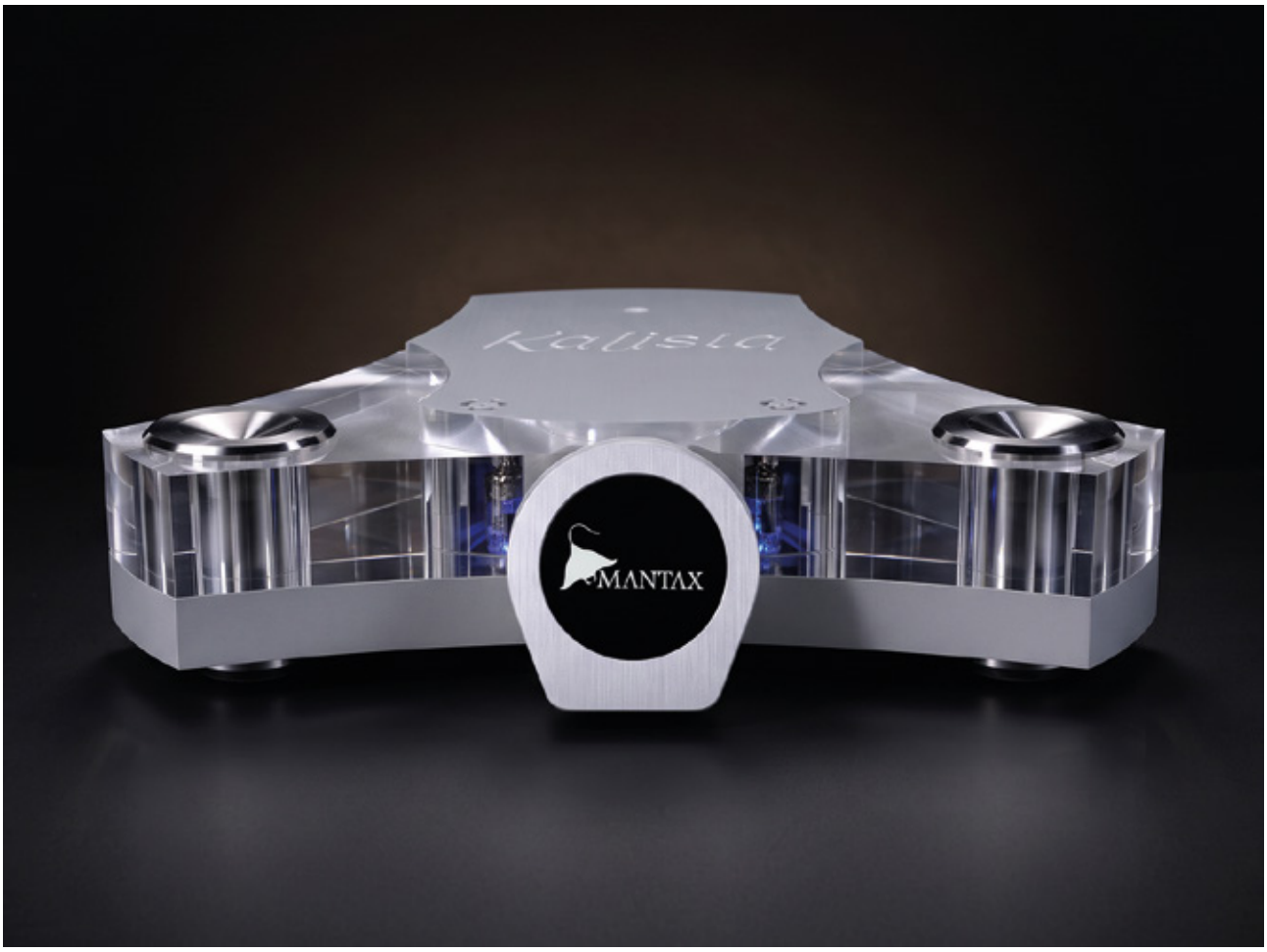
Kalista

TEST & REVIEW

Mantax

DAC



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Even a devoted analog hound like me has to admit that digital playback is presently enjoying a golden age. With sterling offerings from marques like Wadax and dCS, many of the things that bothered me about digital sound have been ameliorated. No, digital sources still don't have the full measure of the lifelike three-dimensional imaging, air, and dynamic bloom that record players and R2R tape decks (and actual instruments) regularly offer up. But the best of them do more than hint at these qualities (particularly with physical media), while retaining their undeniable superiority in bass extension, definition, and impact and their higher overall resolution. Which brings me to the component under review—the Kalista Mantax DAC from Metronome.



Although they don't get the attention paid their competition, the digital components of the French firm Metronome are, in my opinion, at least on a par sonically with those of Wadax, dCS, CH Precision, Boulder, Linn, Nagra, Goldmund, Soulution, and other "big boy" digital manufacturers. Founded by French audiophiles in 1987 and taken over by Jean Marie Clauzel in 2014, the company has consistently engineered some of the most musically compelling CD players, DACs, and streamers on the market.

