MÉTRONOME

TEST & REVIEW

AQWO 2

Hybrid DAC - SACD/CD - Streamer



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HI-FI +

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The Metronome AQWO 2 impresses quietly. When you take it out the box, it is as heavy (at 17kg) as many amplifiers I have reviewed. But you'd never know it to look at it – unless you open it up, then there are clues such as the six power supply transformers.

It is solidly made and the aluminium slab that serves as its front panel was finished in a gorgeous gold colour that really looked classy. Impressive touches too were visible in small things, such as the logo and brand name machined into the metal on the top right-hand edge.

This was my first acquaintance with a Metronome product and so I was keen to learn more about the company. It was originally founded in France by a woodworker by the name of Dominique Giner in 1987. The name was inspired by his first product, the 16in high MT1 loudspeaker, which was shaped like a metronome. The company then moved on to manufacture CD players, developed in conjunction with another French company, Jadis. It gained a higher profile after the launch of its Kalista by Metronome CD transport in 2002.

New Owner, new love

Current owner and designer Jean Marie Clauzel came onto the scene in 2013, when Giner was looking to retire. Clauzel bought the company as he says he fell in love with its products. He was an agronomist by trade before buying Metronome and he has admitted in interviews I have read that he is not a digital designer, but has a great team behind him. But, he says, his ears are the final judges.



The whole philosophy of Clauzel's company is based around the concept of 'Le vrai son' (the true sound). He once said: "We try to make people forget about the sound and that the music is coming from a digital device. Our slogan, 'le vrai son' means we try to reach, as much as possible, the original recording. We try to make it as 'analogue' as possible."

And so for Metronome and Clauzel, it is all about teamwork and when asked what makes his product special, he will tell you it is all about the quality of build, and Metronome prides itself on the fact that all of its products are made by hand by its craftsmen in France. "For me," he once said, "high end is all about handcrafting."

When he took the reins at Metronome, he also wanted to move the company away from being just a pure CD player manufacturer and move it towards becoming a digital sources specialist, and he says it took him around five years after joining the company to renew its ranges.

Now the Metronome product line-up consists of the Le Streamer at £4,799, the Le DAC 2 at £6,700, the Le Player 4 CD transport at £7,300, the c/AQWO DAC at £21,000 and t/AQWO transport at £22,000.

Affordable high-end?

AQWO is the high-end range for Metronome, but there is also a Classica range of products that is billed as 'more affordable'. But given the company also makes ultra-fi brand Kalista, 'more affordable' is a fairly plastic term.

The original AQWO integrated CD/SACD player, DAC and streamer was introduced in 2018 and was a replacement for its successful CD8. The AQWO2 I am reviewing here was unveiled to the world at the Munich High End show this year.

It was a brave move perhaps to change a winning formula, especially as the original AQWO was Metronome's all-time best-seller, but AQWO 2 came in and was housed on a bigger chassis, gained extra functionality such as a universal CD player with SACD capability and a network player/streamer, 100% new improved electronics and the well-respected ESS 9038 Pro chipset at the heart of its DAC, which is said to decode all music formats in their native form, with PCM up to 384kHz and DSD up to 512.

The player is a top loader and uses a modified transport mechanism developed by the D&M Group (now Sound United). Metronome says it chose it because it is a high-quality product that comes from experienced developers that were also behind the Denon and Marantz brands. CDs are loaded by sliding back the solid aluminium door, which also is finished in gold and has the Metronome logo engraved on it. A puck is provided to clamp the CD firmly in place when playing. The playing mech is supported on a substantial three-point suspended subchassis.

Metronome says it has paid special attention to the power supply design in AQWO 2, as it believes it is an important factor in achieving the best sound quality. It uses four toroidal transformers with Schaffner filters and 10 independent voltage regulators.

It seems that for the streamer Metronome has sourced a high-quality, industry-standard model and it recommends that this is controlled using the mConnect app. It is also said to be Roon-ready, but I used mConnect for my listening. It is simple, works well with Tidal and had no trouble locating AQWO 2 on my network.
Send in the Cones.

The machine is also unusual in that it does not sit on rubber feet, as most do, and is fitted

instead with three metal cone-shaped feet, each narrowing to a single point of contact, which doubtless is intended to help isolate it from its surroundings.



The rear panel provides USB, RCA S/PDIF, XLR AES/EBU, Toslink optical and HDMI digital inputs with S/PDIF, AES/EBU and I2S output, while there are phono unbalanced and XLR balanced analogue outputs. There is also an RJ45 socket to connect to your network if you choose wired operation rather than wi-fi. The front panel of this handsome machine sports just a large, 7in colour touch screen to control the device and nothing else to add unnecessary clutter, and indeed everything you need can be accessed from that screen.

The large display has five basic modes – Digital, DAC, Stream, Display and Other. The digital screen lets you select signal resampling for the digital output and MQA decoding, the DAC screen lets you choose from a selection of eight internal digital filters, change the analogue output level and select tube output (an optional extra). Stream displays metadata and allows you to select wi-fi or gapless mode, the Display mode lets you select various screen parameters and 'Others' shows you things like the firmware edition and lets you restore factory default settings.

