

Reviewer: Srajan Ebaen
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REVIEW

MÉTRONOME – DST

Main system: Sources: Retina 5K 27" iMac (i5, 256GB SSO, 40GB RAM, Sonoma 14), 4TB external SSO with Thunderbolt 3, Audirvana Studio, Qobuz Sublime, Singxer SU-6 USB bridge, LHY Audio SW-8 & SW-6 switch, Laiv Audio Harmony.

Active filter: Lifesaver Audio Gradient Box 2.

Power amplifiers: Kinki Studio EX-B7 monos & Gold Note monos on subwoofer.

Headamp: Enleum AMP-23R; Phones: Raal 1995 Immanis, HifiMan Susvara.

Loudspeakers: Qua/ro IQ [on loan]

Cables: Kinki Studio Earth, Furutech.

Power delivery: Vibex Granada/Alhambra on all source components, Vibex One 11 R on amps, Furutech OPS-4.1 between wall and

conditioners.

Equipment rack: Artesania Audio Exoteryc double-wide 3-tier with optional glass shelves, Exoteryc amp stands.

Sundry accessories: Acoustic System resonators, Lessloss Firewall for loudspeakers, Furutech NCF Signal Boosters; Room: 6 x 8m with open door behind listening seat.

Room treatment: 2 x PSI Audio AVAA C214 active bass traps

2nd system: Source: FiiO R7 into Soundware O300Ref SO transport to Cen.Grand OSOAC 1.0 Oeluxe.

Preamp/filter: Lifesaver Audio Gradient Box 2.

Amplifier: Kinki Studio EX-M7.

Headamp: Cen.Grand Silver Fox.

Loudspeakers: MonAcoustic

SuperMon Mini + Oynaudio S18 sub.

Power delivery: Furutech GTO 20 NCF, Akiko Audio Corelli.

Equipment rack: Hifistay Mythology Transform X-Frame [on extended loan].

Sundry accessories: Audioquest Fog Lifters; Furutech NFC Clear Lines; Room: -3.5 x 8m.

Desktop system: Source: HP Z230 work station Win10/64.

USB bridge: Singxer SU-2.

DAC/Headamp: iFi Pro iOSO Signature.

Speaker amps: Nord NC500 monos with v2 input buffers.

Speakers: Acelec Madel One.

Headphones: Final 0-8000, aune SR7000.

Upstairs headfi system: FiiO R7, COS Engineering 01, Cen.Grand Silver Fox;

Headphones: Raal 1995 Magna, Meze 109 Pro, Fiio FT3.

2-channel video system:

Source: Oppo BOP-105;
Ali-in-One: Gold Note IS-1000 Oeluxe;

Loudspeakers: Zu Soul VI;

Subwoofer: Zu Submission;

Power delivery: Furutech eTP-8,

Room: 6x4m

Review component retail: €4'950

Resuscitated?

That the demise of the CD was a fake obituary everyone knows by now. Métronome of France just removed another nail from that coffin with the DST, a compact disc transport in their Digital Sharing range. Unusually, it embeds an upsampler to output 44.1 kHz Redbook as 32/352.8 or DSD256; on I2S over HDMI. There's also classic AES/EBU and coaxial S/PDIF capped at 192kHz. The 3.9" display of 480 x 128px resolution is a touch screen but an IR remote is included as well. Finish options of the steel and aluminium chassis are silver or black. The USB port allows on-the-fly firmware updates. Dimensions are a compact 25cm squared footprint of 7cm height. Weight is 4.7kg. In case you weren't aware, today's deck is from the same digital experts who designed this €60K Kalista DreamPlay. In keeping with our gig's more relaxed than hyper vibe, "so there's that". I let you do the math. Today it obviously means simpler cosmetics, a smaller footprint, a slot not top loader - and a far friendlier price. But it also means the same engineering DNA, aural aesthetic and sonic standards.

The mention of DSD256 for a pure disc transport could suggest SACD compatibility. Yet the DST press release and product page remained mum about it. You think they'd make some rightful noise. Current machines with that ability are uncommon. So I asked Jean Marie Clauzel, Métronome's boss. His catalogue already includes SA/CD machines with a

mechanism from Denon & Marantz.

