

Review of Metronome Le Dac by Michael Johnson, 02/2021 on :

Audiophilia

Métronome Technologie Le DAC



One of the most pleasant audio surprises of 2020 for me was the excellent CD Transport by French manufacturer Métronome, simply titled Le Player. As I noted in my [review](#), Le Player increased detail, control, and musicality significantly in my system when run through my modest Oppo 105D. So, when Wynn Wong at Wynn Audio asked me if I would like to review the sister component to Le Player, the similarly named Le DAC (\$7000), I jumped at the opportunity.

Features

Le DAC is presented in the same sleek industrial style as Le Player, which will prove aesthetically appealing for those interested in visual continuity in their systems. The overbuilt unit weighs almost 12 kgs and measured wider and deeper than even my McIntosh C712 preamp at 43x13x42 cm. It features the same 10mm thick alloy faceplate as Le Player and also rests on the same tripod of magnetic Delrin cone feet.

On the back, the user is treated to a wealth of connectivity options, including two each of coaxial, AES/EBU, and Toslink inputs, as well as a single USB type B input. Outputs are provided for either unbalanced XLR or balanced RCA connections. The front panel features a digital display indicating the selected input, bitrate, and format, with industrial feeling steel buttons to cycle inputs. There is no remote included, but on such a simple device I don't see much necessity for one. My one complaint is the placement of the power switch which is located in the rear. Perhaps this is a hint Métronome intends its unit to stay powered on most of the time, but for those with less accessible rack setups, it can prove annoying.



The heft of this DAC is not simply in its exterior shell, under the hood there is a total of three toroidal power transformers with no fewer than ten independent regulation lines. One look at the board and it would be easy to confuse Le DAC with an R2R resistor model, but no, this unit is a delta sigma model centered around an AK4493 chip.

The processing functions of this DAC cover pretty much any bitrate you could imagine, going up to PCM 384 and DSD 512, which provides not only more than enough resolution for the present, but should do a good job of future-proofing the user. The only thing lacking is MQA compatibility which is not uncommon among many purist brands. I personally rarely find myself in need of MQA compatibility, but digital is an ever changing landscape and who knows where MQA will sit in importance 5 or 10 years down the line.

Setup

Much like the Ares II DAC I [reviewed](#) last month, I connected Le DAC to my Oppo 105D using a DH Labs Silver Sonic coaxial cable. I also ran my TCL smart TV through the Toslink connection and my Macbook Pro through USB via an Audioquest Forest USB cable. After a week of burn in, I sat down and intended to see just what an ultra high-end chipset DAC could do in my modest system.

Listening

At \$7,000, Le DAC is the single most expensive piece of gear that has entered my (just under 10K) apartment stereo. I was wondering how much it would alter the overall sound of my system. Audio is a chain, so the performance differences one can hear in swapping out individual units is going to vary greatly depending on the level of gear you are already working with.

The aforementioned Métronome Le Player 3 CD Transport made a very substantial difference in my system. It also had a very distinct sonic character that I would describe as open and detailed.

Putting in my CD of Radiohead's *The Bends* for my first attempt at note taking with this unit, I found myself hearing a very different character from the DAC's sister unit. My first observation is that the bass is more robust and full than I've ever previously heard on the digital side of my setup. After adjusting to the low end, I was very surprised to be hearing what I perceived to be a very warm, round, and somewhat romantic presentation coming from Le DAC when partnered with my 105D as a transport.

As I made my way through the album, I was a little disappointed in the unit's ability to unpack detail in large, full-scale sections. In both 'Planet Telex' and 'The Bends', the presentation I heard was sweet and enjoyable, but left me a little fuzzy on things like transient attacks and imaging. In other words, it was relaxed, and perhaps a bit too relaxed for the balance of my components. However, once I got to track 3; 'High and Dry' I started to realize the appeal of this voicing. This song is Radiohead at their more stripped down and subtle, with the crooning head voice of Thom Yorke floating over acoustic guitar melodies and a simple but sweet bass line. Despite the perceived lack of pinpoint detail retrieval, I started *listening in*, meaning I was drawn into Yorke's vocal inflections, almost bathing in the tone along with the eerie clean guitars. And then I realized what this DAC was showing me; tone. On 'Bones', when the effect laden guitars hummed after each verse stanza, I found myself listening not to the impact of the strum, but rather the vibration of the string and all the harmonics within it. Again, *listening in*.

After the initial surprise of the tonal nature, I began to understand why Métronome might voice Le DAC and Le Player in such a way. Le Player was about detail retrieval, information retrieval. After all, it is the source, the first piece of equipment in between the media and our ears. It's only natural that one would want to squeeze every bit of information out of the disc from the source. Le DAC seems to be the Yin to Le Player's Yang, and I found myself wishing I could have heard the two pieces in tandem.

