MÉTRONOME

# TEST & REVIEW

# AQWO 2

## Hybrid DAC + SACD/CD + Streamer




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# Digital, Star Component Award

I began to notice French manufacturer Métronome Technologie's digital products several years ago at HiFi shows. Audiophilia reviewed some of the earlier iterations of their now "Classica" line. The streamer and DAC received positive notices. Excellent sound quality and superb fit and finish. All Métronome products, including the "AQWO" model here under review and their super luxury "Kallista" brand (now spun off into a separate company), are designed and manufactured at their Montans plant near Toulouse. Métronome Technologie was founded in 1987.

Their top AQWO line ("AQWO" is ancient Greek for "I listen, I hear") has four models of which the review model AQWO 2 is the hybrid of the range, combining a CD/SACD player, DAC and streaming. The AQWO 2 retails for USD 22,000 (a tube output stage option—included in the review unit—is available for an additional USD 2300). The model is also available in the AQWO 2+ version which provides the same features as the AQWO 2 but adds a separate power supply (not requested for this review).




I want to thank Jean Marie Clauzel, owner and designer at Métronome and distributor Wynn Wong of Wynn Audio in Toronto for shipping the unit across the country to the island.

## My Use

Métronome describes its unit as follows:

*Métronome gives more to audiophiles with AQWO 2: the famous Métronome analogue sound with your CDs and SACDs, a high-end converter and now a network player. AQWO 2 has a new larger 6 1/2 inches touchscreen with a 21/9 aspect ratio allowing it to be read at a distance and manage the settings.*

*Like many other Métronome devices, AQWO 2 can be provided with an analog tube output, installed at the factory or later by your technician. As a converter, AQWO 2 manages PCM and DSD formats up to 512 (x8).*

*Robust and sizable, AQWO 2 is available in Gold, Silver or Black finishes.*

I was fascinated to hear the differences between two of the finest (CD/SACD) players on the market including my reference MBL CD/DAC (USD 15,400), which is still in current inventory and designed by Jürgen Reis using only a Red Book design—more on SACD drives later—and what is now regarded as one of the finest SACD players in the industry, the 22K Métronome AQWO 2. I was intrigued by how the AQWO 2 would sound, but I also thought I might have a bit of a shootout with the MBL.

The AQWO 2 was coming in "mob-handed" as they say in British gangster films. The box is chock-a-block with digital goodies.

Check out the impressive stats and functionality below.

### Pickup Mechanism:

- SACD D&M with customizations and Delrin® puck

### Network:

- 1 Ethernet connector and integrated Wi-Fi
- 1 USB input

### Resolution :

- 32 bits / 384 kHz

### Digital Inputs:

- USB asynchronous type B (32/384)
- S/P DIF 75 Ohms RCA
- AES-EBU 110 Ohms XLR

### Digital Outputs:

- $I^2S$ HDMI proprietary
- S/P DIF 75 Ohms RCA
- AES-EBU 110 Ohms XLR

### Analog outputs:

- Unbalanced 3 V RMS @0dB – 47 kOhms RCA
- Balanced 3 V RMS @0dB – 600 Ohms XLR

### Optional tube outputs with additional boards

### Power supply:

- 3/4 toroidal transformers with Schaffner filters, 10 independent regulation lines

### Voltage :

- 120/240 VAC - 50/60 Hz

### Other characteristics:

- Consumption: 40 VA
- Dimensions (LxHxP): 425 x 130 x 415 mm
- Weight: 17 Kg




*The rear of the unit has all connectivity covered. USB asynchronous type B, S/P DIF 75 Ohms RCA, AES-EBU 110 Ohms XLR, I²S HDMI proprietary, Toslink, Unbalanced RCA x2, Balanced XLR x2, WiFi antenna connection (the antenna was not provided with the review unit), LAN socket and standard IEC power socket with rocker on/off switch.*

Not only was the box stuffed to the gills with Métronome's proprietary goodness, but the box was a looker before a note was played. The top-loading unit is very elegant and is built like a tank. My unit was gold/black but it is also available in black or silver.

This is the latest version of the model and one that shares very few parts with the original. As such, a completely reworked unit.