Our Gallic crew have experience with the breed and the necessary parts for it. Was the DSD256 mention a webmaster's error; or oversight to promote SACD compatibility?

While I had Jean Marie, I also asked for his I2S scheme since it's fixed not configurable. To use it successfully¹ requires a matching DAC. Whilst one of Métronome's own is an obvious answer, what if we have something else with an I2S-over-HDMI port like my Laiv Harmony DAC?

DST is a CD-only transport based on a StreamUnlimited mechanism from Austria but includes an upsampler. The I2S over HDMI pin config is the PS Audio 'standard'.² With SACD out of the picture, this left the unexpected wrinkle of the upsampler being capable of resampling to DSD256 on the fly like my iFi iDSD Pro Signature DAC does all the way to 1 '024? Did I read that correctly? "You got it, 16/44.1 can be resampled up to DSD256." The first time I ever came across an upsampling disc transport was with Ensemble of Switzerland very many moons ago. My current Denafrips Avatar can, too; but not to DSD. On that score the DST was a personal first.

Paraphrased from the StreamUnlimited transport site, the JPSL-33 is a slot loader whose traverse mechanism mounts directly to the loader chassis without any moving parts like a subchassis in-between. This guarantees vibration and noise-free operation even when playing an unbalanced disc. If you didn't already know, with original engineers from Philips this section of the Austrian firm continues directly in the vaunted CDPro2 tradition of non-PC music-dedicated mechanics. Like



Teac/Esoteric, Denon/Marantz, JMF and Luxman, they are one of very few left who manufacture disc spinners not for computers, cars or DVD but upscale Redbook playback. If you don't believe such mechanics can make a difference, buy an Apple SuperDrive or similar at 1 % of today's ask. If you want complete CD players for a few hundred euros, shop FiiO, Moondrop or Shanling. The format is enjoying a resurgence across the board all the way up the snow-capped peaks of CH Precision and Wadax.

Days after the final Munich HighEnd show closed, Métronome's Laura Olivier confirmed my address for immediate dispatch. Their catalogue's Digital Sharing range had added the DSAS, a 2-4TB streamer with fully integrated Audirvana OS, 3 years of their Studio license and a lifetime subscription to Origin or local files. As an enthusiastic user of Audirvana Studio on both my desktop's Win 64/10 work station and music room's 27" fully loaded iMac, I'd be an ideal DSAS client.

The latest Audirvana update has added this very intuitive 10-band EQ to augment its existing tuning options of two custom upsampler engines including on-the-fly conversion to DSD 1'028 where supported. Building that into the DSAS updates Métronome's focus on classic audiophiles who still spin polycarbonate discs whilst wanting to ride the cloud- or local-files train in Orient Express style.

Unlike the nerdy HQPlayer platform aimed at power users, Audirvana's interface expects general consumers without IT degrees. Even retirees get to split the aural atoms. To create this ultra-basic compensation curve took me less than a minute. Move a few sliders, trim rotaries. Defeat the EQ to compare. Rinse and repeat until shiny. Done.

It will be obvious to even the most devout legacy/vintage practitioner that massaging the response in sound-optimized precision software is a surgeon's scalpel compared to swapping cables or footers, twirling old-fashioned tone controls, even upgrading core hardware for our ideal sound. That old way takes years and much coin through countless buy 'n' sell cycles. Those give with one hand but take away with the other. Tuning in software is instant, not reliant on new hardware and far more precisely calibrated.

When I pitched bundling the DSAS into this review, Jean Marie loved the idea but "we unfortunately only have one prototype which we need for our final developments. The DSAS will release commercially in September. So it's up to you. Either get the DST now or wait until September for the combo." My reply were three letters. Now!

To hitch the DST ride in full glory, I'd wire up its PS port to Laiv's Harmony DAC, that to Enleum's AMP-23 driving Raal 1995's triple-ribbon fully vented flagship headphones. It's my max-res scenario. It never hurts to apply one's best microscope for digital-domain effects.

