MÉTRONOME

# TEST & REVIEW

# AQWO 2

## Hybrid DAC - SACD/CD - Streamer




Elmar Salmutter
Fairaudio

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# Talentshow




*It's not every day you take delivery of a package worth more than 22,000 euros. All the greater the pleasure, then, when it actually happens – as it did with the Métronome AQWO 2 universal player. This French machine combines a CD/SACD player, DAC and streamer in a single unit, and can be ordered with an optional Class A tube output stage, which was already fitted in our review sample. Delivered at an outside temperature of minus ten degrees, AQWO 2 (https://h-e-a-r.de/) was first given 24 hours to thaw out before being gently played in. Yet not for a single second does it sound like it has just come out of the freezer...*

No, Métronome Audio, a digital specialist founded in 1987, is no ordinary hi-fi manufacturer. You notice it not only from the price tag, but also when unpacking the handcrafted review unit: what a classy piece of kit! Admittedly, the gold front panel of AQWO 2 falls more into the "matter of taste" category and is likely to appeal to owners of Accuphase amplifiers. According to Arnd Rischmüller of H.E.A.R., the German distributor, the gold finish is a special colour available at no extra cost. Those who don't care for it can opt for the more understated silver or black-grey version of this 17-kilo machine, which exudes the luxurious aura of a bank vault.

Your eye is immediately drawn to the transport compartment on the top panel, with its gold aluminium cover that glides open and shut, buttery-smooth and rock-solid, as you take hold of it to load a CD. The transport comes from Marantz/Denon, whose designs, finished in Shirakawa, are highly acclaimed – and spin in the two brands' own premium products as well. The team led by Métronome boss Jean Marie Clauzel modified it in several places; the French speak of "proprietary improvements" designed to coax every last detail out of a CD. On this top-loader, the discs are held in place by a CD puck that – click! – attaches magnetically and sits rock-solid. It is made of Delrin, a thermoplastic, which is why Métronome also calls it the Delrin puck. Delrin is an alternative to metal and is ideally suited to industrial and mechanical applications. The whole ritual of loading a CD is a tactile delight that leaves you wanting more. Click, and "Play".

## The DAC section

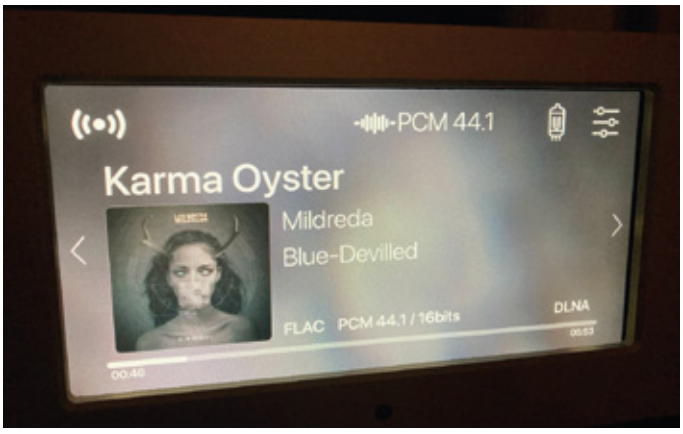
No surprise there: the Métronome AQWO 2, first unveiled at High End 2023 in Munich, belongs to the French company's Reference series, which is meant to embody perfection in

both craftsmanship and sound. This flagship player doesn't just play CDs and SACDs – it also works as a DAC. A look at the rear panel reveals digital inputs for other sources: AES/EBU, S/PDIF, Toslink and USB-B. This refined French machine can handle PCM files up to 32-bit/384 kHz and DSD files up to DSD512. According to Métronome, AQWO 2 decodes DSD natively, without DoP conversion or downsampling.