With quality equipment, cables are important components, but I feel even more so with delicate digital circuits. As such, only the very best for my French guest. Ansuz Acoustics Mainz D2 Power Cable and sundry other Ansuz C2 cables.

The unit is Roon Ready and is UPnP and DLNA Certified. I used Airplay 2 and the better HiRes via Qobuz and UPnP using the MConnect app. I'd go for a Roon subscription if I were all in on streaming. It's the best.

The touchscreen is said to be much improved in size and functionality over the original model. All menu screens are clear with easy access to the many functions including device settings, restore, display (colours and brightness), streaming settings, filter settings, signal resampling, main menu choices (Digital, DAC or Stream), inputs, sample rate, metadata, time, and all the standard SACD playback functions.

The well-built plastic remote has all the standard CD and setting functions and feels substantial in the hand.




*The large screen is remarkably clear even from a distance and is very intuitive to use. In no time, you'll be scrolling through all the menu settings and choosing the best playback for you from the six digital filters, signal resampling, MQA decoding, screen brightness, background colour choice (me, sapphire), and every other functionality. I loved the tube on/off press—touch then hear the satisfying relay switch. It remained on for almost all of the review. Many settings are available via the remote, but not all. Place the unit on the top rack and have fun using the touchscreen or your mobile device for streaming. It's worth the exercise from your listening chair to the unit and the use the remote for CD/SACD play/pause/mute/skip, stop, etc.*

## Features

At USD 22,000, the AQWO 2 was bound to have the latest and greatest functionality—a one-stop digital shop, including enough connectivity to use as a standalone DAC, CD/SACD player or streamer. And even though I gave it a good streaming workout, my primary interest in the unit was its SACD guise and how it sounds with some of the finest new SACD releases on the market. And how it performed playing Red Book.

The top-loading mechanism is a Métronome-modified unit by D&M Group and the D/A converter is provided by ESS Technology Inc. Specifically, its Sabre ESS ES9038Pro Flagship Hyperstream II 8 channel DAC, which process signals in Linear PCM up to 32 bit and 384 kHz and DSD up to DSD512. Clauzel has implemented these two high-end, off-site solutions in typical Métronome fashion—with meticulous attention to detail.

With its multi-functionality and connectivity, digital fans may use the DAC as a standalone unit (via its digital outputs including the important $I^2S$ connector), as a streamer or in my preferred use as a CD/SACD player. CDs may have bottomed out in sales but I think the best of CD and SACD will remain in the marketplace for audiophiles. It's why so many legacy manufacturers are returning to the CD/SACD player market. How many of you have sold, given away or dumped your CD collection? Happily, replacing your favourites is still fairly inexpensive on the used market.




*Even the limited streaming playback resolution of AirPLay 2 sounded warm, detailed and dynamic*

Practical: the unit has no server functionality (receive only), updates via firmware, and the DAC cannot be upgraded (unlike an FPGA-based DAC), but the DAC chosen should be cutting edge for a long time. Be careful with the puck—if you're careless, it'll be easily lost, misplaced, etc, or, like me with a Naim puck, it disappears into the machine's guts! The manual is comprehensive.

## Streaming

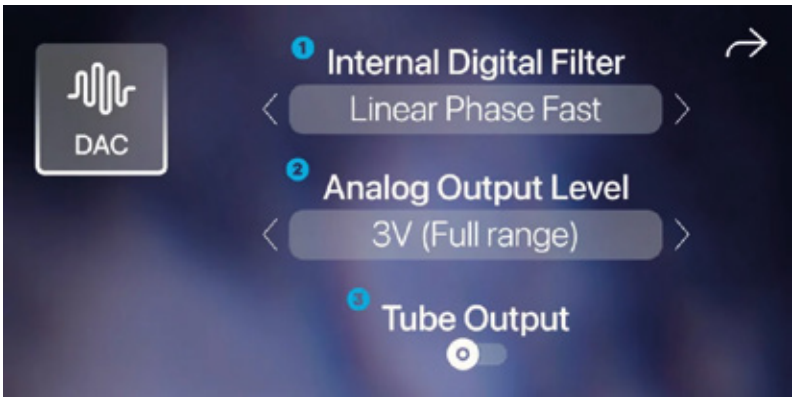
My biases notwithstanding, many folks reading will be ever so interested in streaming, filters, UPnP, Roon, and all the other swish technologies that make the digital world a fun place to be. Me, even with a USD 60,000 streaming setup, including all the very best from Aavik Acoustics (and here)/Ansuz Acoustics (and here), Nordost (and here) and using Qobuz HiRes, streaming doesn't do it for me. For all the reasons our readers and viewers will know (ownership, tactile, the actual sound, disposable, etc). But for many, it'll be vitally important in the decision to purchase. So let me assure you, Métronome has nailed its AQWO 2

