MÉTRONOME

TEST & REVIEW

AQWO 2

Hybrid DAC + SACD/CD + Streamer



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6Moons

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AQWO is a stylized render of old Greece's akoúō for 'listen'.

Jean-Marie Clauzel didn't pick metrísete for 'measure'. That prefix already factors in his brand name Métronome. Its tagline 'the most analogue digital sound' means that today, valve outputs are optional, even retrofittable (see the display's tube symbol at right), whilst overbuilt power supplies factor either way.

In this French catalogue, the AQWO collection means top SA/CD transports and players. Still beyond them live hyper-stylized versions from sister brand Kalista. The 2nd-gen AQWO 2 with ESS9038 silicon incorporates a network streamer function, new touchscreen with higher resolution and "zero electronics or housing parts in common with its predecessor".

Le son vrai is obviously the true sound.

The modified SACD top loader is from DEI Holdings Inc whose many subsidiaries include B&W, Denon and Marantz. Hence this D&M transport is a true audio part, not one that was originally made for computers.

Launched in 1987, Métronome's expertise with digital dates back to their very first products. Those were CD players that founder Dominique Giner co-developed with Jadis. New owner Clauzel who took over in 2013 retained the original engineering team. This ensured continuity and 2023's catalogue remains squarely focused on digital.

Unlike spec-chaser brands, our French team don't really pander to the biggest numbers, so no PCM up to 768kHz, no DSD1024, no resampling of Redbook to 16 x DSD. But tAQWO 2 does support 8 x upsampling to 384 and 512, well beyond the sample rates of physical discs. The tube mention already had figures-first buyers log off. They clearly aren't Métronome's core audience though if they could just bring themselves to listen before passing judgment, they still might be?

Once more, a metronome is an exacting musical timekeeping device. By name alone this team are no strangers to measurements and precision. They simply hold very specific ideas also on what sound they chase. Here it's telling that Jean-Marie, whose background is agriculture, mentions being trained by Dominique who stayed on for two years past the handover. This training presumably was a bit less about circuitry and engineering and all about target sonics: le son vrai. Once that's seeped deeply into our ear/brain like a persistent blood stain, we recognize it when we hear it. It's how we know very quickly whether a given aural profile is for us or not. Unlike Métronome's marketing, I simply prefer to call that my sound rather than the true or absolute sound. Semantics.

The RCA and XLR analog outputs are equally set to 3Vrms, then 47kΩ and 600tΩ respectively. Digital inputs cover async USB B, 75Ω coax and 110Ω AES/EBU for accessing

the internal DAC via other sources. To use AQWO 2 as a dedicated transport and bypass its converter and analog stages is possible with I^2S over HDMI, 75Ω coax and 110Ω AES/EBU. The second USB slot is for firmware updates. The power supply uses 3 or 4 toroidal transformers depending on the optional tube PCB, Swiss Schaffner AC filters and ten independent voltage regulation lines. At 17kg and 42.6 x 13 x 41.5cm WxHxD, this Gallic challenger is no petite Pro-Ject box but a full-size heavyweight. Finish options are black, silver or champagne gold. To get all curvaceous and semi-translucent will set you back well more than twice as much.



To select between layers of hybrid discs, we tap the disc symbol in the touch-screen's top-left corner. A white disc signifies SACD layer, a grey disc CD layer. There are repeat and shuffle modes as well as time elapsed/remain. If installed, tube mode too activates by touch. So does forced upsampling. DAC mode shows chosen input and actual sample rate. Network mode has cover art, album/track and artist info plus the actual sample rate. The main menu splits out into digital (resampling the digital output up to DSD256/I^2S, DSD128/coax; S/PDIF DoP and full MQA), DAC (internal digital filter, analog output level at 1.4/2.5/3V), stream (meta data, WiFi, gapless), display (brightness, cursor and 5 different background colors) and other (device info and default restore). For the full feature breakdown, refer to the manual.

The recommended network control app is mConnect. With two LHY network distributors in series, 27" iMac with most current MacOS and Audirvana Studio as the playback engine, I used standard UPnP. In Métronome's menu I enabled meta data and gapless then turned off WiFi. Voilà, cover art and lengthy album title as ticker tape here for a DSD folder from Aaron Neville, tubes engaged, upsampler at DSD 256.