Compared with its outwardly similar predecessor – the original AQWO, still available (€16,990 plus €2,190 for the optional tube output stage) – AQWO 2 looks quite different on the inside. D/A conversion is handled by the eight-channel ES9039PRO chip from the ESS Sabre Pro range, regarded as ESS Technology's flagship. Métronome has also reworked the electronic design and the firmware. The AQWO, launched in 2018, relies instead on two AK4497 DAC chips in a dual-mono configuration. The German distributor attributes the change partly to the limited availability of the previous chip. As you may recall, in October 2020 a fire raged for three days at chipmaker AKM.

The Métronome AQWO 2's DAC can be fine-tuned under the "DAC" heading of the main menu, which is operated via the touchscreen (a nice touch: the background colour can be changed). In other words, owners can try out various filters, set the analogue output level, and switch the Class A tube output stage (two JAN 6922 tubes) on or off, provided it was ordered. According to the distributor, around 50 per cent of buyers order this option straight away. Eight different PCM filters are available in all, each shaping how the signal builds up and settles when processing transients. The analogue output voltage (the unit offers both RCA and XLR outputs) can – very commendably! – be set to one of three levels: 1.4, 2.5 or 3 volts. Many settings can also be adjusted with the supplied remote control, but I preferred experimenting on the large touchscreen. There are digital outputs too: S/PDIF, AES/EBU and I2S via an HDMI connector. I do wonder, though, why anyone would use them, given this world-class DAC.




But that's not all: the gloriously large seven-inch touchscreen, still legible from three metres away, opens up yet another playground in the "Digital" menu. Here you can set the resampling rate, S/PDIF DoP output and MQA decoding.

## Streaming machine




Another main menu heading ("Stream") reveals a further talent of the Métronome AQWO 2: unlike its predecessor, it has a built-in streaming module. This addition is the biggest difference from the AQWO. When I asked Métronome, I learned that the streaming function is based on the same board in every unit, from the DSS 2 up to AQWO 2. AQWO 2 can be connected to the home network wirelessly using the supplied Wi-Fi antenna, or via Ethernet cable – which I managed with no trouble at all. For control, Métronome recommends Conversdigital's mconnect Control app, available free for Apple and Android devices, which worked flawlessly and reliably throughout the weeks of testing. The app integrates Deezer, TIDAL, Qobuz and Spotify, as well as vTuner internet radio. AQWO 2 is also Roon Ready and, last but not least, gets along perfectly with the audiophile Audirvana software for PC and Mac.

The French engineers also placed great emphasis on the power supply, which, as is well known, has a decisive influence on sound quality. Hence the use of three toroidal transformers with Schaffner filters and ten independent regulation stages. The unit also features EMI and RFI shielding and is more than solidly built in every other respect – the front panel, for instance, is machined from 10 mm-thick aluminium. Enough technology and head work: let's leave the verdict to our ears – and our gut and heart. Click.

## Métronome AQWO 2: Listening Test & Comparisons




I always let new review units play away in the background for a day or two before listening attentively and carefully reflecting on what I hear. Quite often, the differences from what I'm used to are fairly subtle at first, with clearer character traits only emerging over time. Not so with the Métronome AQWO 2: it sounds different from the very first note! To put it another way, no review unit has ever glued me to my system so instantly – first with two or three CDs, then as a pure DAC, and a few days later as a streamer too. On the very first CD (Girls Under Glass: Backdraft), I notice that the individual instruments are more clearly separated from one another – they cling together less. By comparison, everything I'd heard before seemed muddy and frayed at the edges; in other words, simply not as clearly delineated. With the Métronome AQWO 2, on the other hand, there is a remarkable amount of air between all the

instruments. And yet – and this is crucial! – the sound picture doesn't fall apart into disjointed fragments, but remains as coherent as ever, all of a piece.



A quick switch to the French player's DAC section: a while ago I discovered the Australian artist Zanias, whose third album, Chrysalis, celebrates a purely electronic blend of dark wave, eighties pop, EBM and techno. I often play the album, stored as WAV files on the Innuos Zenith MK3 server, through the PrimaLuna EVO 100 Tube DAC – an outstanding D/A converter for its price (€3,500) – which feeds the signal to the McIntosh MA8900 AC integrated amplifier.

