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MARCH 2012 • 87
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ISSN 1465-5950



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

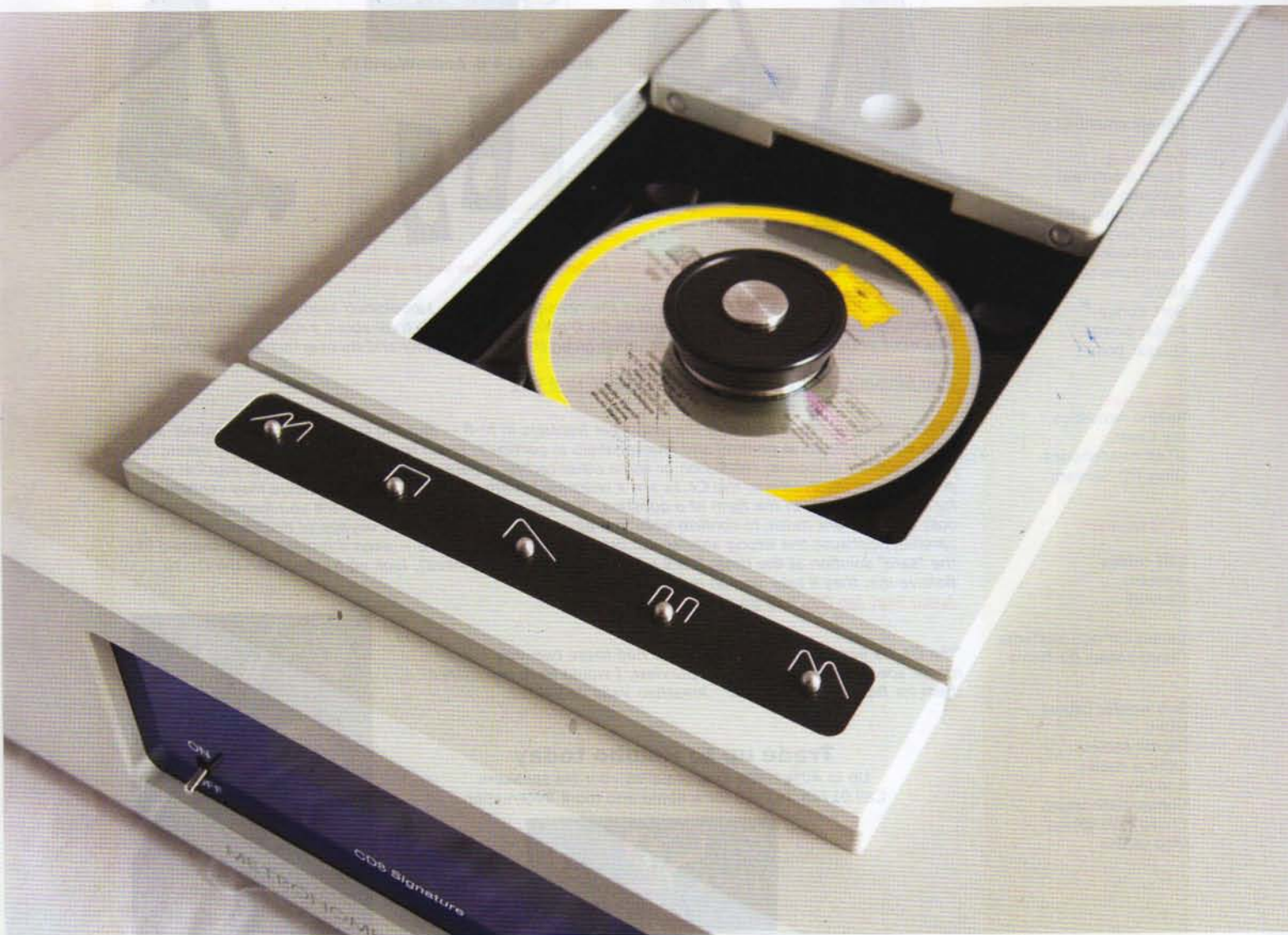
Metronome Technologie CD8 CD player

By Alan Sircom

It's perhaps a sign just how important this whole computer audio thing has become that virtually all new CD players today come with computer-friendly inputs. Even Metronome Technologie – France's most dedicated CD player maker – has capitulated with a USB input on its latest top-loading CD8 player.

Metronome is perhaps best known for its Kallista players, shiny methacrylate tributes to extracting the best from optical disc, that represent the pinnacle of performance and are priced accordingly. The CD8 is more down-to-earth. Aside from the main controls being on the top of the player in front of the CDM12 Pro v6.8 top-loading mechanism, the gunmetal or silver CD8 is perfectly conventional looking and operating. Some might miss the quirky sci-fi look of the Kallista, but having spun a few discs across a room for failing to put the puck on quick enough, a bit less 'quirk' will not go amiss.

