

Review of Metronome' Le Player 4+, by Maurice Jeffries, 09/2023 on :

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Métronome Technologie Le Player 4+ DAC / CD
The persistence of memory.



In an act of musical and marketplace bravery, the esteemed French electronics firm Métronome Technologie has taken the bold step of offering music lovers still wed to physical media a device many long ago consigned to the dustbin of audio history: a dedicated CD player. When Toronto, Canada-based audio distributor / dealer Wynn Wong of Wynn Audio and our Creative Director Steven R. Rochlin contacted to gauge my interest in reviewing Metronome Technology Le Player 4+ CD player / DAC, I thought that they both must be crazy. What sane manufacturer would dare to offer a dedicated (and pricey) CD player in a market dominated by digital servers, streamers, music streaming services, and outboard DACs to that most fickle of consumers, the modern audiophile?

Several factors ultimately compelled a "yes" from me. First, Wynn Wong has superb taste in components and music (and is a bloody nice guy to boot). Wynn Audio's show demonstrations always vie for top honors. And the product lines that Wynn carries (including Thales, Kalista, Métronome Audio, Vimberg, and Karan Acoustics) offer superb sound at numerous price points. Of equal import, Metronome and sister outfit Kalista Audio enjoy sterling reputations as top-flight digital audio engineering and product design firms. With the Le Player 4+, Métronome Technologie has created a lovely little CD player / DAC / server (the server remains an *a la carte* option) hybrid for modern audiophiles who don't particularly like CD players, or typical CD player sound. Métronome's corporate parent, Métronome Technologie, also owns and operates Kalista Audio, Métronome Technologie's tonier sibling and the creator of the lovely DreamPlay line of digital components, amongst the most beautiful kit on the planet. While lacking the aesthetic flare and élan of the DreamPlay line, Le Player 4+ downsizes a healthy dose of the engineering know-how and technical skill from the impressive Métronome Technologie universe into a relatively affordable single-box package.



The Le Player 4+ represents what Métronome describes as a premium but affordable DAC and CD player that boasts high-quality sound reproduction in a simple package. Part of Métronome's entry-level Classica product range, the Le Player 4+ speaks to audiophiles and music lovers with sizeable CD collections who have yet to embrace digital streaming and dedicated digital file replay as the new home music replay standard-bearers. They also offer Le Player 4, a dedicated CD transport sans DAC and their Le DAC 2, a stand-alone converter for use with Le Player 4 or other digital devices. The model sent to me, the Le Player 4+, merges the Le Player 4 transport and Le DAC 2 into a single-box unit, along with the *a la carte* streaming option.



Handsomely packaged in a black aluminum chassis, the Le Player 4+ eschews the ubiquitous front-loaded sliding drawer CD transport arrangement featured on most cheap players in favor of a more robust top-loaded layout. A lightweight magnetized puck holds the CD in place to ensure rotational stability. The 12 kgs (27 lbs.) package boasts a three-toroidal transformer power supply, utilizes Schaffner filters, and features generous supply regulation. The unit rests on three sculpted Delrin cones that channel vibrations away from the chassis.



All of which neatly sidesteps the looming elephant in the digital listening room, namely, why offer a device that functions *primarily* as a high-quality CD player in an era where stand-alone DACs and digital streaming devices (and servers) dominate? Not to mention the crucial fact that many music lovers have ripped to hard drive(s) and then sold their entire CD collections on eBay (or gifted them as a tax write-off to the local library) without so much as a backward glance.

Let me offer three possibilities. Priced at a sane (if hardly cheap) \$9,995, Le Player 4+ delivers exceptional build quality, commendable connectivity, a digital streaming option, and superb sound in a single box. It can therefore function as a complete digital hub in space-starved high-end systems, negating the need to purchase separate components (disc player / DAC / server / streamer) to perform similar tasks. Second, a market still exists for audiophiles who own large (and increasingly valuable) CD collections, seek a convenient single-box playback option, and can afford to spend \$10,000 or more to obtain excellent sound from their beloved silver discs.

I know one highly regarded reviewer who listens to CD almost exclusively, and many more listeners who feel that CD playback over a quality setup bests the sound of digital streaming from sources like Tidal and Qobuz. These same users also feel that the performance of a top-flight CD player can rival the sound of CD-quality digital files served to a dedicated player or computer and then decoded by a top-flight DAC.

Last, one should not discount the power and pull of physical media, of inserting a silver disc to CD tray and pressing play. Ah, the joys of late twentieth-century music playback rituals.