When I swap in AQWO 2 as the DAC, this punchy album gains yet more clarity, edge definition and spaciousness: the soundstage, which begins level with the line between the speakers, sounds wider and now extends a little further beyond the sides of my loudspeakers (Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III, €13,400). On the single "Metrics", I also immediately notice that the stage projects further forward; there is simply much more room here for clearly separated instruments. These stand rock-solid, crystal-clear and three-dimensional in the room, in a way I have never heard at home before. The same goes for depth layering: the voice floats in the centre, slightly in front of the synth pads, which are clearly set further back but happily drift forward by a few centimetres now and then, and back again. Impressive.

## Resolution: Warm Sound & Cold Nights



I probably don't need to stress that all this comes with an exceptionally high level of resolution. It's evident, for example, on Sivert Høyem's new album On An Island, recorded in the middle of the pandemic in an old church on a small Norwegian fishing island. For this solo album, the singer – best known as frontman of the indie rock band Madrugada – deliberately chose not an acoustically damped studio with all its digital aids, but a large, true-to-life space, where he, his fellow musicians and sound engineer Bjarne Stenslie placed microphones all around. The end result sounds not only expansive, but also warm, melancholic and analogue, even though the damp chill of the nights keeps creeping in. On the opening title track, carried only by sparse guitar chords and Høyem's unique baritone, the strings resonate for an extremely long time. The comparison shows that with AQWO 2, this decay lasts a little longer and is more precise than with the PrimaLuna DAC. Yet despite its extremely high resolution, the Métronome AQWO 2 never sounds overly analytical, but always clear, coherent and natural. Not a trace of digital harshness.◊

## Tonal Balance



In purely tonal terms, this refined French machine has a similar balance to my older McIntosh MC301 CD player (€5,650 at the time): slightly on the warm side. It pulls off the feat of delivering extremely high resolution without ever forgetting the soul of the music. In other words, AQWO 2 is an all-rounder not only in terms of features but also in sound, appealing both to lovers of analytical detail and to those who simply want to enjoy their music. What's more, I can't imagine any group of listeners who wouldn't fall for it instantly.

## Precise Soul-Stroker

So if you ask me now what it actually is, I have to answer: it's everything. The McIntosh CD player also qualifies as a soul-stirrer, but comes nowhere near the clarity, soundstage size, illumination and resolution of the Métronome AQWO 2. No wonder: the French player also costs four times as much. Nor, of course, can the Teac VRDS-701 CD player and DAC (€2,500), which I reviewed a few months ago, keep up in terms of resolution, clarity and soundstaging – although it does a very good job for its price class, even if it also sounds a little more sober and emotionally detached.

## Sound Tuning Options

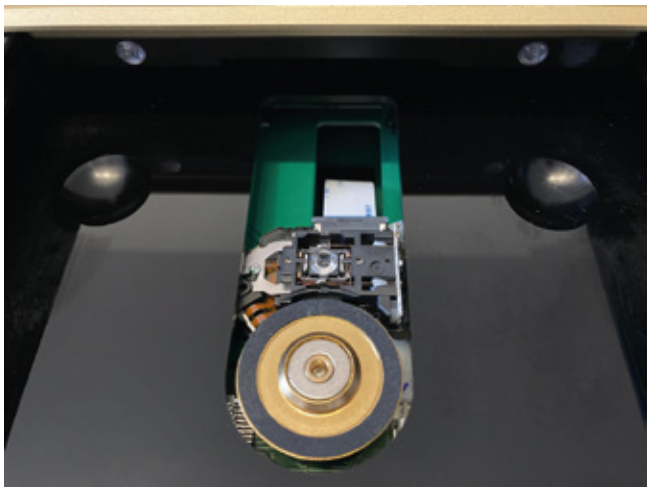


The tube output stage of the Métronome AQWO 2 was active for this sound description. Switching it off, however, makes only a slight difference – the sound becomes marginally more matter-of-fact, but remains very, very engaging. Anyone paying almost €20,000 for this unit should order the tube output stage as well, since the extra €2,190 hardly makes a difference at that point. Then there are the eight different PCM filters to choose from. Métronome writes: "The different filter models may sound subjectively better depending on the type of source material and your listening habits." After a little experimenting, I settled permanently on the "Brickwall" filter. That said, the differences between the filters range from minimal to, for me, imperceptible. When it comes to resampling, too, new owners can decide according to taste – anywhere from PCM 44.1 up to DSD256.

