MÉTRONOME

TEST & REVIEW

c|AQWO 2

DAC with Streaming option



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HI-FI +

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c|AQWO 2 - Highly Commended 2026



Since I reviewed the excellent AQWO 2 CD player and streamer in Issue 225, I feel a strong rapport with France's Metronome brand and its products. Therefore, when the chance came to borrow the latest two-box c|AQWO 2 DAC with streamer, they didn't have to ask me twice!

Sitting above its Classica line, the AQWO range was first launched in 2020, with the current line-up debuting at this year's Munich High End show. The AQWO 2 is a hybrid DAC/SACD and CD player with streamer. There is an additional DAC tube output option. AQWO 2+ gains a separate power supply and includes a built-in streamer, and also has an optional tube output stage. Then there is t|AQWO 2 SACD/CD transport. This can be turned into a digital hub thanks to the streaming card option. Lastly, we have c|AQWO 2 DAC, which features the separate Elektra power supply. It can be purchased with an optional streamer card and a tube output. I opted for both, making this the current top of the Metronome tree.

The big changes

The latest AQWO 2 range differs from its predecessors. Design office manager Cyril Monestier explains that the same streamer modules are used in each model, and the DACs all feature similar circuitry. The analogue stage, says Monestier, "features three independent current-voltage stages; primary analogue amplification, a second stage to drive XLR outputs and a third to drive RCA outputs."

c|AQWO 2 DAC has been entirely re-engineered and now features two converter chipsets, the ESS 9039M PRO and AKM 4499EX, which Metronome believes are the two best chips available. The Asahi Kasei Microdevices (AKM) factory in Japan was destroyed by fire in 2020, prompting Metronome to switch to ESS chips. However, as Monestier explains, they had "a fabulous history with the AKM brand" and they "never wanted to stop the partnership." Therefore, when AKM resumed production, Metronome chose to include the new AKM 4499EX in c|AQWO 2 DAC, as, after extensive listening, they felt it offered "something different compared to ESS – a different analogue feeling."

Elektra

In c|AQWO 2's separate Elektra power supply, Metronome has multiplied the different regulation lines to "optimally control the quality of the low voltage power supplies, while guaranteeing separation between each stage/function". The supply for the tube output stage is also in the Elektra, which they say is key to optimising its performance.

Metronome's engineers recognise that noise is a constant issue with digital circuits. Therefore, they manually map their PCBs to optimise the digital signal path between different integrated circuits. Additionally, they implement, as Monestier notes, other "secret things" to further optimise signal transfer.

All Metronome products are designed and manufactured in their factory in France. The company was founded in 1987 by Dominique Giner, and its first product was a speaker shaped like a metronome. They collaborated with the French company Jadis to develop CD players, and current owner Jean-Marie Clauzel took over in 2013 when Giner retired. Clauzel gradually restructured the product range to make digital sound "as analogue as possible".

C'est si bon!



When you unpack c|AQWO2 and its power supply, the quality of the product is immediately apparent. It is heavy and feels robust, with a beautifully finished aluminium front panel that is minimalist, featuring just a seven-inch colour touchscreen. This not only displays status information about the source but also shows the album sleeve in colour and the track playing when streaming. It also indicates which chipset is active and whether the tube output (if fitted) is on or off. Although a remote control is included, the screen can be used to switch inputs and fine-tune the DAC's parameters, from the output voltage to the chipset and filters. Several filters are available, and on the AKM chipset I preferred to use, Minimum Phase Slow sounded best to me out of the eight options.

On the back panel, there are balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA outputs. An RJ45 port is provided for network connection, and a USB socket for an external USB storage device. For digital inputs, it features S/PDIF, AES/EBU, Toslink, and USB (compatible with your Mac or PC), as well as two I^2S outputs via HDMI sockets. When using a transport, Metronome recommends employing I^2S, as this is commonly used inside CD players to carry native DSD and PCM signals from the laser to the internal DAC. It transmits both the signal and clock signals separately, which is said to significantly reduce jitter.

