



**Hi-Fi Voice**  
hi-fi magazin

Text by | Daniel Brezina  
October 2022

## **BANC D'ESSAI - Octobre 2022** **Kalista DreamPlay XC**

The southern French brand Kalista (and its more accessible offshoot, Métronome) has for many, many years represented a benchmark of musicality in the world of high-end audio.

Handcrafted production focuses on exceptionally luxurious components designed to appeal to their affluent owners not only sonically, but also aesthetically. The latest DreamPlay collection aims to achieve this as well, with the versatile signal source DreamPlay X / XC, where the optional second letter in the name indicates the presence of a built-in D/A converter, or analog output.

The DreamPlay XC is almost a work of art (for the same reason, like any art, it may not appeal to everyone—but the important thing is that it has an unmistakable character), crafted from appropriately high-quality materials with the desired level of artisanal workmanship.

The basic shape is essentially a triangular footprint, defined by two legs/pillars at the front and one at the back. On the metal base, the transparent acrylic body lightens the visual mass of the component, giving it its characteristic appearance. Also original is the round touchscreen display, housed in the protruding metal “beak.”

Almost the entire top surface is covered by a heavy metal panel, which slides back with a luxurious glide along lubricated rails. Beneath it, a recessed compartment reveals the mechanism, a heavily modified SACD solution from Japan’s D&M.

The rear third of the device is formed by a metal chassis, which houses and shields all the signal circuits. In the case of the X version, this is limited to digital processing, while the XC also includes the company’s renowned D/A converter.

On the left side are two power connectors (separate for the DAC and for the transport), with an Ethernet interface above them — combined (it must be said, somewhat impractically) with a USB input for data storage.

Next to it is a small antenna for wireless connectivity, and below that another USB port, though this one is intended solely for firmware updates. Digital output is provided by the recommended I2S in HDMI form, as well as the traditional coaxial and AES/EBU options.

For analog connectivity, there is one pair of balanced XLR outputs and one pair of RCA outputs.

What most photographs do not show is the external power supply, which makes it possible to maintain



adjusted so that the player integrates optimally with your preamplifier.

The Leedh Processing system deserves a paragraph of its own. This technology, developed by the French company Leedh, is gradually finding its way into many top-tier digital devices. While it cannot fully replace high-end analog preamplifiers — the sound remains a little flatter and drier in comparison — it offers an important advantage.

For those who want an absolutely minimalist system, who wish to admire the beauty of the component and perhaps drive a pair of active loudspeakers directly, it provides one of the best digital volume control solutions available, and that matters.

The essence of the Leedh algorithms is that they add only a minimum of bits to the signal, avoiding the truncation of useful audio information that occurs with some other digital implementations.

We listened to DreamPlay XC in the importer's showroom in Kopřivnice, where it was paired with an unusually refined setup. Amplification was provided by the Vitus SIA-030, with playback through Rockport Technologies Atria II (and for a while also AudioSolutions Virtuoso M), and comparisons were made with Métronome DSC acting as a D/A converter and streamer. Accessories included a full loom of Nordost Valhalla 2 and ODIN 2 cables, along with various Nordost components such as feet, bases, harmonizers — essentially everything the company offers in practice. The room itself also featured custom acoustic treatment.

From a player priced like a piece of real estate, you simply expect the best... and with Kalista, that is exactly what you get. The depth, weight, and at the same time punch and drive of the bass in Jackson's Rock with You (Off the Wall | 2009 | Epic | 88697 53621 2-1) were magnificent. On one hand, it is the typically French sound — colorful, rich, with a certain ornate, pliant fullness — while on the other,

beneath that elegance, it offers perfect definition and control. It is a confident, highly expansive sonic character.

The bass is big and powerful, yet never loses its charming Gallic elegance and almost buttery smoothness.

