

Métronome c|AQWO



Posted on February 28, 2020 [José Manuel Delgado](#)

Ars Antiqua Audio

My relationship with the establishment specialized in high fidelity Ars Antiqua Audio has been gradually strengthening thanks to the fact that Xubing Zhu, his soul mate, whenever I have passed through his facilities has treated me with special affection and attention. In fact, my relationship with Xubing dates back to 2010, where a common friend introduced us to one of the days promoted by the extinct Elitexpo that were held at the exclusive Hotel Santo Mauro in Madrid, and since then we have shared common concerns, especially for the world of vinyl of which we agree to be absolute fans. And it is that Xubing, with Ars Antiqua Audio in 2015 did nothing more than fulfill a dream, since previously his dedication to this world was from the perspective of cultivated amateur.

The company is based in Madrid and as the unconditional Hifilive will know, it has several rooms where you can hear first-rate artillery. The establishment is divided into two floors, the main room at the time of writing this article of brands such as Diesis Audio attacked by Kondo or Absolare electronics and sources of Kalista or Lumin in digital or Vyger in analog. Already on the second floor, it has in one of the rooms of the beautiful B&W 800 D3 attacked by the latest from Rotel (Michi series) and fountain of Clearaudio with tangential arm on beautiful furniture of Audio Crafts. A third dedicated room includes impressive hORNS speaker speakers, Ming Da valve electronics and Métronome digital source.



Without a doubt, I invite all the people who read this article to make an appointment with him at their facilities and get carried away not only by listening to the best hi-fi brands on the world scene, but also to taste the magnificent discography that he has (several thousand vinyls) and be able to share with him purely melómanas conversations. And it is that Xubing has avid knowledge not only versed in different types of music, but also how it should be heard and understood.

The purpose of this article is the analysis of one of the new products that the French Métronome has incorporated into its catalog, specifically the c|AQWO, a high-flight decoder with a separate power supply - called Elektra - which, after the last visit that I made to their facilities, I had the opportunity to take me "under my arm".

Métronome

The positioning of this French firm based in Montans (northeast of Toulouse) is currently aimed at the highest exception fidelity. Its designs show how there is no compromise in its manufacture, they are handmade products entirely in France, meeting the highest standards of quality and, not least, aesthetic.

Led since 2014 by Jean Marie Clauzel, a wide-ranging agronomist, Métronome was founded by Dominique Giner in the late 1980s. Giner had worked for a French firm already consecrated at that time, Jadis. Dissatisfied with the limitations that the market imposed on him he designed several components on his own related to high fidelity such as loudspeakers, amplifiers, dishes ... although finally the key that led him to create Métronome Technologie precisely the same year that the Olympics were held in Spain was the success of small metronome-shaped speakers. However, over time



Métronome has oriented towards the development of components mainly in the digital environment.

However, the consecration of this firm would not come until 2002 thanks to the almighty Kalista, a *tour de force* technological that quickly positioned itself as the best and most beautiful CD player ever built.

Since 2014, Métronome has been renewing its catalog and is currently composed of three lines: Digital sharing, Aqwo and Classic. Within the first we find two integrated streamers, the DSc1 (analyzed by Hifilive [HERE](#)) and the newly released DSs. Within the second line it has a CD / SACD reader simply called AQWO and the current transport and decoder called t / AQWO and c|AQWO. Finally, the last line is composed by the excellent in its quality / price ratio Le DAC decoder (analyzed by Hifilive [HERE](#)) and the CD player LePlayer 2s compatible DSD.

Additionally, for those who seek not only quality but also aesthetics outside parameters Métronome has its Kalista brand. Currently composed of a CD / SACD reader, an external transport and decoder and speakers weighing 150 kilos! My direct relationship with Métronome dates from the end of 2016 where thanks to Ars Antiqua I had the opportunity to live for a few months with one of the firm's best-selling products, the recently discontinued integrated CD8S tube reader of which I have excellent memories, a wonder whose analysis you can read [HERE](#). Later I had the opportunity to listen to the DSc1 (network player + PCM / DSD decoder) and finally at the beginning of last year Le DAC, belonging to the Classic line and, which, is currently my reference in its segment.



c|AQWO

The c|AQWO is a digital to analog decoder that is put on the market complementing the t / AQWO transport. CD / SACD transport and decoder (t / AQWO and c|AQWO) are now companions of the integrated AQWO CD / SACD reader. The tandem was finally presented at the 2019 Munich Hiend Show with great success and interest. Its distribution began finally after the summer, being the first international show where the increasingly interesting Warsaw A / V Show of 2019 has been presented as a "market product".