You're a bit dense.

Say this to a person and it's no compliment. Spy inside an elite piece of hifi kit and parts density becomes cause célèbre. Our hard-earned scratch has met its perfect itch.

AQWO 2 is packed. Here we see six blue potted transformers (two up, four down), heatsinked voltage regs and Kendeil filter caps.

On the other side our geek show flaunts its optional tube output stage of twin Electro-Harmonix 6922 dual triodes, more voltage regs and more capacitance. We also revisit the massive triangular suspension for the transport mech and, sacré bleu not rouge,

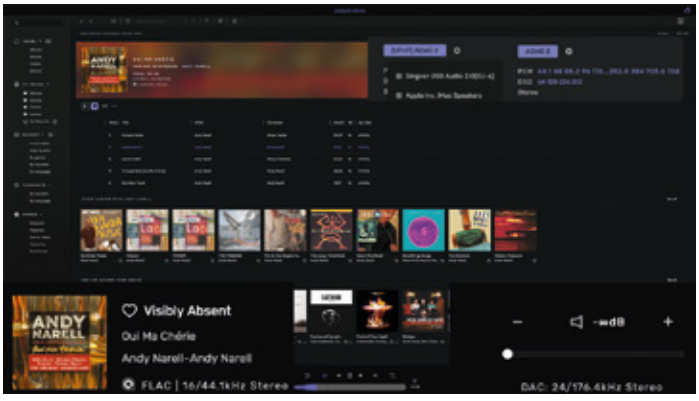
an LED sentinel, Yves-Bernard André style, that bathes any spinning disc in blue light to give the laser better operating conditions.



The attendant weight of these goods including the substantial steel chassis tickles more kg/€ goose bumps. Add the intuitive and responsive GUI. Even Joe Civilian and Jill next door would instantly know that this is a most serious deck; and from a very different planet than scratchy CD/ROM slot drives. Whilst 'only the sound matters' buyers claim otherwise, my inner spendthrift chokes when popping costly hoods only to find mostly hot air inside. No such gasping with the AQWO. No switch-mode power but multiple beefy linear power supplies. Unlike other Métronome models, this one simply integrates. We don't need two chassis. Bravo. So AQWO 2 is really dense; and not at all insulted for it.

In use.

Though Métronome say otherwise, Audirvana Studio recognized the UPnP-connected AQWO 2 as 768/512 compatible. Regardless of whether my isolated LAN distributor forwarded local or remote .flac/.aiff files, Métronome's display insisted on getting .wav instead. I don't know what this signifies. Cover art and meta data obviously need a network connection. USB or AES/EBU merely show 176.4 PCM or DSD 64 in very big letters. Should we set 'universal gapless play' in Audirvana's device window (recommended for machines which lack native gapless), even in network mode the AQWO 2 display defaults to saying 'universal gapless' to omit cover art or meta data. With this deck capable of gapless when set in its menu, there's no need to enforce it on the 'send' end. AQWO 2 display goes dark when it sees no signal. I didn't track how much elapsed time triggers the blackout but it's thoughtful behavior to extend the bright screen's longevity.



With my setup placing AQWO 2 at ~2.5m from my eyes, I found album art and meta data perfectly legible to make this a genuinely useful feature in the real world. Add your choice of background color and illumination intensity. Our French engineers clearly thought hard on how to best optimize this streaming aspect. Once displays and font sizes need 18-year-old retinas to make out, they fail my ageism grade. This one passed with flying colors.

Of course AQWO 2 is a disc spinner, too, with custom Delrin puck. In physical media mode the display looks exactly as expected. Extra are the hybrid layer, resampler, tube and menu

access icons. For resampling we don't specify multipliers like x 2, x 4 or x 8 but a single target frequency. When set to 384kHz for example, both 44.1 kHz and 48kHz family signal upconvert to that. Users who prefer integer upsampling must reset the target rate whenever the source material changes between audio and video rates; or DSD and PCM.