In 2003, the Metronome team launched a premium sister brand called Kalista (from the Greek word meaning "most beautiful one"). Like Metronome products, Kalista creations are engineered and assembled entirely in Toulouse, France, by Metronome's experienced artisans. What makes Kalista gear different is its higher aim (and higher price). The goal at Kalista is to create handcrafted objects that are "unique" in build and sound quality.

It is easy to see this uniqueness from the outside—Kalista components are strikingly handsome-looking objects. What makes them unique on the inside, however, is less clear. Aside from admitting that his precision power supplies are critical to Kalista's sonics, Clauzel is vague about the other technologies he employs. The website references "unique and singular design, the selection of highest quality components, the combination of noble materials, and the meticulous assembly of electronics boards," but that's as deep as it goes.

A couple of years ago, I reviewed one of Kalista's statement offerings, the DreamPlay XC, and concluded that it was, indeed, a unique design that was impossible to reduce to a single component category. "The DreamPlay isn't just a DAC or a streamer; it is both, as well as a CD/-SACD player and a [digital-only] preamp with Leedh Processing volume control. In Kalista's words, it is a 'universal digital source.'" Floating on its optional, anti-vibration Silent Base, it

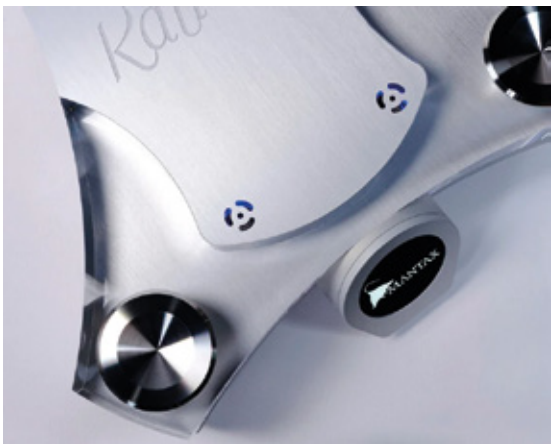
was, as noted, an object of considerable beauty; more importantly, its sonics were outstanding. Indeed, on physical discs, the DreamPlay's presentation was so sumptuously rich, full, and continuous that, on first listen, I was momentarily astonished—it sounded that much more like an LP or RTR tape than other digital sources I've heard and used, and was nearly as analog-like on good streams. Obviously, I recommended it highly—and gave it one of TAS's 2024 Product of the Year Awards. Nor have its charms worn thin over the past couple of years. I was still using it as my reference when importer Wynn Wong offered to bring me Kalista's latest creation, the $76,000 Mantax DAC.

Although the DreamPlay XC has its own built-in DAC, the performance of which I still prize, the Mantax is a considerably better-sounding and more versatile device. For one thing, it has two user-selectable D-to-A conversion processors—the more neutral and dynamic one, the AK4499EX from AKM (Asahi Kasei Microdevices), and the warmer, more laid-back and liquid-sounding ES9039MPRO from ESS Technology. For another, it uses handcrafted dual-mono circuits for both digital and analog signal paths. For a third, it has a panoply of filtration options (Linear Phase Fast: a filter designed for quick processing; Linear Phase Slow: a filter designed for slower, more deliberate processing; Minimum Phase Fast: a filter that avoids pre-ringing artifacts; Minimum Phase Slow: a slower minimum phase filter; Apodizing Fast: a type of filter that corrects for pre-ringing in the original recording; Corrected Minimum Phase Fast: a specialized minimum phase filter; Brickwall: an aggressive, sharp filter; and Hybrid Low Dispersion: a blended filter option), allowing you to tailor sonics to your taste.

The Mantax not only gives you a choice between DACs and among filters; it also gives you a choice between output stages—a solid-state transistor one or a tubed one using a pair of dual-triode 6922s. The use of a tube output stage is not new to Metronome products (see Alan Taffel's POY blurb of the AQWO 2+ on page 54). In fact, it's not new to digital source components, dating all the way back to the California Audio Labs Tempest from the early 1980s.

At that time, tube outputs in DACs were essentially sonic Band-Aids, intended to "soften" and "warm up" the ice-cold sound and ice-pick brunt of early digital recordings. In the Mantax, the tube output stage doesn't so much soften the sound as it does realistically enrich it, intensifying tone color, boosting the three-dimensionality of sonic images and the depth and width of the soundstage, and adding lifelike air, nuance, and texture to voices and instruments. Although I may be giving my conclusion away just a few paragraphs into this review, when coupled with the tubed ARC REF 330M monoblocks and ARC REF 10 preamp, the Mantax's 6922 output stage produced a level of sonic realism through the MBL 101 X-Treme MKIIs that I had never experienced before from a digital source. Even recordings that had sounded great





through the DreamPlay XC's own outstanding DAC, such as Hans Theessink's Jedermann Remixed CD, were nudged that much closer to the real thing.