To insure 100% I2S compliance, I asked Laiv's Weng Fai Hoh which of his eight pin configurations is the PS Audio standard. "Our Laiv default mode is the PS Audio standard." Plug 'n' away? As a

classic discrete R2R DAC not Halo, Laiv convert DSD to PCM before analogue conversion. That could confirm DSD256 resampling but not really support meaningful sonic assessments. I simply had no alternate I2S/HDMI deck. I'd still explore I2S vs coax and AES/EBU on standard Redbook then 176.4kHz PCM; DSD64 over coax; and PCM 352.8 over I2S.

Remembering just then one excellent listener who deliberately converts PCM to DSD ahead of his Laiv DAC, I quickly tested that with a USB-direct connection into the Laiv whilst Audirvana resampled to DSD512. I had instant sound but a clear preference for PCM. The PCM DSD PCM rigmarole impacted clarity by injecting haze. I don't see why one would without a DAC that processes raw DSD as DSD. My iFi iDSD Pro Signature can but lacks an I2S input. So does the Cen.Grand DSDAC 1.0 Deluxe. The twin feature of I2S and pure DSD processing was sadly absent from my DAC collection.



Cynics expecting heavy case work with mostly hot air inside already moved to sparser pastures. Métronome don't play silly buggers.

Just so, their capacitive fascia controls number just five to keep things tidy not loaded for bear. A long press on 'eject' doubles as standby. The remote's 'menu'

button accesses the customization choices shown next. It's all super intuitive but the included manual still explains how to navigate the menu for those not feeling the intuition. There are five brightness modes, the back-lit command icons can be on/off, the display can auto dim at different speeds and show elapsed/remaining track/total times. We can repeat a track or the whole disc. What more could one want from a physical disc spinner?

Upsampling to 384kHz or DSD256 with all the intermediate steps? We already squared that away if we do I2S. Otherwise it's 192 or 64 over coax or XLR. Check, mate!

Given the very basic job description of this machine, I had instant proof of office life. Old-school charms. That includes compatibility with CD-R for anachrophiles who remember assembling their own 80-min. hard playlists before cloud streaming was a thing. Include me amongst that dying breed. I still have some I burnt for prior

transport reviews by Ancient, C.E.C., Denafrips and Jay's. Supposedly tape cassettes are making a minor comeback. Perhaps some dinosaur youngsters will rediscover CD-R as long as blanks are traded? It reads querulously quaint when this generation shares Spotify or Qobuz playlists. Cue The Last of Us. Everyone else believes in the undying stability of the Internet. Should it glitch, temporarily or for longer, physical media continue to

play. Now the last laugh is on the dinosaurs. What if a silvery meal gets stuck in our throats because the slot drive refuses to spit it back out? Whilst Stream Unlimited enjoy an excellent rep for their mechanics, I do wonder about that. With the sied mech concealed beneath a double-decker PCB unlike a free-for-all top loader, the average user won't be able to get at it. For

hifi worriers not warriors, that might be checkmate? That covers my physical inspection other than the typical Métronome build of a very thick painted bent steel caver that doesn't ring; and expert finishing that looks the prime placement. This is a brick not plasticky bric-a-brac.

Old school

It's not just the operational ease of hook up and play. It's the strict absence of WiFi's perpetual UHF noise and its microwave radiation. It's the cancellation of USB helpers, network switches, external reclockers and all the other paraphernalia high-end networked listeners apply like sonic lip balm and UV protection. Without any of it-just a few hours of electrons doing what they do when circuits go live-my desktop sound with the DST as music butler had that tell-tale gestalt of relaxed ease that can be so hard for digital to achieve. It's when all subliminal needling, pixilation and 'crispies' exit stage right.

It's when any remnants of embedded rust, nerviness and etch evaporate. In my book premium Redbook performance of physical media remains a very high standard. To equal it with networked audio involves a lot of extra care. It can be done. It simply must be armed with the old-school standard to know what one is up against.

