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hi-fi news

CD NOUVEAU

KALISTA DISC PLAYER



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Perfect Timing

METRONOME TECHNOLOGIE KALISTA INTEGRATED (£29,950)

High-end CD technology and avant garde styling collide in this French disc spinner. Prepare for 16-bits of Gallic charm...

hi-finews
EDITOR'S
CHOICE



With its design team headed up by Dominique Giner, Metronome Technologie is a French high-end audio company founded in 1987. Alongside world famous hi-fi marques such as Koetsu, Audio Research, Krell Industries and Sonus faber, Metronome's products are imported and distributed in the UK by Absolute Sounds of south-west London.

Recent visitors to hi-fi shows at Heathrow may have come across Metronome's magnificent Kalista Reference CD transport with matching C2A two-box DAC making sublime music in one of Absolute Sounds' 'Absolute Studio' demonstrations, partnered with DarTZeel amplification and Magico speakers. While Metronome produces some slightly more 'real world' CD spinners such as the CD3 Signature (a mere £6900 for the transport), the Kalista line-up represents Metronome's no-holds-barred statement products. Cost no object. They are, without doubt, striking works of art – and they're a two-man lift.

Before you read further, we'd better talk prices. In case you dream of owning components as fabulously luxurious as Krell, for example... well, Metronome's Kalista products are to Krell what a Maybach is to an S-Class Mercedes. And if your idea of choosing some new clothes is a trip to M&S rather than recalling the personal number of Stella McCartney from your mobile phone's memory, you might care to turn the page right now. The Kalista model I've been enjoying at home



these past couple of weeks is the brand new Kalista Integrated. It's the cheapest model in Metronome's Kalista range. It costs £29,950.

The Integrated, then, is the latest addition to Metronome Technologie's top-end Kalista line-up, and the first *integrated* Kalista player. It joins the existing Kalista and Kalista Reference CD transports, priced at £20,500 and £29,500 respectively, to which one would add the aforementioned two-box D-to-A converter, the £15,500 C2A. Wow!

But just look at our photos. And check out some further images at www.metronome-technologie.com. When I consider that this masterpiece of audio sculpture actually costs more than the *two* cars parked outside my house, I shudder at the realisation that I really should have contacted my insurers prior to installing it in my listening room.

THE ART OF SCIENCE

With its sculpted acrylic structure similar to that of the existing Kalista transports, the new Integrated commands the attention of anyone entering your

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listening room, as I discovered on several occasions. Perhaps I should have been photographing the looks of awe on visitors' faces when they first saw it. Without doubt the blue light which bathes a CD's surface as it spins atop the player – to improve reading accuracy, claims Metronome – adds to the distinction of the overall design. I didn't bother pointing out to any of my guests that they were looking at only half the story. The separate power supply feeding the Integrated was on the bottom shelf of my Townshend Seismic Stand, itself the size of a substantial power amplifier with a metal fascia hewn from solid alloy.

Both the supply and the main unit should be sited on the inverted cones supplied with the player. These are fabricated from Delrin, a polymer thermoplastic developed by DuPont that, like Corian, is often described as 'synthetic stone'. The disc clamp/puck looks like Perspex but is also fabricated from Delrin and it looks and feels fabulous. Less well considered in my opinion is the player's cover. As all the Kalista

ABOVE: Digital outputs (to the right) include S/PDIF as coaxial and AT&T optical with balanced AES/EBU through the XLR socket. Fixed balanced analogue outputs are offered (to the left) alongside Metronome's multi-pin power supply connection



AUDIO JEWELS FROM THE ABSOLUTE STUDIO

Absolute Studio has been created by Ricardo Franassovici, Absolute Sounds' founder and Managing Director, as a side-project to cater for 'outstanding audio components that fall outside of Absolute Sounds' long-established brands'. These are products from more recently formed, highly promising high-end companies that Franassovici has sourced on his travels, in his quest to find 'the world's finest audio jewels and present them to UK-based music lovers'.

Absolute Studio is described as being 'like an haute couture audio boutique – exclusive, rarified creations, pieced together to create an audio ensemble of uniquely desirable quality'. The other brands in the Absolute Studio line-up are: Continuum (turntables), darTZeel (amps), Mimetism (CD player and integrated amp), Yter (cables), and fabulous Magico loudspeaker products from the Bay Area of San Francisco.

AUDIO FILE

Top-loading CD player with outboard PSU

Made by: Metronome Technologie

Supplied by: Absolute Sounds

Telephone: 020 8971 3909

Web: www.metronome-technologie.com



ABOVE RIGHT: The top-loading, linear-tracking disc mechanism is bathed in blue LED light and (LEFT) kept dust-free by a circular cover when not in use. Note: the cover cannot be fitted when a CD is clamped into position

models are manual top-loaders, you can't leave the player unattended without a CD sitting in place otherwise dust will fall onto the critical pickup lens. The black 'helmet' cover for parking over the mechanism when not in use seems a bit of an afterthought. At this price I'd like a motorised lid, frankly.

