Kalista

TEST & REVIEW

DreamPlay X · Mantax

SACD PLAYER · STREAMER / DAC



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KALISTA'S FLAGSHIP DREAMPLAY X TRANSPORT AND MANTAX DAC

French Masterpieces: Visual Distinction and Aural Refinement



This review had its genesis some year-and-a-half ago when, in mid-November of 2023, Jean Marie Clauzel, the owner and chief designer of France's Métronome Technologie, invited me to the private launch event for the new flagship Kalista Mantax DAC held in Vienna, Austria.

The next piece of this puzzle to drop into place came with the showing of the Kalista flagship products, including the Mantax DAC, paired with their recently released Kalista DreamPlay X, a superbly accomplished optical disc transport, and more, in the Utopia C Room during AXPONA 2024. This showing was presented by Wynn Wong, the principal of Canadian-based Wynn Audio importers. But just who or what is Kalista?

Deconstruction



The brand Kalista was first introduced under the French Métronome Technologie banner in 2002, and this new flagship €59,900 (~ $65,000) Kalista DreamPlay X Optical Disc player/Streamer/-DAC/Preamp, and the similarly fashioned €59,000 (~ $64,000) Mantax DAC, represent Kalista's no-holds-barred approach to the regeneration of digital music.

Both machines are housed in identically sculpted, luxuriantly elegant, curvilinear triangular chassis, roughly seventeen and a half inches (445 mm) wide, standing nearly five inches (125 mm) tall, with a depth of about sixteen and a half inches (420 mm), receding to its rear connectivity panel some five inches in width. Two finishes are available, Diamond, which I had, and Black Pearl. These gracefully fashioned devices are fabricated from an amalgam of aluminum, stainless steel, and acrylate (an acrylic plastic), to maximize mechanical decoupling. Each weighs about thirty-eight pounds (~17 kg) and rests on a troika of very shallow conical pointed footers. To facilitate stacking when the two are used as a complimentary pair, the top of the Mantax chassis has three machined



receiver dimples placed to conveniently accept the footers of the Kalista DreamPlay X. Each machine is powered by a seventeen-and-a-half-inch (440 mm) wide, six-and-a-quarter inch (160 mm) tall, sixteen and seven-eighth inch (430 mm) deep, forty-eight pound (~22 kg), external Elektra linear power supply, connected via a meter long umbilical for convenient placement. Central to their front panels, each device showcases a slightly sloped back from vertical, three-inch round touchscreen display, and includes a beautifully machined, bespoke aluminum twenty-eight-button remote, permitting full functional control from either its face or your listening position. Some streaming functions may be further controlled using the mConnect mobile device app with either machine.

The Kalista DreamPlay X elegantly combines four functions into one device, it is a CD/SACD player, a streamer, a DAC, and with Roon, it may also be used as a digital preamplifier. It will essentially let you play virtually any digital music you have access to, be it an optical disc, local file, or stream. By opening the elegantly machined precision sliding cover, bearing the engraved Kalista brand, centrally located on its top, you can load Redbook CDs or SACDs into its ergonomically configured transport. After securing the disc with its K-branded magnetic clamp, and closing the tray, the disc spins up and is read by its optical drive using a pick-up mechanism from the Denon & Marantz Group. It will also natively stream music files from a server, computer, NAS, or directly from online streaming services such as Roon, Airplay, Qobuz, Spotify Premium, or Tidal.

Its rear panel includes a dedicated Molex input jack to connect to its power supply, and both an RJ45 socket for wired and a WiFi antenna for wireless, LAN connectivity. With two USB slots, one for connecting any external USB storage, and another to facilitate future system updates, it also includes an S/PDIF, AES/EBU, and I2S output. The remote volume functionality may be enabled when using the “Digital volume (for Roon)” parameter in the Device Setup menu.