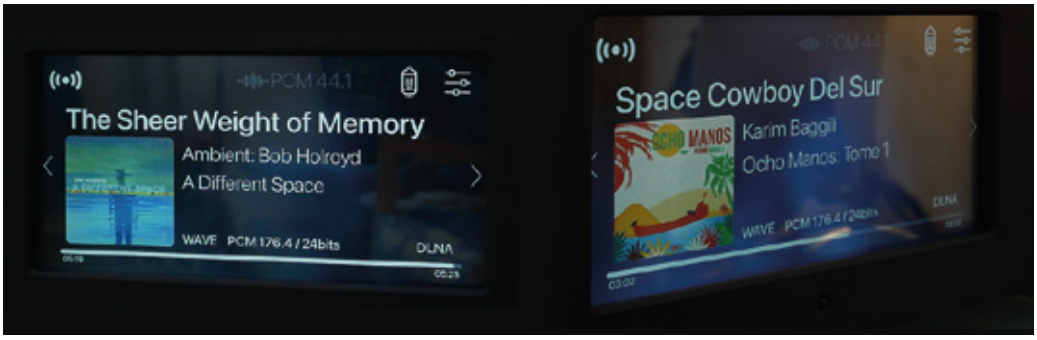
And that's pretty much all she said. Oui ma chérie. Why should a DAC/player or streamer be any more complex; particularly when networking over DLNA/UPnP with an iMac's 27" screen as GUI? I won't comment on wireless sources or mConnect. Our household is WiFi allergic. We hardwire everything. And I usually replace a post-iMac network leash with USB into a Singxer SU-6 bridge then AES/EBU to our Cen.Grand DSDAC 1.0 Deluxe. To demonstrate and test AQWO 2's networking chops simply required UPnP integration. And now our opening act on tech & features can already exit stage left. Time for the main gig: musical performance.



You *are* a bit dense, Part II.

Sonically and with its 6922 bypassed, the AQWO followed in the footsteps of our everything DSD1024 DAC. In the virtual sand of Robinson Crusoe's beach, it simply didn't leave imprints quite as deep. It meant similar tonal mass so high resolution clad in fleshiness if not hung quite to the same degree. Physicality blocks light to cast shadows. Ghosts pass light unhindered to throw no shadows. The Cen.Grand emphasized some extra physicality. The Métronome shifted toward a bit more transparency. Engaging its valves caused no deep triode sightings, not even medium murmurs. Whilst not entirely homeopathic, I'd call the difference degree surprisingly minor. My ears latched onto it mostly in the transient realm. That softened somewhat to suggest the archetypal "drawing with a blunter tip" expression. I also heard a modicum of extra connective tissue. My takeaway was that like Cen.Grand, Métronome's organic tuning embeds in how a transistorized discrete circuit and its overspec'd power supplies interface. The add-on optional tube stage was no more than the leathered-up version with plusher heated seats but the very same engine and chassis. Since I favour greater leading-edge punctuality over plumptiousness, I settled on tube bypass and 'hybrid' for the filter. Between RJ45 and AES/EBU, i.e. twin-slaved LHY network distributors vs. USB through the Singxer bridge, I gave the latter route a small edge. I'm obviously in no position to draw final conclusions about Métronome's network card. An inextricable part of the equation was my disparate digital signal processing. The AES/EBU stream included extra reclocking and dejittering in the SU-6 bridge. The CAT8a stream sidestepped it. Without a USB cable long enough to direct-connect iMac and DAC, I couldn't compare USB and network without our Singxer. A direct comparison could well have ended in a perfect draw. Like digital filter choices and whether to upsample or not, and if so in player software like

Audirvana or on a DAC's converter chip or separate FPGA, such differences get very subtle. They're for the end user to explore then set to taste and forget about for good.