Still, it's a deliciously pleasing player to use on a daily basis. Reading of a CD's table of contents is rapid, track access is near-instantaneous, and the Kalista's remote controller is a reassuringly solid hunk of metal. (Shame the buttons aren't illuminated, though.) Only one thing really bugged me: there is no method of 'fast-forwarding' or reversing through tracks. Both on the player and on the handset, the skip forward and skip back buttons are just that; you can't hold down the skip buttons in order to fast-scan within long tracks... which might drive you bonkers if you sometimes like to access

'It seems to dig deeply into the spirit of the musical event, making one forget about the hi-fi...'



ABOVE: The heavyweight IR handset is machined from aluminium. The volume function is inoperative

the last few minutes of a long piece of music. Methinks the designers intend that you should relax and listen to the whole piece, not just the canon or the tubular bells of the finale!

GALLIC HIGH-END ESOTERICA

What is it about French audio designers, I wonder? I was listening recently to the French-designed Cairn Tornado 192 CD player and I swear this Metronome has a similar trait about it, inasmuch as it draws one into the music no matter what flavour. It seems to dig deeply into the spirit of the musical event making one forget about the hi-fi and get on with the business of enjoying the music.

Some hi-fi products – CD players, especially, I find – can sound wonderful one minute (with a pristine, audiophile recording) and abysmal the next (with an off-the-shelf, dynamically compressed pop/rock recording), often forcing me to convince myself the system is highly transparent to the source (the recording) and simply telling me 'like it is'. Other products, however, are more forgiving of recording quality. They seem better able to paper over the cracks. The Cairn Tornado 192, which I consider a delightful example of budget esoterica, had his ability. So too

does this Metronome Kalista Integrated player. Perhaps it's a Gallic aspiration: a yearning for enjoyment over resolution and precision. Whatever, it's a compelling and justifiable goal: to make everything sound simply great!

Not for the first time, I discovered this distinguishing attribute when spinning up the 'CD side' of a DualDisc in order to check that the Kalista was compatible with DualDiscs. (It was.) I've a dozen or so DualDiscs in my music collection which, with the exception of a couple of Donald Fagen albums, are all either terrible or so-so recordings, so I wouldn't dream of using them in attempting to determine a CD player's audio quality. The first DualDisc that came to hand in this instance happened to be REM's classic *Automatic For the People* [Warner Bros R2 78105]. It's a grand production number for sure, but none of us has a clue what it's really supposed to sound like.

I hadn't sat through an REM album for years, yet by the time I was into the fourth track I was clearly in for the entire album. The tortured emotion of Michael Stipe's plaintive vocal on 'Everybody Hurts' along with the lush, grandiose string accompaniment had me almost choking up. Later that evening I also spun Audioslave's eponymous album from 2002 [Sony/Epic 5101302] for a bit of a rock thrash, primarily to wash away the anguish of Michael Stipe. The Kalista delivered a dense, dark, brooding growl of discordant nastiness without hint of an apology. The sound was nasty, as intended by the band's production, of course, but not in the least bit jarring or over-strident.

Listening to proper high-fidelity recordings from the Opus 3 label's *Test CD 5* compilation disc, designed for assessing depth of image, timbre and dynamics, the Kalista helped create audio images well beyond the boundaries of the Revel Ultima Studio 2 floorstanders currently in residence. Of course the sound's character is bound to change depending on partnering equipment; in my system the Kalista could be described as 'a bit of a lush'. While a little 'hazy' compared with the cleanest, most pristine sounds I've ever experienced, the Kalista Integrated erred towards a relaxed, velvety quality that was gloriously addictive. ☺

SOUTHERN BELLES

Situated close to the Pyrenees in the South of France, Metronome Technologie has been hand-crafting products for 20 years. There are just five employees, individually hand-crafting every product for discerning clientele who can afford such total exclusivity.

We spoke with Cyral Monastier, one of Dominique Giner's engineering colleagues at Metronome. For the design team it's the subjective sound quality that is of overriding importance in the development process. For listening to their creations they use their own design of amplifiers (which are currently not for sale), with monitoring loudspeakers from Wilson Audio (Watt/Puppy 8s) and massive Master II floorstanders from Focus Audio of Canada.

Metronome currently has a 100W pure Class A power amplifier under development, scheduled for release later this year.





