

Metronome DSC DAC & STREAMER
by Stuart Smith - 02/2022



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METRONOME DSC DAC/STREAMER REVIEW

Costing just shy of €26 000 the French-built Metronome DSC DAC and Streamer is clearly pitching itself at the high-end user. It has some interesting and innovative onboard technology from Industry stalwart Gilles Milot (Leedh) and certainly looks the part, but how will it sound? Stuart Smith finds out for HiFi Pig.

Metronome is a high-end manufacturer based in the central part of Southern France, North East of Toulouse. The brand is headed up by Jean Marie Clauzel and the brand are perhaps best known for their Kalista Dreamplay ONE CD player that would certainly be on my Desert Island Component list, though their [AQWO CD/SACD player and DAC](#) was very good indeed and would certainly be afforded shelf space at HiFi Pig Towers.



Sleek, elegant and superbly constructed, the Metronome DSC certainly looks the part.

Metronome is unashamedly high-end and the prices reflect this, but so does the fit, finish and engineering that makes up any of their products.

The product we have here is their DSC (Digital Sharing Converter) and that pretty much sums up what you are getting for your twenty-six thousand European wine vouchers; a streamer and DAC with a preamplifier. The latter utilises Leedh Processing technology which is touted as the world's first lossless volume controller.

The Leedh Processing technology is an interesting bit of tech' created by Gilles Milot, the guy behind the [Leedh E2 loudspeakers](#) that we reviewed around eight years ago. I'll leave pretending to understand the technology behind this processing to others, but should you be interested in reading more you can read about it in [this white paper](#). However, whether I understand the science is neither here nor there. The Leedh tech' is also used in Wattson Audio, Vermeer Audio, 3D Labs, Solution and Lumin products which suggests that it is held in very high regard given the prestige these brands carry.

BUILD AND FEATURES

Needless to say, the DSC arrived very well packaged and with a small but informative instruction booklet that also had the warranty registration document, a signed Certificate Of Conformity and a voucher for you to try out Roon for a couple of months free of charge.

There's something about high-end audio that feels different to your run of the mill products and the Metronome DSC doesn't disappoint on this front. Let's face it, this is an expensive bit of kit and if I'm spending such a significant sum of money I want to feel like I'm getting a product that meets and exceeds my expectations not just from an audio perspective (that should be a given) but also from the perspective of, for want of a better word, pride of ownership. The heavy, cold metal felt great to handle and it was heavy, 17KG to be exact, and this is down to the chassis being machined from billets of aluminium.

Looks-wise it really appeals to me – it looks elegant and yet purposeful measuring 430 x 105 x 430mm. Just look at the photographs and decide for yourself as to whether you like it or not. It's available in both silver and black versions.

That front panel has one of the rectangular panels as a sort of rocker for the volume (this is exceedingly cool), an indicator that the unit is powered on, and a touch screen – the latter giving the owner access to all the functions on the DSC, though there's also a remote included.

It's classy, it's minimal and it just looks great on the rack.

Turning to the back of the DSC, it's full but well-spaced out. Left to right you have the main IEC and main power switch, LAN and USB inputs (you can add a WiFi dongle to one of these USBs to make the unit wireless and that's included in the package), and then inputs for TOSLINK, S/PDIF and AES/EBU.

Next comes a pair of RCA outputs and a pair of balanced XLR outputs. So, the options are to connect directly to LAN and use the DSC connected to your power amp directly, add a digital source of your choice and connect using the digital inputs, or connect to a computer (Windows will need a driver downloading and installing). There is no provision for analogue inputs which I would have liked to have seen given that the DSC is touted as being a preamplifier. I think that whilst many potential buyers of the DSC will want to just have the unit, an amp and a pair of speakers I also believe there will be users who will want to add the DSC into an existing system that may include a vinyl front end and even a single analogue input would have allowed for this. Clearly, however, this is a product for the digital age and for those looking purely for a digital preamplifier/hub, though if you are connecting the DSC to an integrated or pre you obviously open up other possibilities for inputs. Personally, I see this as a product for those looking for a stylish and high-end one box streamer/DAC.

