

Kalista DreamPlay XC

The first SACD player from French audio artisans, Kalista, is also this spin-off brand's most comprehensive digital hub to date, with wired/wireless network streaming
Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Having emerged from French manufacturer Métronome Technologie with its inaugural model in 2003 – think Citroën spawning DS, or Seat's Cupra line – Kalista now has a growing range of DreamPlay products. This includes the £21,000 Kalista STREAM – described as 'The only streamer on the market that combines perfect functionality with exceptional looks' – and a turntable, the £44,000 Twenty-Twenty.

All have in common striking looks and all-French construction, being assembled by the company in-house in southern France. All the control, digital and analogue electronics [pic, p49] are embedded into a tripod layout of aluminium and thick slabs of clear methacrylate to form the 'legs', finished with stainless steel spiked feet. This suspends the central mechanism and contributes to the substantial 17kg all-up mass of the machine, on the front of which sits a new 75mm slanted circular touchscreen.

FULLY LOADED

Two versions of the player are available, finished in silver (natural anodised) or what the manufacturer calls Black Pearl for a £1500 premium. The £51,000 DreamPlay X is a CD/SACD transport-only device, offering a range of digital outputs, while the £58,000 XC adds onboard conversion for formats up to 384kHz and DSD256 via both unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR outputs. Common to both is not just the aforementioned CD and SACD playback, but also a full streaming implementation with Ethernet and Wi-Fi networking, plus a USB input in addition to its I²S (on HDMI), coaxial and AES/EBU digital outputs.

RIGHT: Top view of the DreamPlay XC reveals the new CD/SACD mechanism from the D+M/Sound United Group. A lightweight magnetic puck is placed onto the spindle before you slide the heavy cover back into position

SACD is as significant an addition as the streaming engine and is made possible by a disc transport sourced from Denon/Marantz parent company Sound United. The mechanism is modified in-house, just as we saw with Métronome's AQWO integrated player [*HFN* Mar '19]. As with past players, Kalista's DreamPlay X is a top-loader, with a precision K-branded puck holding the disc on the spindle beneath a substantial sliding cover. The company has gone for top

loaders in previous players, but typically in a 'naked' turntable-inspired form.

Meanwhile the DreamPlay XC player adds to its flexibility by having both fixed and variable level outputs, allowing it to be used straight into

power amplification or active speakers. This preamp function uses the Leedh digital processing/volume algorithm [see *Lumin D2*, *HFN* Jul '20] and allows the company to claim the product as 'four devices in one (CD/SACD player, streamer, DAC and digital preamp)'. It also claims the device offers 'the purest sound perfection and the most fluid interface'. That'll be that touchscreen

control panel, then, which, as well as handling basic transport functions also allows the user to dig deeper into digital filtering and upsampling options [see PM's boxout, p47]. There's also a sleek metal-clad remote-control handset [see p51].

TOWER OF POWER

Common to both DreamPlay X/XC models is the offboard Elektra power supply which, despite a sculpted finish to its front-panel and substantial 21.7kg weight, is as ordinary-looking as the player is striking. It appears for all the world like a compact tower computer, with just a power LED on the front, and a mains input, switch and two outputs on the rear. These are marked 'DAC' and 'Drive', and connect to the DreamPlay XC via two multicore cables. If you're using the X version purely as

a streaming transport, only one cable is connected to the single power input on the rear panel of the 'head unit'.

The streaming implementation handles not just content stored on local network



RIGHT: The marriage of thick, precision-cut acrylic with a milled alloy chassis is Kalista's unmistakable 'brand signature', enhanced here with a 3in touch sensitive display



storage conveyed via UPnP – PCM-based data at up to 384kHz/32-bit and DSD to DSD256/11.2MHz – but also Deezer, Qobuz, Spotify and Tidal, the last complete with MQA decoding. You can even use the DreamPlay XC to listen to your favourite Internet radio streams via vTuner.

