



CD PLAYER/USB DAC

CD player and USB DAC
Made by: Métronome Technologie, France
Supplied by: Absolute Sounds Ltd
Telephone: 0208 971 3909
Web: www.metronome-technologie.com; www.absolutesounds.com
Price: £7500

AUDIO FILE

Métronome CD8 Signature

CD players with accessible DACs have evolved into the high-end's bridge between discs and streaming – does Métronome's CD8 Signature offer the best of both worlds? Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Which CD player was the first to offer digital inputs and therefore the ability to double as a DAC, I cannot recall.

Indeed, try naming recent CD players that *don't* have digital inputs. I do know, however, that my trusty Marantz CD12/DAC12 is over 25 years old, so it's nothing new, but it is a two-box solution. And yet, back then, there was precious little to feed into it. Not so for Métronome's CD8 Signature, which is as much a high-end DAC as it is a CD player.

With a price of £7500 (£8500 will buy the forthcoming version with a tube output stage), this latest model in the middle of the Métronome catalogue comes in above Le Player [*HFN* Jul '15], the CD8 range being the top of the company's all-in-one players. Above this are stand-alone transports and DACs, and the company remains committed to top-loading mechanisms throughout, save for its Music Centre One server.

CUSTOMISED TRANSPORT

In evolving to this level, Métronome has opted for DSD over USB, an S/PDIF input and change of DAC chip from Crystal to AKM, now a 384kHz/32-bit part instead of 192kHz/24-bit.

I won't waste space here on my hatred of top-loaders, which has always been based on practical grounds. But that's old news. Suffice it to say that Métronome's preference for top-loading is based on the sound – as in 'sensible' – reason that the transport stays fixed in one place, and the precise location of the disc is a given.

You slide open the lid, place the CD over the hub on the venerable and much-loved, metal-chassis'd Philips CDM12 Pro 2 v.6.8 transport, which has been 'significantly customised' with Métronome's proprietary improvements. You then secure the disc

with a Delrin magnetic puck. Simple: less to break, reminds you of playing LPs, yadayadayada. I'm so over it.

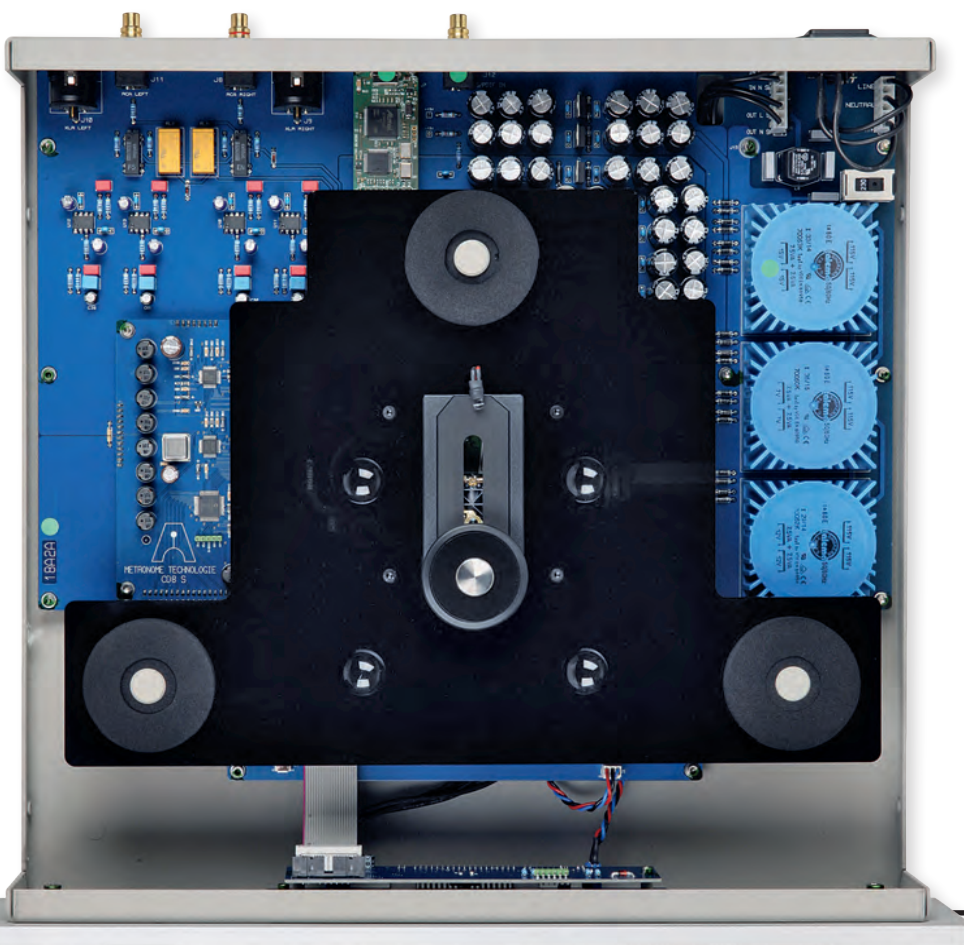
Métronome designed the puck as well as the proprietary shaft, in the interests of more precise and secure disc placement and control. Another element of the design is that the topology creates a continuous earth link from the CD's surface to the electrical earth, 'for excellent dissipation of static electricity for better working conditions of the electronics and the optical components'. I put that in quotes, because it's in Métronome's words and you can take your own view.

