Kalista

TEST & REVIEW

DreamPlay XC

SACD PLAYER · STREAMER · DIGITAL PREAMPLIFIER · DAC



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HiFi NEWS

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The first SACD player from French audio artisans, Kalista, is also this spin-off brand's most comprehensive digital hub to date, with wired/wireless network streaming.

Having emerged from French manufacturer Métronome Technologie with its inaugural model in 2003 – think Citroën spawning DS, or Seat's Cupra line – Kalista now has a growing range of DreamPlay products. This includes the £21,000 Kalista STREAM – described as 'The only streamer on the market that combines perfect functionality with exceptional looks' – and a turntable, the £44,000 Twenty-Twenty.

All have in common striking looks and all-French construction, being assembled by the company in-house in southern France. All the control, digital and analogue electronics [pic, p49] are embedded into a tripod layout of aluminium and thick slabs of clear methacrylate to form the 'legs', finished with stainless steel spiked feet. This suspends the central mechanism and contributes to the substantial 17kg all-up mass of the machine, on the front of which sits a new 75mm slanted circular touchscreen.

Fully Loaded

Two versions of the player are available, finished in silver (natural anodised) or what the manufacturer calls Black Pearl for a £1500 premium. The £51,000 DreamPlay X is a CD/SACD transport-only device, offering a range of digital outputs, while the £58,000 XC adds onboard conversion for formats up to 384kHz and DSD256 via both unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR outputs. Common to both is not just the aforementioned CD and SACD playback, but also a full streaming implementation with Ethernet and Wi-Fi networking, plus a USB input in addition to its I2S (on HDMI), coaxial and AES/EBU digital outputs.



SACD is as significant an addition as the streaming engine and is made possible by a disc transport sourced from Denon/Marantz parent company Sound United. The mechanism is modified in-house, just as we saw with Métronome's AQWO integrated player [HFN Mar '19]. As with past players, Kalista's DreamPlay X is a top-loader, with a precision K-branded puck holding the disc on the spindle beneath a substantial sliding cover. The company has gone for top loaders in previous players, but typically in a 'naked' turntable-inspired form.

Meanwhile the DreamPlay XC player adds to its flexibility by having both fixed and variable level outputs, allowing it to be used straight into power amplification or active speakers. This preamp function uses the Leedh digital processing/volume algorithm [see Lumin D2, HFN Jul '20] and allows the company to claim the product as 'four devices in one (CD/SACD player,

streamer, DAC and digital preamp)'. It also claims the device offers 'the purest sound perfection and the most fluid interface'. That'll be that touchscreen control panel, then, which, as well as handling basic transport functions also allows the user to dig deeper into digital filtering and upsampling options. There's also a sleek metal-clad remote-control handset.

Tower Of Power



Common to both DreamPlay X/XC models is the offboard Elektra power supply which, despite a sculpted finish to its front-panel and substantial 21.7kg weight, is as ordinary-looking as the player is striking. It appears for all the world like a compact tower computer, with just a power LED on the front, and a mains input, switch and two outputs on the rear. These are marked 'DAC' and 'Drive', and connect to the DreamPlay XC via two multicore cables. If you're using the X version purely as a streaming transport, only one cable is connected to the single power input on the rear panel of the 'head unit'.

The streaming implementation handles not just content stored on local network storage conveyed via UPnP – PCM-based data at up to 384kHz/32-bit and DSD to DSD256/11.2MHz – but also Deezer, Qobuz, Spotify and Tidal, the last complete with MQA decoding. You can even use the DreamPlay XC to listen to your favourite Internet radio streams via vTuner.

Now it's arguable that these streaming services may not be capable of delivering the kind of sound quality the player is designed to accomplish from higher-resolution content, and indeed Wi-Fi via the little stub antenna presents more of a challenge for hi-res streaming than does the wired Ethernet connection, but that sort of misses the point. The DreamPlay XC may be engineered for ultimate performance, but it must also live in the real world, where users might just want to stream content for convenience when they're not listening to their CDs, SACDs or hi-res files. A high-end machine with practicality? If it can be achieved without impinging on performance, why not?

Keeping it simple

Before we get stuck into the fabulous sound, a word about the digital filters provided by the ESS Sabre ES9038PRO DAC within the DreamPlay XC. These are all accessible from the touchscreen menus whether playing from network, online sources or from disc, and you can also navigate them via the remote handset, although the multiple key presses aren't exactly intuitive. As for the filters themselves, I found them to offer the usual mixed bag of inconsistencies that I've commented on many times before. Far too much time can be wasted experi-



menting with different digital filters without any reliable favourite being decided upon.