Now it's arguable that these streaming services may not be capable of delivering the kind of sound quality the player is designed to accomplish from higher-resolution content, and indeed Wi-Fi via the little stub antenna presents more of a challenge for hi-res streaming than does the wired Ethernet connection, but that sort of misses the point. The DreamPlay XC may be engineered for ultimate performance, but it must also live in the real world, where users might just want to stream content for convenience when they're not listening to their CDs, SACDs or hi-res files. A high-end machine with practicality? If it can be achieved without impinging on performance, why not?

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Before we get stuck into the fabulous sound, a word about the digital filters provided by the ESS Sabre ES9038PRO

DAC within the DreamPlay XC. These are all accessible from the touchscreen menus whether playing from network, online sources or from disc, and you can also navigate them via the remote handset, although the multiple key presses aren't exactly intuitive. As for the filters themselves, I found them to offer the usual mixed bag of inconsistencies that I've commented on many times before. Far too much time can be wasted experimenting with different digital filters without any reliable favourite being decided upon.

More consistent, however, was my preference for using the DreamPlay XC merely as a player/streamer, rather than invoking its digital volume control in

preamp mode. Here I found the sound softer and a shade less dynamic, so I stuck with the fixed output. Metronome/Kalista's suggested control app is ConversDigital's familiar mConnect running on a tablet or smartphone. I also used several other UPnP packages on a tablet and computer with no problems whatsoever.

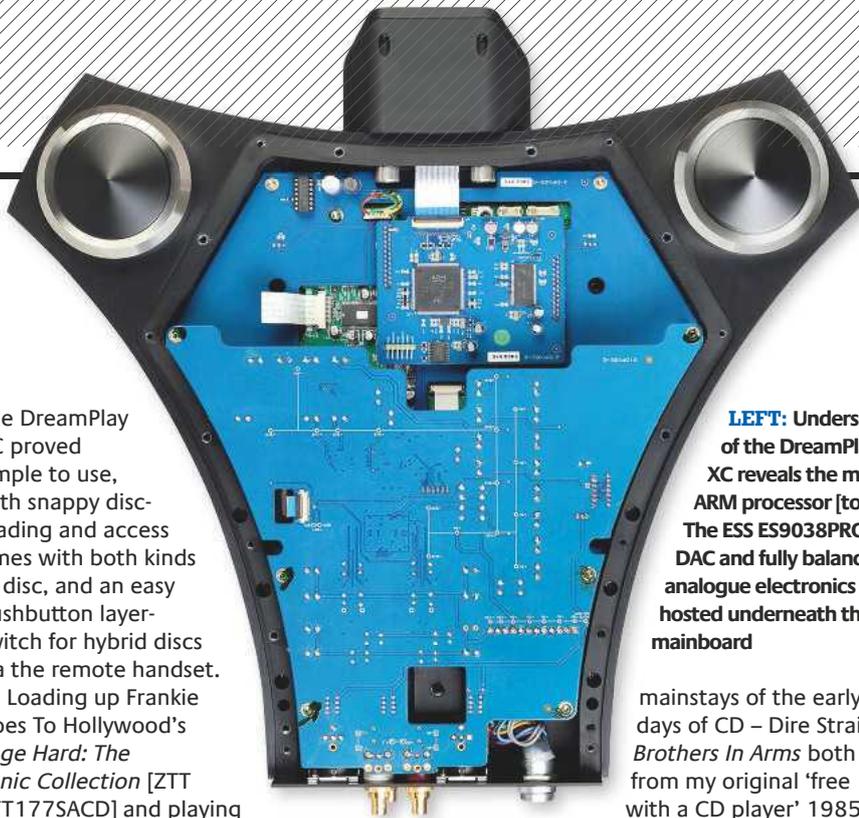
Nevertheless, my early sessions with the DreamPlay XC involved spinning more than a few CDs and SACDs – something of a nostalgic experience, given that so much of my music these days is stored on my servers. ☺

MENU À LA CARTE

For its first fully integrated CD/SACD/network player, Kalista is not only offering the full gamut of linear-phase, minimum-phase, apodising, brickwall, etc, digital filters that come packaged with the ES9038PRO DAC but – as we saw in the DreamPlay One [HFN Oct '18] – there's an additional low-pass filter that modifies the distinctive time domain and stopband performances of these options. In our early sample these various filters were only enabled once the Leedh volume DSP was switched on. With the latter defeated, the DreamPlay XC's output reverts to fixed mode (three levels are available) with a traditional linear phase/fast roll-off filter as default. In this guise the XC behaves 'as expected' with a full 130dB stopband rejection and response that's flat out to –0.4dB/20kHz, –1.6dB/45kHz and –4.5dB/90kHz with CD/48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz media, respectively.