Making Music The Old-Fashioned Way

For all its "old school/new school" posturing, I suspect that most potential purchasers of devices like the Le Player 4+ have one core consideration in mind, namely: how does this player handle the humble CD? In a word, beautifully. The Le Player 4+ delivers an airy, tonally balanced, lightning-quick sound free of sonic glare, grit, and obvious noise artifacts. The Le Player 4+ CD player / DAC recreates music as effortlessly and naturally as any digital component to reside here at Casa Jeffries.

From its sparkling, crystal-clear treble region to its potent lower end, Métronome Technologie's Le Player 4+ never puts a wrong foot forward tone-wise. Instruments and voices possess a bell-like clarity with plenty of traction and body. Well-recorded discs can captivate with a disarmingly natural charm. The Le Player 4+ captures all the pathos, regret, and sober introspection of Joni Mitchell's late-career masterpiece, *Both Sides Now*, a release lovingly produced by Mitchell and long-time collaborator (and former life partner) Larry Klein. This disc had music lovers and critics singing to the rafters upon its release way back in 2000, and it still has the power to move one to tears almost a quarter century later.

Both Sides showcase Mitchell revisiting her personal catalog of reworked pop classics plus several Great American Songbook gems. Backed by a superb orchestra that would have caused Nelson Riddle to blush, retro-reflectively spotlights an older Mitchell, one who grasps that every choice made earlier in life resonates, sometimes dissonantly, in the present. On the standout cut, a searing and paradoxically haunting re-working of *A Case of You*, Mitchell's cigarette and whiskey-laced alto (she sang as a mezzo-soprano as a younger woman) imparts an aching sober clarity to the lyrics. When she recounts how, lovelorn, she once "drew a map of Canada, Oh Canada" and later retro-reflectively counsels that enduring love demands that one be "prepared to bleed", one both hears and *feels* the weary and resigned wisdom and insight that only comes through heartbreak and age.

Reaching back even further in time, I pondered how the little French box would decode a gem from the early days of digital. When Barbara Streisand's *The Broadway Album* (Columbia) appeared in 1985, digital playback, still in its infancy, wooed the public but left critical listeners cold, and for good reason.

The early days of digital had little to offer musically: gray textures, two-dimensional imaging, synthetic staging, and little in the way of genuine tonal body or bloom. To my considerable surprise, when I inserted the Streisand disc into Le Player 4+, I heard none of the canards that characterized circa-1985 digital.

No gray, washed-out textures and tone, no two-dimensional perspectives, no closed-in treble. Instead, the Le Player 4+ gifted supple textures, lots of air, natural imaging, and an appealing delicacy that flattered Her Majesty like nobody's business. Oh, all the telltale hallmarks of 1980s-era pop remained, meaning the hyped-up *Beyond Thunderdome* timpani, the post-disco-era synths, the *uber*-densely orchestrated scores, and of course, the silly melodrama. But, with equal doses of charm and naturalism, the 4+ made all that 1980s nonsense fun and vibrant again, but now skillfully imbued with 21st century sonics.

Métronome Technologie's Le Player 4+ handles symphonic blockbusters with equal skill and sonic dexterity. A heavy rotation favorite and one that features prominently in my most recent reviews is Naxos Record's soaring *Candide Overture* from the *Bernstein: Symphony No. 2 - West Side Story* [Naxos 8.559099] CD (skillfully engineered by Wilson Audio's Peter McGrath). If the playback device is up to the task, the *Candide* should bloom with room-inflating life, punch, and momentum. The little French stalwart proved utterly unflappable here, allowing the opening bars of the *Overture* to explode with stomach-churning reach *and* heightened focus, naturalness of pitch, and precise transient attack. This is an impressive performance for a multi-format device.

Refreshingly, the Le Player 4+ delivers equally musical results via the easy-to-use streaming option. Sonically, the steaming option yields little if any ground to CD playback. I was hard-pressed, for example, to hear any coarse differences between the CD and streamed versions of the *Candide Overture*. In granular terms, the CD came across as a touch more detailed in the midrange and with a bit (perhaps) more soundstage layering on recordings with good depth perspective. Tonally, any differences between the two formats escaped my notice or were too minor to note.

Analog-to-digital transfers of classic jazz warhorses spoke via the streaming option with essentially the same spring water purity and transparency that I heard with CD.

