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Métronome Technologie Launches Their World-Class Kalista Mantax DAC

Musical revelations in Vienna!

Coverage By Greg Weaver



## A World-Class Product Launch

Thursday morning, November 16th found me on an airplane bound for Vienna, Austria. I had been invited to the private launch event for the new flagship Kalista Mantax DAC, to be held at the Adagio Vienna City Hotel on Saturday, November 18th.

The Adagio Vienna City sits just south of the Donaukanal, an arm of the nearby Danube River, and just immediately west of where the Wiental Kanal flows into it, bordering Vienna's city center.

This places it just inside what is known as "The Ring," the popular name given to a series of wide tree-lined boulevards that encircle nearly the entire center of the city. "The Ring" is about six and a half

kilometers long (~ four miles) and arguably offers more historical sights lining its edges than any other road in the world.

Interestingly, the city of Vienna was the home (or adopted home) of many of the most illustrious composers of the classical music era during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. From about 1780 to 1828 (the year of Schubert's death), the city's litany of distinguished composers raised music to a force that transcended all geographic borders and generations. The fact that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Joseph Haydn, Franz Schubert, Joseph Lanner, Johann Strauss, Anton Bruckner, and Gustav Mahler were Austrians and that

Ludwig van Beethoven, Johannes Brahms, and Christoph Willibald Gluck put down spiritual and musical roots in Vienna merely solidifies the extent to which Austria may be regarded as a true birthplace to music, giving rise to what has become known as Viennese classicism.

Not so surprisingly, this litany of highly esteemed musical personalities was drawn to the capital of the great Austrian empire to take advantage of the overt patronage offered by the ruling monarchy, the House of Habsburg, as well as that of the other aristocrats of its imperial court. The Habsburg dynasty takes its name from Habsburg Castle, a

fortress built in the 1020s in present-day Switzerland. As one of the most prominent and important dynasties in European history, the House was celebrated for having fostered a lucrative and fertile environment for artists and musicians.

Why so much background on this extraordinary and musically rich city? Given its role as the source of some of the most memorable and influential works of music ever created, could there be a more appropriate or better-suited city from which to launch such an ambitious musical playback machine, the Kalista Mantax?

## The Kalista Story

Kalista is a brand first introduced under the French Métronome Technologie banner in 2002, and this new flagship €59,000 (or just over \$64,000 at today's rate of exchange) Mantax is their



no-holds-barred approach to Digital to Analog conversion. It is a statement, stand-alone DAC, that integrates two individual conversion processors (AKM and ESS), both tube and transistor outputs, and uses an external linear power supply called Elektra. While it will accept input from virtually any transport available today, it was built to be the perfect partner to perhaps the most eye-catching CD and SACD transport on the market today,

their similarly styled flagship €59,800 (or just over \$65,000) DreamPlay X, which was released in 2021.

The invitation to attend this remarkable launch event came from the current owner and designer at Métronome Technologie, Jean Marie Clauzel. Métronome Technologie was born in 1987 in the south of France, and like so many other major audio companies, was the result of founder Dominique Giner's passion for music. Giner's background was in wood crafting, furniture making, and as a lover of hi-fi, and the company name is derivative of Giner's first bookshelf loudspeaker, a product that he began developing in 1984, the 15.75"-high MT1, which was shaped rather like a metronome.

The company's first "official" Kalista-branded products were CD players, which Giner developed in partnership with another passionate French audio company, Jadis. Though Métronome remained fairly small until 2002, it was the introduction of their first "Kalista by Métronome" CD transport, with its remarkably distinctive aesthetics and exceptional sonic performance, that opened the door to their looming global notoriety.

## A New Beginning

In 2014, Jean Marie Clauzel stepped into the picture when he purchased the company. He retained the company's engineering team until Giner chose to retire some two years later, at which time, Jean Marie himself assumed the role of

leading the design team. Speaking with the very engaging Monsieur Clauzel, I soon learned that over the past two decades, the Kalista series has morphed into a very vital brand in its own right, virtually overshadowing the parent Métronome Technologie group.



