

Review of Dreamplay CD & DAC by Alan Sircom, January 2018, on :



KALISTA DREAMPLAY CD TRANSPORT AND DAC



Not perhaps the most exciting way to start a review of more than £70,000 worth of CD player, but taxonomy is important here. Métronome Technologie is a French company that makes digital players. Its top CD player/converter combination used to be known as the Kalista Reference CD player and Nausicaa DAC. There was a slimmed-down version called Calypso. Then Métronome Technologie brought out a line of more affordable players, such as LePlayer. The company patently didn't want the LePlayer line to be undermined by the very different looking high-end range, so the parent company Métronome Technologie split the two brands into entirely different entities; Métronome (making the more conventional looking players and DACs) and Kalista, which currently makes just two products – the Dreamplay transport mechanism, and the DAC. Both are still made by Métronome Technologie. Simple, ain't it?

All of this is important to know because the Kalista line of old helps shape the Kalista brand today. Actually, forget 'helps shape'... this is a full-scale begetting. Kalista Reference begat the Dreamplay and the Nausicaa begat the DAC. They have a huge amount in common, not least the distinctive three-point inches-thick clear acrylic styling that forms the suspension and isolation system of both head units (also like the previous Kalista/Nausicaa models, both devices are fed by a more conventional looking Elektra external power supply).

The Kalista Dreamplay is more 'chip off the old block' than its converting counterpart, in that it shares much with its predecessor. The top-loading mechanism is still a Philips CDM12 Pro transport, commonly considered to be the best dedicated CD transport mechanism ever made. Unfortunately, that is in the past tense, because Philips is out of the transport mechanism game and the only way you can get hold of new mechs today is to fire up the time machine. Métronome is one of the few companies with enough good sense to buy up as many as they could when Philips announced they were End Of Lining it, and the company has enough transports stored to both continue to make and service new Kalista Dreamplay transports. Unless, of course, there is a sudden spike in CD-loving lottery winners.



That's not to say this is exactly the same player, though. The transport housing and puck have been subtly redesigned, with better sensors, the front panel display has moved from hard-buttons and an antiquated blue LED readout to an elegant black on light grey touchscreen (to match the DAC), and the hard-to-find upsampling switch has been removed because that's a job for the DAC. It sends a digital signal in pure, unadulterated 16/44 PCM in your choice of S/PDIF (coaxial and Toslink) and AES/EBU.

The Kalista DAC accepts all of these, and asynchronous USB. Your choice of input is controlled from the touchscreen front panel. As is your choice of DAC, and your choice of valve or solid-state output. The DACs are a choice of PCM-friendly or DSD-chummy converter chip (not that straightforward, as DAC1 is the more conventional brickwalled PCM converter, while DAC2 is the more extended-frequency design made for DoP DSD replay from a computer. Of course, having these two DACs as options on the front panel invites experimentation. This is a radical departure for the Kalista DAC; previous versions allowed the listener to swap between valve and solid-state outputs, but the digital pathway was fixed. But, like the Nausicaa before it, there are balanced XLR and single-ended RCA analogue outputs.

The big part of the Kalista experience remains the interface itself. The 60mm thick methacrylate outriggers on the transport are echoed in the DAC, and the two are designed to sit one on top of the other, because the aluminium tubes at each corner are a lateral suspension system. Add to that the two aluminium central sections for the electronics, which both match and are beautifully finished, and the whole CD replay aspect takes on a degree of elegance no bluff box could hope to deliver.



Both transport and DAC are fed by their own separate external Elektra power supplies. These too look almost identical to their predecessors, but have been upgraded to support the new models with 12 stages of regulation per chassis. These power supplies look more conventional than the eye-catching transport and DAC, but are no less well-made, and remind you (and your back) of rack-mount power amplifiers in their own right. A newly beefed up remote handset completes the package.

Those who love vinyl for its rituals insinctually love the Kalista even before a disc is played. There is ritual here, too. The drive must be at chest height or above _ no scrabbling around on a lower shelf, your player takes pride of place, ideally with the DAC and Kalista's own three-pointed equipment stand making it a column of pure digital entertainment (I'm not laying it on thick here, that's the sort of thought processes that go on when experiencing this player first hand). You walk up to the player, press stop to make sure the last disc isn't going to spin off and fly across the room. You remove the clamp, place it on one of the towers for safe keeping, and carefully remove the last disc playing. Put that in its caddy. Then extract the next disc from its own caddy, place it carefully on the top of the Kalista Dreamplay, replace the clamp just as carefully, wait a few seconds while it spins up and the Dreamplay reads the table of contents of the CD, then press play. You aren't done yet, because you have the option of walking through the different DAC options, and either valve or solid-state output, and these can help shape the sound of a particular disc. If you are really obsessive about this, note the choice of DAC and output on the front of each CD caddy. Some will look at this routine and think it pointless; this is not the player for them. Others will see this as something like the Tea Ceremony, for audio. And that's precisely what it is.