The touch screen is large enough (5 inches) to be usable and to read when needed, but not so large as to be the Metronome's dominant front feature. I do like the touch screen functionality as I really do hate menu-diving using buttons. You can control everything from this touchscreen, though in reality, the UI is pretty easy to navigate and not particularly complex. Again, this simplicity will appeal to folk who want great music rather than something to show off to their audiophile friends.

File-wise you can play 44.1 to 192kHz on the digital inputs and then through the USB input you can play 32bits/384kHz PCM and DSD from 64 to 512. That really should satisfy everyone!



The touch screen is simple to navigate and functions well.

SET UP

Set up of digital kit used to scare the bejesus out of me and I do still treat the whole process with a degree of caution, but in actual fact, most things are a doddle to set up if you read the instructions and follow them – two entirely different things in many cases and I'm a veteran ignorer of manuals, though I did actually read this one. The manual is short, well written, and easy to understand and follow – a major irritation for me are manuals that expect you to have a degree in digital engineering before you can get a sound out of the product.

For the purposes of this review I'm going to be using the Metronome DSC in the way I think the vast majority of people will use it, and that is connected directly to our network using an ethernet cable and then straight into the power amplifier. This makes for a very elegant solution of just three components; DSC, power amp and speakers.

The set-up process is a simple one; plug in the ethernet cable from your router, or in my case a network switch, plug in the cables to the amp (balanced XLR in my case), plug in the mains cable and turn it on. The unit lights up and you are all set to go. In fact, I had to do an update to the firmware first which was a simple case of pressing the touch-sensitive screen when asked if I wanted to update or not. To set up via wireless it's a similar process.

The touchscreen displays the type of file playing and the sample rate, plus the input that is currently active. In addition, it can be used to set up one of the seven pre-set digital filters and to set the output gain of the unit (1.4, 2.5 or 3V) allowing you to correctly set for your amp of choice. Importantly, the screen is where you can also turn the LEEDH Processing on or off, though there is a warning in the manual to never turn it off (and presumably on) without disconnecting your amp or turning the volume down. All is pretty obvious and the touchscreen works flawlessly as you would expect. I find some screens a bit too busy, but the one on the DSC is clear and easy to navigate. For some reason I'd not expected the screen on the Metronome to display album artwork, but it does. However, the proportion of the screen given over to this is pretty small and you'd not really be able to tell what the album playing was from across the room – pretty moot point to be fair as I, and I suspect most people, will use a tablet or other device with a screen on to control the DSC.

To control the DSC and make music play from your network Metronome encourage the use of the mconnect app, though other UPNP apps can be used. I will be using Roon as this is my preferred method by far. Using Roon is a simple matter of going into the settings in Roon on your tablet, finding the metronome and adding it to the list of players you have – literally a ten second job. Hey presto...music. Like the recently reviewed Aavik amplifier, it was clear within a matter of seconds that this was a good sounding set-up, though I skipped plugging the Metronome into our mid-priced system and installed it in the big system from the off.



It looks the part and sounds the part too.

This is an expensive bit of kit and there's no getting away from that, but with that price tag comes a good degree of expectation that the product is going to feel like you are getting something a bit special by way of how the item is presented, and the Metronome scores very healthily in this respect and is only let down by the remote (*it's functional, big enough and certainly a step up from the Apple remote on the Aavik amp I reviewed recently but still not good enough*) and the screen not being big enough, though other than having a screen that flipped out of the top I'm not sure how Metronome engineers would get around this. Anyway, I have to mention it. Build-wise the Metronome DSC is the canine's gonads. However, it is sonically where high-end kit should be primarily judged...so here we go.

SOUND QUALITY

After plumbing the Metronome DSC into the system and setting it up in Room I had a quick and rudimentary listen to the first track on the Deep Dish Yoshiesque II album as I'd used it in the Aavik review fairly recently. Not really listening in any way critically, it was clear that the textures of some of the synth noises as they broke up and faded on the opening track were a tad more evident than with our Leema DAC/Pre in place (an outstandingly good DAC in its own right at its price-point). I'd also never really clicked what the Spritualized tune isn't really a love song to a person, but rather a love song to Jason Pierce's drug of choice, to the point I found what I thought was a joyous song now quite lyrically depressing – I'd never really listened to the words before but the Metronome made everything a smidgen clearer. Whatever it was clear from the off that what we had here was a rather good-sounding bit of audio hardware.



