapport.

On Ry Cooder's seminal digital recording from 1979, *Bop Till You Drop* [Warner Bros 7599-27398-2], the bass was deep and clean, and the whole presentation had space as well as precision. On the opening 'Little Sister,' you could find yourself analysing the contribution of each backing vocal line, or mentally picking apart Cooder's multiple guitars, rather than just hearing them as an electric collage.

Moving forward a couple of decades, I floated off with Simple Minds' *Cry* from 2002 [Eagle EAGSACD196]. The Krell could make those dance beats truly hypnotic, and you could wallow in the kaleidoscopic soundscape. It seemed to enhance every

KRELL SPREADS ITS WINGS

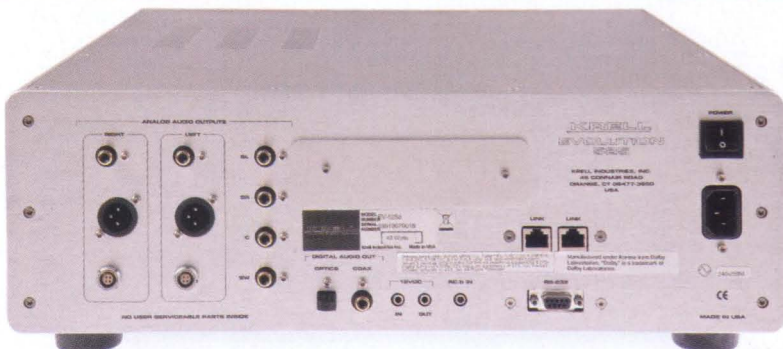
Changes at Krell began in April 2009 when investment group KP Capital bought a 40% stake. Later came the departure of Dan D'Agostino, who'd headed up Krell and been chief designer since co-founding it with his then wife Rondi in 1980. He's now launched his new company, Dan D'Agostino Inc, and its Momentum amplifier [see *HFN*, Dec '10]. But Krell's recently-appointed president Bill McKiegan, with the company since 1994, emphasises the continuity in the team.

'There's 50-plus years of Krell experience among the top three engineers,' he points out. 'And we continue to move forward. We'll continue to keep that high performance, top-end branding that we've always had. But we are looking to embrace the new world of streaming and IP control, and the creature comforts that folks desire now. So we'll be spreading our wings a little bit.'

CD PLAYER

LAB REPORT

KRELL EVOLUTION 525a (£12,000)



ABOVE: Two-channel output options include Krell's CAST and balanced XLRs as well as phonos. But those extra 5.1 output sockets are redundant for CD replay

colour of Jim Kerr's chameleon-like vocals, so that in his most nasal moments he positively dripped.

Returning to pure acoustic sounds, I put on *Rosa* [Telarc CD-83646], the beautiful solo album which was the great Brazilian singer Rosa Passos' American label debut in 2006. With the Krell, that lovely voice and sweet-and-gentle guitar emerged from an absolutely black and silent background, drawing you in completely. It was like being at a real performance, surrounded by a silent audience, holding its breath.

I BELIEVE!

On another superbly crafted recording, Eric Bibb's *Get Onboard* [Telarc CD-83675], the Krell seemed to allow the singer to just be there, effortlessly, again emerging from a space between the speakers in a believable way. This was most striking, perhaps, on a track like 'Pockets', which is mainly just Bibb and his acoustic guitar, but the band tracks were great too.

Guitarist Pierre Bensusan doesn't sing on *Intuite* [Favored Nations 2130] but with the help of studio echo, fills a huge space with one guitar. Much as I love this record, I think the Krell perhaps exposed the trickery a little too ruthlessly, and I found myself wishing I could enjoy Bensusan's playing without having to feel I was in the bathroom with him.

I turned to classical with the more genuinely 'wet' recorded acoustic of Mitsuko Uchida's *Debussy Etudes* [reissued as Philips 464 698-2]. Here the Krell gave a really convincing sense of depth, so that I felt as if I could get up and pace out the distance to the piano, except that I would walk into the back wall before I got to it. There seemed to be real space behind the instrument too.

Not only did this player negotiate the most intense treble passages, it allowed you better than most to focus on the left hand notes at the same time. It gave a fine, natural quality to the bass too, and in passages where the music is founded on quick, lightly-touched bass notes, the architecture came through with great clarity.