However, not only are these native responses influenced by filter setting, the comprehensive synchronous and asynchronous 'signal resampling' may also truncate the response if, say, a 192kHz input is downsampled to 96kHz or 88.2kHz. Interestingly, the DreamPlay XC's inherently low jitter is largely unaffected by 'resampling'. None of this impacts on the SACD performance, however, where the response shows a more progressive treble roll-off of –1.5dB/20kHz, –5.5dB/40kHz, –14dB/60kHz and –28dB/80kHz. PM





JEAN MARIE CLAUZEL

Over the last 20 years the high-end Kalista series has morphed into a brand in its own right, almost overshadowing the parent Métronome Technologie group, founded in 1987. Métronome already has an SACD player, but Kalista was after something special. 'Our customers had been requesting an SACD player for many years, but we didn't have a good technical solution until we found this pick-up mech at the D&M Group', says Associate Director Jean Marie Clauzel.

'Our development of this SACD player caused us to renew the Kalista platform itself – a major challenge for all Métronome Technologie staff. We also responded to requests from our audiophile customers for more simplicity, plug-and-play features, and combined functionalities.'

Jean Marie had a change of heart, moving away from separate disc transport, DAC, streamer and preamp solutions in favour of a fully integrated, single-chassis product. In practice, that's *two* boxes because Métronome/Kalista has always gone 'big' with its outboard PSUs.

'Technically we always focus more than half of our efforts on the power supply', says Jean Marie. 'The DreamPlay X power supply is really huge, and doubled-up inside when supporting the full XC player. Our other big step, since our Métronome DSC last year, is reflected in the move to more powerful ARM Cortex processors. This has allowed us to offer more features and flexibility while also improving our well-known sound reproduction profile.' PM



The DreamPlay XC proved simple to use, with snappy disc-loading and access times with both kinds of disc, and an easy pushbutton layer-switch for hybrid discs via the remote handset.

Loading up Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Rage Hard: The Sonic Collection* [ZTT ZTT177SACD] and playing 'Welcome To The Pleasuredome', I was impressed by the detailed handling of the track's opening, with its ambient birdsong effects, but slightly less enamoured of the pounding beats of the main section of the track. There was bags of information here, but the pace was tempered – the drama of Trevor Horn's thundering production restrained rather than relentless.

The player was seemingly much more at home with one of the

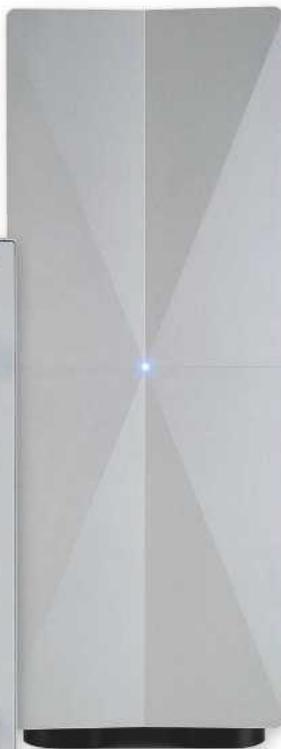
LEFT: Underside of the DreamPlay XC reveals the main ARM processor [top]. The ESS ES9038PRO DAC and fully balanced analogue electronics are hosted underneath the mainboard

mainstays of the early days of CD – Dire Straits' *Brothers In Arms* both from my original 'free with a CD player' 1985 CD copy [Vertigo 824 499-2] and the 2005 remastered 20th anniversary SACD [Vertigo 9871497]. The added clarity, impact and detail of the CD layer of the remastered disc was built upon when switching to SACD, but even the original sounded crisp and clean via the DreamPlay XC. That was true whether with all seven minutes of 'Money For Nothing', which bounced along impressively with good clarity in the rhythm section behind that trademark Knopfler guitar sound, or the more contemplative title track closing the set, which saw this French disc player doing a fine job both with the husky vocal and the guitar solos.