streaming qualities, which approach sound and ease of use/connectivity of those costly solutions I've reviewed from Denmark and the USA. Very impressive.

The unit was delivered without the antenna, making the streaming delivery choice moot. As such, I used the Ansuz Acoustics Digitalz D2 Ethernet Cable for the connection.

As for filters, I've made myself clear in reviews of boxes from Aavik to MBL to Mytek to T+A Elektroakustik—I'm a one-filter-and-forget guy. Much like using Métronome's tube option, which is a tone control. A damn good one with many fine, beguiling qualities. The great news is that even without the tube option, your well-recorded CDs and SACDs will still sound dynamite on the AQWO 2. However, a plain-Jane 1990s jobby, will get a warm tube output bath and glow nicely without the coarseness so prevalent on those types of CDs. For the most part, I left the tube function on and I enjoyed it. If you're spending 22 grand, why not go the extra distance and cover all your bases? As for filter choice, I had a cursory listen to all and settled on Linear Phase Fast for my taste. YMMV.

In its streaming and CD/SACD decoding role, the DAC is superbly neutral, with a beautifully organic sound biased ever so slightly on the warmer side of its basic neutrality. My cup of tea, exactly. Interestingly, it remained this flavour on quality SACDs and CDs without the tube option on.




*My filter choice was "Linear Phase Fast". My Tube Output was switched on for most of the duration. Other filter choices include Linear Phase Slow, Minimum Phase Fast, Minimum Phase Slow, Apodizing Fast, Minimum Phase, Brick Wall, and Corr. Minimum Phase Fast. ◊*

## CD/SACD

Now, for me, the meat of the review.

Staring at the gorgeous unit, researching all the numbers for the digital functionality, testing the streaming, and the tactile loading and unloading of CDs and SACDs was fun, now unboxed and warmed up, a favourite concert pianist friend of mine was about to play the opening gambit on a bog standard CD.

Hush everyone, please.

As the unit was well broken in (the distributor's unit), I warmed it up for twenty minutes, opened the slider (weighty, substantial) removed the Delrin puck, placed Phantasmata in the drawer, replaced the puck, closed the slider and pressed play on the remote. What I heard shocked me. It was the very quiet opening of Liszt's masterpiece "Piano Sonata in B minor", which shortly thereafter explodes into a passionate exposition (played brilliantly by Beth

Levin from a live show)—the sound was incredibly dynamic, clear-voiced, with all the atmosphere from the hall. I looked at my wife and muttered "Uh oh". This was going to be instructive and fun.

Friendship aside, Levin is a wonderful pianist and is gifted with great touch and tone. She's a remarkably thoughtful and musical artist, too. And those qualities shone through the AQWO 2 and my BØRRESEN Acoustics 01 Silver Supreme Edition Loudspeakers. I had not thought of volume matching with my MBL; the MBL was off and my focus was on the AQWO 2. As it turns out, the output of the Métronome is quite high and a high volume setting on my integrated meant a loud playback of the very quiet opening of the Liszt sonata followed by those thundering chords. It was quite an experience with Beth far louder in my room than on her concert platform. The AQWO 2's fff unfazed the unit. It was just really loud and damned impressive. But some moderation would be required for the long-term audition and some volume matching if we got to a shootout.

Next Red Book was the Telarc recording of Vaughan Williams' Symphony No. 2 "London", one of my favourite recordings on any medium. Smooth, detailed, powerful and superbly played by the RPO and conducted by André Previn. This later performance eclipsed his famous RCA with the LSO. Especially beautiful is the gorgeous "Lento", describing the great city at night. This is one of RVW's sublime inspirations. As we get to the climax, I'm listening for the always-added portamento in the 1st violins to their high C (marked "8va", up an octave—see score below) and the throbbing horn triplets. The recording, the RPO players and the AQWO 2 did not disappoint. It captured the beauty of the violins' sound as the players (musically) swoop up to their top C.

