

TEMPTATION

EXPENSIVE, YES. BUT YOU KNOW YOU WANT THEM

Metronome Le Player | CD player | £5490

“When ‘entry level’ sounds this good...”

FOR Agile and articulate; plenty of insight; expressive dynamics

AGAINST Ergonomics could be a little better



Don't know Metronome? The company was founded in 1987 by Dominique Giner (who still designs the products) and is based in Toulouse. It's a brand best known for its exotic-looking high-end digital creations.

The term 'entry level' is normally used for a cheaper product, but that description certainly doesn't apply here. For Metronome, 'entry level' means Le Player - a chunky 15kg aluminium-clad unit that promises a large slice of the performance of its pricier siblings, but at a fraction of the cost. The company's flagship transport/DAC combination, the Kalsita Ultimate SE/Nausicaa, costs around a dozen times as much, so if that holds true Le Player could be a bargain. In high-end terms at least.

Relive the turntable ritual

Things start off well. While offering none of the outlandish aesthetic treats of other (much more expensive) Metronome products, Le Player is still an imposing unit once placed on our rack. It has to go on the top shelf because this is a top-loading design - none of your rickety plastic loading trays here - and any other level won't leave enough space to load the disc comfortably.

We've always liked top-loading CD players. It makes them seem more exotic and adds some of the ritual of using a turntable into the deal. Here you slide back a thick aluminium lid, exposing the CD spindle and laser mechanism. Don't be tempted to touch the laser though.

The transport is a Philips GF8 unit that has been modified by Metronome. It now features a revised motor spindle (to improve stability) and a magnetic puck made mostly of Delrin (a highly crystalline polymer). The nicely shaped puck is there to ensure the disc is held securely on the spindle. Make sure you don't lose it - the player won't work without the puck in place.

The whole transport assembly is mounted on a Perspex support to help control resonances. There are two large circular cut-outs on the top surface to provide clearance when putting the disc in. It's a nice idea but their placement didn't suit all our reviewers.

As would be expected at this level, Metronome has taken a lot of care with the power supply arrangement. The configuration used in Le Player is made up of no fewer than three mains transformers and seven discrete supply lines. The idea is to prevent degradation of performance caused by interference between the various analogue, digital and control sections of the circuitry.

Simple button layout

The rest of the Metronome's chassis is as solidly built and nicely finished as you'd hope, though the only colour option is silver at the moment. The front panel control layout is simple, with just the basic transport functions accessible. It's a shame these buttons aren't particularly precise or pleasant to use though. At this price there is no excuse.

This shortcoming makes it all the more important the remote feels so nice. It's not particularly flashy, but the clear layout and sensibly positioned buttons make it a pleasure to use. The unit's display is pretty clear too, though the mix of upper and lower-case letters makes it look like a relic of the 90s.

Look around the back of Le Player and you'll find the usual single-ended RCA and balanced XLR analogue outputs alongside a coax digital output. Don't be surprised if you find the Metronome sounds a little louder than normal. Its RCA analogue outputs are set to an output voltage of 2.5v rather than the more usual 2.0 volts, so make sure you

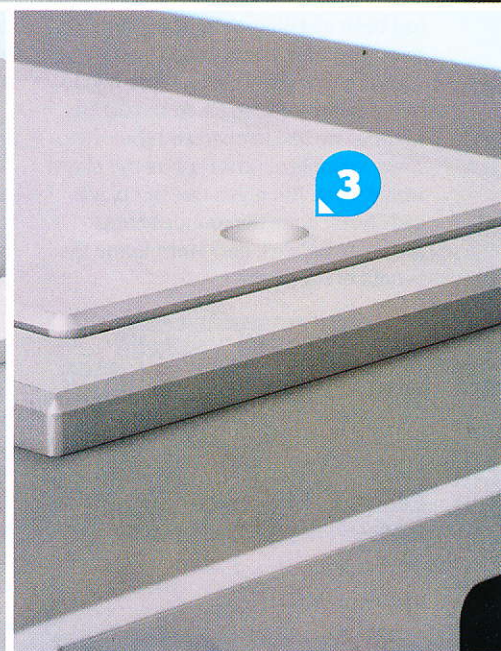


No rickety plastic loading tray here – the top-loading design means you need plenty of room for Le Player on your top shelf

“Entry level here means a large slice of the performance of its pricier siblings, but at a fraction of the cost”