My review sample was fitted with the optional tube output stage, which uses twin Electro-Harmonix 6922 dual triode valves. I have used many DACs where a tube output has been included and, rather perplexingly, especially as I am a tube amplifier convert, I have always preferred the solid state option. Would that be the case with the Metronome?

Well, it was something I had to decide on before starting my main listening, so I might as well reveal my findings on that now, before getting on to setting those internal digital filters. What I found was odd really, and definitely at odds with what I find from good valve amps. Using tube output on a favourite Larry Carlton track, I felt that his guitar did not sound so well focused. I could not hear as precisely how each note was played and shaped and drums and percussion also seemed to lack bite. Bass guitar was definitely fuller, but not as articulate or tuneful. On vocal content, I felt that voices were cleaner, clearer and had more space around them with tube output disabled. So I left it switched off for the rest of my listening.

Slowly going mad

Next I had to decide on which digital filter to use. I have driven myself slowly mad listening to the differences between such filters and usually the differences are slight. The choices were Linear Phase Fast or Slow, Minimum Phase Fast or Slow, Apodising Fast, Minimum Phase and Brickwall. In the past that I have always preferred filters that are slow-acting rather than fast,

and ended up liking Linear Phase Slow for its better note edge definition and inner detail and weight on bass lines. But my final choice was Minimum Phase Slow, as it was maybe marginally more revealing on guitar. So that's where I left it set.

I also compared oversampling on (DSD128) or off. Here, as I have previously found on other DACs, I preferred it without oversampling as it tended to make hi-hats and cymbals sound more muffled, robbed sax of some of its body and made vocals sound a bit less human. The DX7 synth on one of my favourite tracks, for example, did not have the signature sparkle that it should have had. So, it stayed off.

To evaluate AQWO 2, I hooked it up to my Audio Note Meishu Tonmeister amp driving both Audio Note AN-J LX Hemp and Russell K Red 120Se speakers. I also had another well respected, comparably-priced CD player/DAC/streamer to hand as a yardstick.

First I listened to the CD player and played the track 'Never Too Far to Fall' from George Benson's In Your Eyes album. Straight away I liked the openness and articulation/emotion in Benson's vocals and the weight, tightness and rhythmic drive of the synth bass line. AQWO 2 separated out the different strands of the music well, allowed you to listen to what each musician was doing, while driving the music along apace. My benchmark player made things sound slow and stodgy by comparison.

'On Sunny Side of the Street' from Ben Sidran's Enivré d'Amour, the Metronome conveyed the bass guitar line with more weight and movement, allowed Sidran's vocals to soar and captured the movement of the track well. The DX7 synth had a nice top end sparkle to it and on balance the track flowed and moved along nicely.

Peter White's guitar on the track 'I Can See Clearly Now' from his Groovin' album sounded really good and his guitar was cleanly etched with incisive leading edges and a good insight into how each note was played. And again rhythmically, AQWO 2 proved to be no slouch, conveying that reggae-style lilting rhythm that drives the track along.

So what was its streamer like? Well, I called up Tidal on mConnect and played 'Spanish Harlem' from Rebecca Pigeon's excellent The Raven album. I have to say it conveyed her atmospheric vocals very well indeed and her voice was open and the emotional content well conveyed.

Switching to the much funkier 'Honey Dipped' on Dave Koz's Saxophonic, I was impressed by the presence, bite and expressiveness of his alto sax. His sax was full bodied and I was pleased to be able to follow Jerry Hey's trumpet part, which did not get subsumed in the mix.

Morning blast

Next I had a quick blast of 'Morning' from the George Benson/Al Jarreau Giving' It Up collaboration. The Metronome caught the style and feel of Benson's guitar play well and the scat vocal lines were coherently presented. All in all, the track moved really well.

So it is time to reach a decision. And I am pleased to say that although I did not know much about Metronome when I embarked on this review, I have learnt that it is a serious company, committed to quality and an 'analogue sound' and AQWO 2 delivered an excellent, musical, dynamic and tuneful performance that made listening to music a pleasure. Its ultra-fi Kalista sister brand threw down a challenge that AQWO 2 rises to meet.

AQWO2 took everything I threw at it in its stride and never gave me cause for concern. It is beautifully made and finished, easy to use and makes music. What more could you ask for? It more than holds its own at this price point and should not be overlooked if you are in the market for a versatile and great-sounding digital source solution.

Technical specifications

- Type CD/SACD player, DAC and streamer
- Transport mechanism Customised SACD Sound United
- Digital inputs and outputs USB, S/PDIF, XLR AES/EBU, Toslink optical, HDMI (I2S)
- Analogue outputs Balanced and unbalanced
- DAC resolution 32bit/768kHz dual mono, PCM 384kHz and DSD512
- DAC chipset ESS 9038 Pro
- Dimensions 435mm (W) × 130mm (H) × 425mm (D)
- Weight 17kg
- Price £17,800, £20,000 with tube output