Well laid out and with plenty of digital inputs but no analogue inputs.

Euro-Disco is the obvious and highly popular choice of listening fodder for high-end review folk (*not really as most seem to like challenging pinky-plonky jazz or classical*) and not wanting to disappoint I reached for Disco Discharge: European Connection. So whilst this kind of music may well not be the go-to music that audiophiles look to for testing out a new bit of kit, I'd argue that a good deal of it is very well produced and has all the prerequisite elements to get a feeling for what a review item is presenting sonically. Anyway, I like it a lot and I'm not going to spend time listening to test tones or music that I cannot abide for the sake of a review. Dilemma's 12" Disco Mix of In Spirit sounds magnificent here. The DAC is certainly doing a very good job at converting those digits into something the amp can make use of. Everything is there from the deep and pulsing synth to the crispy disco hats (let's face it, it'd be a bit shit if they weren't at this price) but what grabs my attention is the way the sounds are layered and cut through each other in the mix, making for a real aural treat. There's certainly more of a feeling of sounds having their own space in the mix than with the Leema and Stack Audio streamer I use in this system – it's not a huge difference, but it is there and it's what allows Metronome to command such a hefty price tag, I suppose. Like any bit of excellent kit, it's hard to separate review-listening from listening for pleasure and the whole of this record gets played – and not once did I feel that I'd have preferred listening to this on vinyl, which is another good sign. I'd like to use the word natural-sounding, but given that most of what I'm listening to is synthesiser-based, that seems like a bit of an odd choice of words, but it'll do. There's a bit of a thing I've noticed and that is for high-end kit to pander to the audiophile-ear and really concentrate on the mid-band and presence spectrum in the way they present music, but the Metronome isn't like that and it's a really exciting thing to listen to and brings a bit of verve and energy to the table. I like that!

You can fanny about with the filters on the DAC, there are seven different filters to choose from, but I found I ended up sticking with the Linear Phase Fast one with my least favourite being the Brick Wall filter that sounded like everything had been slightly constrained and dulled. Anyway, I found the one I preferred and stuck with it.

Accessing these filters is simple and you simply press the top right of the touchscreen and then the filter you want – all very easy and intuitive and done in real-time so you can pick what suits you and your lugs, or indeed the particular track or album you are listening to.

So far I've been listening with the Leedh Processing turned on and the noise of the system itself has been zero, nada, nowt. So it's time to switch it out of the loop but before I did that I had to turn the amp off as instructed in BIG LETTERS in the user manual. However, it seems that this is not something you can actually do and if the Leedh Processing is turned off the output of the unit is set to 100% and is not controllable other than adding an external preamplifier. Now, that all seemed a bit odd to me as I can't see anyone wanting to use an external preamplifier, but thinking about it I suppose some folk may want to do that. It's there, it works flawlessly and so use it – you've paid for it! Actually, this processing really intrigues me and I'm hoping to have a chat with Gilles Milot about it in the very near future. However, I'd have loved to have been able to switch it in and out to get a feel of what it actually does sonically – more a whining reviewer comment than a real moan about the unit itself.

Like the Aavik, the Metronome majors in detail and that's evident on everything I listened to using it. Eels' Novocaine For the Soul's artificial snap crackle and pop at the beginning was all there and as irritating as ever. But it's when the track drops out at about a minute twenty that you really appreciate just how deathly silent this pre/DAC/streamer is, and I suppose that silence is where the secret of the detail retrieval capabilities of this unit lies. I'd love to try it with an Aavik power amplifier at some point as I reckon they would compliment each other very nicely, with both majoring on lack of noise other than the music.

