MÉTRONOME

TEST & REVIEW

AQWO 2

Hybrid DAC + SACD/CD + Streamer



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A charming companion for the truly discerning listener

Southern France: a land of delicious food, beautiful wine, near-constant sunshine and a generally gentle, harmonious calm. It is also home to Métronome, one of the finest manufacturers of digital audio sources you can buy today. The company is small but remarkably active, innovating and renewing its range unusually often. At this year's Munich show it unveiled its latest product, the AQWO 2 SACD player, which reportedly shares little more than its name and basic physical features with the previous generation.

First and foremost, the underlying concept has changed. AQWO 2 (its name comes from the ancient Greek word akouo, meaning "to hear well") no longer simply plays CDs and SACDs and offers several digital inputs; it also features a built-in streamer drawing on the know-how gained from developing the company's flagship solutions such as the DSC and DSS.

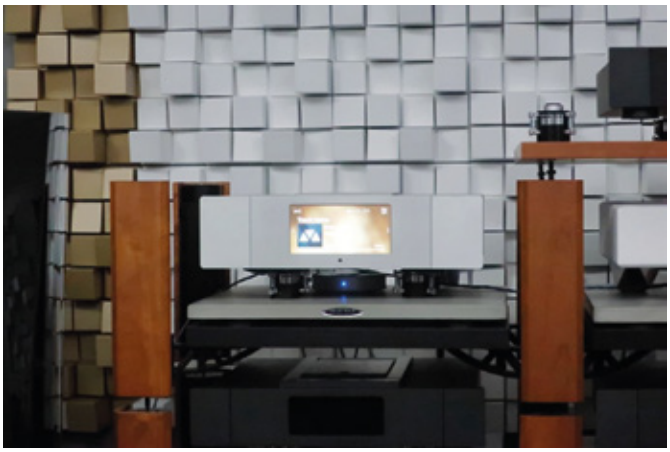
AQWO 2 is a fairly large player, with a sturdy, very clean front panel fitted with a 6.5" multicolour touchscreen whose graphics are attractive and easy to read. As a result, no physical control buttons are needed. The only real "design" flourish is the division of the panel into three sections: the two small outer sections are brushed, while the centre is smooth. The logo engraved along the top edge also looks very elegant.



The cleanness of the front panel is helped by the absence of a disc drawer. The transport is instead accessed via a sliding metal plate on the top surface, which glides with a beautifully smooth, almost oily action. Slide the cover back and you'll see a black plastic tray with only the most essential parts visible: the disc spindle and a magnetic puck made of damping Delrin. Changing CDs is therefore actually more of a pleasure than loading a conventional drawer.

Compared with the beautifully finished cover and front of the chassis, the rear panel is somewhat simpler, but practically laid out. On the left is the power socket with a substantial rocker switch, followed by a set of digital inputs (AES, coaxial, optical and USB for connecting to a computer), then an Ethernet socket, a Wi-Fi antenna and a USB port for storage devices (though for service purposes only; the AQWO 2 cannot read from them). You also get a whole array of digital outputs for future upgrades: AES/EBU, coaxial and, above all, I^2S over HDMI, the ideal connection to the company's own D/A converters. The player provides analogue

outputs in both RCA and XLR form.



The foundation of it all is, of course, the transport. Métronome uses a custom-modified mechanism from D&M. That said, one could argue that the truly fundamental element is the oversized power supply, as is customary for the company. Inside you'll find four toroidal transformers and a total of 10 separate regulated power supplies, so that each of the critical sections gets "its own peace and quiet".

Métronome traditionally doesn't discuss how it designs its internal circuitry or which components it uses. It is possible to find out that ES9038 chips should be at work inside, but the only thing you'll learn for certain is that AQWO 2 handles PCM at up to 32-bit/384 kHz and DSD512. Métronome supports upsampling the signal to precisely these maximum values (selectable on the display, as are three output voltage levels), as well as a choice of digital filters.

You'll also learn that both analogue outputs deliver a slightly higher-than-standard maximum voltage (since it is selectable) of 3 V RMS, along with the unit's physical dimensions. At 42.5 cm wide, 13 cm high and 41.5 cm deep, AQWO 2 ranks among the larger players, as its 17 kg weight underlines.

We listened to the AQWO 2 in the importer's showroom in Kopřivnice, paired with Rockport Technologies Atria II loudspeakers and an Alluxity Int One mkII integrated amplifier, using a mix of Nordost Tyr 2 and Valhalla 2 cables. For comparison, we had the original AQWO model on hand.



It should be said right away that the A/B change in reproduction quality is substantial. Métronome is one of the few brands where, across generational updates, we have never yet noticed differences of a merely cosmetic nature; it has always been a tangible and unambiguous transformation. And fortunately, a step forward: in resolution, precision and overall perspective, although the company's full-bodied style and sense of rich, expansive colour remain clearly recognisable.

