MÉTRONOME

TEST & REVIEW

DSC mini

Digital to Analogue Converter



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HI-FI Voice

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DSC mini - HiFi Voice Editor's choice

A southern French high-end manufacturer with a signature sound, Métronome, and by extension its more ambitious sister brand Kalista, has recently turned its attention to the compact components of the Digital Sharing range. We're talking about DSAS server, DST CD transport and DSS 2 digital transport. The hub meant to connect them all is DSC mini, a D/A converter that brings the company's in-house technology to a small format.



Despite its compact size, it's still plain to see that this is the work of the people from the commune of Montans who are behind the rest of the range. You can clearly see it in the one-piece chassis and the front panel, made up of vertical metal strips. At one point these strips are interrupted by an identically shaped control for navigating the menus, and at another by a small display. Overall, it really does look very much like a scaled-down version of DSC.

A look at the rear panel reveals, besides the essential power inlet and rocker switch, five inputs and two outputs. Signal can come in through the usual interfaces (USB, coaxial, AES/EBU and optical), but also via I2S over HDMI, using the pin configuration found on other Métronome components. This is the connection the manufacturer recommends. On the output side, you have XLR and RCA.

At the heart of the converter is the ES9026PRO chip, which gives DSC mini a signal-to-noise ratio of 110 dB, for instance, and a dynamic range of 124 dB. It can process PCM signals up to 32-bit/384 kHz or DSD512, depending, of course, on the capabilities of each input.

The manufacturer doesn't actually go into the specifics of the technical design, saying only that the whole thing builds on the know-how gained in developing DSC and other higher-end models. This probably means the use of several encapsulated toroidal transformers for the individual sections, large capacitor banks and other techniques that shape the typical Métronome sound.

Among the other technical details, there's an above-average output voltage of 3 V (identical on both outputs) and a 320 x 240 pixel resolution on the 3.5-inch non-touch colour display.

Beyond that, however, you won't learn anything more than the dimensions (25 cm wide, 25 cm deep and 7 cm high) and the 4.8 kg weight. This too is fairly typical of this French manu-

facture, which builds its products from “Made in France” components (except for things like chips, where that isn’t possible).

We listened to DSC mini primarily in two setups: with Le Player 3, and via USB alongside the Musical Fidelity M8xi (where the comparison was mainly with the amplifier’s built-in D/A converter), driving Fyne Audio F1-5 speakers. The main test, however, was a comparison with the company’s “big” DSC, on Norma Revo SC-2 LN / Norma Revo PA 160 MR and KEF Blade One Meta. Details of the cables, accessories, platforms, filters and so on can be found in the right-hand column -->.

The lively bass in The Alan Parsons Project’s soft rock track “Mammagamma” (“Eye in the Sky” | 1982 | Arista | 788478) was smaller and less punchy than with DSC, but far bigger and juicier than with the M8xi. The character itself really does recall a “miniature” DSC: it has rich but not heavy power and weight, and rather than aiming to be super quick, it’s robust and pleasant. Still, you can feel that separation and definition are good, no doubt about it. This is a sound from a higher class, tuned for listening pleasure.

The delicate sound of Anne-Sophie Mutter’s Stradivarius in Vivaldi’s “Spring” (“The Four Seasons” | 1992 | Deutsche Grammophon | 463 259-2) had slightly less body and earthy, woody substance than with DSC. It also rendered details and nuances somewhat more explicitly, with a slight emphasis on delineation. But you also sense that the performance is organised with the ease and discipline of the premium category, without losing the traditional French lyricism and sense of colour. You really can still say that this is essentially “big” DSC, slightly simplified.

The highest notes of “Almost Like Being in Love”, played by Sonny Rollins on tenor saxophone (“with The Modern Jazz Quartet” | 1988 | recorded 1953 | Prestige | 00025218111126), also unfolded in an unforced, mature and refined way. Cymbals and vibraphone have a convincing metallic timbre, although stylistically they seem less pronounced than with DSC, not as clearly articulated. Compared with the M8xi, however, they are noticeably more natural, far less technical and not as “spotlit”. That said, we’d say there’s a faint touch of “ESS presence” somewhere in the background: the vibraphone, for example, can make its notes “shine”, and while it never crosses into harshness, the delivery is a little more bell-like.



If there’s one way in which DSC mini is truly French (or, better put, “part of the Métronome family”), it’s its juicy dynamics, delivered with elegance and charm. “Job” by Laco Deczi and Celula New York (“Jazz na Hradě” | 2007 | recorded 2004 | Multisonic | 31 0651-2) sways and flows, with instruments that are genuinely robust and rich. It’s what you might call “a lot of

sound". When the rhythmic kick drum strikes come in, DSC mini gives them richness, emphasis and a sense of physicality, while the supple swing and looseness remain the backbone.



The grand piano under the hands of Romanian virtuoso Radu Lupu in Schubert's "Piano Sonata No. 16 in A minor, Op. 42" ("Plays Schubert" | 2005 | Decca | 475 7074) seemed easy to follow, certainly more so than with the M8xi, yet beautifully organic, large, even expansive. Although the proportions of the sound don't quite reach what DSC can achieve, it's still a full-bodied and slightly "larger than life" presentation. That is precisely why it also comes across as clear and clean, even though it doesn't push details and nuances forward. It's primarily a euphonious rendering, with colours that feel natural and saturated, where decays are easy to hear and nothing gets lost, even though it has a "pleasing envelope" rather than technical analytical precision.

Viklický's "Acrostic" ("Pocta Josipu Plečnikovi" | 1994 | Lotos | LT 0036-2 131) may be a relatively simple a cappella piece, yet its spatial rendering and intelligibility are a real stress test for any playback chain. DSC mini comes across as quite focused, locating the individual voices well and keeping them distinct, while the sense of space is helped mainly by that above-average scale. It isn't as clear and three-dimensional as with DSC, but it definitely belongs in the premium league.

The blues-rock track "Hideaway" by former Whitesnake member Bernie Marsden ("Green & Blues" | 1995 | Castle Music | CMRCD 181) had good rhythm. DSC mini plays more energetically (albeit with less perspective) than DSC, with flair and a healthy dose of energy: not frantic, but juicy and full-blooded. The music isn't exactly aggressive; it has its own expression and colour, along with a slight extra push of energy in the core rhythm section. That's precisely why the listening experience may not be strictly neutral, but it's definitely enjoyable and satisfying. You could even say it has a musical magic of its own.

Small as it is, DSC mini is a beautifully crafted device with good connectivity, and although at this price it would certainly benefit from a streaming module (or a slightly more intuitive user interface), it's a premium proposition. A sizeable share of the price naturally goes into the fact that it's made in France from mostly local components. As for the sound, it has its own style, rooted in the Métronome signature: richness, colour, scale and juiciness, with the ability to draw you into a pleasant listening mood through its density, almost regardless of the recording. It's certainly a solid, higher-class device...

PLUS

- ✓ Beautiful, big sound à la Métronome
- ✓ Plenty of connectors for such a compact format
- ✓ Juiciness
- ✓ Format and resolution support

MINUS

- ✓ Display and controls are not the most intuitive
- ✓ The price is relatively high