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EDITOR'S CHOICE
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KIDs are alright

Can Krell and MartinLogan raise the iPod to audiophile standards? Alan Sircom seems to think so

PRODUCT Absolute Sounds ElectroKID

TYPE iPod hi-fi system (dock and active electrostatics)

PRICE £1,350 (KID); £2,390 per pair (ML Purity)

KEY FEATURES (Krell KID) • iPod preamplifier
 • Balanced and single-ended audio outputs • S-Video and composite video outputs • Class A architecture (MartinLogan Purity) • Active hybrid electrostatic
 • Built-in 200-watt amplifier • Sensitivity: 95dB/0.1v (at line-level) • Impedance: 14,000 ohms (at line-level)

CONTACT ☎ 020 8971 3909 @ www.absolutesounds.com

Depending on your viewpoint, the £3,740 ElectroKID system is either a serious and successful attempt at wringing the best possible sound out of an Apple iPod, or a rich audiophile's folly. Actually, it's both, and we should love it for being both.

The ElectroKID is formed of two products from two different American high-end manufacturers – Krell and MartinLogan. The connection is Absolute Sounds, the UK distributor for both products. Ricardo Franisovici, *Grande Fromage* of Absolute Sounds, realised that the combination of iPod 'interface' and active loudspeakers could deliver the sort of sound quality that even Apple might not have expected from the ubiquitous iPod. And so, the ElectroKID was born.

The name itself is a portmanteau of 'electrostatic loudspeaker' (the MartinLogan Purity) and 'KID', which is itself an acronym for 'Krell Interface Dock'. Technically, it should be 'KIDelectro', but that sounds way too 1980's! Incidentally, if you type 'electrokid' into Google on the interweb, you get a lot of DJs before you get to this system.

The Krell Interface Dock was the big audiophile controversy of 2007, because it was the first iPod-related product from a big name high-end brand. And, like all controversy, it has set the trend; at the CES 2008 we saw products like the Wadia 170 iPod transport follow in the footsteps of the KID. The £1,350 Krell Interface Dock is essentially an iPod dock combined with line preamplifier. It has both balanced and single-ended inputs, a composite and S-Video connection for video, and an RS232 port for those using high-end Crestron/AMX-style remote control systems. It also has an auxiliary line-level input mini-jack on the front panel, for those wanting to use a digital audio player that is not of the iPod family.

Krell has been canny with the universal docking connector. Inset into a silo on the top of the KID, this has four little clear Perspex rods that wheel back and forth to make a snug fit for the iPod. So, you can guarantee an iPod Nano will sit just as robustly as an iPod Classic.

The KID does not crack the digital code within the iPod, but instead has mild filtering in post processing to help give the signal the best possible start in life (there's also subtle treble and bass tone controls, which are useful

Source in issue 303. You could be forgiven for expecting the only difference between the two speakers to be the amplifiers, given that they were launched so close to one another. In fact, the two have significant differences, especially in the bass. Yes, both share the same CLS Generation 2 electrostatic treble/midrange panel, housed in ML's rigid 'AirFrame' curved aluminium housing, and both have a broadly similar footprint, but where the Source features a single 200mm bass driver, the Purity sports a

“The name is a portmanteau of ‘electrostatic loudspeaker’ and KID, which is itself an acronym for Krell Interface Dock.”

when trying to improve a lot of compressed audio sources). Strangely, given the fact that every single company in the audio industry has latched onto the iPod as potential saviour of their business, precious few exploited the fact that the iPod actually delivers a differential output. This means it's a doddle to run balanced outputs from the Apple player, but the KID is the first product to take advantage of this. Applause for Krell and dumb points all round to everyone else for missing an obvious trick. Krell runs its differential amplifier circuitry in Class A, so the KID runs warm – not hot enough to reach for the Calpol, though. Incidentally, Krell is considering a second iPod product – a full preamp with docking capability, called Papa Doc, although presumably not named after the possibly insane mid-20th Century Haitian dictator, Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier.

The KID is joined by the MartinLogan Purity loudspeaker, to form the ElectroKID system. Last year, MartinLogan launched two entry-level speakers – the passive Source and active Purity – and HFC tested the

pair of 165mm units, driven by a built-in 200-watt amplifier.