Otherwise streaming conveniences overshadow the conversation. Now beliefs of sonic arrival can be deluded because they remain safely unchecked. Add the number's wars of hi-rez files beyond Redbook. To the average consumer growing up in the CD's golden years, perception offers little incentive to investigate polycarbonate drink coasters.

Should they get popped into a



laptop's DVD drive if such a floppy ejector can even be found still, building that house on a shaky foundation isn't the same. Just because something works doesn't mean it's any optimal representation. Ruminations to that effect flashed like lightning through my mental clouds.

With CD, enjoying Métronome's relaxed musical fluidity was so easy. Without any experience, everyone can achieve it. It's baked in. I bagged it without Singxer's USB bridge, iFi's 3.0 USB cable, their inline filter then my Audirvana Studio license set to exclusive hog mode and 4 x upsampling with the SoX algorithm. Using the same music and DAC, all of that streaming fuss still came in second not really on objective sonics but certainly subjective feel.

As I see it, that's a proviso. If we're desensitized to how playback affects our body not just ears, we might be oblivious to this difference? I couldn't say for certain. I am sensitive. I'm forced to imagine the opposite as a purely

intellectual exercise. I'm also sensitive to WiFi when the vast majority isn't. That's personally bizarre when it's so blatantly obvious. Yet I don't see auras, nature spirits or angels but know others to whom they are as visible as my own hands are to my eyes. It's a useful reminder. Perceptions differ to very profoundly shape our personal reality. Seing depressed at a wedding, our sentiment colours an occasion that's joyous to others. Same reality, opposite interpretation.

I actually surprised myself by finding the DST signature so big and easy to read. I was just as easily conscious that the very verbal measurement brigade in sundry chatrooms is virulently triggered by beyond-measurement notions like feel, gestalt or milieu in music playback. It leaves me wonder to whom the DST difference will speak; and who won't perceive it at all to question what our kind is up to.

I can tell you what this singular sort was up to on his humble desktop: indulging absolutely fantastic sound! He also loved the compact dims to fit under his computer monitor; the silver/grey finish; the big crisp display; the touch controls; the well-executed remote. It segues into an obvious intermission before my show relocates to the big system. When this difference lived in a subjective gap of flow-state feel not those hard basics of treble, mid and bass, how to tabulate value? So often value weighs quantity. How much more can we buy without spending more? Here it was about quality; not more or less quality but a qualitatively different type.

If that happens to be what we found really hard to nail, value instantly escalates like a vigorous argument heats up. If we're immune to the type, a €50 Asus Zen Drive at 1 % the ask destroys any notion of DST value. Those blessed or cursed by such

immunity should look at those who aren't as having no choice in the matter. Suffering a shellfish, peanut or other food allergy can be bloody annoying particularly socially. No matter, it's well known how their symptoms are far from imaginary and in extreme cases lethal. Thankfully nobody has died of the wrong type sound yet. But if it stifles the fun of listening, it could kill the habit and have us do something else instead. If that turned into an epidemic, I'd be out of a job. That point now made, let's move on.

In my main system I pamper the LAN with two Ethernet switches in series separated by passive SOTM filters and industrial CAT7a cabling. Local files sit on a 4TB SSD. Once files of either origin hit my dedicated music iMac, Audirvana Studio contrails signal routing in extreme hog mod then applies 4 x upsampling in its SoX algorithm. Once output over USB via a Furutech NCF cable, the still digital signal hits a Singxer ultra-cap powered USB bridge.

That outputs I2S to my headphone rig's Laiv Harmony DAC, AES/EBU to the speakers' Sonnet Pasithea DAC, another R2R design. The double trouble of twinned LAN distributors was my response to local files sounding better than cloud files when my Ethernet feed entered the iMac directly off the router. Now my local and Qobuz Sublime files have parity. The DST in this context first replaced the Singxer's HDMI-cabled feed into the Laiv converter, then compared coax.

Métronome's upsampler works on the fly. Changes confirmed instantly on Laiv's display. Sound interrupted just momentarily until it relocated at

the new sample rate. We can shuttle at will, survey the scene then settle on our favourite format and figure. As I already knew and had confirmed again, unless there's 'network neon' to nix where DSD's sweeter softer fuzzier gestalt can help, I'm a PCM perp. I hear more focus, depth and contrast ratio.