Past its truly fabulous touch screen and vault build, AQWO 2's core appeal is a high-resolution sound with fully developed image density. In the variable balance which each listener adjusts between speed and comfort, lucidity and mass, I peg our French sitting close to center albeit a bit deeper in the density than detail half. "You're a bit dense" thus becomes the proper same emphasis; and again as a fine compliment not fat insult. Using this wording underlines how tonal mass is the door through which we enter to then meet resolution and all the other usual suspects. It's not just the first thing we notice. It's the quality which frames all others. In speaker terms it's the Harbeth/Spendor not Børresen/Vivid aesthetic. There's simply a qualifier. This balance isn't two-dimensional. There are levels to it. I like the image of a scale. As long as we apply equal weight to both sides, it can load up to infinity. Holding 15kg vs 15g doesn't change the balance but certainly scales up the load. On that score the DAC which our Cen.Grand replaced was Sonnet's Pasithea. That now works upstairs. Many reviews for it mean a useful benchmark. With spectacular S/NR specs, it's of very high resolution. The DSDAC 1.0 Deluxe met it then added more weight. The AQWO meets it too, just with somewhat less extra weight. This qualifier is critical. Density per se can be had with cheap Chinese valve amps of high measured distortion and very middling resolution. There are levels to balance. AQWO 2 loads up that scale; for a price. At £6K, our Cen.Grand demands far less but for it omits the luxurious touch screen, drops the streamer module, eliminates the SA/CD drive and cancels the valve option. It's high-value Chinese vs. boutique built-in-France economics. It's still marginal distribution vs. well-established dealer presence and name recognition. The latter might nearly be paraphrased as digital Nagra. In that view the AQWO range is their Classic range physically expanded to full size, Kalista the Reference series from Lausanne. On said branding score, very few are familiar with Cen.Grand as yet. Whether and how much that matters is in the eye and wallet of the prospective buyer.

The one desirable thing which AQWO 2 omits from my imaginary 'everything' list is volume control. Because it supports SACD/DSD, it couldn't be digital Leedh code without first converting to PCM. So it'd have to be a BurrBrown or Muses ladder-on-a-chip affair. Ferrum's Wandla embraces the latter. So does our Cen.Grand. It's how I usually control SPL to ditch a separate preamp. That's the only feature I'd personally add to a future AQWO 3. Here you could argue that the 64-bit dithered code in our Audirvana Studio player makes for a perfect stand-in already. End of coulda/woulda detour. For those who must know, my chosen controller for this review was a Life Changer Audio Gradient Box active crossover with precision remote-controlled volume. It's the small silver box beneath the 250-watt monos to the left of the subwoofer. On redundant features, many could call AQWO 2's digital outputs

that. What splurge maniac would part with €20K just to bypass a superb DAC? It's a fair point. But headfi users with existing DAC/amps could just spot a plausible scenario in which to exploit a digital feed in parallel to main system duty? Of course the XLR analog outs can easily run the main system, the parallel RCA a headfi amp sans DAC; or vice versa. Either way, the digital outputs seem there just for rare eventualities; and to accommodate as many users as possible.

As to the old question—do material discs still out-sound files—my observation is that to equal physical media over a quality top-loader transport, digital files over USB need help. Forget a generic laptop's USB port alone. My two-stage solution is to bypass Apple's core audio engine with Audirvana in extreme hog mode set to x 4 upsampling; then to reclock/dejitter the iMac's USB feed with the super-cap powered SU-6 bridge. Local files store on an external 4TB USB3 SSD drive. For cloud files I presently run two LHY network switches in series to isolate our fiber-optic modem. One switch alone still left crumbs under the table. Two switches now get very close indeed to our optimized USB. But in pricked-ear Spock mode, I still do prefer USB even if by just a subliminal sliver. With a top player like an AQWO 2 meanwhile, we need no extra shenanigans and boxes. We simply spin a disc off a single component. Done. At Métronome's execution, this plays at the peak of what a modern digital source can be. If you expect its network input to pull even, polish the pipeline between it and your router/modem. No free pass for networked audio; at least not for me when I play hard to please.

Also, I despise *having* to be online for local files.