As Métronome already had an SACD player in its lineup, the Kalista brand has chosen to blaze a more specialized path. Though Jean Marie cites the intense customer outcry for a Kalista-made SACD player, by 2016, as the all-but-ubiquitous Philips' CDM transport mechanisms had become a very rare commodity, the team didn't have a good technical solution. Then the Kalista team found the SACD drive pick-up mechanism offered by the D&M Group (Denon & Marantz), which seems to be the only optical drive mechanism available for OEM manufacture today.

With the successful release of the Kalista DreamPlay X transport in 2021, it should come as no surprise that Kalista customers were soon clamoring for an accordant flagship quality DAC, a machine that would match both

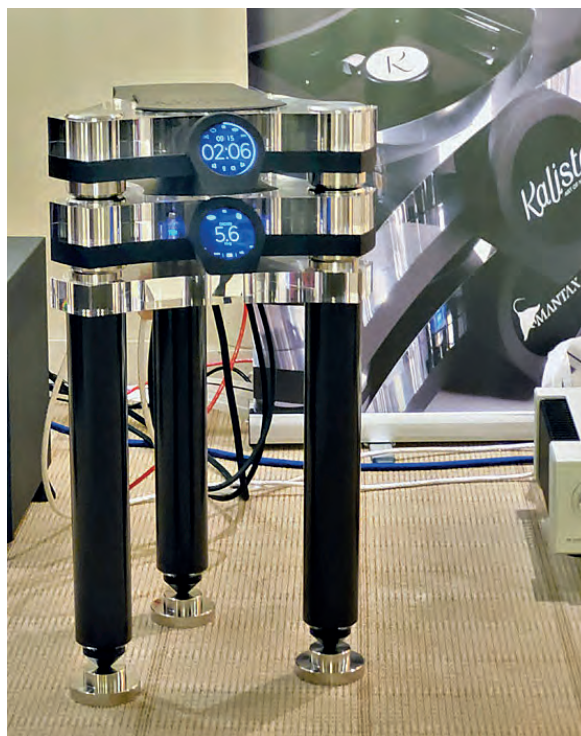
the grander aesthetics and performance delivered by the DreamPlay X.

With the development of the Kalista Mantax, whose appellation is derivative of a Manta Ray, Jean Marie taxed his team to continue the practice of mixing both valve and solid-state circuitry, coupled with the use of two different, exceptional converters, one from AKM, and another from ESS. He intended to be able to blend all of the device's different options, including its myriad of filters, to fulfill their mission of offering digital playback products that more convincingly resemble the sound of analog components.

The AKM connection initially presented a challenge in the wake of the massive fire that broke out on October, 20th, 2020, ravishing their manufacturing facilities in Nobeoka, Japan. That devastating fire, which took a total of three days to completely extinguish, completely disrupted their ability to produce large-scale integrated circuits (LSIs) for audio equipment. When production finally recommenced in January of this year, even though the design team pushed back on Jean Marie's initial proposal to incorporate two separate digital converters, the project could finally move forward.

## The Soul Of A New Machine

But the Mantax embraces all of the existing Kalista and Métronome's current technologies and philosophies. The chassis and housings are fabricated from an amalgam of aluminum, acrylate, and stainless steel, affording exceptional decoupling qualities. They utilize only the most premium components throughout, with all assembly and soldering done by hand. They implement uniquely designed, highly



effective ground plane techniques, strict trace routing, and strategic component placement, as well as advanced inter-stage EMI/RFI protection and power supply isolation.

The Mantax weighs 37 ½ pounds (17kg), is 17 ½" (445 mm) wide, stands 4 7/8" (125 mm) tall, and is 16 ½" (420 mm) deep, while its Elektra power supply weighs 22kg and stands 6 ¼" (160 mm) wide, by 17 ½" (440 mm) tall, and 16 7/8" (430 mm) deep.