I did a lot more listening over that week to try and suss out how Le DAC handled familiar music. What I found is my listening sessions got longer, and longer, stretching 2 to 4 hours if I had a night free. That's when I realized Le DAC is incredibly easy to listen to for long periods of time, it is entirely unfatiguing. I will try and avoid more generic sonic descriptors like 'warm', because these generalities tend to carry with them a lot of thought-baggage in the reader's mind. When I say warm, many people will reflexively think 'rolled-off', but that's not the case here. In all my listening, I never noticed any roll off in either the bass or the treble. However, I will say the bass is more about tone and pitch rather than 'punch'. Rock material like Radiohead or Deftones led me to focus on the scream of guitar distortion, the shimmer of vocals, and the pitch of the low drums, rather than the impact of the kick drum or snare.

Switching to some orchestral music, I played a fair bit of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* from a CD rip. The texture of the strings was not quite as vivid as I wanted. Yet, the vocal soloists had a rich texture that allowed their voices to fill out more space. The arrival of the basses and cellos also showed off the Métronome's ability to flesh out full sound in the lower octaves without distorting the pitch or character of the instruments. This is not always an easy feat. Missing to some extent was a clear orchestral soundstage that brings you into the hall. And when the orchestra and chorus emerged with a larger sound, while the dynamic range was actually quite impressive, I did feel a bit of coherence was lost in the sound.

I wanted to play some smaller scale music so I put on a CD recording of oboist Thomas Indermuhle playing the Jolivet *Serenade for Oboe and Piano*. Now, being an oboist, I know what an oboe tone is supposed to sound like, and Le DAC captured the tone of Indermuhle wonderfully. I was able to switch back to the internal DAC on the Oppo 105D, and the Métronome portrayed a much richer sound with more breath and life in comparison. Presentation was also more intimate, this is a DAC that seems to want to place you right into the musician's lap rather than at a distance. This effect can be very enveloping on small scale music such as this, and I do mean that in a good way.

After a time playing CDs and files on my Oppo through Le DAC, I began to wonder if this combination simply lacked some synergy. Also since the Oppo 105D could not output DSD through its coaxial connection, I had yet to test Le DAC's DSD decoding capabilities. I pulled up my DSD 352 files of *Zenyatta Mondatta* by The Police on JRiver Media Center played via my Macbook Pro through Le DAC's USB input. Immediately things improved, there was now more clarity, leading me to think the Métronome and the Oppo were a dark and mismatched pairing. I almost always prefer DSD to any other type of digital file as to me it imparts a more analogue signature

Finally, I put on some more chamber music with a lovely DSD recording of Beethoven's *Archduke Trio* by the Storioni Trio. Here Le DAC's strengths were on full display, with cello and violin beautifully rendered in both tone and dynamics. When decoding DSD the Métronome is a dynamic powerhouse, portraying the full spectrum of contrast a recording can possibly capture. At first I did sense the piano was a bit 'soft, especially on the front of the notes, but when the intensity of the piece started to take off, the forceful passages followed through with sharper transient attack that was indeed satisfying. The DSD decoding on the Métronome is clearly one of its shining features.

Closing thoughts

As my time with Le DAC was coming to an end, I thought long and hard about what this unit is designed to accomplish and who it's targeted towards. Obviously, the build quality is second to none, with no cheap parts externally or internally. Its feature set is also optimal for home stereo usage with either physical media or a plethora of high resolution files. I had good results streaming Tidal through Le DAC, although its lack of MQA decoding may bother some (not me).

The sound is incredibly intimate, tone-focused, round, and romantic. It lacks any form of glare or fatiguing elements and renders solo voices and instruments with incredible delicacy and insight. Small scale music excels on the unit and poorly mixed tracks will not offend the listener which is always a feat in digital. In my review of the budget-priced Ares II R2R DAC, I talked quite a bit about how the unit rendered an analogue sound signature. I think Le DAC also manages to express an analogue presentation despite being a delta sigma chipset-based DAC. There are of course major differences between the two units that definitely betray the price difference. The Métronome goes much deeper, and has a much richer, three dimensional sound, especially on complex acoustic instruments such as strings and winds. Yet, the sound signature of the Métronome is perhaps purposefully more intimate and personal than the Denafrips, and depending on your preferences can be either a good or a bad thing.

From my listening, in my system, I can safely say the Métronome is not a detail retrieval machine. If you want the ultimate in analytical unwrapping, there are plenty of units on the market that can serve your needs. However, if what you crave is a more emotional engagement, one that will leave you thinking about the landscape of a single guitar chord, or the shimmer and vibrancy of a single voice, Le DAC is likely right up your alley. Rather than giving you a map, it allows you to 'get lost' in the sound. Paired with the excellent Le Player, it would likely yield the best of both worlds. As a standalone unit, it could require some careful pairing depending on tonal preferences. If the sonic signature is one that naturally appeals to you, Métronome's Le DAC is a high end, well-built digital converter worthy of your audition.