In USB/local mode the Internet could crash and I wouldn't notice. In network mode I'd immediately be out of sound. That obviously goes for running local files over the network too, just for the spurious delight of cover art and meta data on AQWO 2 display. I already enjoy that at far higher pixel count and scale on a 5K 27" Retina display right next to my seat. It's my inner curmudgeon expounding on his pathetically puny pulpit. I'm fully cognizant how most modern users will screw in the short included WiFi antenna, set AQWO 2 to wireless then stream off a smartphone connected to Apple Music, Qobuz, Spotify, Tidal & Bros. On all that and actually having bought all the music I stream off my SSD, I'm a hardwired offline leprechaun; querulous, cantankerous and the odd chap out. The AQWO 2 simply doesn't care. It caters to my kinky kind and the vast always-on majority. It's a modern multi-tasker in the best sense of the word.

Readers who assume that I hold back sometimes ask by separate email whether I'd buy a certain component for myself. Today let's ask in public. Would I buy an AQWO 2? No. But

that's only because prior to our last move, I gave away our entire very large CD collection; and because with an iMac dedicated to just music playback, I have no need of a separate streamer with awesome touch screen. All I need is a top D/A converter; an AQWO 2 XS if you will. If I didn't already run the iMac/Cen.Grand combo; if I hadn't transferred a large CD collection onto SSD and added countless digital files bought off Qobuz and occasionally BandCamp; if it had volume control, I'd pursue today's 3-in-1 Métronome in a heartbeat. It unites streamer, spinner and DAC in one handsome well-built chassis without offboard power supply; and offers sounds right on par with what I ended up with after 20+ years on the beat. So now let's take it into the upstairs system and bump off Sonnet's Pasithea.

Given ongoing subtext, it won't surprise that what went bump in the light of day was another "you're a bit more dense" compliment. This extra weightiness telegraphed right off. So did absence of attendant loss of subjective resolution. All gain no pain. But there was a new lesson to be had; on unexpected tube microphonics. Whilst downstairs I'd heard zero direct evidence thereof (no tweeter hiss or midrange hum), a trio of recently updated Carbide Base Diamond isolators laboring in my second system made an advanced point. Once AQWO 2 floated on zirconia bearings in diamond-coated raceways plus viscoelastics plus a second layer of less extreme ball bearings, tube mode eliminated the downstairs 'connective tissue' injection. It even minimized leading-edge softening. Those effects apparently tied to subliminal vacuum-tube microphonics. Extreme decoupling now eliminated or at least noticeably diminished those. And that lowered a very particular kind of subtle distortion to focus 6922 contributions purely on the harmonic domain.

The takeaway is spicy like hot green Thai curry.

Just because small-signal triodes don't suffer the very obvious microphonics of big boutique power triodes like 45, 50, 2A3 and 300B doesn't imply that they're not present in more subtle form. If you're spending an extra €2'190 on Métronome's optional valve buffer and are keen to maximize it, a triplet of purpose-engineered isolation footers à la Carbide's best or the recently reviewed soundkaos Vibra 68 becomes a logical parallel upgrade. As an actual buyer of the latter recently put it to its maker, "thought I'd pop the Vibra in yesterday just to see for myself. Flippin' heck Martin .... stop it! It's like adding a new DAC two levels above the old one. More detail and definition across the range but most importantly, no loss of soul." In short, underestimate the importance of resonance control to your own detriment.

Minutes ago I stated that I'd not buy AQWO 2 due to extreme overkill for my far simpler functional needs. Now I must confess to an unseemly lust attack upstairs purely on sonics. My reviewer salary isn't in today's market. That simply didn't prevent audiophile reflexes from twitching hard. As they say, if you can't stand the heat of temptation, stay out of the reviewer's kitchen. Steady on old chap. This is the perfect place to step back on my puny pulpit. Just because I'll always pick speed in an either/or scenario doesn't mean I'm immune to the charms of curves and body. Au contraire. I simply won't pick the latter if they eat into the former. On that score AQWO 2 was a personally perfect player. It laid on image density and tone mass without sacrificing startle factor or lucidity. I find that a generally very difficult stunt to land. All of it leads to the inevitable conclusion. Now on ESS silicon previously AKM