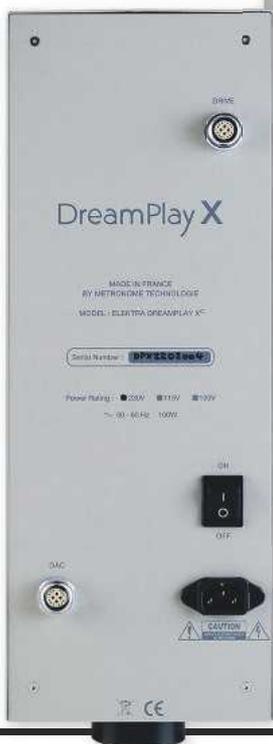
SUPERIOR SACD

The detailed sound of the player is also well suited to the Dunedin Consort's 2018 'small ensemble' recording of Bach's *St John Passion* on SACD [CKD 419]: again, the Super Audio layer brings out more of the sense of space in the acoustic, and especially in director John Butt's solo keyboard additions framing the main work. But the sound here is a little darker, and arguably a little less free-breathing, than I am used to, whether comparing the DreamPlay XC's disc playback or its streaming capabilities. This doesn't detract from the very fine way the player handles the textures of the instruments and voices, but in some systems it might diminish the sense of drama in the performance, and the feeling of a liturgical event the recording usually conjures up.

For all that, this is a balance many will surely find exceptionally pleasing for the DreamPlay XC is never anything other ☺



LEFT: Rear of the Elektra PSU has separate outputs for the transport and DAC sections of the DreamPlay XC



KALISTA DREAMPLAY XC



ABOVE: The 'fully loaded' DreamPlay XC has two PSU inputs, wired/wireless network ins, a USB-A port for external drives (and one for service) plus digital outs on HDMI (I²S), XLR (AES/EBU) and coax (S/PDIF). Fixed/variable analogue outs are on RCAs and XLRs

than big, rich and generous in the way it plays music, whether that's from disc, network stores, USB or even online streams. Indeed, it even sounds rather special when playing concerts from Radio 3's Internet stream. On more than one occasion I dropped into the beginning of the channel's *Afternoon Concert* strand and found myself still contentedly listening when the programme ended a couple of hours later.

As I mentioned earlier about these streaming services, they may not offer the sheer quality available elsewhere, but they're a useful function to have – in the case of vTuner, it's free music after all, and a lot of it from around the world – and the DreamPlay XC delivers it in a consistently enjoyable fashion. Radio 3's stream may only be 320kbps AAC at best, but the music still communicates well via this player.

Push up into the DXD and DSD resolutions the DreamPlay XC supports via its network connection, and while that warmth and smoothness remains, the player is fully able to demonstrate the advantages of more data being moved to deliver the music. Play

trumpeter Angelo Verploegen's relaxed *When Night Falls* set, a typically intimate recording from the Just Listen label [JL028; DSD256], and the result is a remarkably effective evocation

LEFT: Partnering all-alloy remote offers direct track access, skip, search plus CD/SACD and digital input selection. Volume and menu are also accessible



of the three musicians – Ed Verhoeff on guitar and Eric van Der Westen on bass – just sitting down and playing together, recorded straight to DSD256. Yes, there are other network players that might bring out more of the studio ambience but very few will match the wonderful late-night cosiness going on via the DreamPlay XC, entirely befitting the gentle theme of these sessions.

BREAKING GLASS

Similarly, the 2021 Metropolitan Opera live recording of Philip Glass's *Akhmaten* [Orange Mountain Music, Bandcamp download; 48kHz/24-bit] packs quite a wallop in the hands of this player. It's heard in the repeating rhythms of the Prelude, the thundering ritualist percussion and deep voices of the funeral sequence opening Act 1, and also in the chimes and soaring duet of countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and mezzo J'Nai Bridges in 'The Window Of Appearances'.