'Dry', by comparison, is the LSO's 2005 recording with Haitink of Beethoven's Symphony 5 [LSO Live LSO 0590]. With the Krell player, the system coped smoothly with the almost shocking dynamics of the orchestra, the sound underpinned by a confident, no-nonsense clarity and depth in the bass.

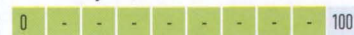
Although there was still, as always, a feeling of the orchestra being somehow imprisoned in the Barbican concert hall, the Krell seemed to resolve fully those acoustic clues that are there.

And, with so many discs I tried, the Krell could make this a more believable and enjoyable performance than you'll hear on many a high-end system. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

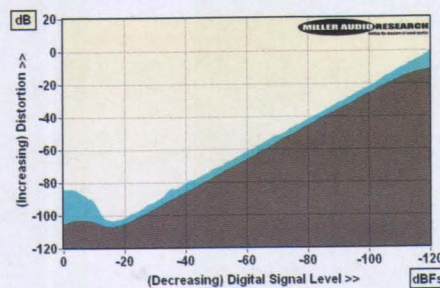
A superb CD player, which just makes you go on listening. It has a tower-of-strength kind of bass – never exaggerated, always lucid – plus wonderfully 'black' backgrounds and fabulous speed and precision. Yet this is a transitional product: part of the cost buys video elements that are redundant unless you upgrade it to 525av spec. And if you'd consider doing that, you'll wait for the 555 Blu-ray player instead.

Sound Quality: 85%

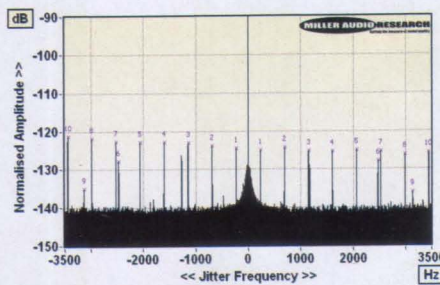


The plethora of buttons on the fascia of this massive disc player are largely redundant, as are the centre, surround and subwoofer outputs at the rear, for this 'minimalist' version of the 525 chassis handles CD media only. Each channel is powered by a (stereo) Burr-Brown DSD1794 DAC operating in dual-differential mode and feeding both balanced (XLR) and Krell current-mode CAST outputs. The former offers a 3.8V output from a 170ohm source impedance, conferring a wide 110dB A-wtd S/N ratio and distortion that falls as low as 0.00006% through the midrange at -10dBfs. Peak level distortion increases with frequency to reach 0.005% at 20kHz [see blue trace, Graph 1 below] but this is analogue rather than digital in origin with 2nd, 3rd and 4th harmonics dominating the spectrum. Similarly, the very mild -0.2dB/20kHz response roll off is determined by Krell's proprietary analogue stage.

Take a close look at our inside shot [see p30] and you'll notice a black module labelled 'Jitter Reduction Module', an interface between the ATAPI disc drive and L/R DAC boards that squeezes jitter down to within 3psec of the measurable 16-bit limit at 116psec [see Graph 2, below]. The pair of peaks labelled 6 and 9 represent the only correlated jitter in this spectrum! Stopband rejection is also superb at 126dB below full output – a function of the DAC's digital filter. The only digital oddity is a pair of idle tones, at 2.45kHz and 4.89kHz, but as both are -123dB below full output, neither are likely to be audible. Readers are invited to view a comprehensive QC Suite test report for the Krell Evolution 525a CD player by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Distortion versus digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range using 16-bit CD data



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plot. Markers 1-5, 7, 8, 10 show the residual data pattern; 6 & 9 are jitter

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

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|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Maximum Output Level (Balanced) | 3.78Vrms at 170ohm |
| A-wtd S/N Ratio | 110.4dB |
| Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs) | 0.00098% / 0.0039% |
| Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs) | 0.0048% |
| Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz) | +0.0dB to -0.21dB |
| Digital jitter | 116psec |
| Resolution @ -100dB | ±0.1dB |
| Power consumption | 43W |
| Dimensions (WHD) | 438x152x440mm |