With its elegant, centrally positioned 3" round display, the uniquely shaped Mantax chassis supports S/PDIF, AES/EBU, TOSLINK, I²S, and USB inputs, and one each RCA (75 Ω) and XLR (110 Ω) analog outputs. A dedicated USB port allows for any future updates that may be offered. It will play all audio file types, including PCM from 16 to 32 Bit at 44.1 to 384 KHz, and native DSD from DSD64 to DSD512 over USB. S/PDIF and AES/EBU inputs will support up to DSD128, and TOSLINK will only support DSD up to DoP DSD64. As mentioned, it employs two different world-class converter chipsets, both the AKM AK4499EX and ESS

ES9039MPRO. Available accessories include a silent anti-vibration base, a bespoke tripod stand, and even the possibility of further customization upon request.

The beautifully machined aluminum 28-button remote allows for the full manipulation of the Mantax options and settings. Selections include Linear Phase Fast, Minimum Phase Fast, Linear Phase Slow, Minimum Phase Slow, Apodizing Fast, Corrected Minimum Phase Fast, Brickwall, and Hybrid Low Dispersion. You may switch between the two individual DACs by choosing either the AKM or ESS chipset, engage or bypass the tubed output, or switch settings mode. Finally, you may select inputs and change volume settings with the Input +, Input -, Volume +, Volume -, and Mute buttons. Jean Marie pointed out that given all the possible options and filters, the Mantax offers twenty-four different sonic output profile combinations! Talk about versatility!

## The Launch Event

The venue chosen for the launch event was a large meeting room on the Mezzanine level of the Adagio Hotel. Set up was done the morning of the event by Kurt Wögerer, of Audio Exclusive, a Kalista dealer from Wels, Austria, some 200 kilometers west of Vienna.

The remarkable system installed in that space for the day's event included the Kalista DreamPlay X SACD/CD transport/Streamer (\$66,400/€61,000), which fed the Kalista Mantax DAC (\$64,250/€59,000) via a 1.5-meter Audioquest Dragon HDMI I2S digital cable (\$3,500/€3,199). Both machines were supported on the bespoke Tripod Stand KaTri by Artesania (\$12,000/€11,000).



6:00 PM to familiarize themselves with the Mantax sonic signature, followed at 6:00 PM by the official keynote address by Jean Marie Clauzel himself. After the formalities, there was an informal social event planned, with coffee, wine, and snacks for all attendees, after which the team and guests

would head off for a meal at the Restaurant Vienna, just a few blocks from the Adagio.

I had made plans to meet with Jean Marie at 3:00 PM Saturday before the official event was to start so that we could shoot a brief video conversation with him about the Mantax, and record some short music selections to feature in an upcoming YouTube Channel episode. We finished by 3:30 or so, at which time I took my video recording gear back up to my room before returning at 4:00 PM to do some extended listening to the system.

## Let The Music Flow

While the Piega 411 monitors list a frequency response of 35 Hz to 50 kHz, I suspect that the 35 Hz rating is a bit on the ambitious side, and may count on the assistance wall proximity and room loading. And as excellent as their overall presentation is, their lightish low-frequency extension was revealed with several tracks. When the Genie is released from his bottle and starts to speak in Roger Waters' "Three Wishes" from his 1992 magnum opus release *Amused to Death*, it gave them a bit of a fit... stressing their capabilities and causing the host to dive for the remote volume control.

That notwithstanding, the resultant sound regenerated in that space over my two hours of pre-keynote

address listening revealed an unbelievable degree of faithful timbre, with vivid tonality, enveloping space, complex texture, and subtle nuance, rife with expressive detail. Even in this remarkably limited context, a setup in a venue that was essentially even less friendly than most show conditions – this system had been assembled and dialed in over the space of something like just two hours - the enveloping tapestry of sound created was surprisingly impressive.

No matter the genre of music selected, the pace, rhythm, and timing of the arrangements were all equally well served. There was an infectious sense of correctness to the flow, momentum, and tempo of everything, from jazz masterpieces to rock 'n' roll classics.