The Kalista Mantax takes its name from a Manta Ray and is the embodiment of diversity and adaptability. It not only features the ability to switch between two different world-class converter chipsets, the AKM AK4499EX or the ESS ES9039MPRO, at the touch of a button, you may also further tailor its sonic output characteristics by selecting either its valve or transistor-based audio output! When these chipset and output choices are taken into consideration in conjunction with its array of eight internal digital filtering parameters, the Mantax affords listeners some thirty-two different sonic output profile combinations!

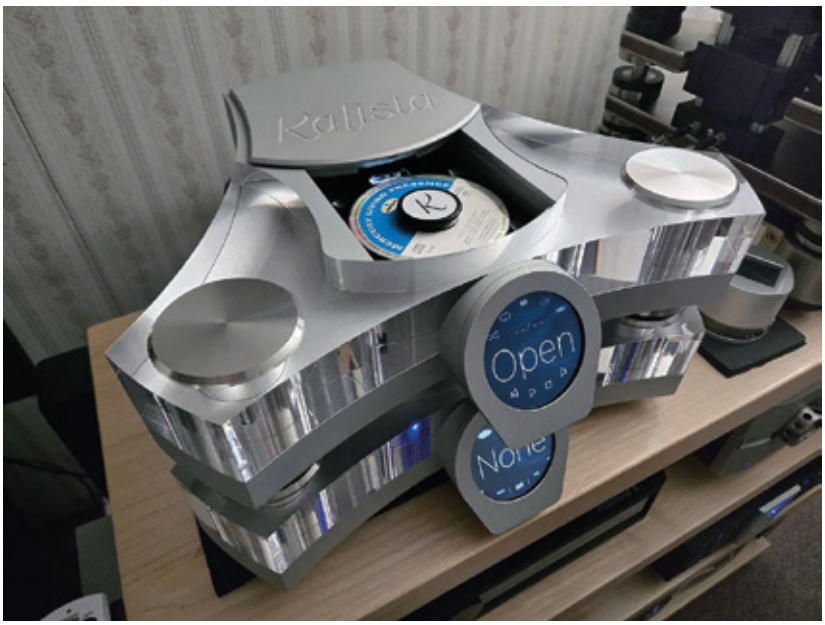
As well as its dedicated Molex input jack for its external linear power supply connection, the rear panel also sports a dedicated Service USB A port to implement future system updates. Including an S/PDIF, AES/EBU, TOSLINK, I^2S (the input I used from the Kalista DreamPlay X), and USB B input, it also houses one pair each of single-ended RCA and balanced XLR analog

audio outputs. With the ability to play PCM files of 16 to 32 Bit, from 44.1 to 384 kHz, and native DSD files from DSD64 (single) to DSD512 (quad) over USB, its S/PDIF and AES/EBU inputs will support up to DSD128 (double), while the TOSLINK input will only support DSD64 (single) over DoP, (DSD over PCM).

Strategically positioned and beautifully accented behind a symmetrical pair of "windows" found flanking its central round touch screen we find a pair of 6922 valves. Used for the tube-based output, the 6922 premium high-mu twin triodes are prized for their high trans-conductance and exceptional longevity and are considered by many to be the best-sounding input tubes ever developed. Finally, these machines enjoy the benefits that thirty years' worth of understanding and experience can bring to their sophisticated, high-performance audio circuits. Utilizing only the most premium components throughout, they implement uniquely designed, highly effective ground plane techniques, strict trace routing, and strategic component placement to optimize advanced inter-stage EMI/RFI protection and power supply isolation.

By this point, I hope that I have been able to convey some sense of just how visually arresting – how striking looking and beautifully executed – I find the design of these stunningly stylish and gorgeous machines to be. They are among, if not, the most beautifully crafted digital components that I have ever laid my eyes on. But all that would be meaningless if they couldn't deliver the sonic goods, no?

World-Class Performance Combined with Benchmark Versatility



A closer look at the Kalista DreamPlay X reveals it to be among, if not, THE most versatile digital audio sources available today. While its primary responsibilities as a CD/SACD transport make it the most desirable transport system I'm aware of on the market today, it is also a streamer and network player.