The first of those aspects also factored between I2S and coax. I2S had cleaner transients which subtly but surely improved clarity and with it, image focus. I personally hear upsampling benefits times four but loose track beyond. Whilst DSD256 improved over the opaque and dull DSD64, it still didn't match livelier more dimensional PCM. If your mileage varies, having the DSD option is key. Dweebs now want to know how my streaming compared.

Sonically I thought it perfectly on the level though making it so was far more multi-box complex with twin network distributors, twin passive LAN filters, an annual Audirvana Studio subscription with embedded Qobuz Sublime and a Singxer SU-6 USB bridge. As to "the feels" and if squeezed real hard-like my morning grapefruits in a motorized stainless Sage press perhaps- I might give the Métronome a subliminal lack of edge. This gets very subtle. Just so, it strikes me that not creating noise in the first

place must be better than filtering it afterwards even if 100% efficient. The Internet is a far noisier far more interconnected so enormous world than the tiny province of isolated CD spinners. Incidentally, mentioning grapefruit had another reason.

The word I love best to capture the DST's sonic action is fruity. And yes, I'm first to admit that once my 15-17 tracks per CD ended, I missed my iMac's keyboard and mouse to cue up the next album or personalized playlist. Less convenience is the old-school currency. But listening for up to 80 minutes without interruption is quite the stretch. Taking a little break if we're in the mood for another CD is actually not bad. And what a foreign concept it might be to this generation to listen to one CD beginning to end, in the exact sequence the artist curated.

On that score, skipping around from track to track is a different thing. On my score between office and main systems, the first's lesser LAN optimization gave the DST the clear lead. My big rig's heavily tweaked LAN and post-PC treatment equalized the sound but involved far greater complexity. Do the math.

Fronting my Qualio IQ speakers and sound|kaos Gravitas 15 subwoofer, the DST reminded me of Nagra's petite Streamer still in house. In the ongoing review of the Swiss I invoke a particular relaxed feel which has naught in common with obscurity, blur, weak focus or subdued energetics. To me Nagra's action doesn't suggest DSD or tube-reminiscent bloom nor does it remind me of the mellower ways of cellulose drivers. My best guess at the enabler of that relaxed



feel is superior timing and from it, less wetware interpolation by my brain.

Playback which chips away at the otherness against real sounds that haven't undergone recording, mixing, mastering then the passage through our hifi hardware - such playback creates less subliminal fatigue. Our hearing must perform less 'overlooking' or 'correcting' to overcome the otherness.

It's mere personal theory based on, again, not just paying attention to what my ears report. I also check into my psychological mood. Such subjective inquiry and commentary alienates people who think that listening is merely an ear thing; and that anything about that thing is measurable and understood. That there's more we already know from the voicing process whereby hifi designers, after having locked in precise parts values by measurement, compare various same-measuring parts from sundry vendors for their final decision. That decision is based on purely subjective opinion about what sounds best to that design team. And if things that measure the same sound different, how about all else we cannot as yet measure? Remember the era before jitter was understood? MQA's divisive notion of temporal blur is more evidence. So is Mark Levinson the man's C-Wave algorithm and its associated claims.

Though it's worked since the first CD dropped, digital isn't done. It continues improving to work better. Compared to networked digital, CD playback is rather more mature. Add a specialist company like Métronome who have worked this field for decades. It shouldn't surprise that given good recordings then highly engineered hardware, this format could know a thing or two that's news to the cloud crowd?

It's the old song 'n' dance. For every thousand CD-is-dead

prophets, there's one hair-shirt anachrophile who touts its superiority over most (all?) streaming. If you no longer own physical media, the whole discussion is academic. If you contrast a Grimm-level streamer to an Asus Zen Drive twirling a CD, it also might be. It's when we compare a DST-level transport with premium DAC and proper digital cable to a carefully curated yet far from crazy-coin streaming solution that it could be time to go back to the academy for a refresher course.