More consistent, however, was my preference for using the DreamPlay XC merely as a player/streamer, rather than invoking its digital volume control in preamp mode. Here I found the sound softer and a shade less dynamic, so I stuck with the fixed output. Metronome/Kalista's suggested control app is ConversDigital's familiar mConnect running on a tablet or smartphone. I also used several other UPnP packages on a tablet and computer with no problems whatsoever.

Nevertheless, my early sessions with the DreamPlay XC involved spinning more than a few CDs and SACDs – something of a nostalgic experience, given that so much of my music these days is stored on my servers. The DreamPlay XC proved simple to use, with snappy disc-loading and access times with both kinds of disc, and an easy pushbutton layer-switch for hybrid discs via the remote handset.

Loading up Frankie Goes To Hollywood's Rage Hard: The Sonic Collection [ZTT ZTT177SACD] and playing 'Welcome To The Pleasuredome', I was impressed by the detailed handling of the track's opening, with its ambient birdsong effects, but slightly less enamoured of the pounding beats of the main section of the track. There was bags of information here, but the pace was tempered – the drama of Trevor Horn's thundering production restrained rather than relentless.

The player was seemingly much more at home with one of the mainstays of the early days of CD – Dire Straits' Brothers In Arms both from my original 'free with a CD player' 1985 CD copy [Vertigo 824 499-2] and the 2005 remastered 20th anniversary SACD [Vertigo 9871497]. The added clarity, impact and detail of the CD layer of the remastered disc was built upon when switching to SACD, but even the original sounded crisp and clean via the DreamPlay XC. That was true whether with all seven minutes of 'Money For Nothing', which bounced along impressively with good clarity in the rhythm section behind that trademark Knopfler guitar sound, or the more contemplative title track closing the set, which saw this French disc player doing a fine job both with the husky vocal and the guitar solos.

Superior SACD

The detailed sound of the player is also well suited to the Dunedin Consort's 2018 'small ensemble' recording of Bach's St John Passion on SACD [CKD 419]: again, the Super Audio layer brings out more of the sense of space in the acoustic, and especially in director John Butt's solo keyboard additions framing the main work. But the sound here is a little darker,

and arguably a little less free-breathing, than I am used to, whether comparing the DreamPlay XC's disc playback or its streaming capabilities. This doesn't detract from the very fine way the player handles the textures of the instruments and voices, but in some systems it might diminish the sense of drama in the performance, and the feeling of a liturgical event the recording usually conjures up.

For all that, this is a balance many will surely find exceptionally pleasing for the DreamPlay XC is never anything other than big, rich and generous in the way it plays music, whether that's from disc, network stores, USB or even online streams. Indeed, it even sounds rather special when playing concerts from Radio 3's Internet stream. On more than one occasion I dropped into the beginning of the channel's Afternoon Concert strand and found myself still contentedly listening when the programme ended a couple of hours later.

As I mentioned earlier about these streaming services, they may not offer the sheer quality available elsewhere, but they're a useful function to have – in the case of vTuner, it's free music after all, and a lot of it from around the world – and the DreamPlay XC delivers it in a consistently enjoyable fashion. Radio 3's stream may only be 320kbps AAC at best, but the music still communicates well via this player.



Push up into the DXD and DSD resolutions the DreamPlay XC supports via its network connection, and while that warmth and smoothness remains, the player is fully able to demonstrate the advantages of more data being moved to deliver the music. Play trumpeter Angelo Verploegen's relaxed When Night Falls set, a typically intimate recording from the Just Listen label [JL028; DSD256], and the result is a remarkably effective evocation of the three musicians – Ed Verhoeff on guitar and Eric van Der Westen on bass – just sitting down and playing together, recorded straight to DSD256. Yes, there are other network players that might bring out more of the studio ambience but very few will match the wonderful late-night cosiness going on via the DreamPlay XC, entirely befitting the gentle theme of these sessions.

Breaking Glass

Similarly, the 2021 Metropolitan Opera live recording of Philip Glass's Akhnaten [Orange Mountain Music, Bandcamp download; 48kHz/24-bit] packs quite a wallop in the hands of this player. It's heard in the repeating rhythms of the Prelude, the thundering ritualist percussion and deep voices of the funeral sequence opening Act 1, and also in the chimes and soaring duet of countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and mezzo J'Nai Bridges in 'The Window Of Appearances'.

In short, it all sounds gloriously unusual and extremely dramatic in its other-worldliness, a

sentiment that might just as easily be extended to the visceral visual impact of the DreamPlay XC itself!

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Operational foibles aside, the DreamPlay XC looks and sounds every bit as 'dreamy' as we might have hoped. Maybe it's not quite the 'four in one' its manufacturer claims – the lack of external inputs beyond networking and USB counting against it as a preamp. Nevertheless, as a standalone player it is superb – the characterful sound matching those striking looks to produce a true statement machine.