If you recall, it combines four devices into one exceptional machine. As a stand-alone digital source, it includes a CD/SACD player, a streamer, a DAC, and has the ability to be used as a digital preamplifier. As such, its exceptional versatility, blended with its capacity to be paired with virtually any external DAC, gives it the ability to make significant contributions to any complete digital front end. But the Kalista DreamPlay X was created to provide for an exceedingly high-performance, world-class optical media transport and streamer; its ultimate goal was to be a synergistic and meaningful partner for the

Mantax. Let's explore that relationship.

As touched upon, the Mantax offers eight internal digital filtering parameters. Because I've had so many questions as to just what all these different filters are for from listeners visiting my reference system while these products were in residence, let's take a quick look into what they actually do. "Linear Phase Fast" prioritizes frequency alignment and timing accuracy, potentially at the cost of some pre-ringing artifacts. It aims for a quick roll-off, and minimization of aliasing, the reproduction of high frequencies that have been folded back into the audible range. "Linear Phase Slow" maintains a consistent phase shift across all frequencies, attenuating higher frequencies gradually, with a slow roll-off, and is designed to minimize pre-ringing artifacts. "Minimum Phase Fast" prioritizes the minimization of group delay, or latency, and accomplishes a fast roll-off, potentially at the cost of some phase linearity and slightly unnatural impulse response. "Minimum Phase Slow" prioritizes minimizing pre-ringing and temporal accuracy, resulting in a smoother, more natural sound, often described as being warmer and analog-like. "Apodizing Fast" filtering uses a fast roll-off characteristic and is designed to reduce unnatural sound artifacts, like pre-ringing in the impulse response, to offer a cleaner, potentially more natural sound, whereas "Corrected Minimum Phase Fast" offers a balance between fast roll-off, to diminish pre-ringing, with a focus on reducing phase distortion, again aiming for a more natural and balanced sound without noticeable artifacts.



"Brickwall" filtering offers a very steep and abrupt cutoff, resembling a brick wall at its frequency response limit, designed to attenuate frequencies above a certain point almost instantly. This was the de facto standard when CD Players were first introduced in 1982 and chosen thanks to a mistaken understanding, and implementation, of the Nyquist Theorem. "Hybrid Low Dispersion" typically balances time dispersion and roll-off sharpness, aiming for a balanced sound with minimal artifacts by reducing both pre- and post-ringing.

Yet, Jean Marie and the Kalista team sought to expand upon merely delivering a more comprehensive "menu" of ranges of filtering options available from most other flagship DACs today. But how might they accomplish such a goal? This is where it gets interesting. By boldly offering users four more exceptional options, choices unavailable from any other DAC known to me on today's market. The Mantax was conceived to allow you to choose between the known sonic signature differences offered from either of two flagship converters, AKM or ESS, coupled with the ability to select either tubed or solid-state output circuitry!

In today's world where linestages and preamplifiers routinely eschew any manner of tone control, the resultant degree of scalable, adjustable, versatility of the audible output range

that Mantax offers affords listeners an otherwise inaccessible degree of adaptability and resourcefulness. I presume that you may begin to appreciate just how significantly one may be able to "tailor" the resultant sound of this digital playback system.

Revitalizing, Reinvigorating Your Digital Music



First, while I have chosen to maintain my extensive library of optical discs, made up of Redbook CDs, SACDs, DVD Audio titles, etc., while the Kalista DreamPlay X was in my system, I found myself comfortably scouring through them, revisiting all my favorite titles. The result was fascinating, as I quickly discovered just how shockingly rewarding this trip down memory lane could be. Suffice it to say that my mostly inactive CD and SACD collection has never sounded better. In more than a few cases, the media played back with this Kalista duo readily bested, clearly outdistancing, the sonic playback of both ripped files on my NAS and/or streaming playback of the same titles! In the larger scheme of things, the Kalista DreamPlay X is simply the finest transport I've yet encountered, and in no uncertain terms. Next, focusing on Mantax, with its unparalleled range of combinations of filtering, DAC chipset implementation, and analog audio output options, there can be little question that the Mantax represents the most accomplished chameleon available in the world of digital playback machines today. It should be clear that its incomparable degree of versatility might be problematic when trying to identify, define, and describe its native sonic character... I mean, it doesn't have such a single sonic characteristic! With that caveat in mind, the range of resultant voices this magnificent pairing was able to express in my reference system over my time listening to this combo was consistently compelling. Offering wide-ranging sonic attributes, including extraordinarily faithful timbre, with bold, vivid tonality, creating enveloping, credible space, delivering complex yet refined texture, with captivatingly subtle nuance, rife with expressive detail, explosive macrodynamics, effortless scaling, and yet capable of captivatingly subtle nuance and shading of microdynamic expressiveness.