All this by way of confessing that Métronome's DST had me attend such a one. Having divested myself of 5'000-some CD during our last move to County Clare to keep just a few for gigs like today's, I'd not been back to that school. Now that I have, I'm certainly not about to start collecting silver discs again. That ship had its Viking burial on the river Shannon fronting my office.

It's no cautionary tale either. Streaming very close to-some might say indistinguishable from-prime CD playback is certainly possible. It just takes nerdiness, more money and a proper CD reference to pull off and be sure. If simple does it and you demand guaranteed not maybe results, starting your digital chain with Métronome's DST would be a brilliant idea.

With the DST reference now living in the brand's Montans HQ, we should expect a virtual stand-in for their upcoming nearly lookalike DSAS streamer. That'll be for the dematerialized amongst us to hopefully give our ghostly kind equivalent sound. So back the DST goes to France. In September or thereabouts, I hope



to welcome the matching Audirvana-powered streamer and take its temperature.

For now I'll leave you with more ruminations on "the feels" to undermine anyone nursing golden-eared or voodoo assumptions about them. So-called PRat short for pace, rhythm & timing is all about a particular performance feel. Do we have correlating measurements? A speaker's impulse response might suggest a good place to look. But when a different source component affects our system's PRaT, something other than the loudspeaker is responsible. It's a strange situation that in our hobby, many don't trust their experience to require measured confirmation. They worry that their senses might trick them into enjoying something that's objectively faulty or wrong. C'est étrange.

In such matters, perception is king and reality. In a chicken broth, what's the correct amount of salt? The one your tongue calls right. Meanwhile a person one chair over might reach for the salt shaker to add more. Once we wrap confidence around our ear/brain being the final arbiter in hifi matters, we gain independence from external validation. Our path to bliss could be short and simple; or ongoing. Much depends on our sensory sensitivities. Also, just what triggers our personal 'rightness' or 'better'? For example, we'd expect a drummer like Stereophile reviewer Ken Micallef

to have sensitized different triggers than my classical clarinet past has for me.

Inquiring into what makes us tick can quickly move us past basics of frequency response and soundstaging. Very soon it could be all about how listening makes us feel; how different hardware even player software alters playback's feel. We could focus on timbre, timing/phrasing, dynamics, immediacy - anything that for us adds depth. Simultaneously we would try to eliminate anything which even subtly takes us out of said depth. We needn't justify ourselves to any external authority, not even accepted reasons. We might develop personal theories to communicate our journey; or not. As a professional reviewer, I'm in the communicating biz. It just doesn't mean that my theories on subtler playback aspects are anything other than well-meaning attempts to share personal observations. The latter are real. My ideas on what causes them might miss.

To conclude, Métronome's apparently archaic DST-an expensive deck that in this multi-tasking era does just one thing; and then one which most people no longer do-created an unexpected personal op. Many years after my original transition to PCfi, I once more compared USB streaming to physical CD playback. I still clocked differences not objectively sonic in nature. Yet I found them meaningful to my subjective experience; and to favour the outdated method. Fruity. Juicy. Organic. Fluid. Sentiments to that effect point at the difference but don't really explain it. It seems to me its enabler was about what the DST didn't do, inject UHF noise and how that very subtly undermines timing. Cen.Grand's JianHui Deng seems to work similar notions. His new GLD1 .0 Deluxe streamer replaces USB data transmission with an already patented synchronous high-speed

PCIe interface with fibre-optics for audio, BNC for dock data which allows for even high-rate multi-channel DSD transmission. Back to the DST, it gave me the feels; fabulous feels whose flavour or effect I attempted to point at. Hopefully that conveyed as intended because for the right kind of listener, this minimalist box will be quite the treasure chest!

Postscript: A few days after publication, reader Ron asked whether the DST does gapless. Oui. I checked a CD that without any decrescendos or crossfade flows from one track to the next. Some file player software will artificially insert track breaks which aren't on the disc/file. The DST did not. Its toothy grin is all Hollywood; without gaps. Say cheese.