Ralf Gauck's bass guitar is generally recorded to be a slightly showy, generously exposed low-frequency treat. That holds true for "Little Wing" ("Ultimate Tunes 2" | 2013 | stereoplay). On AQWO 2, the slow, drawn-out plucking sounded almost unbelievably richer, more defined

and more taut, as if you had put your ear closer to the rig Gauck plays through. The first generation is entertaining, voluminous and soft, with a supple sway; here the size, weight and sense of richness remain, but there is much better firmness at the edges of the notes, which therefore come across as far more defined, and there is simply more of them in terms of power and emphasis. In any case, that beautiful dimension of entirely non-technical fluidity is retained.



Grace Slick's delicate yet charismatic vocals with Jefferson Airplane on "Triad", a David Crosby cover ("Crown of Creation" | recorded 1968 | Culture Factory | 0819514010265), sounded fragile, almost ethereal on the original AQWO. On AQWO 2, however, without losing any of that elegant charm, they took on a considerably firmer and more physical form. It's not that you could name specific details you're now hearing for the first time, but you perceive a more three-dimensional, clearer sound, simply more distinct. The difference is of such a class that AQWO 2 could probably exist alongside the first version as a higher-tier model.

The tinkling little jazz number "Feeling Alive" performed by the Agathe Jazz Quartet ("Räumlichkeit & Transparenz Vol. 1" | 2015 | stereoplay) had roughly the same treble balance, but the cymbals were unquestionably brighter and (it's hard to find a more descriptive word) more metallic. The gentle rustles and ringing crashes come across as natural and luminous, yet never shrill in any way. It's a metallic sound with a certain elegance, nonchalantly resolved and even more "effortless" than before. Here we are listening in the high-end sphere, where one can simply sit back and savour.

The musically accomplished rendition of Vivaldi's "La Primavera" by the chamber ensemble I Musici ("The Four Seasons" | 1993 | Belart | 450 051-2) took a surprisingly deep breath with the AQWO 2 compared with the previous generation. The already large sound seemed to expand even further, but above all, the added definition makes it feel as though you had moved several rows closer to the stage. It's more powerful and considerably more immediately gripping, less relaxed, yet still picturesque, even poetic. You get the feeling the music has "stoked up the boiler", without it coming across as forced or strained in any way; on the contrary, the sense of perspective and self-assurance is immense.



A very pronounced change in how the reproduced music is perceived in terms of defini-

tion and sense of control (which was by no means bad before) was confirmed by Iannis Xenakis's highly complex 16-minute work for piano and orchestra, "Keqrops" ("Synephaï" | 1986 | Decca | 476 5430). With AQWO 2, it was as if you could immerse your attention much deeper among the instruments; it was markedly easier, for instance, to make out the delicate sounds of the piano beneath the orchestra's chaotic eruptions. AQWO 2 handles the almost diabolically unpredictable, instantaneous shifts in rhythm, texture and intensity in such a way that the chaos seems literally ironed out, undue tension is removed, and the picture remains clear and legible, not unlike "tuning" a room's acoustics so that the impression of, say, flutter echoes disappears. Everything settles and calms down.



In terms of spatial presentation on "That Old Feeling" by Paul Desmond and Jim Hall ("Easy Living" | 2000 | recorded 1965 | RCA Victor | 74321747962), the new AQWO 2 plays in a characteristically "expansive" manner, so the sound is large in its proportions and fairly imposing. That was essentially comparable with the original AQWO, however. What has been added is a sense of greater vertical scale, as if the instruments were closer to the floor and rose in their larger-than-life size right up above the system. "More settled" would also be a fitting term. We would attribute the better legibility mainly to the greater amount of detail and the overall improvement in definition, but the soundstage itself comes across as wonderful, expansive, airy and three-dimensional, with an almost tangible sense of the instruments' physical mass.

Although the original AQWO can hardly be accused of lacking energy, it is somewhat "comfortable" and slightly swaying, imposing rather like the Mississippi somewhere in the middle of the forests. "All In", with its very emphatic bass rhythm, sounds on it like a bolt of silk sliding off a table. AQWO 2, however, seems to stoke up the boiler and properly warm the music up, adding to the overall juiciness, but above all to the emphasis, physicality and intensity. The music thus pumps away willingly and sweeps you along until you want to get up and move to it.

For decades, Métronome has carried a reputation as a maker of truly top-flight and, above all, immensely enjoyable digital sources, and the latest AQWO 2 will certainly not tarnish it. The basic principle has remained the same between generations, but the feature set has been expanded with streaming (which, in our testing via mConnect, worked flawlessly from both TIDAL and local storage), putting the price increase in an acceptable light. Should you wish, the valve output stage adds warmth, but also softness, so in our view it is by no means an essential add-on. The ability to play with digital filters also subtly alters the overall character, giving you a versatile device capable of interpreting practically anything in your digital music collection. But above all, you get a player that performs with charisma and verve, exceptionally dynamic and rich, with a remarkably engaging dose of musicality. As a result,

the music simply has magic and emotion; it brings joy and breathes with life. The Métronome AQWO 2 is a charming companion for the truly discerning listener.

PLUS

- ✓ A considerable sonic leap over the previous generation
- ✓ Quite nice range of settings
- ✓ Fair-performing streaming as a bonus
- ✓ Build quality and materials offering good value
- ✓ An actually acceptable price increase (given the gain in quality, general inflation and the added streamer)

MINUS

- ✓ Practically none; it’s an exceptionally enjoyable “big SACD”