(as elsewhere, this switch was due to the 20.10.2020 fire at the Asahi Kasei factory in Japan), AQWO 2's equals mon son idéal. The approach is classic old school. Linear power supplies rule; and the more the merrier. It means a full-size deck which weighs as much as many a 200wpc integrated. It also means 36 years of perfecting digital boutique audio. Here nothing fell out of the sky fully formed. Think constant evolution of incremental refinements which held steady to a clear vision on what type of sound to pursue. The original Jadis connection implied tubes. Today they're optional. The team in Montans learnt how to inject their aroma with just transistors. It's one more reason for my earlier 'Digital Nagra' connection; and this deck as full-size virtual member of their Classic range. Equally old school is the undying support of physical media, here the rare wrinkle of SACD which continue to enjoy enthusiastic embrace in Japan. Ultra modern is the embedded streaming module with lovely touch-screen display. LegacyFi meets FutureFi. Fuleg audio? Fully legit.

As the chosen setting of the companion YouTube video suggests, this is a luxury product for insider cognoscenti. (True, given available space, a real audiophile not actor would have set up his speakers far better.) Whilst the envious hoi polloi routinely insist that luxury clients have more money than sense or taste, AQWO 2 expresses unassailable taste and undeniably keen audiophile sense. This commoner for one wishes he could afford this silver version as that come-what-may forever source. What now comes instead is the sad end.

PS:

A reader wanted to know what the remote can control. Apart from the expected transport commands plus time remain, one can access and control all menu items; turn resampling on/off; set the resampling rate; adjust display brightness; engage/disengage tube mode; and turn the machine itself on/off. Another reader asked whether the USB host port can read an SD card. Without being on the network, that input isn't even seen. Unlike a portable audio player or FiiO R7, this deck can't be used as an offline SD transport/player despite a display that would be suitably large for purpose.

Main system:

Sources: Retina 5K 27" iMac late 2020 with Ventura 13.4, 40GB RAM, Audirvana Origin, Qobuz Sublime, Singxer SU-6 USB bridge, LHY Audio SW-8 network switch, Sonnet Pasithea DAC;

Active filter: icOn Gradient Box at 80Hz/4th-order hi/lo-pass;

Power amplifiers: Kinki Studio EX-B7 monos, Goldmund Job 225; **Headamp:** Cen.Grand Silver Fox; tAudio footers, Audio Physic Codex, Cube Audio Nenuphar Cables: Complete loom of Allnic Audio ZL; Power delivery: Vibex Granada/Alhambra on all source components, Vibex One 11R on amps, Furutech DPS-4.1 between wall and conditioners;
Equipment rack: Artesanía Audio Exoteryc double-wide 3-tier with optional glass shelves, Exoteryc Krion and glass amp stands; Sundry accessories: Acoustic System resonators, LessLoss Firewall for loudspeakers, Furutech NCF Signal Boosters; Room: 6 x 8m with open door behind listening seat

2nd system:

Source: Shanling M3 Ultra, Soundaware D300Ref;

DAC: Cen.Grand DSDAC 1.0 Deluxe;

Preamp/filter: Vinnie Rossi Signature L2 + icOn 4Pro + 4th-order/40Hz hi-low pass;

Amplifier: Enleum AMP-23R;

Loudspeakers: MonAcoustic SuperMon Mini, Dynaudio S18 sub;

Power delivery: Furutech GTO 2D NCF + Akiko Audio Corelli;

Equipment rack: Hifistay Mythology Transform X-Frame [on extended loan];
Sundry accessories: Audioquest Fog Lifters; Furutech NFC Clear Lines; Room: ~3.5 x 8m

Desktop system:

Source: HP Z230 work station Win10/64; USB bridge: Singxer SU-2;

Headamp/DAC: iFi iDSD Pro Signature;

Headphones: Final D-8000;

Active speakers: DMAX SC5

Upstairs headfi/speaker system:

Source: smsl Dp5 transport;

DAC: Auralic Vega; Integrated amplifier: Schiit Jotunheim R;

Phones: Raal-Requisite SR1a

2-channel video system:

Source: Oppo BDP-105;

All-in-One: Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe;

Loudspeakers: Zu Soul VI;

Subwoofer: Zu Submission;

Power delivery: Furutech eTP-8, Room: ~6x4m

Review component retail: €19'900, add €2'190 for tube output stage