Like the DreamPlay XC, the Mantax is housed in a handsome triangular chassis, made from aluminum, acrylate, and stainless steel. Again like the DreamPlay, it has a three-inch circular touchscreen on its front panel that allows you to change playback parameters (you can do this via the supplied remote as well); it also has an external power supply, the Elektra, and an optional anti-vibration Silent Base, making it a perfect physical match to the $76,300 DreamPlay XC or the $38,500, DAC-free DreamPlay X.

Why would you want to buy both these pricey products? Well, greater versatility and improved sonics aside, the Mantax is not a streamer per se and does not include a disc player. When hooked up to the Mantax, the DreamPlay XC serves as a superior source for streams, CDs, and SACDs. The combination is not only visually arresting; it is, in my experience, sonically non pareil.

Here's the thing about 1s and 0s: Unlike analog components, digital sources tend to emphasize parts at the expense of wholes. Yes, you hear more individual details through DACs (or you do through really good ones), but the connective tissue that binds these parts together—the organicism which makes recorded music sound less recorded, less microphonically divided into independent pieces and more like a living whole, whose many parts, while clearly audible, are so intimately interconnected that the ear hears them as one multi-limbed thing—is typically scanted.

This emphasis on parts vis-à-vis wholes was markedly reduced in the DreamPlay XC, which is one of the chief reasons why I liked it so well. Through the Mantax's tube output and the ESS DAC, this organicism is substantially increased. So is a fair measure of 3-D imaging and soundstage dimensionality. As a result, large ensembles that are recorded live in a concert hall, such as the Philadelphia Orchestra under Nézet-Séguin in the Trifonov performance of Rachmaninoff's Paganini Variations [DG], sound like many things and one thing at the same time. You can, if you choose to, hear every instrument in the orchestra's choirs, but you also hear those choirs as a single ensemble. Moreover, you hear them in perspective—not as flat, independent, similarly sized objects layered atop each other, as in Medieval art, but as three-dimensional groupings of string, wind, brass, and percussion instruments whose presence varies with their location and the pitch and intensity with which they are being sounded (and the number of other instruments or instrumental choirs that are playing along with them).

To hear the ebb and flow of the Philadelphia Orchestra and Trifonov's Steinway Model D concert grand through the Mantax/Dreamplay, especially with high-resolution omnidirectional loudspeakers such as the X-Tremes or the truly marvelous Metaxas & Sins Emperor elec-

trostats (review forthcoming), is to hear something that sounds as if it's alive and constantly changing rather than a static, piecemeal collection of well-recorded parts. To my ear, this increase in lifelike continuousness is a major step forward for digital playback that pulls it much closer to LPs and tape, though not close enough to overtake or equal them. (Let's face it: Analog hasn't stood still, either. It is also experiencing a golden age and with the advent of DS Audio's optical transducers, mounted on something like Acoustic Signature's standard-setting TA-10000 NEO tonearm and AS's Invictus NEO turntable, has greatly reduced digital's long-standing advantage in distortion-free low-end extension, definition, power, and resolution.)

Of course, more organic imaging and soundstaging wouldn't be quite as impressive if they weren't accompanied by lifelike timbre and dynamics. Happily, the Mantax/DreamPlay is equally adept at both. On something like the Hans Theessink recording I mentioned earlier—which is, of course, a studio production par excellence—you'd simply have to hear the realistic timbre with which Theessink's voice and his many instrumentals are reproduced, along with the three-dimensional presence which makes them "pop" from their various places on the soundstage as if the performer had suddenly stood up, stepped into a spotlight, and started to play with increased energy, to credit all that the Mantax is adding to the presentation. Via ARC Reference tube gear, I have never heard Theessink's voice and slide guitar to better or more realistic effect.

The "stage" in Jedermann Remixed is artificially assembled, of course, but so expertly mixed that, as with the concert hall performance of Rachmaninoff, the sense of listening to a living ensemble playing together rather than a collection of independently recorded overdubs is greatly increased. This is not the way digital playback, with its emphasis on individual parts, flattened imagery, and dead silences, has sounded in the past.

It should be obvious that I highly recommend the Kalista Mantax/DreamPlay, which (via physical media and tube output) narrows the gap between digital and analog by injecting the breath of life into what was once a breathlessly still landscape. Simply put, if you listen to a good deal of digital and can afford these products, you should audition them at once. They are the most lifelike digital components I've reviewed.

Specs & Pricing

- ✓ Digital inputs: SPDIF, AES/EBU, TosLink, I2S, USB
- ✓ Analog outputs: RCA, XLR
- ✓ D/A converters: Two
- ✓ Display: 3 inches
- ✓ Display resolution: 432 x 432
- ✓ Dimensions: 445 x 125 x 420mm (drive); 440 x 160 x 430mm (Elektra power supply)
- ✓ Weight: 17 kg (drive); 22 kg (with Elektra power supply)
- ✓ Price: $76,000