When it came to the portrayal of instrumental accuracy, the Mantax delivered in spades! Horns were portrayed with their truthful, distinctive "blat," combined with a

The Mantax used a 2-meter set of Nordost Odin 2 XLR interconnects (\$70,550/€64,799/pr.) in combination with its native volume control to connect to a T+A PA 3100 HV stereo amplifier (\$24,800/€19,000), which in turn drove a pair of Piega Coax 411 monitor loudspeakers (\$9,995/€8,500/pr.) using a 4-meter set of Nordost Odin 2 speaker cables (\$49,000/€44,999/pr.). As the Piega 411 monitors may be biwired, a 4-piece set of Nordost Reference biwiring jumpers (\$875/€800) was used to best accommodate the single set of Odin 2 loudspeaker cables. The Piega's sat atop a pair of Dynaudio Stand 20 speaker stands (\$700/€650/pr.) and were anchored to the stands using Sicomin Antispik speaker feet (\$130/€120/set of 8 pieces).

Components were isolated using Nordost SortKone TC cones (\$2,900/€2,550/6 pieces). An Audioplan Powerstar S IV with a 3-meter Ampere L Powercord (\$3,200/€2,940) was used as the AC Mains distribution system, and other AC cables included 1.5-meter Audioplan Ampere L power cords (\$2,850/ €2,600). Nordost QK1 and QV2 load resonating coils (\$720/€660) were used to scrub and condition the AC power.

The event was scheduled to allow attendees some two hours of open listening time between 4:00 and



level of creaminess that perfectly served their natural texture and overall fidelity. Piano was rendered so accurately that with the right tracks, you could readily perceive hammer striking string, more properly communicating the piano's voice as the percussion

instrument it is.

Most of my readers and viewers know that I place considerable value on a system's capability to accurately recreate the recording's physical space, and to generate precise individual placement and voice sizes of instrumentation throughout the soundstage. Here staging was not only presented with realistic depth and appropriate width but was remarkably specific and authentic in its ability to convey instrumental locations and proportions across the entire stage. No small feat!

## More To Come

As I would learn in conversations after the keynote address, the Mantax had been cycled through a good number of the possible filter and playback combinations during the two hours of playback, which may in part explain why I'd had such difficulty in pinning down any specific attribute or signature sonic characteristic of its playback envelope. What I can say is that the Mantax had turned in a stunning first act!

This launch event was an overwhelming success, one that was not only a stirring achievement, but one that has deeply aroused my further interest. The Mantax, as heard with this array of extraordinary associated gear, had proven itself to be an exceptional performer, one that clearly provides a uniquely authentic and engaging voice to digital sources. I cannot express strongly enough my appreciation to Jean Marie Clauzel, and his entire team, for having been allowed to attend and to share this experience with my audience.

Given how taken I was with what I heard from this audition, after further conversations with Jean Marie, and at his suggestions, I reached out to his Canadian Representative, Wynn Wong, of Wynn Audio whom I've known for



some time now. And guess what? Wynn has agreed to send me the DreamPlay X Transport and the Mantax DAC for a serious evaluation in my reference system sometime early next year! That should prove to provide yet another exceptional digital experience here at the audio analyst© central. Stay tuned.

## Specifications

Type: Solid-state Hi-Res Audio

stereo DAC

Digital inputs: S/PDIF via RCA, AES/EBU via XLR, TosLink optical, I<sup>2</sup>S, and USB  
Analog Output: Unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR

D/A converter for all audio files  
Display: 3" with a resolution of 432 x 432

Available Accessories:  
Silent base  
Classic tripod furniture  
Can be customized upon request

Weight: 37.5 pounds (17 kg)

Dimensions: 17.5" (445 mm) x 4.875" (125 mm) x 16.5" (420 mm) WxHxD

Price: €59,000 (~\$64,000 @ December 2023 exchange rate)