One of the strengths of this duo was the ability to soften the blow of some of the more typically aggressive, more strident sounding, early '80s all digital (SPARS Code, DDD) CDs in my collection, titles like my UK Deutsche Grammophon copy of Beethoven: Symphonien 1 & 2, by the Berliner Philharmoniker under Karajan, or the original US Warner issue of Donald Fagen's, The Nightfly. Employing some combination of either the "Corrected Minimum Phase Fast," or "Minimum Phase

Slow," along with the AKM chipset and the tubed output options, rendered such titles not only less harsh, edgy, or strident sounding, but imbued them with a "warmer," more analog feel or flavor, very closely approximating an LP playback experience.

As a specific example, my Redbook CD of the reading of the Hungarian Rhapsody No. 13, by Franz Liszt, with Alfred Brendle on piano, was utterly captivating. Here, this system's ability to bring this performance to life, especially its ability to recreate the nuance and power of its dynamic prowess, made for a stand-out presentation. This is a recording that I've often heard sound too energized above about 3000 Hz with many digital front ends. Yet this presentation was balanced with remarkable tonal honesty, an engaging vibrance, and an amazing sense of harmonic bloom. Suffice it to say that, depending on the variation of combinations of title, label, mastering, and production values found within my disc collection, the Mantax was able to deliver the musical goods on so many different levels that I simply fell in love with the surprisingly impressive and resultant enveloping tapestry of sound it routinely created for me.



Moving to its phenomenal performance with streaming, no matter the source, my NAS or Qobuz, or the genre of music I selected, attributes such as vibrancy of tone color, clarity of timbre, density of texture, or the ability to deliver the rhythm and timing of the arrangement under consideration, were all equally well served. There was an infectious sense of correctness to the flow, momentum, and tempo of everything, from full-scale orchestral works, pensive jazz masterpieces, Chicago blues, to the scale and power of progressive or classic rock anthems.

When it came to the portrayal of instrumental accuracy, the Mantax delivered in spades! Horns were portrayed with their truthful, distinctive "blat," combined with a level of creaminess that perfectly served their natural texture and overall fidelity. Piano recordings were rendered so accurately that with the right tracks, you could often perceive the hammer striking its string into excitement, more properly expressing the piano's voice as both a percussion and stringed instrument.

Conclusion

Most of my readers and viewers know that I place considerable value on a system's capability to accurately recreate the recording's physical space, and to generate precise individual placement and voice sizes of instrumentation throughout the soundstage, an attribute that I

have come to call corporality. Here, especially with the AKM chipset and tubed output options engaged, staging was not only presented with realistic depth and appropriate width but was remarkably specific and authentic in its ability to convey instrumental locations and proportions across the entire expanse of the stage.

Because the Mantax is capable of presenting so many possible voices, there is simply no way I can begin to pin down a single, definitive specific attribute or signature sonic characteristic of its playback envelope. What I can say is that the Mantax is capable of delivering any number of stunningly engaging and musical acts! The real takeaway here is that the inspiring amalgamation that the Kalista DreamPlay X and Mantax deliver form one of the most superlative, most profoundly musically expressive digital sources available today, combined with an unmatched level of versatility and adaptation, and level of stylishness that will inspire an unequaled sense of pride of ownership. Individually, there is simply nothing else remotely similar to the Mantax available from any other manufacturer. Together, they present a digital music solution that not only places them in a class of their own but secures their place among the finest performers available today.