For example, Métronome Technologie's Le Player 4+ skillfully captured all the momentum and drive that Rudy Van Gelder engineered into his classic Blue Note recordings, along with the soft top-ends and occasional flabby lower registers that typify the label's house sound. On a swinging session like Herbie Hancock's grooving *Empyrean Isles* [Blue Note 84175], the Le Player 4+ made no attempt to hide the softened top-end of Hancock's piano or Tony Williams' high-hat embellishments, nor the fat and spongy lower register of Ron Carter's bass. But in sheer musical terms, the Metronome beautifully captured the session's rhythmic subtlety, drive, and infectious energy.



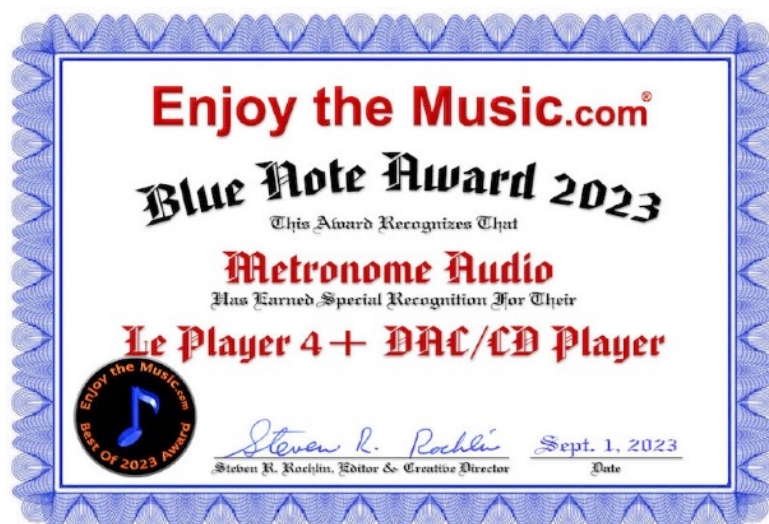
The only downside when using the streaming option, IMHO, owes to what I see as the system's sub-optimal streaming app functionality. Métronome Technologie utilizes the downloadable mconnect player, a media player app that supports UPnP / DLNA and Google Cast (Chromecast) streaming. I downloaded the basic free version of mconnect, this version features pop-up ads at the bottom of the display screen and quite limited functionality. An upgraded for-purchase option is also available, hopefully sans pop-ups, but I didn't use it. Without dwelling too much on app specifics, let me say that I found mconnect serviceable but hardly a match for the functionality of Roon or the superb app offered by companies like AURALiC.

















Parting Thoughts

Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money, no matter how well the stock market has performed. Ten thousand dollars for a CD player (albeit one that features a dedicated streaming option plus a DAC that can be used with other digital devices) at a time when fewer and fewer audiophiles are buying CDs seems an even riskier proposition. Nevertheless, on pure sonic grounds, the Métronome Technologie Le Player 4+ CD player / DAC comes highly recommended. It played every disc or file that I threw at it sound unfailingly musical, with reference level clarity, coherence, and transparency.

This is not to say that the unit lacks a sonic point of view or a unique musical voice. It absolutely does. Métronome Technologie's Le Player 4+ unabashedly celebrates its Gallic sonic roots. Like other French product lines that I have admired over the years (think Focal and Triangle on the loudspeaker side, and the lovely Jadis tube amps on the audio electronics front), the little Metronome exudes a subtle lightness of touch tonally, an intoxicating rhythmic athleticism, and an open and airy quality that makes listening to my favorite tracks the audio equivalent of peering through a squeaky-clean sonic window.

If your system tilts to the warm and fuzzy side of the tonal spectrum, Métronome Technologie's Le Player 4+ CD player / DAC will surprise you with its openness and clarity. OTOH, if your system comes across as a bit lean and perhaps a touch analytical, the little Metronome would not be my first choice. But in a balanced, essentially neutral setup, the Le Player 4+ makes well-recorded CDs and digital files sound superbly musical and engaging, offering equal doses of charm and insight. If I were still into CD, I would strongly consider keeping this little wonder.



Tonality	
Sub-bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	
Mid-bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	
Midrange (200 Hz - 3 kHz)	
High frequencies (> 3 kHz)	
Attack	
Decay	
Inner resolution	
Soundscape width front	
Soundscape width rear	
Soundscape depth	
Soundscape extension into room	
Imaging	
Fit and finish	
Self noise	
Emotionally engaging	
Value for the money	