Kalista

TEST & REVIEW

DreamPlay XC

SACD PLAYER · STREAMER · DIGITAL PREAMPLIFIER · DAC



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HiFi VOICE

Oct 25, 2022

The southern French brand Kalista (and, by extension, its more affordable offshoot Métronome) has for many, many years been a benchmark of musicality among the cream of the world's high-end offering. Its handcrafted production focuses on exceptionally luxurious components, which must win over their wealthy owners not only with their sound but also with their looks. In the latest DreamPlay collection, the universal source DreamPlay X / XC also sets out to do just that; the second letter in its name, where present, signals a built-in D/A converter and, with it, an analogue output.



The DreamPlay XC is almost a work of art (and for that very reason, like art in general, you may not like it at all; what matters is that it has an unmistakable identity). It is built from materials of appropriately high quality and with the level of craftsmanship you would expect.

The basic form is essentially a triangular footprint, defined by two feet/pillars at the front and one at the rear. Sitting on a metal base, a transparent acrylic body visually lightens the mass of the component and gives it its distinctive look. Another original touch is the round touch-control display, set into a projecting metal "beak" at the front.

Almost the entire top surface is covered by a heavy metal panel that slides back with a luxurious glide along well-oiled rails. Beneath it, a recess housing the transport mechanism comes into view. This is a heavily modified SACD solution from Japan's D&M.

The rear third of the unit is a metal chassis in which all the signal circuitry is housed and shielded: digital processing only in the X version, plus the company's renowned D/A converter in the XC. On the left-hand side are two power connectors (one for the DAC and one for the transport), and above them an Ethernet port in a combination – an impractical one, it has to be said – with a USB input for storage devices. Next to it is a small antenna for wireless connectivity, and below it another USB port, this time intended solely for firmware updates. Digital output is provided by the recommended I2S over HDMI, as well as standard coaxial and AES/EBU. Analogue connectivity consists of one pair of balanced XLR outputs and one pair of RCA outputs.

What you won't see in most photos is the external power supply, which allows the player itself to keep more compact and elegant proportions. The player still weighs a solid 17 kg and has a footprint of 44.5 cm × 42 cm (with a height of 12.5 cm), but that is nothing compared with the tower housing the power supply. It is reminiscent of 1990s PC towers, yet outdoes even those in size: 44 cm high, 43 cm deep and 16 cm wide – and, at 22 kg, it outweighs many an

ordinary bookshelf speaker. The enclosure is far from inelegant, though its main purpose is still to sit tucked away out of sight behind the rack. Incidentally, the mains cable plugs into it, and inside are two independent units – as mentioned earlier, one for the transport mechanism and the other for the sensitive converter circuitry.

The key innovation in Kalista's approach to digital equipment is that the DreamPlay XC combines functions to meet every current digital need of the demanding listener. First, there is an SACD/CD transport for everyone who loves spinning their extensive collections of silver discs. Second, there is a streamer – an obvious necessity these days – giving access to collections on your home network or on a range of audiophile services. Third, the DreamPlay XC works as a D/A converter, where the operating parameters, and with them the character of the output, can be adjusted to a very noticeable degree. You can choose to upsample the signal to many PCM or DSD rates, and the unit offers full MQA decoding. Naturally, any form of PCM or DSD (up to DSD256) poses no problem either. The output is thus highly "shapeable". The various digital filters available also have a noticeable effect, and the output voltage can be adjusted too, so that the player works as well as possible with your preamplifier.

The Leedh Processing system deserves a paragraph of its own. This French company's technology is gradually finding its way into many top-tier digital devices. It cannot fully match the quality of top analogue preamplifiers: by comparison, the sound is slightly flatter and drier. But if you want a truly minimalist system, if you want to enjoy the beauty of the component and use it to drive, say, a pair of active loudspeakers, you have access to one of the best digital volume controls around – and that matters. The key to the Leedh algorithms is that they add only a minimum of bits to the signal, which means that, unlike some digital implementations, they do not truncate the useful audio signal.

We listened to the DreamPlay XC in the importer's showroom in Kopřivnice, where it was partnered by an unusually carefully tuned system. Amplification came from a Vitus SIA-030, listening was through Rockport Technologies Atria II loudspeakers (and briefly AudioSolutions Virtuoso M), and comparisons were made with, among others, the Métronome DSC acting as D/A converter and streamer. Cabling was entirely from Nordost's Valhalla 2 and ODIN 2 ranges, and the accessories came from the same brand too – feet, stands, harmonisers and, in practice, just about everything the company offers. The room also has custom-designed acoustic treatment.



From a player that costs as much as a house, you simply expect the very best... and with Kalista, that is exactly what you get. The depth and density, combined with the punch and drive of the bass in Michael Jackson's "Rock with You" ("Off the Wall" | 2009 | Epic | 88697 53621 2-1), were superb. On the one hand, this is a typically French sound, with colour, richness and a certain refined, supple fullness; on the other, beneath that elegance it offers perfect defi-

nition and control – a confident, highly expansive sonic character. The bass is big and powerful, yet never loses its charming Gallic elegance and an almost buttery smoothness. Quite naturally, there is not a trace of tension, strain or stress – the music rolls, bounces and pulses just as it should and just as the recording captured it. It is remarkable how easily you can recognise the nobility and refinement of the French sound from the bass alone. And yet the pluck of the bass string is wonderfully taut and powerful, so you feel its hum right in the middle of your chest.