Far from being the stuff of frustration and annoyance, this disc changing ritual slows down the process of playing music just long enough to put you in the 'music appreciation' head-space. OK, I should add the word 'eventually' to that because the first few times you use the Kalista, CDs sit quietly doing nothing because you forgot to use the clamp. This is one of the changes from the Kalista Reference; there was no sensor on the transport and discs used to fly like ninja stars if you forget to clamp up. Once you are past that first knee of the learning curve, the slower, more contemplative approach to disc play really pays dividends.

There is a group of audio enthusiasts who question the need for a good CD transport. I used to think this a variant on the 'bits is bits' lowest common denominator argument, but I've softened my approach recently. There are many who might not have experience of what a good CD transport can do, having either not been around CD long enough, or simply never having heard a good CD transport. 10 minutes in the company of the Dreamplay will cure that!

There's a huge difference between what the Dreamplay can do and what mere mortal digital source components are capable of. That is perhaps to be expected given the price of admission to the Kalista Klub, but the difference still takes one by surprise. It's an organic, open sound and one that doesn't sound like anything we have been led to believe represents 'digital'. It still retains all the pitch and temporal precision of good digital, but adds a degree of dimensionality and inner detail to the overall performance that makes you think more of master tape than spinning bits of polycarbonate.

Then there is the DAC taken separately and fed a digital signal from elsewhere. The DAC is remarkably adaptable, in part because it's four DACs in one. This helps compensate for less than perfect PC inputs (DAC 2+valves) and poor CD rips (DAC 1+valves). Ultimately though, the DAC without the Dreamplay is like tick without tock.

It's as a whole player, then, that the Kalista comes into its own. Used with AES/EBU, the player as one unit really brought home just how much we are missing when we play our CDs on normal players, and just how wide remains the gulf between really well-sorted CD and streaming.

CD through the Kalista has a civilising element to digital. Not tame, not soft, and definitely not laid-back, just civilising. It's like it gives CD a touch of the *My Fair Lady* treatment and turns it from 1980s music carrier to refined transporter of digital music done right. Soundstage goes from being a notional idea (compared to vinyl) to a three-dimensional presentation of musical material. You don't play musical snippets here; music is to be revelled in or set aside. That's not simply because of that ritual aspect, but rather that you find yourself so engrossed in the music itself; drawing away is an effort.

Even when the music is sub-par, the Kalista combination shows new insights. I've fallen in and out of love with 'Because he was a Bonny Lad' by the Unthanks [*Here's the Tender Coming*, Rabble Rouser] at times. The Kalista shows why: it highlights the limitations of the recording, showing up how the reverb sounds very artificial, but in the process does not undermine the meaning of the record itself. But when the recording is first rate, and the music has its groove on, the Kalista makes you relearn the music from first principles. 'The Ghetto' by Donny Hathaway for example [*Everything is Everything*, Atco] produces a sound so ultimately soulful and entertaining it leaves you wanting more. So, out comes the live album for the same track, and pretty soon you are singing along to one of about six tracks on the albums, and wishing you had a fraction of his talent (but not his schizophrenia). There is so much detail, so much dynamic range, and so much energy on offer in every track, that you want to walk up to the musicians and thank them personally. There's a downside to all this. The dawning realisation that only a select few will ever hear precisely what CD is truly capable of, and of those, an even smaller set of music lovers will ever be able to own the means whereby digital music happens. Going back to mere mortal digital is impossible for a few days as you reacclimate to 'mainstream levels', even if that mainstream is extremely good in its own right. It's like getting used to cook-chill food after Michelin-starred dining. It takes time to adjust, and it's not a pleasant experience. Sadly, even with my most Editorial of Editor's hats on, trying my best magic price squeeze, this is still a remortgage, and digital at its best has to remain a memory.



The £72,000 question is “As a owner of the last generation of Kalista player, is the upgrade worth making?” And the simple answer is yes... and no. In the case of the DAC, it builds so heavily on the already fine performance of the Nausicaa, but adds strengths both as a PCM player and in replaying computer audio files. The argument for the Dreamplay is perhaps more nuanced. The removal of the built-in upsampler, the change from hard-buttons to touch-screen, and the slight change to the clamp all make for improvements in performance, but I am not convinced those increases are enough to justify trading up. If you have a Kalista Reference, you already have one of the best CD transports that was ever made, and while this betters its predecessor, it doesn't annihilate it. That being said, I reckon the number of people who will stay with the original transport after using the Dreamplay will be very low indeed. There is more than a touch of luxury element to the Kalista package and that touchscreen tips it over the edge.

The Kalista Dreamplay/DAC take the notion that CD is a dying medium and stomps all over it. If you listen to this player as a player then go back to the very best streaming can offer, you'll start to wonder if we've taken a wrong turn in sound quality. This might be perhaps the most elaborate way of spinning a polycarbonate disc in a time of absolute convenience, and the cost might cause even the most spendthrift and well-heeled of audiophiles to think twice, but it sounds fantastic and that is ultimately all that matters.