Naturally, there is not the slightest trace of strain, pressure, or stress — the music flows, bounces, and

the more compact and elegant proportions of the player itself. Even so, the player still weighs a solid 17 kg and measures 44.5 cm x 42 cm in footprint, with a height of 12.5 cm — but this is nothing compared to the towering power module. It recalls computer towers of the 1990s, yet even surpasses them in size. Standing 44 cm tall, 43 cm deep and 16 cm wide — and weighing 22 kg — it outclasses many conventional bookshelf speakers.

The enclosure is not unattractive, but its primary purpose is clearly to be tucked away behind the rack. Power enters via a dedicated cable, and inside are two independent units — as mentioned earlier, one for the transport mechanism and the other for the sensitive converter circuits.

A key innovation in Kalista's approach to digital devices is that DreamPlay XC combines functions to meet all the current digital needs of demanding listeners. First, there is the SACD/CD mechanism for those who enjoy spinning their extensive collections of silver discs.

Second, there is the streamer — nowadays an essential feature — providing access to collections on your home network or on various audiophile streaming services. Third, DreamPlay XC functions as a D/A converter. Here, operating parameters and consequently the output character can be finely adjusted. You can choose to upsample the signal to multiple PCM or DSD levels, and the device fully processes MQA. Naturally, it also handles any form of PCM or DSD (up to DSD256). The output is therefore richly "shapeable."

Different available digital filters also have a tangible impact, and the output voltage can be



pulses exactly as it should and as the recording captures. It is remarkable how easily you can recognize the nobility and refinement of the French sound simply from the bass. At the same time, the pluck of a bass string is superbly taut and strong, so that every note resonates right in the middle of your chest.



to wall, with that distinctly French, slightly grandiose dynamism.

It is captivating and full-bodied, bursting with energy, and it is clear that the player possesses enormous authority and power, capable of projecting dynamic gradients under any circumstances.

The way Kalista pumps the untamed energy of the recording into the

room is utterly immersive, yet the performance never feels forced — the music simply flows, fluid and compelling.

One might think that a warm, generous, and rich sound could come at the expense of resolution, but here we are already at a level where there is no need for such concern.

The polished recording of *Mercy Street* by Christy Baron (*Retrospective* | 2004 | Chesky Records | 0090368026965) was delivered by Kalista with almost unbelievable resolution. It is truly astonishingly informative: every micro-detail is present, every chime stands out, every single breath is almost physically perceptible, yet the dominant impression remains that of cohesive, natural, flowing music.

Métronome/Kalista has created a product with a tremendous dose of inspiring musicality, and then elevates it with a brilliant level of definition that reveals every nuance in the recording. Thanks to its vast proportions — arguably the largest in the entire audio world — everything is laid out clearly, as if on the palm of your hand, truly close and intimate.

This is also connected to the sense that the musical scene of recordings is unprecedentedly expansive. Bach's *Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C major, BWV 1066*, performed by Marriner's Academy of St. Martin in the Fields (*Orchestral Suite Nos. 1-4* |

*In River* by Renée Fleming (*Haunted Heart* | 2006 | Rounder | 0602517032798), the player revealed the slightly excited sibilants with great clarity and precision — but never in a harsh or distracting way. They are present, yet not off-putting.

The voice itself possesses a fascinating vitality, both in terms of plasticity and articulation. An enchanting fullness with a distinct French charm gently carries you through each word with perfect intelligibility. It is a vivid, colorful, and profoundly “human” voice — three-dimensional and limited only by the quality of the recording, which the player nonetheless manages to exploit wonderfully, adding juiciness and richness.