## CD Player, DAC, Streamer – and a Royal Road?

Naturally, I put all three of this universal source's access routes – CD player, DAC and streamer – through their paces extensively. The result: all three perform at the same level. Since I own the Dead Can Dance album Within the Realm of a Dying Sun (1987) both as a conventional CD and as a Japanese SACD edition, I was able to check the SACD advantage: more detail, and sound even more detached from the speakers – much like the benefits of many high-resolution downloads.

## The Spirits, summoned



Speaking of 1987: that was the year the dark electro-industrial band yelworC was formed in Munich. After a long hiatus, they recently released The Ghosts I Called, a new album that is fascinating in many respects. When I first heard it, it struck me as relatively quiet for a modern electronic record without vocals. Over time, I understood why: to leave dynamic headroom (think Loudness War). There are passages on this album (in "Mute Voices", for example) that make me flinch, because the bass suddenly surges so much in both level and depth. That makes the album a perfect test tool for bass and macrodynamics. Even with my Innuos Zenith MK3 as the source and the DAC built into the McIntosh integrated amplifier, the bass precision and articulation are captivating – with the Métronome AQWO 2 as the DAC, both reach another level altogether: it's incredible how much becomes audible here, combined with enormous depth. Yet despite this depth, the bass never drifts into excessive bloat, let alone becoming flabby or uncontrolled, but always remains beautifully defined.

One small reservation, though: macrodynamics don't quite reach this level. On the yelworC track mentioned above, AQWO 2 renders jumps in level very dynamically, but not with extreme explosiveness. Here my fast PrimaLuna tube DAC is a little snappier – which is not to say that the French player sounds soft or lacking in temperament in this respect, not at all. As an aesthete, it's simply not its signature discipline: it prefers flow to sudden ambush.◊



The fact that AQWO 2 is a touch snappier again when it comes to microdynamics doesn't fundamentally change its aesthete's flair: it renders small differences in volume lightning-fast, sharply outlined and clearly perceptible even at lower levels. The precision of detail retrieval and the perfectly timed accuracy of level changes are thoroughly convincing here – for instance on the beautiful dream-pop track "Prayer Remembered" from Slowdive's latest album, Everything Is Alive (2023). The song drifts past the listener like a gentle ribbon of

cloud that soon dissolves, and the French player conveys every tiny change in level without disturbing the dreamy flow. Superb!

## Soaring Heights




Let's glide on to the treble and midrange. The former conveys a great deal of information, yet never grates on the listener despite its high level of analysis. We've already covered resolution: everything that can be there is there – and yet nothing ever stands out from the sound picture or seems isolated like a hermit. Beyond that, I find the Métronome AQWO 2's treble very airy, with just a slight hint of velvet and suppleness that makes it eminently suitable for long listening sessions. I never felt I was overtaxing my ears, especially as the high frequencies neither stand out in level nor fall away. This, too, reminds me of the PrimaLuna EVO 100 tube DAC – though the Métronome achieves it with higher resolution and greater clarity overall.

After the death of guitarist Geordie Walker in November 2023, I listened to a lot of Killing Joke, especially the legendary 1985 album Night Time, which inspired not only Nirvana to later great things. On "Love Like Blood", the band's anthem par excellence, AQWO 2 lets me admire Geordie's guitar work more precisely and with more air than ever before – without it sounding detached from the rest. Sigh.