Options



c|AQWO 2 can process linear PCM signals up to 384kHz/32-bit and DSD up to DSD512. It also features an MQA renderer. Supported protocols include DLNA/UPnP, Spotify Connect, Roon Ready, Deezer, Tidal, Qobuz, Bugs, and vTuner Internet Radio. To control the streaming process, Metronome recommends using the mConnect app, and I had no trouble discovering c|AQWO 2 on my network with that app and Qobuz.

To ensure the DAC performed optimally, I compared the ESS and AKM chipset options and ultimately selected the AKM. Both delivered excellent sound, but the AKM was more open, with greater subtlety on piano, guitar, vocals and delicate cymbal and percussion lines. Vocals also sounded cleaner and more natural.

I played one of my current favourite tracks, 'Sun Pillars', from pianist and songwriter Fergus McCreadie's album Stream. For me, there was no doubt that with the AKM chipset I could hear subtle background percussion elements more clearly and that his piano was cleaner, with more power in the lower registers. Stick-hit cymbals were sharper and had more crack, and the track moved better, with a more precise rendition of its driving, staccato rhythm. The ESS, for me, was not quite as musically coherent.

Hubs and tubes

Before my main listening session, I also wanted to assess the Waversa Smart Hub 3.0 network switch and its separate power supply, which I was lent by Metronome's UK distributor (courtesy of retailer Home Media) to review. The Smart Hub and its power supply retail for £3,780, compared to the modest £500 or so you'd pay for the network switch I already had in my system.

I tested a couple of tracks on the Waversa compared to that £500 switch. On 'We're in This Love Together' from Chris Walker's excellent Al Jarreau tribute album of that name [CCW], the saxophone in the intro was clearer and better voiced; his vocals were far more open and expressive. Meanwhile, the bass line was much heavier, better controlled and more tuneful, whereas it had sounded overblown before.

I also quickly listened to 'Rio de Janeiro Blue' from the Randy Crawford & Joe Sample album Feeling Good [PRA], and I was very impressed by her vocal quality on the Waversa – cleaner, more powerful, and more emotion-filled. Joe Sample's piano was also more open and dyna-

mic, and the Brazilian-inspired rhythm was more effectively conveyed. So I left the Waversa in place for the duration of my listening to c|AQWO 2.

Tubes?

So, what about the tube output? In the past, whenever I have tried tube output options on DACs, they have sounded worse – and I am a tube amp fan! So, imagine my surprise when I discovered that the tube output in c|AQWO 2 actually works, and I preferred it! I asked Metronome about this, and Monestier told me that they spent many hours listening to arrive at the final design, capacitor brands, and PCB layout to achieve the best sound.

Playing 'Omission' from guitarist Julian Lage's latest album Speak to Me [Blue Note], the tonal quality of his guitar was better when using the tube output, making it easier to distinguish the acoustic bass from the electric bass and the different textures of each. His guitar sounded more three-dimensional when using the tube output, and cymbal lines had more sparkle and subtlety. So, hats off to Metronome for a DAC tube output stage that genuinely enhances the sound!

Le vrai son

So much for the fine details; now it's time to assess the overall experience and to hear what Metronome would call "le vrai son [the true sound]." I connected c|AQWO 2 into my home system, featuring the Audio Note Meishu Tonmeister amplifier and Fyne Audio Vintage 10 speakers. I used the Waversa Smart Hub 3.0 as my network switch, alongside some filtering from an English Electric (Chord Company) EE1+ and a Network Acoustics Eno2. The mains block was a MusicWorks ReFlex Ultra G5 with ReVive Ultra II leads. I also played my Audio Note CDT Five transport through the DAC, as well as streaming.

The first track I looked for on Qobuz was 'Beautiful Fools' from Jo Harrop's album The Path Of A Tear [Lateralize]. I was immediately captivated by the sensual and expressive quality the Metronome captured in her voice. The bass line was deep, and the lively rhythmic energy of the track was well conveyed. The distorted guitar was well voiced, offering an interesting textural contrast to Harrop's silky-smooth vocals. I have never heard this track sound so good at home on a streamer.