The CD8 sits on three well-engineered spike feet; it has the aforementioned Asynchronous USB input, S/PDIF digital output and both balanced and single-ended stereo outputs. Using the appropriate drivers supplied with the Metronome, the USB input will support up to 24bit, 192kHz file sizes and the



▶ player features a pair of AKM 24/192 DACs on its very high-spec PCB.

It's a curiously one-sided lift out of the box, and on closer inspection this is down to a group of transformers along the right side of the circuit board; three main toroidal transformers and seven independent isolating transformers. That would be three isolate power feeds for every aspect of the CD8's performance. This harks back in microcosm to the Kallista/D2A combination, which went a stage further and isolates everything in its own separate case.

The other big bug-bear with Metronome is dissipation of static electricity build-up in the transport itself. Metronome has customized the CDM12 transport for that end, adding an acrylic plate/plinth, which connects to three isolating pillars that sit in line with the three feet of the player itself.

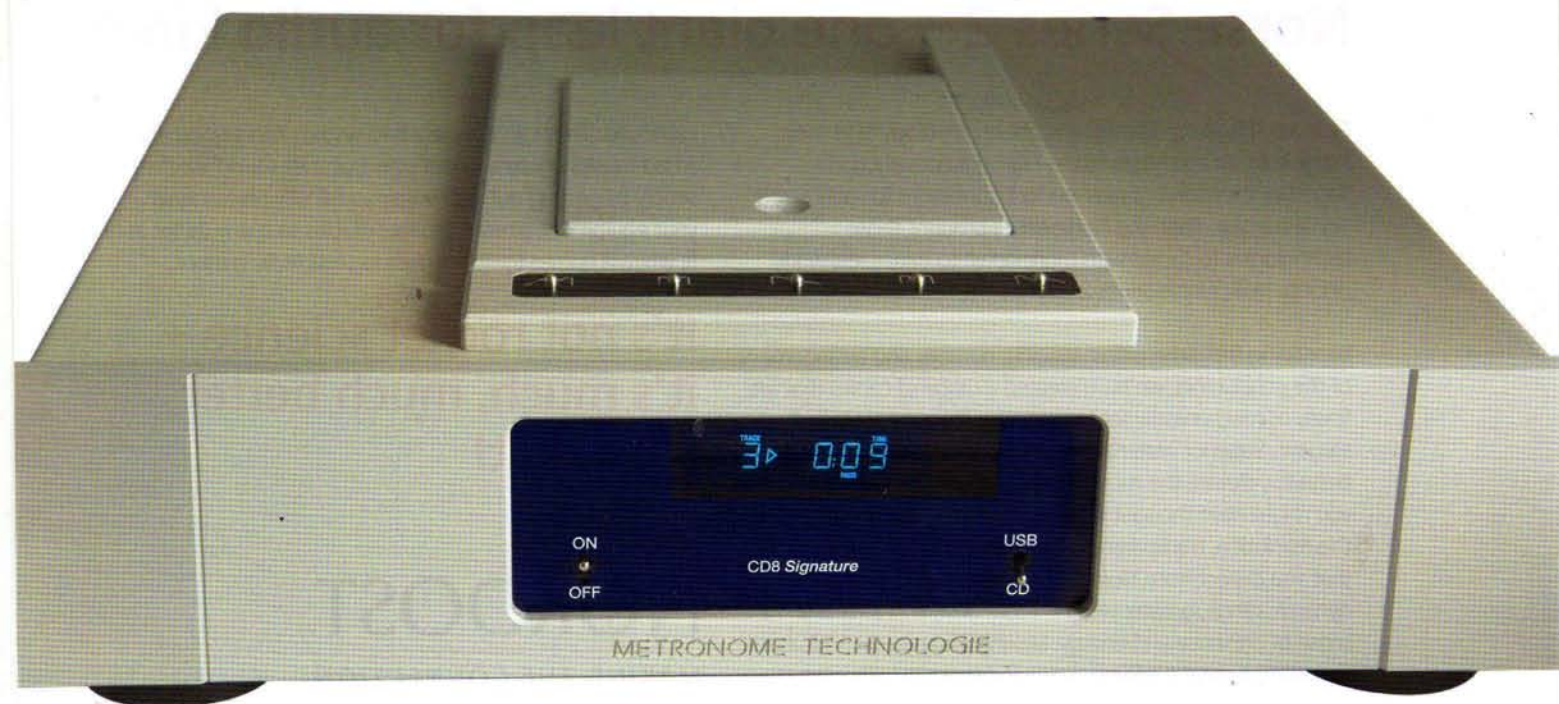
As with anything Metronome, there are a few operating idiosyncrasies that you have to get used to. The days of the CD-as-Frisbee are long gone, but there doesn't seem to be much distinction between skip-in-track and skip-track that can occasionally prove frustrating (try playing an opera under such circumstances!). However, ultimately it is nothing to get too frustrated about and it's as much down to the listener learning to approach replay logically as it is the twisted

logic of the Metronome, but if you are used to a player that allows the user some degree of *laissez faire* in track navigation, you will need to relearn your approach to music replay.