In pukka audiophile manner, the power supply comprises three individual encapsulated transformers, with seven stages of independent regulation for each

critical part of the transport, as well as the motor, servo mechanism, digital output section and display. At the back are single S/PDIF (on RCA) and USB-B inputs, the latter for direct connection to computer or server, while analogue outputs include single-ended and balanced on XLRs. Two small toggles on the front panel operate power on/off and choose between CD and external sources.

Housing the CD8 Signature should be approached exactly as if you were locating a record deck because you'll need enough space above it to allow access to the CD aperture. It comes fitted with three pointy feet and set-up is a no-brainer.

To operate the CD8 Signature, Métronome supplies a comprehensive remote that's long enough to use as a



RIGHT: Top-loading Philips CDM12Pro 2 mechanism features Métronome's own modifications. A 32-bit AKM4490 DAC supports DSD and LPCM replay while pairs of OPA604 op-amps drive the balanced analogue output

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back-scratcher, while the buttons in front of the CD aperture are so small that they'll test your eyesight. As this is a French brand, they just couldn't stick with conventional icons, so the legends over the controls are stylised, as in the manner of 1960s/1970s SF movie graphics. The display could have been a prop in Vadim's *Barbarella*.

WARM 'N' CUDDLY

I used the Métronome through Devialet and Constellation electronics via B&W 802 D3s [HFN Dec '15] for the main listening session in editor PM's media room, as well as a day hearing it through Constellations and Wilson Audio Sabrinas elsewhere. The testing included both my own CDs and music off PM's choice of Melco N1A server [HFN Aug '15] with a comparison made directly into the Devialet Le800's USB input.

As this is a review of the Métronome as a standalone device – I doubt anyone would buy it as just a transport – I will spare you the torture and the anticipation.

'The finger-picked acoustic guitar shimmered – I was transfixed'

There was an immediate gain in clarity through the Devialet via USB that, ironically, sounded like I had gone from valves to solid-state. What that means for the Métronome with tube output I can only imagine: warmer still? Note, too, that 96kHz files are handled natively via USB, while 192kHz files are downsampled [see PM's Lab Report, p51].

Editor PM has welcomed the Melco music player the way typists welcomed word processing, the ability to store vast tracts of visiting contributors' favourite music selections making everyone's life much easier. But I will admit that I have never been seduced by storing music on some device for easy access. I like handling discs, whether they're black or silver, and was more interested in the Métronome as a CD player. But I dutifully listened via the Melco server, and was not a little impressed.

There is one bit of shorthand I can employ to describe how the Melco USB

ABOVE: The display is distinctly retro, as are the stylised legends for the little pin-head control buttons. Toggles beneath the display select on/off and CD, USB and S/PDIF inputs

feed sounded: it was like the gain from a cheapo cable to something of peerless pedigree – and you know what it takes for me to say something like that! It was as if an entire layer of audio muck had been removed. The Métronome's primarily 'warm 'n' cuddly' posture remained intact, but it was a stance that made me think of a valve amplifier maker apologising for the very warmth that makes tubes the choice of a certain type of listener. It was all about 'humanising' the inhuman.