Live beauty

Next up was the latest album from keyboard legend Bob James, Just Us [Just Koz Entertainment], a straightforward recording of him and saxophonist Dave Koz performing live in James's home. The Metronome truly captured

that simple, live atmosphere and the recording's beauty. James's piano exhibited both delicacy and strength, just as Koz's saxophone did, with their play characterised by fluidity and virtuosity. The lower registers of the piano were also clearly conveyed, and when Koz really pushed a note, the Metronome allowed it to soar.

Switching to the Randy Crawford & Joe Sample track mentioned earlier, 'Rio de Janeiro Blue', I was instantly impressed by how natural, powerful, and open Sample's piano sounded. Meanwhile, Crawford's voice was expressive and authentic. The deep bass line was syncopated and had a good swing, and Sample's piano playing was as masterful as ever, with the Metronome providing great insights into his playing and excellent technique.

Inside out

I decided to try something I know inside out next, namely 'A Place for Skipper' from Larry Carlton's superb Discovery album [MCA]. I was very pleased with how well the Metronome conveyed the sound of his guitar, with sharp leading-edge bite, while subtle percussion lines were delicately painted and drum rimshots had a real crack. The bass line was tight, tuneful, and there was a good sense of ebb and flow to the track.

For some more vocals, I searched Qobuz for Samara Joy's Portrait album [Verve] and played the track 'You Stepped Out of a Dream.' c|AQWO 2 conveyed her gorgeous voice with emotion and power, while the percussion, horn, and woodwind backing were well defined. The bass line moved smoothly, and the piano in its solo had a good sense of space around it.

I also played a few of my favourite CDs on the Audio Note transport. Again, the Metronome did not disappoint, and the sound was well balanced, detailed, dynamic and musical, and the c|AQWO 2 proved more than capable of doing justice to a top-tier CD player.

The nitty-gritty

I enjoyed my time listening to the Metronome c|AQWO 2. It was superbly crafted and finished, easy to operate, and provided a quality of sound from streaming that I had not experienced at home before.

I also compared it thoroughly with a similarly priced streamer/DAC from another highly respected brand, and there was no doubt in my mind that the Metronome was more musically coherent, with a deeper and tighter bass and sounding more dynamic and detailed without being fatiguing. It was lively on drumkit and percussion, subtle on delicate brushed cymbals and snare, and captivating and engaging on sax, guitars, and vocals. Its weight and control on the bass guitar or double bass were outstanding, and this helped to convey the rhythm and swing of the music.

I could spend a long time listening to streamed music on c|AQWO 2.
Worth the asking price? Absolutely!

Technical specifications

- Type: Hybrid DAC with optional streamer and analogue tube output
- DAC processors:
- ESS ES9039MPRO THD+N: -122dB Dynamic range: 137dB
- AKM AK4499EX THD+N: -124dB Dynamic range: 135dB
- Digital inputs:
- I^2S (x2): PCM: 44.1kHz – 384kHz/32 bit DSD: DSD64 – DSD256 Native
- S/PDIF: PCM 44.1kHz – 384kHz/32 bit DSD: DSD64 – DSD128 DoP
- AES/EBU: PCM: 44.1kHz – 384kHz/32 bit DSD: DSD64 – DSD128 DoP
- Toslink: PCM: 44.1kHz – 192kHz/32 bit DSD: DSD64 DoP
- USB: PCM: 44.1kJz – 384kHz/32 bit DSD: DSD64 – DSD512 Native
- Streaming (option):
- Wi-Fi Dual Band (2.4 and 5GHz)
- Ethernet: 1 Port Ethernet 10/100/1000
- MQA Renderer: MQA 44.1kHz – 384kHz/32 bit
- Protocols supported: DLNA/UPnP, Spotify |Connect, Roon Ready, Deezer, Tidal Connect.
- Qobuz, Bugs, vTuner, Internet Radio
- Touch screen: 7in, resolution 1024 x 600
- Outputs: 1 x balanced XLR and 1 x unbalanced RCA
- Dimensions (WxHxD):

  c/AQWO 2 streamer/DAC: 425mm x 120mm x 420mm
  Elektra power supply: 425mm x 85mm x 420mm
- Weight: DAC: 11.6kg PSU: 12.8kg
- Price: £25,500, €29,350, $35,000 + streamer card (£1,800/€2,000/$2,350) + tube output (£2,000/€2,290/$2,700)