There's a three-position bass control at the rear of both speakers, for +3dB, flat and -3dB, and its best to experiment. There's even a set of speaker terminals for those who want to drive the stators from an amplifier and that turns the internal amp into a subwoofer driver, although that's effectively irrelevant in this case. As ever with MartinLogan speakers, the Purity needs a lot of air – a good metre from the rear wall and half a metre from the sides.

As a high-end partnership, the two fit snugly together, although there's one small sacrifice in reality – the MartinLogan speakers don't accept a balanced input, so although the Krell KID takes advantage of the differential output of the iPod, that advantage is not passed on here. Still, unless you have to use more than 5m runs of interconnect cable 'twixt KID and Purity, it's doubtful you would gain much by going balanced anyway. ▶



Q&A

Ricardo Franissovici of Absolute Sounds discusses how two disparate products came together to form the ElectroKid.



HFC How did the ElectroKID system come about?

RF The ElectroKID concept was developed because we distribute both Krell and MartinLogan. These two products happened to be released at around the same time, and given their attributes, it seemed a pretty obvious thing to put them together to deliver a complete system concept as an option.

There have been other iPod systems before. Aside from the price tag, what makes this one so different?

This system excites my passion about music and the way it should be heard. Something had to; given that the iPod is now such a universally popular way of listening to music, I was determined to deliver a genuinely high-end solution for those who wish to use their iPods – and the music stored within – as a source component at home. The ElectroKID is the result: simple, stylish and, I think, utterly brilliant!

The critical bit is the iPod interface itself, which is unique and enables maximum audio quality to be transferred. It proves that the iPod can be used as a high-end music source, particularly if the music is stored in uncompressed form.

Are you intending the ElectroKid as a standalone hi-fi system?

Of course, you can add other source components to this system, or even amp components if you so wish, but the beauty is that it's the first genuine high-end solution that harnesses the convenience of the iPod as a source, with the minimum number of boxes (albeit relatively large ones!). And with MartinLogan electrostatics to boot.

The ElectroKID is called an Absolute Sounds system. How did you get that past Krell and MartinLogan?

You have to be more than simply a distributor of these brands – you have to be a trusted colleague, a consultant on an international level and an entrepreneur all in one.



■ SOUND QUALITY

Part of the issue with any dock is the quality of the recordings made to your iPod. These can be so variable that they can make or break a sound, and many's the time low-fi systems actually do better than their high-end brethren in this context because small, cheap speakers are less demanding and thus, do not highlight the parts where data has been sacrificed at the altar of disk space. In contrast, a full-range audiophile-grade system can throw the limitations of data compression into sharp focus.

So, if you are planning to use a take-no-prisoners replay system, you need to be just as resolute in your choice of format; AIFF or WAV give you bit-for-bit transfers, but with the concomitant disk-eating properties of storing 650MB or more per CD, Apple Lossless (as the name suggests) works like a zip compressor and does not interpolate the music itself. You are still looking, however, at nigh on 300MB per CD.

Then, there's AAC and MP3; consider 160kbps AAC and 192kbps MP3 files as a bare minimum for use with the ElectroKID and if you can go higher (both go up to 320 kilobits per second), do so. You still get hundreds of

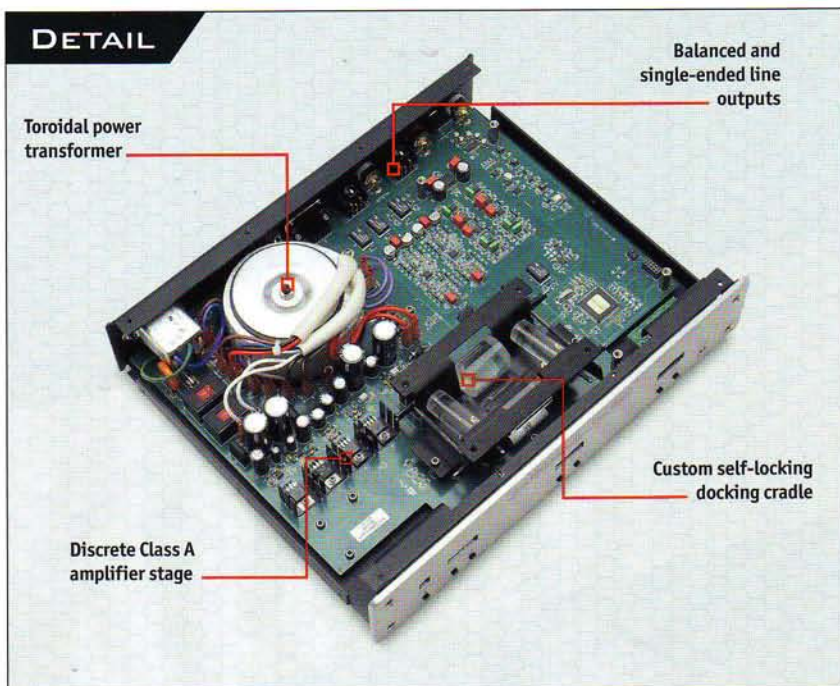
hours on a single iPod (400 hours of music on a 60GB model sounds about right), but at least they are all listenable.