I did a Roon search for classical piano and came up with something from Calm Radio, pressed play and, frankly, it sounded crap. Then I looked at the file and it was an MP3 128Kbps file. Top tip, don't try and play this kind of file with the Metronome as it doesn't hide their shortcomings. The whole thing sounded, and I am exaggerating a bit here, as though I was listening with my head under a blanket. However, quickly but not quickly enough, I found Nils Landgren and Michael Wollny's Fragile at Schloss Elmau (Live) and that sounded a whole lot better on FLAC. I've another record recorded at this German castle/venue and acoustically it's brilliant. This was no different, and the feeling of being in the room was very, very real. Again, it's that quietness of the system with the Metronome in place that I think allows for these acoustic subtleties to come through.

Jazz At The Pawnshop on DSD 128 on Naxos is another step up in fidelity from the FLAC and it's clear that the Metronome is able to really present the detail and inherent fidelity in a file. This is a famous recording, of course, but listening on this system really was a "sat there" moment.

Here's the thing, as I always do when I review anything, I threw a whole load of different music at the Metronome and in various file formats and found that so long as the file quality was good enough then the music that got played would be superb. From Disco to classical piano (with a slight blip) I found the Metronome not to give a monkey's toss what style the music was. It simply presented the amplifier with what I assume to be a very clean signal free from digital artefacts, extraneous noise and nasties to produce a sound that let the character of the amps and speakers shine. And I think this is the best a DAC/ source can do.

QUIBBLES

Artwork displayed on the screen is pretty tiny and too difficult to see from across the room, though it is perfectly usable and you can alter the background pattern/image.

Remote is functional rather than in keeping with the rest of the design – regular readers will know that this is a major bugbear of mine and I'm going to keep on banging on about it until manufacturers take notice...and at this price, a few tens of quid isn't going to make any difference at all.

If you play poor quality files the Metronome isn't going to guild the lily and I'm afraid you will be left wanting!

CONCLUSION

This is a high-end product and commands a high-end price. It feels luxurious and certainly looks the part.

Sonically the Metronome DSC is a master of detail and subtle nuances in the music being played. It does this by presenting what I assume to be an incredibly clean and electronically silent signal to the amplifier.

In short, it's as transparent a product as I've come across in the DAC/ streaming realm. The Leedh Processing volume technology seems to work wonderfully and I've would have loved to have been able to switch it in and out to hear what it actually did in real-time.

However, the DSC is not without its faults! The remote is adequate rather than in keeping with the excellence of the unit and there are no analogue inputs.

The litmus test of any product is "would I give it shelf space?" and the answer is a resounding yes...with a degree of hesitation. If I was running a purely streaming system and could afford this then I'd have it in a heartbeat (it's a fantastic sounding bit of kit), but the truth is I need to have the capability to plug in my phonostage to allow me to play vinyl, and the DSC doesn't have one and I'd need to add an external pre, which sort of defeats the object.

AT A GLANCE

Build and Features:

Built very well and looks great – clearly a high-end product but without any over the top embellishments you often see to justify a product's price

Ability to add external digital sources should you wish but no analogue inputs and so if you want to add a turntable you will need to look elsewhere if you plan to use this as a preamplifier too

Remote is functional but not right at this price

Simple to set up and use

Onboard filters to tailor the sound

Cutting edge volume control in the form of the Leedh Processing technology

Sound Quality:

Exceptionally quiet – silent, in fact

Dynamic sounding and as transparent as I've heard in a product at this price

Detailed and without embellishment – feed it with quality files and you will be hugely rewarded

Value For Money:

Not cheap but I'd buy it had I the funds and ran a purely digital set up...

We Loved:

The presentation of the file and just the file without adding or taking away anything

Lovely looking thing

Silent

Simple set up

Runs wireless and has an included WiFi dongle

We Didn't Love So Much:

Remote is a bit lacking

Screen is difficult to read at a distance

Leaves crap files nowhere to hide – conversely it allows hi-res files to shine

Price: €25 990



Elevator Pitch Review: Unashamedly high-end in both the way it looks, feels and the way it sounds. The French built Metronome DSC allows whatever files you play to be converted and presented to the amp without adding or taking anything away. Its huge draw is the absolute quietness of the unit which allows you to hear your music as it was intended. Remote is a bit out of keeping and it doesn't have any analogue inputs which I would have liked to see. Minor quibbles apart, the Metronome DSC is a fantastic sounding machine.