On "River" by Renée Fleming ("Haunted Heart" | 2006 | Rounder | 0602517032798), the player revealed the slightly excited sibilants very clearly and precisely, but never harshly – they are present, yet not off-putting. The voice itself has a fascinating vividness, both in its three-dimensionality and in its detail. A captivating fullness with French charm guides you gently through every word with perfect intelligibility. It is a very lively, colourful and "human" voice, three-dimensional and limited solely by the quality of the recording – which, moreover, the player exploits in remarkable fashion, lending it juiciness and saturation.

An interesting comparison came in the treble, for which we used "Use Me" from Vanessa Fernandez's album of the same name (2014 | Groove Note | 0660318105028). First up was a standard rip of the CD, which had pleasant treble and, until we heard the other versions, seemed flawless, if slightly flatter. The same track played via Qobuz gained in volume, and the cymbal had more pronounced body, although metal can sound richer still. The purchased DSD file transformed the reproduction entirely (partly, perhaps, thanks to a different mastering): the cymbal gained not only a considerable amount of extra detail but also a somehow calmer character and more pronounced texture. But it was the SACD that delivered the experience of experiences – not only did the whole sound become more present, it was by far the most detailed rendition of this recording we had ever come across. It is phenomenal: every ting and crash blooms and decays at length. It is excellent, and frankly fascinating in the sheer amount of information available, in all those new layers.

Hans Zimmer's "Wheel of Fortune" ("The Dali CD Vol. 4" | 2015 | Dali | 474 564 6) is a huge, massive piece, and the Kalista lets it unfold in all its splendour. It is a floating sound, stunning in its drama, a truly enveloping volume that spreads the music practically from wall to wall – and once again there is that slightly grandiose French dynamism. It is thrilling and full-blooded, with a great deal of energy bursting forth, and you can sense that the player has enormous headroom and enormous power, able to drive through dynamic swings under any conditions. The authority with which the Kalista pumps the recording's untamed energy into the room is truly immersive, and yet the delivery is never forced: the music simply flows,

attractively fluid.



It might seem that such an inviting, warm and rich sound could take its toll on resolution, but at this level there is no need to fear anything of the kind. The Kalista conveyed the polished recording of "Mercy Street" by Christy Baron ("Retrospective" | 2004 | Chesky Records | 0090368026965) with almost unbelievable resolution. It is truly, astonishingly informative: every micro-detail is there, every ting comes to the fore, every single breath can be felt almost physically – and yet the dominant impression remains one of coherent, non-technical, flowing music. Métronome / Kalista knows how to create a product with an enormous dose of inspiring musicality and then awaken in it a brilliant level of detail that reveals absolutely everything in the recording. Thanks to its large proportions – probably the largest in the entire audio world – everything is also laid out before you, truly close.

Related to this is the feeling that the soundstage of recordings is unprecedentedly expansive. Bach's "Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C major, BWV 1066", performed by Marriner's Academy of St Martin in the Fields ("Orchestral Suites Nos. 1–4" | 1991 | Decca | 430 387-2), was immense – positively vast – and above all there is an enormous amount of air, which you can actually feel around you. In front of you is not just a coherent musical canvas but literally a hologram: a recording drawn out to the full and impressively "natural". All the instrumental sections are clearly localised, and an excellent recording rewards you with a uniquely intense and immersive experience of practically holographic quality.

"Northern Star" by Christine McVie ("In the Meantime" | 2004 | Koch | 0099923960027) is mature and serene, and the Kalista conveys it in all its complexity – so loftily, so richly, so nonchalantly that Métronome's DSC, fantastic in its own right, seems "merely normal" alongside it. The dose of musicality and charm is truly generous, and although you are served an authentic helping of sonic information, it is underpinned by such passion and such a desire to be in the midst of the music that you simply cannot resist: you melt into the music and stop noticing absolutely everything except the silky, ultimately rich caress of every single note.

The DreamPlay XC is a beautiful machine – you may not like its eccentric and daring design, but it certainly bears the hallmarks of a well-considered style, and the build quality is indisputably top-class. It is a genuine pleasure to touch, operate and use, just as it should be with mechanical quality of the highest order. We really like the unit's all-in-one concept, which allows it to serve as a digital hub, and we have to commend the fact that every one of its functions runs smoothly, without any waiting – though with such an ultra-expensive device, that must be a given. But let us set aside its looks and its features (even if the ability to tailor the output quite significantly through various settings is tempting) and stay with the sound itself

– because that alone is worthy of the ultra-high price class. Here Kalista proves that it ranks among the very best makers of digital sources and confirms that its signature is a huge sound, an inimitable juiciness and a dose of musicality that will sweep you away with just about any music. There is nothing to weigh up or debate here – although the DreamPlay XC is an ultra-expensive machine, it is also ultra-engaging, standing at the very top in terms of sheer enjoyment. If you have the chance, have a taste of Kalista – but be warned! The way back down from this musical Olympus will be very, very hard...

PROS

- One-of-a-kind design
- Customisable final sound
- Exceptional musicality
- Practical combination of functions
- Exceptional scale of the soundstage
- Natural warmth of reproduction

CONS

- A unique product comes at a unique price