

NETWORK AUDIO PLAYER

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Krell Connect

Krell announced at the Las Vegas CES its intention to introduce a UPnP/DLNA-compliant network media player and the rather aptly named Connect is now available in the UK.

There are in fact two versions of Krell's Connect player, the one featured here having an optional built-in DAC with balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) analogue outputs. Needless to say it is vastly overbuilt compared with most music streamers!

At its core lies a familiar BridgeCo-based StreamUnlimited platform including vTuner internet radio functionality. Massive power supplies have always been the cornerstone of Krell designs, and the Connect has an over-specified linear power supply with a 94VA toroidal transformer large enough to power a modest amplifier.

The on-board converter section uses ESS Technology's flagship ES9018 Sabre 32-bit DAC chipset and has a fully discrete balanced

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analogue output stage employing Krell's Current Mode topology.

At the rear are three mini-jack sockets. Two are 12V triggers, the third is for an external IR receiver. There is also a solitary A-Type USB input for direct playback of files from 'local storage' such as a USB hard drive or memory stick. These must be formatted for the FAT32 file system, not NTFS.

The Connect's minimalist fascia sports no controls other than a standby on/off button, the unit coming with a chunky aluminium handset that provides navigation and transport keys for playing/pausing/skipping selected music files. Of course, your computer or NAS drive requires server software in order for a network player to access music files; Krell suggests using Twonky Server (available for Windows and Mac OS X). The Connect will render WAV and FLAC files up to 192kHz/24-bit along with WMA, Apple Lossless, MP4A and MP3 file formats.

A FABULOUS SOUND

The Connect is an extremely supple and expressive digital player. With good recordings it delivers really meaty and deeply extended bass, and refined high frequencies without any harshness or glare.

Listening to *Quiet Winter Night* by the Hoff Ensemble [2L] revealed that via wireless connection the

Connect delivered a marginally softer-focused image of the musicians in the church venue than by wired Ethernet hook-up.

But with a selection of tracks played from a flash drive, using the Connect's USB input, sound quality moved into overdrive. If the Connect already sounded great when streaming files via the network, now the performance was even better, both spatially and tonally, with soundstage cues more apparent and subtle tonal hues more fleshed out. It gave a sense of 'being there' with the performers.

ABOVE: New styling matches Krell's Foundation AV preamp/processor. File navigation is via a 3.5in LCD screen and the Connect's IR handset. Single-ended and balanced (XLR) analogue outputs are provided at the rear, along with RCA and Toslink digital outputs, and a USB type-A socket for flash drives

Hearing a naturally lifelike rendering by sound engineering veteran Barry Diament, proprietor of Soundkeeper Recordings (who likes to capture musicians playing live and record them directly to stereo at 192kHz/24-bit), showed just how capable the Connect's DAC is at delivering the *feel* of a performance, preserving both the musical balance and dynamics.

His 'Dragon Boats' from Work Of Art's *Lift* album also highlighted the Connect's delightful midrange purity and outstanding bass extension, with no bloat or overhang. Image scale and focus were exceptional, the musicians presented as a seamless spread of images across the soundstage. It sounded simply fabulous at 192kHz/24-bit resolution, with improved image depth and more finely-described harmonic textures.

We revisited several ripped tracks from the CD version of Carlos Franzetti's *The Jazz Kamerata* [Chesky]. These beautiful recordings – with so much space you feel you could walk up to the jazz ensemble and shake hands with the musicians in turn – sounded exquisite.

As a 'transport-only' music streamer the Connect might be considered a sledgehammer to crack a nut. But with the DAC on board it certainly makes for a network audio player perfectly suited to a high-end system.

VERDICT

It's a pity Krell has not included digital inputs for legacy sources but, via network and especially USB, the Connect sounds bold and confident with CD-res files. Moreover, it delivers the high-end goods when rendering high-res recordings. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.03Vrms at 164ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio	110.8dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0020% / 0.0012%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.0025% / 0.0028%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.14dB/-0.9dB/-2.2dB
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz/192kHz)	100psec / 65psec / 105psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.5dB
Power consumption	25W (4W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	433x88x428mm / 8.2kg