The Métronome AQWO 2 conveys the midrange with a touch of sweetness that speaks to both gut and soul. Beautiful voices come across as transparent as they are heart-piercing – which brings me back to the Dead Can Dance album Within the Realm of a Dying Sun mentioned earlier, and the unique voices of Lisa Gerrard and Brendan Perry. I have heard the classically tinged "Summoning of the Muse" in particular hundreds of times in my life, but never as emotionally gripping as with the Métronome. Lisa Gerrard's voice emerges bell-clear from the mix, yet AQWO 2 doesn't overdo the warmth or the richness of tonal colour in the midrange and remains neutral – apart from that velvety touch of sweetness.



# Verdict: Métronome AQWO 2

While the Métronome AQWO 2 was my guest, I played the lottery. Because if I ever got the idea of buying this fine piece without a substantial lottery win, my wife would have my head (and probably the bank too). Since my top prize of €9.80 unfortunately didn't quite stretch far enough, I had to send it back to the distributor – sniff – with a heavy heart. It combines a CD/-SACD player, DAC and streamer in a single chassis, and thus qualifies as a universal source or all-in-one unit that replaces all of these separate components.

It's not only the vault-like build quality, the buttery-smooth top-loading mechanism and the large touchscreen that linger long in the memory, but even more so its sonic prowess. Soundstaging, yes – but three-dimensionality and image focus: incredible! Combined with the extremely high resolution AQWO 2 delivers, you might easily think you were dealing with a dry, analytical bean-counter who loses sight of the big picture and the soul of the music. But that is never the case – quite the opposite: this uncompromising French machine masterfully walks the tightrope between analysis and musical beauty, which is why it suits both those who simply want to enjoy their music and analytical listeners who like to hear the grass grow.

Only fans of extreme macrodynamic escapades might not get quite everything they want. Apart from that, the only thing missing for ultimate bliss would be a volume control to turn it into a preamplifier – but hey, that's complaining at the very highest level. If you have the means, or are simply curious, I recommend spending an hour or so auditioning the AQWO 2. But be warned: personally, I won't be rid of the ghosts I called any time soon – the French machine has left me with a veritable earworm. A reference that has surely come to stay for a long time.




## The Métronome AQWO 2…

- Opens up a huge musical stage that extends far to the sides and forward. Its three-dimen sionality, image focus and depth layering are in the premier league.
- Shines with extremely high resolution and detail retrieval, yet never comes across as overly analytical or unforgiving, but always clear, coherent and natural.
- Appeals equally to music lovers AND detail enthusiasts, as this multi-format player never sounds hard, digital or soulless despite its extremely high resolution. Tonally, it even leans slightly towards the warm side.
- Digs very deep into the bass cellar, yet never softens even under heavy salvos of deep bass.

- Grips firmly in terms of macrodynamics, though without ultra-brutal ruthlessness, while its lightning-fast microdynamics are snappier.
- Delivers highly resolved, airy treble with a hint of velvet that doesn't tire the ears, even during long listening sessions.
- Indulges the listener with a slightly warm midrange and superb, highly transparent vocal reproduction.
- Is flawlessly built and, with its large touchscreen, also very easy on the eyes. It combines a streamer, DAC and CD player in a single chassis.

## Specifications:

- Model: Métronome AQWO 2
- Concept: all-in-one player combining CD player, D/A converter and streamer
- Price: €22,180 with tube output stage, €19,990 without tube output stage
- Dimensions & weight: 425 × 130 × 415 mm (W × H × D), 17 kg
- Digital inputs: USB-B, coaxial S/PDIF, AES/EBU, Toslink, LAN
- Digital outputs: coaxial S/PDIF, AES/EBU, I2S via HDMI connector
- Analogue outputs: RCA, XLR
- Compatibility: PCM up to 32-bit/384 kHz and DSD512, MQA
- Power consumption: 40 W (in operation), 32 W (in warm-up mode)
- Finishes: aluminium silver, black, gold
- Other: remote control
- Warranty: 2 years
- More information on the distributor's website