There's even the choice of iPod to consider. Naturally, your iPod has to be second generation or later to sport a docking port. But there are also some who reject the iPhone and iPod Touch on audio grounds.

There's a symbiosis between the two non-Apple products that bespeaks quality. In other words, the KID and the Purity sing together beautifully. The Krell KID is more of a preamp than a dock and the improvement that it brings to the Apple sound is quite remarkable. You get a vivid, exciting and clean sound with a surprisingly fine soundstage... something far better than the flat, pinched 2-D sonic disappointment that comes when you usually hook your iPod to the hi-fi. All this without even tangling with digital code must mean Krell is doing something right. The sound is perhaps drier than typical Krell products, but is still an excellent presentation.

The MartinLogan side of things is not too dissimilar from the performance heard in the Source loudspeaker we recently tested. The extended, smooth treble, the open midrange, that effortless sense of





disappearing loudspeakers and the well-integrated dynamic bass are all re-issued here. The big difference between this speaker and the passive version is even better bass control, depth and integration; having that 200 watts on tap really brings the speaker to life and helps bring out the best in the KID. It gives the iPod sound a cohesiveness that it seems to so sorely lack in other settings.

Even the bass and treble controls – usually so alien to any Krell-loving audiophile – have a place here. Unlike most modern CD recordings, it seems that those squeezed into the iPod comfort zone are compressed at the bottom end and over-emphasised at the top. Worse, this seems to have become the norm for modern pop and rock releases, perhaps to make them sit more comfortably in tinny little iPod headphones. The mild degree of tone shaping that goes on thanks to the

KID helps shape this. That the iPod can be controlled by the credit card remote is good, but the logic driving the remote is pure Krell – it's not confusing, but neither is it the genius iPod interface.

We've heard many aspiring high-end iPod-based systems, but this is the best of them (it's also currently the most expensive of them too, these things may be related). In some respects the Purity speakers are perfectly made for the iPod, if using good-quality sound files – the openness of the midrange and smooth, clean and extended treble fit the Apple sound perfectly, where cone-and-dome systems (especially metal dome tweeters) can sound brash and hard. Also, because electrostatics take the emphasis off dynamic range, this helps take the edge off very mild compression, which always sounds too compressed on dynamic box speaker systems.

The Purity designs do have a dynamic bottom end and that also fits the iPod profile.

If there's a limit, it's in the video output. In fairness, this is as much the fault of the Apple device as it is from the Krell KID, but composite and S-Video connections are relatively weak in today's HDTV world. Others have shown (although not, as yet, launched) upscaling docks that bring the iPod video quality a nudge toward DVD-grade video goodness, but here the picture quality is indistinct and blocky, on both outputs.

We want to ask whether this system makes you reach for the off switch on your CD player, but this is wholly the wrong question. We doubt this will be the only system for those who invest in it, and many will be considering the ElectroKID as a useful adjunct or complement to their existing high-end hi-fi. In that context, the ElectroKID is a remarkable pairing. **HFC**

Alan Sircom



VERDICT

SOUND



PRO

The ultimate in specialist systems, these two products raise the iPod to audiophile standards, with a clarity that's uncanny

FEATURES



CON

Not the primary hi-fi for most people, which makes it an expensive second system. Remote seems to have its own logic, loosely related to the iPod. Video quality so-so.

BUILD



VALUE



CONCLUSION

We can see the ElectroKID springing up in the playrooms of the well-heeled, who want their commuting music buddy in the home too. That it delivers, via the iPod, genuine hi-fi sets it head, shoulders and a fair amount of torso above the rest.

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE

