CD transport/outboard DAC
Made by: Métronome Technologie, France
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.kalista.audio/en/collections; www.absolutesounds.com
Prices: £35,000/£37,000

Métronome Technologie Kalista DreamPlay CD/DAC

With its avant-garde styling and immaculate build quality, this French-made flagship CD transport/DAC combination is the very model of high-end audio artistry

Review: **David Price** Lab: **Paul Miller**

One glance at this CD transport and DAC combination, and that great Oscar Wilde aphorism, 'I can resist anything except temptation' springs to mind. There's no beating about the bush – this is one of most visually arresting silver disc spinners the world has ever seen. Manufactured by French high-end specialist Métronome Technologie, this digital front-end looks and sounds like nothing else around.

Kalista is – as supremo Jean Marie Clauzel tells me – the company's cost-no-object brand. 'Two years ago we decided to manage two brands. Métronome has classic design and high-end prices, whereas Kalista stands for absolutely exceptional high-end products…'

SCULPTURAL ART

The DreamPlay CD transport (or 'CD turntable') and Kalista DAC are unalloyed high-end – two sculptural art pieces that play music in an exceptional way. Only those with the princely sum of £72,000 to spend need apply, so you'd better hope that your horse has a good day at the races, or your lifetime of lottery losses finally comes good! There are two things that stand out: the beautiful looking CD transport with its glinting acrylic, and the partnering tripod-esque DAC with its choice of two digital converters and solid-state or tube outputs.

This combination hasn't come from nowhere as four years ago Métronome Technologie brought us its flagship Ultimate Signature/Nausicaa transport/USB DAC [*HFN* Dec '13], of which this is a subtle evolution. It works in much the same way with its top-loading CD transport, although this new generation product brings touchscreen control and more refined power supplies, in addition to twin DACs.

The DreamPlay transport is one of the most glorious silver disc spinners that I have encountered. It works in an intuitive way – you place the CD on the spindle and pop the acrylic puck on, and the machine is ready to go. There's a sensor that knows when a disc is *in situ*, and no further effort is required.

It's faster than many modern transports, not least because this is no tweaked DVD-ROM mechanism. Instead Kalista has chosen the excellent Philips CDM12 Pro mech, with its own custom tweaks for better sound. The only quibble here is that, due to the lack of an integral top cover, it is more likely to suffer from dust contamination than a conventional design. It's an exquisitely fashioned thing, with a 'hewn-from-granite' feel and a 24kg kerb weight to back this up.

'It's an exquisitely fashioned thing, with hewn-from-granite build'

The chassis is a massive aluminium affair, with a thick acrylic (60mm methacrylate to be precise) sandwich giving both a striking visual look and a good degree of additional acoustic damping. Three stainless steel columns are inset into the chassis, and these taper down to spike points that fit neatly into corresponding recesses on the Kalista DAC's own column tops. For those intending to purchase just the transport, there's an optional 'silent base' in a choice of square or triangular shapes, or tripod stand.

At the front of the unit a 4.3in fine-pitch display offers touch-sensitive control of the transport functions via pictograph symbols. In paper-white, blue and black, it looks crisp and is easy on the eye – although some might still appreciate tactile, 'physical' buttons. Track number and time information is shown as well.

Round the back, there's a socket for the matching 15kg Elektra power supply – a redesigned version of that fitted to the Kalista Signature. This is an impressively large and heavy affair with seven regulated lines, but after the 'surprise and delight' at the loveliness of the DreamPlay itself,

RIGHT: The top-loading DreamPlay CD transport features a Philips CDM12 Pro mechanism modified by Métronome. The acrylic 'puck' [pictured overleaf] echoes the aesthetic

LEFT: The frame of both the heavyweight DreamPlay CD transport and DAC includes a 60mm-thick slab of acrylic, with alloy chassis and three stainless steel columns for support. The backlit touchscreens are a novel way to facilitate transport controls and DAC options

it's a bit of a letdown to see that they're conventional boxes with a rather ordinary industrial finish [see p33].

TEMPTING PERMUTATIONS

The transport itself is the star, designed to form the centrepiece of your system, offering digital outputs in S/PDIF, AES/EBU and Toslink form, which is all you can ask from a CD spinner. The Kalista DAC, though, is more technically interesting and also a lovely thing to behold, sporting two digital converters which were selected – says the company – 'to obtain our famous analogue sound'. Making life all the more varied is the choice of analogue outputs, tube and solid-state. The display offers up these combinations in easy-to-understand graphical form, with three columns of options from left to right. The leftmost one lets you select Toslink, USB, S/PDIF and AES/EBU. The middle column offers up DAC 1 or DAC 2, and the rightmost gives you 'AOP' (solid-state) or 'Tube'. It's simple and you soon find yourself experimenting with the various permutations of DACs and solid-state or valve output stages.

The DAC 1 option is the company's traditional digital converter, a Japanese-made AKM AK4395 chip that was also used in the earlier Nausicaa DAC. DAC 2 is an AKM AK4490, which permits the far higher bit-rates used for DSD via the USB input [see PM's boxout, below]. Jean Marie Clauzel says that the other main differences between the Kalista DAC and the Nausicaa are the new 15kg Elektra power supply (with 12 lines of regulation), together with the new touchscreen design.

Round the back are the usual complement of digital inputs, including asynchronous USB in, power supply connectors and RCA and XLR analogue outputs. The 15kg unit has the same base options as the matching transport.

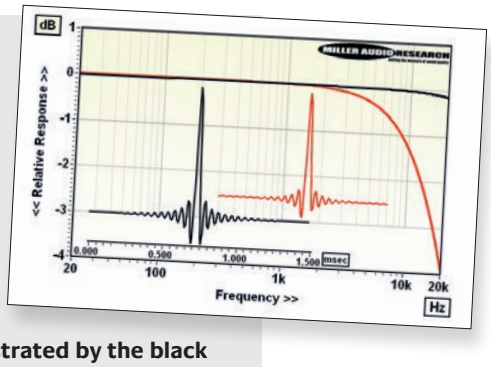
LISTENING CHOICES

This Kalista CD transport/DAC combination rather reminds me of politicians who say, 'here are my principles – if you don't like them then I have others'. It is effectively four things in one, offering a choice between a very detailed, etched and intricate sound (via DAC 1, solid-state output) and a softer, more opaque and euphonic one (via DAC 2, tube out), with two other shades in between. What is certain regardless of the way it is configured, is that it sounds superb and is a highly memorable performer across a wide variety of programme material and digital sources.

Starting with the CD transport, it's a revelation to hear this venerable format sound so up-to-date. With machines like this, you realise that CD was unfairly maligned – it is capable of far better sound than is commonly supposed, but then ⇨

DOUBLE DACS

Aside from the user-selectable triode tube output stage that we've seen in earlier Métronome DACs [*HFN* Dec '13], this latest Kalista-branded DAC is the first we've seen to also include two separate converter options. According to Métronome, 'DAC 1' offers the 'musical sound profile' while 'DAC 2' is the 'analytic sound profile'. In practice, the former is the AKM AK4395 DAC that's been tried-and-tested in a few generations of Métronome products – a 192kHz/24-bit DAC that includes a traditional linear-phase FIR digital filter and offers a very flat response (subsequent analogue stages notwithstanding). This is illustrated by the black impulse and frequency response traces [inset Graph] where the Kalista DAC is flat to –0.1dB/20kHz, –0.8dB/45kHz and –2.7dB/90kHz with 44.1/48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz files respectively. The new selection, 'DAC 2', is provided part in reaction to market pressure for DSD replay (from DSD64 to DSD256) as much as for its compatibility with extended resolution 384kHz/32-bit files via USB. This choice of AK4490 DAC is implemented with AKM's 'Slow' digital filter algorithm, further influencing the Kalista's time and frequency domain performance. The impact on high frequency response [red traces, inset Graph] amounts to a 'sweetening' of –1.3dB/10kHz to –3.9dB/20kHz with CD and 48kHz sample rates. PM



ABOVE: The Kalista DreamPlay CD transport and DAC both come with outboard Elektra power supplies. Both transport/DAC front displays may be defeated via a switch on each power supply

not everyone can afford a digital source that costs the same as a Range Rover.

Mercury Rev's 'Holes' [*Deserter's Songs*; V2 VVR1002772] is a beautiful slice of '90s alt-rock, but it does suffer from a little brightness. Via the DreamPlay, and with DAC 1 selected, things were pretty well lit, yet there was never any harshness. It served up an extremely open and spacious acoustic with an incredibly well-defined soundstage, and a rich sense of timbre.

GLISTENING DETAILS

Violins sounded wonderfully wiry and flutes had a vividness that absolutely glistened with harmonic detail. In front of this, the wall of heavily processed electric guitars rang out, along with the singer's rather anaemic and vulnerable voice. It was a rousing musical event, yet massively detailed as if someone had shone a searchlight right into the centre of the recording. I could delay no longer and duly touched the DAC 2 legend on the screen, and we were off into another world...

> 'With machines like this, you realise CD was unfairly maligned'

Doubters who might think two DACs were some sort of hollow marketing gimmick would be surprised to hear the difference. I discerned appreciably less treble energy, with more focus instead on the midband. I could sense the complex layers of instrumentation better, but the real change was in the slightly more rhythmic feel to the sound. The electric piano work in particular seemed to have more of a groove, as things were more fluid and kinetic. Indeed even the vocals became a touch more contemplative, giving a more moody but less detailed feel to the music.

The better interplay between the snare drum and cymbals signposted the difference between the DAC options quite strikingly, with a superior rendition of the musicians' subtle dynamic accenting. Even the trombone solo seemed more plaintive, making for a very different reading of the recording as a whole. Flicking over to Kraftwerk's 'Spacelab' [*The Man Machine*; Capitol CDP 7 46039 2], and a similar pattern presented itself, despite this being 1970s electro and not '90s guitar grunge. Spatially, the DAC 2 option seemed a fraction more effusive, with performers slightly larger and more tangible overall.

However, this paled by comparison to toggling-in the tube output stage, which made a more dramatic difference – although whether it was better or not would be open to debate. 'Market Traders' by The High Llamas [*Santa Barbara*; V2 V2CI 0008] showed how the tube stage added space to the proceedings, giving a thicker and chunkier sound especially to the midband, alongside a stronger centre image. There was a subtle sense that all instruments in the mix sounded a little bit better defined and full of body.

Yet it did come over as slightly artificial, and fine detail appeared lost in the translation. I was slightly disappointed by the gentle loss of definition to cymbals, which didn't sound quite as silky or precisely resolved, and a slightly thick upper midband that again rather distracted from the proceedings.

The Kalista DAC is clearly a device of many capabilities. The DAC modes offer two subtly different renditions of the source and then there's the tube stage

JEAN MARIE CLAUZEL

'The DreamPlay CD transport and Kalista DAC are targeted at people who really look for top quality analogue-style sound reproduction, and who also want something unique in their auditorium,' says Métronome Technologie's Jean Marie Clauzel. 'I trust that most audiophiles are – may I say – purists. Hedonists, even!'

He explains that this new flagship combination took a fair while in gestation. 'It's difficult to quantify exactly how long, since both models are the accumulated result of almost 15 years of different generations of Kalista CD turntables and DACs. But for these precise models it took three to four months of development, prototyping and testing before arriving at the final product. We had two engineers working full time on both projects.'

The reason he chose the Philips Pro CD drive is practical. 'There is no other CD pick-up mechanism available on the market offering this level of sound reproduction. Furthermore we've been using this drive for years in several models and we perfectly know how to get the best from it.'

The decision to employ two DACs was more philosophical. 'I feel that one should have the possibility to adapt the sound profile to the music, and – why not? – to the listener's mood! As a designer I prefer two DACs rather than artificial filters. With the Kalista DAC the user has the choice of four different sound profiles with the same high level of sound quality, when you factor in the switchable tube output stage.'

ABOVE: The DreamPlay CD transport [top] offers coaxial and optical S/PDIF outputs alongside AES/EBU while the Kalista DAC [bottom] has matching digital inputs plus USB-B. The balanced (XLR) analogue outputs are transformer-coupled

that has a heavier touch – rather more akin to an effects processor. It conferred a sense of greater weight and power to this somewhat effete '90s indie band, yet I found it harder to sit back and enjoy the subtleties of the recording. It's an interesting feature, but my preference would have been to make it more subtle.

TOUCH OF ROMANCE

Employing DAC 1 mode, with its solid-state output, one never forgets its amazingly clean, explicit, open and crisply etched nature – everything located in space with great accuracy and a wonderful sense of confidence. This DAC appears untroubled by pretty much any type of recording, whether it was the laid-back jazz rock of Steely Dan's 'Home At Last' [*Aja*; MCA Records MCAD-37214] or the more densely-packed folk rock of 'Driver 8' [REM, *Fables Of The Reconstruction*; IRS Records IRS-5592].

With DAC 2, things got a little softer of focus and more romantic, with the music delivered in a more rhythmically satisfying way. You'll have to take your own view of Métronome Technologie's own description of the respective 'sound colours' from the two DACs, for I found DAC 2 a little less intense but ultimately more enjoyable.

There's no doubting that while the Kalista DAC is excellent with plain vanilla CD, things really get interesting when you move up to hi-res via the USB input. Pink Floyd's 'Us And Them' [*Dark Side Of The Moon* in DSD64; Capitol Records TOGP-15001] was a joy. There was a wondrous sense of space between the instruments, with a vast, cathedral-like recorded acoustic. At the same time, the sound lilts along in a most beguiling and organic way, never sounding forced.

Tonally things smooth out and one becomes far less aware that you're listening to digital audio. Of course, this is all via DAC 2 which is automatically selected when it receives DSD. Hi-res PCM was no less of a treat, the Kalista DAC showing huge potential here too.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Jean Marie Clauzel says the Kalista brand is looking to offer a complete system in the near future – of which the DreamPlay CD transport and Kalista DAC will form the centrepiece. It's certainly a worthy one – offering both visual flair and truly excellent sound, plus great flexibility in tweaking the end result. It is massively expensive, yet puts in a serious bid to be the finest digital front end around.

Sound Quality: 88%

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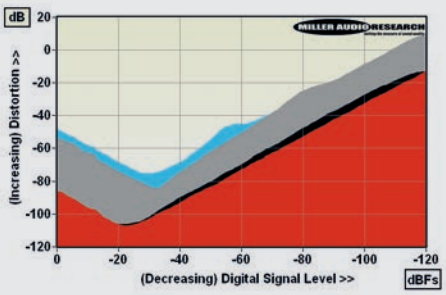
LAB REPORT

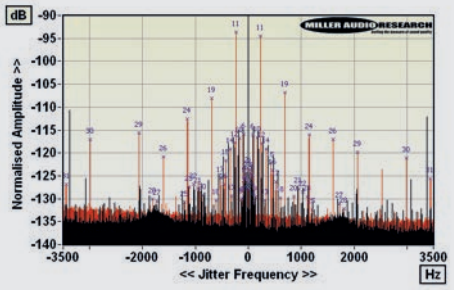
KALISTA DREAMPLAY CD/DAC

As a CD player, the Kalista DreamPlay/DAC combination offers a distinctive performance with a substantial 5.9V maximum (balanced) output from a 20ohm source impedance, a wide 114.0dB A-wtd S/N ratio and flat ±0.1dB response (DAC1 mode). Distortion is ~0.0025% through bass and midrange at this output, falling to a minimum of 0.0002% over the top 30dB of its dynamic range, with some variation depending on your selection of 'DAC 1' or 'DAC 2' conversion [see boxout, p31]. The 'Tube' output mode has a significant (analogue) impact that rather overwhelms either DAC selection, Métronome having beefed-up the output by 0.5dB to 6.2V but adding sufficient noise to reduce the A-wtd S/N by nearly 20dB. Distortion also increases to 0.2%-0.006% [0dBFs down to –30dBFs, see Graph 1 below] while the output impedance surges up to 1.2kohm – making the Kalista DAC more sensitive to (long) interconnect/amp combinations. Jitter, however, is slightly high at 1200psec in either DAC1 or DAC2 modes thanks primarily to a series of data-induced sidebands [peaks 11, 19, 24, 26, 29 *etc*, on the red spectrum, Graph 2]. The AES/EBU connection was used here.

Tested in isolation, the Kalista DAC achieves a lower 350psec jitter in all modes at all sample rates, although the pattern of sidebands is still complex [black spectrum, Graph 2]. The overall A-wtd S/N ratio improves by about 1dB to ~116dB while the Tube mode is revealed as having a boosted ultrasonic response amounting to +0.4dB/45kHz and +2dB/90kHz with 96kHz and 192kHz data. There are some very subtle differences between DAC 1 and 2 modes beyond their responses [again, see boxout p31] including stereo separation (sl. better in DAC 1 mode) and low-level resolution (sl. better in DAC 2 mode). **PM**



ABOVE: Distortion versus 48kHz/24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range (1kHz, DAC2, red; DAC1, black; tube, grey; 20kHz, tube, blue)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter spectrum with CD (red, with markers) and 48kHz/24-bit data (red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	5.85Vrms / 20ohm (XLR out)
A-wtd S/N ratio (16-bit / 24-bit / tube)	114.6dB / 115.8dB / 96.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0023% / 0.00015%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00075% / 0.00060%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to –0.1dB/–0.8dB/–2.7dB
Digital jitter (via CD, 16-bit / 24-bit)	1205psec / 350psec
Resolution @ –100dB (CD, 16-bit / 24-bit)	±0.4dB / ±0.3dB
Power consumption (DreamPlay / DAC)	20W / 28W
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight** (combined)	450x240x435mm / 39kg