A few years ago, I received a CD for review from the talented Toronto singer/songwriter Lara Solnicki. Solnicki dubbed it an "Art Song Project". It is that. Songs in a unique style celebrate Toronto neighbourhoods in lyrics and interesting rock, jazz and classical influences in melody, harmony and construction. Anybody wanting a CD off the beaten path engineered to perfection by Jeff Wolpert, I urge you to purchase this splendid CD for your collection.




Once again, a standard Red Book, the AQWO 2 deciphered the 16/44 to an absolute beauty. I wasn't missing a HiRes Layer in the slightest. Solnicki's lovely voice hangs in the air over a beautifully recorded rhythm section and through the Métronome, every nuance of her voice and lyric inflection is heard in detail. Yet the beauty of the recording remains. It's axiomatic in top CD/SACD players that the vaunted detail retrieval does not overshadow a fine recor-

ding's intrinsic beauty.

The ESOTERIC SACD of Brahms' Symphony No. 2 (originally released on Philips in 1963) is a spectacular example of ESOTERIC's famous remastering for compact discs (their new vinyl remasterings are superb, too). The London Symphony Orchestra sounds dramatic and very beautiful as guided by Pierre Monteux. All instruments' timbral cues are wonderful via ESOTERIC mastering and the AQWO 2's advanced DAC, but those soaring violins are sweet and when things get thick in the mix like the famous viola syncopations in the first movement, the AQWO 2 unravels things easily. This was luxury SACD playback.

## Comparison

One comp. Versus the Red Book MBL CD-DAC.

Many of our readers and viewers have been waiting for this section. And the winner is?

For all testing, I asked Jan to sit in with me to keep my biases in check and my ears objective. You know how you feel about your child running in a race against other kids. Yes. Yes, you do!

From the opening session, with Phantasmata playback at high volume, I believed the clarity, power and tonal lustre of the AQWO 2 would clean the MBL's clock.

I focused on one very special recording, the ESOTERIC SACD/CD of Mischa Maisky, cello and Martha Argerich, piano from an original Philips digital recording from 1985 of music by Schubert. I've been playing the Red Book layer for many years on the MBL and have yet to hear a cello sound (analog or digital) more beautiful than Maisky produces when playing Schubert's famous "Sonata for Arpeggione and Piano in A minor, D. 821." This late Schubert work is a masterpiece and the Maisky/Argerich duo play it better than most.

We began with the SACD layer played back on the Métronome. Just as I remembered it on the MBL, rich, harmonically sophisticated with a perfect chamber music soundstage and pinpoint imaging. Maisky and Argerich are sitting in front of me. Glorious.

CD layer time on the warmed-up MBL.

Instantly, I heard why I adore this recording with Jurgen Reis' voicing of his MBL digital gear. Same as the AQWO 2, with all the refinement and upper harmonics developing Maisky's beautiful tone. As a comparison, both boxes sounded sublime. I loved the dynamite, rocking dynamics of the Métronome, my wife, the MBL's (very, very) slightly laid-back sound compared to the French dynamo.

So, both are very fine high-end digital boxes. Among the very best in the game. For a €4700 premium (sans tube output), the Métronome gives you outstanding streaming quality, SACD functionality, and many more features than the MBL CD/DAC. The MBL is "limited" to CD playback with a superb DAC that may be used separately with its digital outputs. The MBL is




slot loaded, the AQWO 2, top drawer. If you need streaming and want that "one and done" convenience, and it fits your budget, the choice is made. Métronome. If you don't need SACD functionality or streaming and you share Reis' dislike of SACD drives, then I urge you to listen to the MBL. It is current production and you save some bucks. Either way and whatever your software flavour, you are going to be cock of the digital walk. Fun times.

As for the Métronome AQWO 2 Hybrid DAC + SACD/CD + Streamer (USD 22,000), I cannot recommend this magnificent product highly enough. Go ahead, save up and treat yourself.