Ask any Kallista owner about this, and they will immediately say that it's worth the effort to learn, because the rewards are so great. The full Metronome system redefines the word 'texture' in audio. Those unused to what the Metronome can do find the idea of music having its own feel, as if it were a piece of material, an absurd suggestion. Those who have spent time with any of the Metronome products understand precisely what that means. It's like mouth-feel in wine tasting, except with sound. I've tried to put more meaning on this unique property of sound from Metronome, but it's almost impossible. It's one of those intangible things that you get in real music but doesn't happen so often in audio. Except in rare cases, and the CD8 is one of those rare cases.

It's something to do with the flow of music. It doesn't make everything legato sounding, and doesn't make all its rivals sound staccato, but there is a sense of music moving from theme to theme here that is more like a good LP than CD normally delivers. I put on a James Taylor CD from the 1980s – 'That's Why I'm Here' – which is flawlessly recorded for the time, but by today's standards suffers from Yamaha DX7 Synth Overkill Syndrome. It's sometimes difficult to set these distinct and now relatively ugly chimey sounds in context today, but the Metronome straightens things out perfectly. The DX7 sounds no longer dominate and harden up a syrupy mix; they are a part and a function of the sound, and you can begin to see why every keyboard player in that decade used one.

There's a temptation to think this a 'soft' sounding player, but transient information is portrayed brilliantly. It's as much about harmony as it is melody though, and that is something that few players do well, and the CD8's abilities here make it appear at first 'soft' in comparison. Nothing 'soft' about its ability to play Shostakovich's Trio for Piano, Violin and Violoncello no 2 (Argerich, Kremer, Maisky, DG 289 459 326-2), just good keen dynamics and excellent transient information, coupled to a rich and full harmonic structure. ▶



I'm not wholly convinced CD players contribute dramatically to the way a system produces imagery (this element being better defined by the amp/speaker interaction), but that being said, this one is more about tight authority than huge vistas of sound. That isn't to say it lacks soundstaging properties, but it's more precision than size that counts here.

The shock inclusion of a USB in a Metronome player passes off smoothly. The player is a touch cable-demanding in all its guises and the USB is no exception, so choose wisely. But the overall sound of the USB input is on a par with the spinning disc. This does give one the golden opportunity to compare CD and computer audio files through the same electronics and interestingly it comes out as something of a dead heat. Ripped CDs sound as good as their live-played original discs, and the Metronome's computer audio side isn't letting the side down in any way. Whether this means the start of a planned migration to ripped disc replay or it just means you add some internet radio to the front end is down to the individual.

The difficulty anyone faces writing about CD in 2012 is two-fold. First, there are those who think there should be no reviews of CD players anymore, because the time of CD playing has long since passed. This is, of course, nonsense, making the fallacious jump from the individual to the masses. Not everyone has migrated away from CD replay, and it seems not everyone will until it becomes impossible to do otherwise. And, as long as there are new CD players, we'll keep reviewing them, because there is still a market out there.

The second problem is CD is a victim of its own success in hi-fi circles. They have all got pretty damn good, and the gap between a good £200 player and a good £20,000 player is considerably smaller than it is between other aspects of hi-fi replay. Worse, many of those differences only manifest themselves after long hours of close scrutiny. Generally, the more you pay the better you get (a lot of cheaper players deliberately choose a brightly lit presentation that doesn't lend itself to long listening in full-range systems), but sometimes the price differential becomes hard to justify.

Not with the Metronome CD8. The sound it makes is inviting, natural, beautifully structured and more like analogue than many players. Not in an artificial, softened edges kind of way, but just in that organic, not listening to electronics sound that CD so rarely achieves. If you want even more analogue-ness about the sound, there's always a valve version of the same for £1,000 more. But, the solid-state sound is particularly wonderful from the outset.

There's just one other question to be answered. How close does the CD8 get to the full Kallista? Well, that depends. If you have a system that scales the heights of high-end, the difference is marked and immediate. In that case – and, let's face it, if you have a system that reaches those heights, there is unlikely to be anything in your system that costs less than the CD8 – the difference is (a lot of) money well spent. In systems where spending £8,000 on a source component seems more logical and likely, then the differences are less pronounced. In other words, you have to throw the window really wide open to notice the differences. The only big change between the two is the Kallista sounds a couple of notches faster and more direct than the CD8, whatever the system.

Metronome adding USB to a player sounded ominous, but the reality is the result merely adds to the whole system, while taking nothing away. It remains an excellent player that simply adds computer music to the line-up. Few other players flow quite as well as Metronome, and the CD8 brings that bang up to date. Strongly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

CD player, with USB input

Transport mechanism: Modified Philips CDM12 PRO v6.8

DAC: Dual 24/192 AKM chips

Outputs: Line level RCA phono, balanced XLR, digital audio S/PDIF coaxial phono

Inputs: USB Type B

Dimensions (WxHxD): 45 x 12 x 42.5cm

Weight: 15 Kg

Available in black or silver aluminium

Price: £7,950

Manufacturer: Metronome Technologie

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Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

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