MÉTRONOME

TEST & REVIEW

Le DAC 3

D/A CONVERTER

Daniel Březina
Hi-Fi Voice

Oct. 15, 2026

At a time when many a European name conceals a product that has travelled half the world before it is even unboxed, the approach taken by France's Métronome comes across as rather endearingly old-fashioned. In Montans, in the south of France, a short drive from Toulouse, the company still designs and hand-assembles its units, and every finished piece also goes through a listening check. The brand, whose roots go back to 1987, has long made a point of working with local suppliers: apart from unavoidable exceptions such as specialised chips, the aim is for the vast majority of parts to be of French — or at least European — origin. Alongside the electronics, then, the price also buys a fairly tangible piece of local craftsmanship.

The same workshop is also behind Kalista, the premium sister brand, whose extravagant units show just how far a digital source can be taken once you stop paying too much attention to conventional ideas about shape, materials or budget. Métronome offers that same craft tradition in a more understated package, not least in the Classica line. The name captures its simple, traditional proportions rather well, even if the electronics underneath are continually evolving. The latest addition is Le DAC 3, the third generation of the company's standalone D/A converter, this time also available with optional built-in network streaming.

Visually, very little has changed — almost nothing, in fact. The wide front panel, machined from solid aluminium, keeps its two vertical lines dividing it into a large central area and narrower side "wings", along with the boldly engraved logo at the bottom and the spare Le DAC lettering at the top. Between them sits the glossy rectangle of the display, flanked on the right by a pair of arrows. No knobs, no jumble of buttons — purposeful classicism, nothing more. The fascia is 10 mm thick and the chassis behind it is made of 2 mm steel sheet, so the apparent simplicity certainly does not imply a flimsy build.

The blue-toned display measures 3.9 inches across the diagonal, with a resolution of 480 × 128

pixels. With network playback it will also show the track, artist and album names, as the accompanying photographs make clear. The space is therefore given over mainly to text, rather than trying to turn the front panel into a showcase for oversized album artwork.

The rear panel, by contrast, is fairly densely populated, although the sockets are still spaced sensibly apart. Looking at it, the analogue outputs are on the left — a pair of single-ended RCAs flanked by balanced XLRs. On the right sit the mains inlet with its fuse holder and a large rocker switch. The space between the two belongs to the digital side. There is one each of coaxial S/PDIF, optical Toslink and professional AES/EBU inputs, a square USB type B for a computer and, new this time, no fewer than two I²S interfaces in the form of HDMI connectors. A separate USB port marked SERVICE is there for firmware updates.

This doubling of the I²S inputs is one of the practical changes over the previous generation. It means you can connect, say, a matching disc transport and a network source at the same time. I²S carries the audio data and the clock information separately; despite the familiar shape of the connector, this is not an ordinary HDMI input for a television or a Blu-ray player. On top of that, the pin assignment has not been standardised across manufacturers, so it is worth checking compatibility, particularly when combining different brands.

Inside, conversion still rests on the ESS ES9026PRO, the same type Métronome already used in Le DAC 2. This is an eight-channel chip built on the 32-bit HyperStream II architecture, and by all accounts four of its converter stages work together on each stereo channel here. The ESS solution also includes the Time Domain Jitter Eliminator, aimed at suppressing the effects of timing errors in the digital signal. The part number itself may be unchanged, then, but the ways in which the new unit puts it to work have been extended.

The highest resolutions are handled by the asynchronous USB input — PCM up to 32-bit/768 kHz and native DSD1024. Both I²S inputs stop at PCM 384 kHz and DSD256, while the coaxial and AES/EBU connections, according to the manufacturer's specifications, also accept PCM up to 384 kHz and DSD128 over DoP. The optical input is capped at PCM 192 kHz and DSD64

via DoP. DSD1024 support therefore belongs specifically to the USB connection, and does not automatically extend to every route into the converter.

For Métronome, one part traditionally matters just as much as the converter chip that tends to overshadow it in catalogue specifications: the power supply. Le DAC 3 has two toroidal transformers and six independent regulation stages. The point of dividing things up this way is to give each circuit stable supply conditions and to limit the extent to which they influence one another. The analogue output stage is biased into class A. Here too, then, the French have not abandoned their long-standing design priorities.

The optional streaming module adds an Ethernet socket and two USB ports for external storage — as you can see on the unit photographed here, one sits just below the RJ45 socket, the other on its own beside it. For a surcharge, the converter thus also becomes a network source that needs no further transport if you want to listen to a home library or internet services. The streaming section handles PCM up to 32-bit/384 kHz and native DSD256.

The manufacturer lists DLNA/UPnP, compatibility with Audirvāna, Spotify Connect, TIDAL Connect and Qobuz Connect, as well as Deezer and internet radio via vTuner. MQA renderer functionality is on board too. Direct control from the TIDAL and Qobuz apps is particularly welcome, since it means you need not change your habits for everyday listening.

Among the measured figures, the frequency response of 10 Hz – 20 kHz within ±0.1 dB for the analogue section is worth noting. Maximum output level at 0 dB is 3 V on both RCA and XLR, with output impedances of 100 and 150 ohms respectively. Métronome further quotes 124 dB under the heading of dynamic range / S/N, and THD+N of -110 dB, equivalent to roughly 0.00032%. These last two figures, however, appear in the specifications directly alongside the conversion processor, so they are best understood as declared parameters for that section rather than as verified measurements taken at the analogue outputs.

According to the manufacturer's current figures, Le DAC 3 measures 45 cm wide, 12 cm high and 42 cm deep, and weighs 12 kg.