In short, it all sounds gloriously unusual and extremely dramatic in its other-worldliness, a sentiment that might just as easily be extended to the visceral visual impact of the DreamPlay XC itself! ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

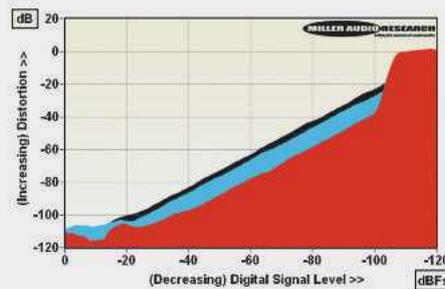
Operational foibles aside, the DreamPlay XC looks and sounds every bit as 'dreamy' as we might have hoped. Maybe it's not quite the 'four in one' its manufacturer claims – the lack of external inputs beyond networking and USB counting against it as a preamp. Nevertheless, as a standalone player it is superb – the characterful sound matching those striking looks to produce a true statement machine.

Sound Quality: 86%

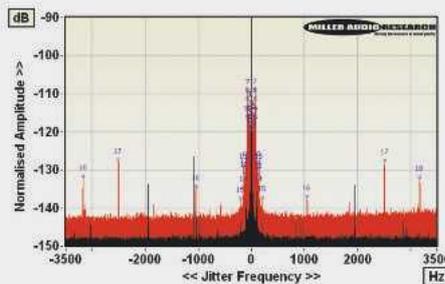


We have followed the evolution of Kalista's DreamPlay DACs and players [HFN Nov '17 and Oct '18] from its earlier Metronome incarnations [HFN Jan '09, Feb '13 and Dec '13] but the DreamPlay XC not only differs with its SACD mech but also in the switch to ESS's ES9038PRO DAC from AKM's 'Velvet Sound' series. All this, and the proprietary code running on its ARM CPU, has combined to deliver what, in most key respects, is Kalista's best-performing digital player yet. Tested in its default fixed output mode [see boxout, p47] the linear phase/fast digital filter delivers a full 130dB stopband rejection with CD (54dB with 96kHz PCM) and a huge 118.4dB A-wtd S/N ratio from a max. 5.7V balanced output. The output impedance is rather too high at 1.8kohm but distortion is very low at 0.0005% (CD), 0.0004% (SACD) and 0.00045% (LPCM over network) through the midrange at 0dBfs and falling as low as 0.00013% over the top 20dB of its dynamic range [see Graph 1]. While THD+Noise is remarkably 'flat' from 20Hz-20kHz with LPCM sources, it's necessarily higher at 0.005%/10kHz and 0.06%/20kHz with SACD due to the swell of ultrasonic requantisation noise rising just outside of the audioband.

Low-level linearity is exceptionally fine with disc sources (good to ±0.3dB over a 110dB range with SACD) but there's a truncation of 24-bit digital signals at ~-104dBfs with external LPCM inputs [red trace, Graph 1]. Previous Kalista players/DACs had shown moderate to high levels of jitter, but this is resolved to impressive effect in the DreamPlay XC with figures of just ~15psec at all incoming sample rates. Jitter is a little higher at 340psec with SACD but these are all low-rate sidebands centred on ±7Hz [Graph 2, below]. Kalista is never less than novel! PM



ABOVE: Distortion versus digital level over a 120dB range – 1kHz at 48kHz/24-bit over Network (red), 1kHz via CD (black) and 20kHz via CD (blue)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plots using 24-bit/48kHz data (Network input, black; SACD, red with markers)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	5.73Vrms / 1.75kohm (XLR)
A-wtd S/N ratio (LPCM / CD / SACD)	118.2dB / 118.4dB / 116.5dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00050% / 0.0007%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.00035% / 0.0009%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to -0.4dB/-1.6dB/-4.5dB
Digital jitter (LPCM / CD / SACD)	15psec / 117psec / 340psec
Resolution @ -110dB (LPCM / CD / SACD)	See text / ±0.9dB / ±0.3dB
Power consumption	57W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	445x125x430mm / 17.3kg