SPACE AND SCALE

Take, for instance, the 96kHz/24-bit track, Livingston Taylor's 'Isn't She Lovely' from Chesky. I have heard that so many times, on a couple of formats, that it is as instantly familiar to me as any Beatles track. Via the Melco/Métronome combo, it possessed all of the vocal richness that has endeared it to a generation of audiophiles, with not a trace of artifice. Even more impressive was the openness, the sense of space and scale that my gut instinct tells me is usually flattened by digital sources. I know that's irrational, but, hey, I'm a product of conditioning, too.

This led to a regimen of tracks that were 1) as recognisable as any of the songs I've bored you with for a few decades, and 2) have a natural acoustic. Muddy Waters' 'Good Morning, Little School Girl', taken from *Folk Singer*, is a deserved audiophile favourite. Just over 50 years old, it has the kind of sound that means it will be issued perennially as long as there are audiophiles on the planet.

The detail accessible through the Métronome was remarkable, its merit evinced most powerfully through the texture of the vocals. Any blues fan will

HI-FI WITH FLAIR

Métronome is one of those Gallic curiosities: a high-end manufacturer from a country with one of Europe's toughest internal markets. And yet it claims a number of native producers. From Focal speakers to Jadis valve amps, its brands range from tiny specialists to multinationals, with no shortage of extreme high-end products. Methinks the export market is what saves these producers, for the French, if I may generalise, are more likely to be cinephiles than audiophiles. As past Paris shows prove, native valve amp makers are plentiful, and it was Paris that hosted the best-ever, all-valve hi-fi show some decades ago: Permanence du Tube, if I remember correctly. Métronome sits at the pinnacle of France's CD producers, with rivals for digital supremacy including Devialet and Soledge. Analogue retains its adherents, with speaker maker Elipson joining the turntable market last year, while Pierre Riffaud's decks – especially his Héritage – are as radical as any. All hi-fi-producing countries have a 'vibe': the UK for 'BBC sound', Germany for overkill engineering. And France? Whatever the French make exhibits something only a French term can describe: *panache*.

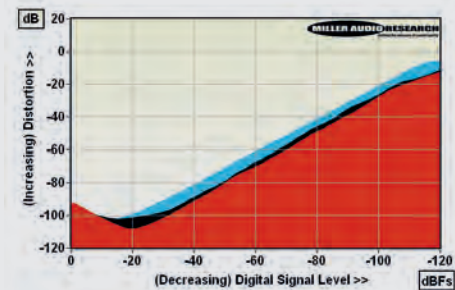


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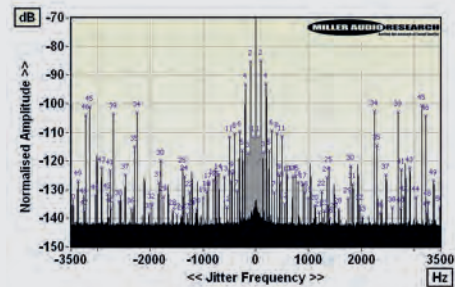
MÉTRONOME CD8 SIGNATURE

'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.' So while Métronome's CD8 Signature player features a new choice of 32-bit DAC – the AKM4490 – and while both balanced and RCA outputs are specified at 2.5V, in practice the XLR outs still deliver 4.9V at 0dBfs from a relatively high 576ohm source impedance. This time around the outputs are *not* phase-inverting but all high-rate inputs are still downsampled to 96kHz, yielding frequency responses of $-0.1\text{dB}/20\text{kHz}$ (CD and 48kHz USB inputs) and $-0.65\text{dB}/45\text{kHz}$ (96kHz to 192kHz USB and S/PDIF inputs). All this we've seen before from previous Métronome players and DACs [HFN Dec '13, Jul '15 and Sep '15] although jitter in this instance is 5-10x higher at $>3000\text{psec}$ via CD, USB and S/PDIF inputs, the result of what appear to be $\pm 100\text{Hz}$ and $\pm 200\text{Hz}$ PSU rectification components [see Graph 2, below].