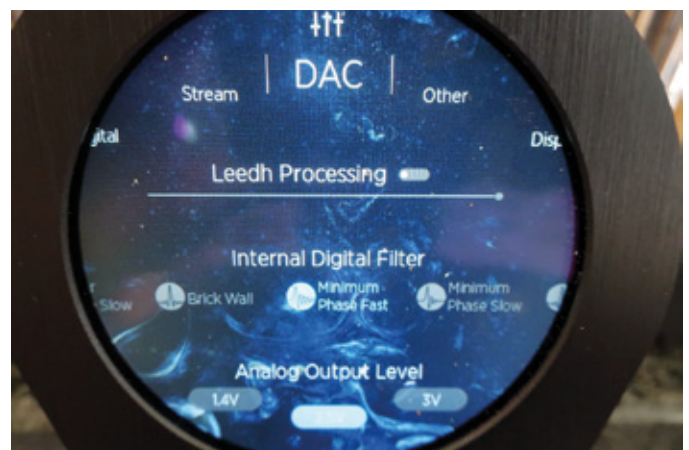
An interesting comparison came with the treble, where we used *Use Me* from Vanessa Fernandez's album of the same name (2014 | Groove Note | 0660318105028).

First up was a standard CD rip, which had pleasant highs and, until we heard the other versions, seemed perfectly fine — though a little flatter. The same track played via Qobuz gained in body, with the cymbal showing a more pronounced presence, even if the metal could still have been richer. A purchased DSD file completely transformed the reproduction (partly, perhaps, due to a different mastering): the cymbal gained not only a wealth of extra detail, but also a calmer character and stronger texturing.

Yet it was only with the SACD disc that the ultimate experience arrived — not only did the whole sound gain a sense of immediacy, but it was by far the most detailed rendering of this recording we had ever encountered.

It was simply phenomenal: every strike and shimmer blossomed and lingered, an excellent and truly fascinating display of sheer information density and newly revealed layers.

“*Wheel of Fortune*” by Hans Zimmer (*The Dali CD Vol. 4* | 2015 | Dali | 474 564 6) is a vast and powerful composition, and Kalista lets it unfold in full splendor. The sound is expansive, breathtaking in its drama, practically filling the space from wall



1991 | Decca | 430 387-2), was immense — truly vast — with an enormous amount of air that you can almost feel around you. What lies before you is not just a cohesive musical canvas; it is literally a hologram, the recording exploited to its maximum and impressively “natural.” All instrumental sections are clearly localized, and an outstanding recording rewards you with a uniquely intense and immersive experience, practically of holographic quality.

“Northern Star” by Christine McVie (In the Meantime | 2004 | Koch | 0099923960027) is a mature and serene piece, and Kalista conveys it in all its complexity — so noble, so rich, so effortless — that even the already fantastic Métronome DSC seems merely “normal” by comparison. The dose of musicality and charm is truly generous, and while you are served an authentic portion of sonic information, it is underscored with such passion and an irresistible sense of being at the heart of the music that you simply dissolve into it. You cease to notice anything else, experiencing only the silky, ultimately rich caress of every single note.

DreamPlay XC is a beautiful device — its eccentric and bold design may not appeal to everyone, but it clearly reflects a thoughtful style, and the build quality is undeniably top-notch. It is a joy to touch, operate, and use, as one expects from a component of such mechanical excellence. We particularly appreciate the device’s versatile concept as a digital hub, and it is worth noting that each of its functions works flawlessly, without delay — though that should be a given at this ultra-high price point.

Setting aside the exterior or its features (though the ability to significantly tailor the output through various options is certainly enticing), the sound alone justifies its ultra-premium status. Kalista demonstrates here that it ranks among the finest



manufacturers of digital sources, confirming its signature: immense, immersive sound, unmatched richness, and a musicality that captivates with virtually any type of music. There is no need for debate — despite DreamPlay XC being an ultra-expensive machine, it is also immensely entertaining, standing at the very pinnacle in terms of musical enjoyment. If you have the chance, experience Kalista — but beware! The journey back from this musical Olympus will be very, very difficult...

## PROS

- Striking, stand-out design
- Ability to tailor the resulting sound
- Exceptional musicality
- Practical combination of functions
- Extraordinary sense of spatial scale
- Natural warmth in reproduction

## CONS

- Unique design comes with a unique price tag