ABOVE: The broad display of the Kalista's partnering 'Ultra High Capacity PSU' shows nothing more than a blue LED

The Lars Erstrand band's 'Talk of the Town' track on this particular Opus 3 label sampler CD, taken from the album *Erstrand Sessions*, is a wonderful recording of a live jazz band in an intimate night club. I use it regularly to assess a playback system's ability to create a believable three-dimensional soundstage.

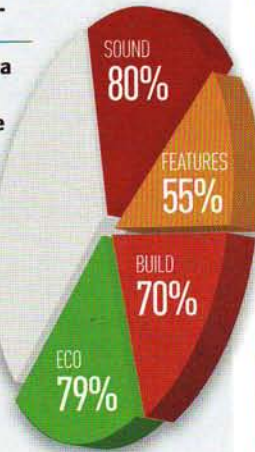
The Kalista Integrated delivered holographic images of the musicians performing in the closed-in space, displaying a fluidity in the musicians' playing that makes it difficult to stop listening even when this style of jazz is not one's preferred taste. When hi-fi sounds this good, all music can become infectious.

Similarly my favourite cello recording of Richard Harwood playing Chopin and Beethoven sonatas on EMI Classics [094635964523] sounded uncommonly poised and assured via the Kalista, with a powerfully rich tonality to the piano accompaniment that is far from the norm in my experience of listening to this disc replayed by countless players.

The piano is a little too far back in the stage in this recording in my opinion. So while most CD players will portray a sense of the recording venue's acoustic, and place the piano far back in the distance plane in a convincing fashion sure enough, the left and right hand playing by the pianist can be hard to distinguish – especially as the pianist's playing grows in intensity and the piano's individual notes begin to blur. With a high-end source like the Kalista this blurring of the left and right hand simply doesn't occur. I've come across very few CD players on this planet with such an ability to remain focused and it makes listening to one's hi-fi system a joyous event. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Metronome Technologie's Kalista Integrated is a visually stunning design statement. Of course, the price is so stratospheric that if you have to even contemplate the value for money in terms of 'sound per pound' then you probably need not consider owning one. But if the novelty of the new Bentley in the drive has worn off and you're now in the market for a circa £100,000 stereo system for the living room, well...



METRONOME KALISTA CD PLAYER / £29,950

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RESULTS



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

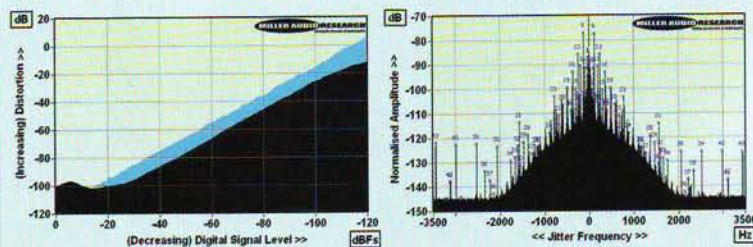
While the machining and finish of the Kalista are of full production quality, the fact that there's no screen printing for the left/right XLR outputs (or indeed the digital outputs) suggests it's not 100% retail-ready. Technically, the player exhibits both significant highs and lows. The balanced outputs deliver a hefty 4.8V with a usefully low ~0.001% distortion over the top 20dB of its dynamic range at mid and high frequencies. The A-wtd S/N ratio is rather lower than expected at 102dB thanks to a series of patterns, probably noise associated with the power supply, reaching up to 2kHz. Nevertheless, this value is acceptable for 16-bit/44.1kHz CD audio.

These spurious patterns can be seen modulating all mid to high frequency signals above -40dBfs or so and very clearly populate the jitter spectrum [see graph,

below right]. The major fundamentals of the jitter are at 16Hz and 123Hz (and their multiples) and are entirely specific to this CD player.

In other respects, the Kalista ticks all the right boxes, offering a very flat frequency response (just -0.1dB at 20kHz), excellent >106dB stereo separation, good low-level linearity, low 0.0002% CCIR intermodulation distortion and a superb 130dB rejection of digital images. Good control of ultrasonic noise is another strong feature of the player which shows no signs of 'analogue stress' from handling high level, high frequency signals right up to its 4.8V peak.

Readers are invited to view an extensive QC Suite report for Metronome's Kalista Integrated CD player by logging onto www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE LEFT: Distortion versus digital signal level over a 120dB range at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue); ABOVE RIGHT: High resolution jitter analysis with multiple 16Hz and 123Hz sidebands marked in pairs

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced outputs)	4.80Vrms
A-wtd S/N Ratio	102.3dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0025% / 0.0036%
Distortion (20kHz, 0dBfs)	0.001%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.1dB
Digital jitter	10450psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD)	±0.5dB
Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz)	>106dB