While PSU-related jitter may add a certain sonic 'warmth', the associated spurious are typically less endearing and increase more markedly via 48kHz, 96kHz and 192kHz inputs than with 44.1kHz (CD), 88.2kHz and 176.4kHz media. The difference in A-wtd S/N ratio is staggering – 101dB vs. 113dB respectively and sufficient to explain the CD8 Sig's improved subjective performance via CD than with some hi-res audio files. This aside, the CD8 Signature offers the lowest *distortion* yet from a Métronome player – lower than 0.0008% through mid and high frequencies at -30dBfs [see Graph 1]. Readers may download full QC Suite reports for the Métronome CD8 Signature's CD, S/PDIF and USB performance by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Distortion versus digital signal level over a 120dB range (1kHz via S/PDIF, red; 1kHz via USB, black; and 20kHz via USB, blue)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plot with 48kHz/24-bit data via USB (sideband pairs marked in blue)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Balanced)	4.86Vrms at 576ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio (CD / S/PDIF / USB input)	113.5dB / 113.1dB / 113.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0025% / 0.0005%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0006% / 0.00075%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz / to 45kHz via USB)	+0.0dB to -0.11dB / -0.65dB
Digital jitter (CD / S/PDIF / USB input)	3680 / 3100 / 3280psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD / USB input)	$\pm 0.3\text{dB}$ / $\pm 0.3\text{dB}$
Power consumption	15W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	450x115x435mm / 15kg



ABOVE: The USB-B and S/PDIF inputs address the same DAC stage as the CD8 Sig's CD section. Analogue outputs include both single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR)

know Muddy's growl. It was visceral, intimate, sinister. Here the blues classic is played with the most 'unplugged', minimalist arrangement you can imagine.

The air around the soft percussion, the twang of the guitar strings, the natural-sounding bass: I'm not saying it's as authentic as the vinyl, but I could have listened to it repeatedly, just to hear the voice-only pause 40 seconds from the end. The air around this voice vibrated with the most convincing sense of spatial reconstruction that I have heard from that song in a non-analogue milieu.

DELICIOUS AUTHENTICITY

Trouble is that track *always* sounds amazing because it is a perfectly-recorded, minimalist, acoustic performance. So, too, from a year later, The Beatles' 'And I Love Her' also enjoys a similar leanness, except for vocal multi-tracking. Ringo's woodblock occupied its own, ghostly space in the middle, the finger-picked acoustic guitar shimmered. I was transfixed.

Clearly there was more to this server lark than I cared to admit, the Métronome's DAC (while not as precise as the Devialet) keeping 'digititis' at bay. Peter, Paul & Mary's 'All My Trials' confirmed it, for the toughest, most natural-sounding recordings are not compromised by any digital artefacts at this level. The choice, however, of Melco USB server versus CD proved to be even more rewarding.

As convinced as I am that CD will – like vinyl and, more recently, cassettes – enjoy a cult following, I have softened toward the format of late, not least because I adore SACD. But the CD8 Signature is 'Red Book' only, directing my choice of Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7 91937 2], The Detroit Emeralds' 'Feel The Need' from *Greatest Hits* [Westbound CDSEWD 119 CD]

and 'Rock The Boat' by The Hues Corporation via *The Very Best Of The Hues Corporation* [Camden 74321 603422 CD].

For me, there is no test like the vocal duel between Dianne Reeves and Lou Rawls on 'At Last' and 'Fine Brown Frame' – a challenge to tax the midband of any system. What the Rawls/Reeves interplay achieved through the CD8 Signature was a cohesiveness and ear-friendliness that I simply did not anticipate from CD. This was a beautiful recording to begin with, from start to finish a late-1980s nod to the values of 1950s recording techniques.

Piano, vibes, vocals – all were deliciously authentic, if (I suspect) admittedly voiced to emulate that which we love in all-analogue playback systems. There was no harshness and no truncated decays as the sound was unconstrained and free to gush forth.

As for The Detroit Emeralds and The Hues Corporation, with their punchy, vivid proto-disco bombast, and the need for added crispness – all this was accomplished without aggression. These are normal, commercial CDs, and you can find 'em for £4 or less. They sounded like a million bucks. And so moreish is the CD8 Signature, I don't even think you need await Métronome's valve output version. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

'Elegant' was the first adjective that came to mind when I saw this player, and elegance remained its pre-eminent virtue. At no time did it sound 'digital' or harsh, regardless of the origins of the material or the means by which it reached the CD8 Signature – disc or streamer. This player exhibits precisely the kind of finesse and musicality that one now expects from any serious digital component. Bravo!

Sound Quality: 83%

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