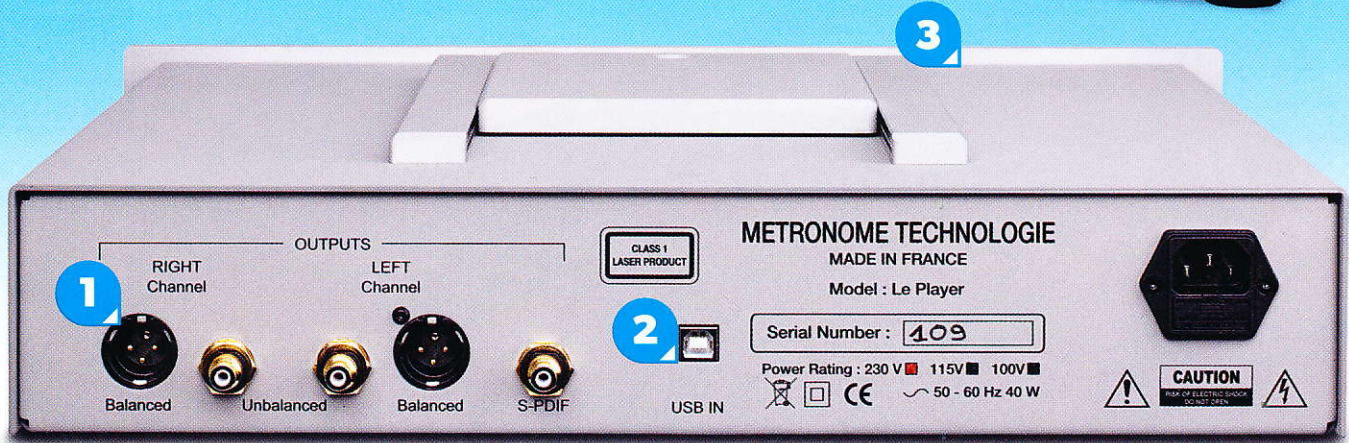
IN DETAIL

- 1 Delrin magnetic puck holds the CD on the motor spindle. Make sure you don't lose it
- 2 The remote handset is a good one. The sensibly sized buttons are well organised too
- 3 Make sure you close the lid properly, otherwise the Metronome won't read the disc





IN DETAIL...



compensate for this in any comparison. Usually, the louder option tends to impress more, on a short listen at least.

The back panel is also home to the USB input. This opens up the player's internal DAC to computer sources, and that can only be a good thing. Not only is Le Player's internal DAC circuitry likely to be much better than that used in most sources, but such an input also offers a degree of future-proofing. That's something to bear in mind when you're thinking of spending so much money.

More accurate clock

The USB input is an asynchronous design where the Metronome takes charge of the timing of information flow between it and the computer. In theory, the player's clock is more accurate than that used in the partnering computer, which should lead to a better sound.

The USB will accept signals up to 24-bit/192kHz, but you'll need to load the dedicated software drivers onto your Mac or PC. Normally the drivers built into a Mac computer operating system tend to be compatible with most outboard DACs we've tried, but in this case our laptop didn't even register the Metronome until the correct software had been installed. Everything runs smoothly after that is done.

Our review unit had what seemed to be a misadjusted sensor on the CD lid. At times we had to open and shut the cover a couple of times before the player would work. But given that our player had clearly done the rounds before getting to us, we'll give Metronome the benefit of the doubt.

"The Metronome's combination of agility, insight and rhythmic precision makes the most of the music"

We start with an old jazz favourite in the form of Bill Evans's *Everybody Digs Bill Evans*. Here the Metronome delivers a terrific performance. *Peace Piece* is a slow burner, and is rendered with all the finesse it deserves. We've heard this piece delivered in a more relaxed way, but there's much to like about its more direct and communicative approach.

There's a pleasing solidity to Evans's piano and superb insight into the instrument's rich harmonic envelope. There's power too, as and when the playing demands. We like the way the Metronome maintains the delicate forward momentum of the music - this is something that can so easily seem stagnant through lesser kit.

Tonally, things err a little towards leanness in our system, but not so much as to be an issue in a balanced set-up. There's plenty of weight and authority, but the emphasis here is on agility and articulation. This is a responsive performer that defines transients with crisp precision and control.

Those qualities are made all the more obvious when we play Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Le Player takes the wild dynamic swings in its stride, delivering them with a spellbinding combination of composure and drama. There's plenty of attack here, but also top-class refinement that stops things going too far.

Ready to rock

The Metronome's sense of organisation is impressive, as is its ability to keep track of low-level instrumental strands even when the piece becomes demanding. It's this ability to keep control yet avoid sounding controlling that's so impressive.

The sound-staging is suitably stable and layered. The Metronome doesn't make as much of the space between instruments as some, and the sense of depth isn't quite as expansive as it could be, but neither of these things is enough to spoil our enjoyment.

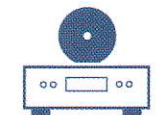
IN DETAIL

1 There's a choice of balanced XLR and single-ended analogue outputs. The output level is higher than normal

2 Le Player's USB input needs special driver software to work. It is provided on a disc in the box

3 General build quality is good. Casework feels solid and the standard of finish is pleasing

KEY FEATURES



TOP LOADING CD PLAYER



USB DAC

24/192 KHz

24-BIT/ 192KHZ

We try a bit of rock in the form of Bruce Springsteen's *Radio Nowhere*, and again the Metronome shines. It's fast, punchy and latches on the song's hard-charging rhythm track with glee. The production is pretty dense, and hardly the cleanest around, but the player communicates the drive and energy brilliantly. There's plenty of power in the bass and an impressive dose of attack throughout.

Just as good via USB

Worried that all this good work might be undone by the USB input, we connect our resident MacBook Air with Pure Music software and press play. And the USB sounds as convincing as the CD section.

Playing a range of files, from intimate pieces such as Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* (16-bit/44.1kHz) through to dynamically demanding works such as Hans Zimmer's *Gotham's Reckoning* (24bit/192kHz) and Kanye West's *Yeezus* (16-bit/44.1kHz), the Metronome continues to sparkle. Its combination of agility, insight and rhythmic precision makes the most of the music played.

Le Player may lack the sheer visual drama of its pricier stablemates, but its sound is one to treasure. Ergonomics aren't flawless, but the overall package is tempting. If Metronome's entry level sounds this good, we can't wait to hear what the upmarket models sound like.

WHAT HI-FI? says

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

VERDICT Metronome's Le Player may be the French company's entry-level option, but it's still a terrific sounding unit