We tested the converter primarily in our main system, that is with the Norma Revo SC-2 LN and Revo PA 160 MR driving KEF Blade One Meta. The points of comparison were Métronome DSC and also, for instance, the TEAC UD-507. The source signal arrived either over USB from a Roon core, or from Métronome Le Player 3, the TEAC PD-507T or the NT-507T.

Hans Zimmer's bank of MOOG synthesisers generates an almost bombastic amount of energy in "Why So Serious?" ("The Dark Knight" | 2008 | Warner | 9362-49860-0), but also frequencies that will drive the dust out of your bass reflex port. Or, at the right volume and with sufficiently stable amplifiers, punch the woofers of under-specified loudspeakers clean out of their cabinets. With Le DAC 3, Métronome gives bass weight a less prominent role than it did in earlier models, yet the power is still there. It can genuinely give your room a proper shake. But this is not just weight and volume: the steady progress made in D/A conversion is audible here too, and alongside the ultra-low frequencies that stretch even Blade One Meta, you also hear structure. Led a touch softly, nicely in the Métronome spirit, yet perfectly distinct. The change between generations, then, lies chiefly in better control, achieved without losing any of that French full-bloodedness.

In the midrange, Le DAC 3 carries over the silky ease of its predecessors, combined with excellent modern resolution. Sara K.'s "Brick House" ("Hobo" | 1997 | Chesky | JD155) came across elegantly, with an inviting delicacy and richness of colour, now underpinned by markedly better definition than the earlier models offered. The music is beautifully musical,

yet built on precise resolution, a firm image and a sense of organic physicality. Even fine nuances emerge with an overall composure, without strain or the slightest hint of mechanism. It is, so to speak, a very "analogue" presentation: rich and colourful, yet carefully worked out and clearly drawn in its form.

"Baba Drame" ("Valentine" | 2020 | UMG | 00602508992094) is full of the mature jazz energy of Bill Frisell and his colleagues, ringing treble included. Métronome gives it both body and resonance; there is a wealth of information to be found, fragile decays among it, yet nothing is forced. On the contrary, the metallic timbre of the cymbals is natural and carefully delineated — again a benefit of the latest generation of DACs — and still smooth and appealing, thoroughly enjoyable. Plenty of current converters offer excellent resolution; Le DAC 3 adds to that an engagingly musical presentation that does not conceal any of the information.

Japanese music is fairly easy to recognise, jazz compositions and performances included. Perhaps it is a particular atmosphere, a way of playing, who knows. So it is with "Midnight Sugar" (Tsuyoshi Yamamoto Trio | "Blues for K." | 2022 | Somethin' Cool | SCOL-1062): you can sense that this is a recording from the land of the rising sun. The dynamics of the acoustic combo are presented in the characteristic Métronome spirit — plenty of substance, volume, weight and colour, a feeling of power. Although the sound breathes deeply, as it were, this time it is "closer to the essence" than in previous generations: less languid and more concrete. Even so, the energy swells with poise and solid maturity. The full-bodied sound never seems heavy or booming, but rather densely packed under control.

For a track laid down in 1969, "Because" (The Beatles | "Abbey Road" | 2009 | Apple Corps | 00600753519653) is beautifully recorded, and the master offers a wealth of fine information. Le DAC 3 lets it out with easy clarity, without ever giving the impression that the converter is engraving individual details into holographic perfection. What matters most here is the harmony of the whole, the flow and the body. A well-structured body, drawn with the detail

high-end standards demand, yet never coming across as technical. The presentation is therefore comfortably relaxed in a way that counts among Métronome's core values, though compared with the previous generation the detail is more forthcoming and more focused.

Macy Gray's "Slowly" ("Big" | 2007 | Geffen | B000857602) had the massive proportions typical of the company — not quite on the scale of DSC, admittedly, but still noticeably beyond the norm. The music spreads out through the space and, although this is not studio monitoring, localisation remains clear, and precisely because there is room to spare, nothing becomes tangled. Compared with what we usually experience, the whole thing is a good third larger. And very, very organic.

If we had to pin down the single most important quality of Métronome Le DAC 3, it would be euphony. Not merely musicality in the sense of flow and catchiness, but a certain tuning that pleases the ear and says "this is it". The cheerful "Me Gustas Tu" (Manu Chao | "Próxima Estación: Esperanza" | 2001 | Radio Bemba | 8103212) grooves, it sways, it glows with colour, woven together easily, smoothly and beautifully. It is full of detail too, even if the qualities that carry it are purely subjective. Much like music itself, in the end — is it not? The converter conveys that exuberant, playful atmosphere and is easy to listen to. That is what it all comes down to, and Métronome is a ticket to effortless listening...

This latest generation of the Le DAC 3 converter from Métronome of southern France builds on the proven foundations of its previous iterations and on the company's characteristic values. Through its own chip implementation, a generously over-specified power supply and long experience in digital signal processing, it produces a highly colourful, organic and succulent sound with striking dynamics and genuinely larger-than-life proportions. Compared with earlier versions, however, the current generation of DAC chips has made it possible to render the resulting sound considerably more concrete and to draw it in greater depth, without any loss of its welcoming charm. Yes, you will once again pay more, all the more so if you decide to add the streaming module, but this remains a beautifully musical machine.

Plus

- ✓ Practical solution with plenty of inputs and streaming on board (albeit at a far from negligible surcharge)
- ✓ Transmission over I^2S from a compatible transport is very clean and clearly defined
- ✓ Noticeably less colouration of its own than before, while the scale and dynamics remain
- ✓ Musical at heart

Minus

- ✓ A price increase that can be justified but is still plain to see