The origin of the name AQWO comes from the Greek "ἀκούω" and means "I listen". In fact, in Munich 2019 I had an interesting talk

with Jean Marie where he explained the functionalities of both transport and decoder. I was especially struck by the incorporation of the newest AK4497 with 32bit architecture and capable of offering 6 digital filters for PCM (we will talk about them later) and the most complete interconnection among them chosen, the I2S.

Those who usually read me already know that I try to apply a homogeneous rigor to all the products I analyze and that is why, although Xubing offered to take me both components, it only seemed appropriate to analyze the decoder by individual and extract its full potential within me system, which I know perfectly. I consider it the only way to commit to the article and, most importantly, our readers.

Once at home I set out to open two boxes, since on the one hand comes the Elektra power supply and on the other the decoder c|AQWO. The packaging is the usual one that Métronome has accustomed us, triple cardboard box attached with simple porexpan protectors, accompanied by a very well finished power cable to join both components, a network cable to use to connect to the network, a card warranty and a numbered quality certificate associated with the serial number of the device and a simple instruction manual (also on CD) in English. In this case the unit of analysis is black, although it is possible to request it in gray. In addition, and unlike Le DAC, this decoder includes remote control,



One of the first things that one can appreciate is the absence of volume control in the decoder, in this case it is necessary to connect it to a line preamp, something unusual at this price level, although it is true that my experience tells me that for the fan who seeks loyalty par excellence, a prior is necessary.

With a total weight of about 26 kilos the c|AQWO is not a lightweight device, nor is it small and manageable. Its rear is composed of two pairs of analog outputs (RCA and XLR) and 8 digital inputs (AES / EBU 2x, RCA 2x, Toslink 2x, i2s / HDMI and USB). The connection recommended by Jean Marie to connect transport and decoder is the I2S since the transport is the only one

that has to transmit the signal in resolutions higher than 24/192 and / or DSD, despite having USB the c|AQWO offers Very good versatility given that it is through this connection that I have been able to evaluate it in order to listen to this type of resolutions greater than 24/192. Jean Marie tells me that in this case he has not included USB output to the transport because he considers that the I2S is an easier way to implement. However,

The c|AQWO is capable of reaching up to 512 (8x DSD or 22.4Mhz) in DSD and in PCM up to 32b / 768Khz. However, the c|AQWO is not intended to perform signal upsampling up to these very high resolutions, Jean Marie nevertheless does not abandon them and whoever has a t / AQWO can perform upsampling of any type of signal as far as it deems appropriate being decoded by the c|AQWO without any problem.

At this point on the one hand I like the purist philosophy "moins est plus" applied to the development of the decoder, although it is true that perhaps for the price at which it is sold, both volume control and upsampling capacity would not have been more, mainly because the market is full of competition at this level, as is the case with legendary firms such as dCS, Esoteric, EMMS Labs, Playback Designs or Nagra, to name a few. In short, the more versatility the more the public can access.



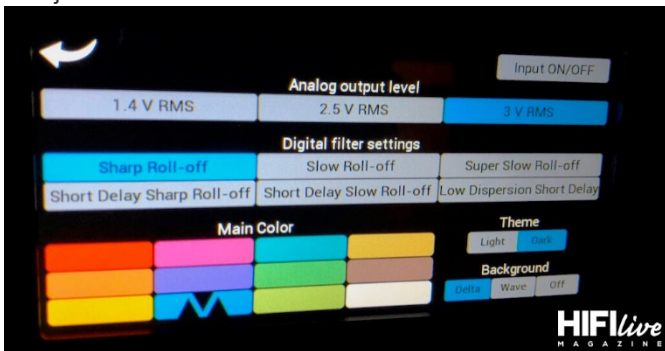
Currently, no Métronome decoder is compatible with MQA (resolution offered by streaming platforms such as Tidal or Xiami Music). Regarding this point Jean Marie told me in Munich that he considers that the MQA is a specific system for streaming and that although its Digital Sharing line does support it, dedicated decoders are not implemented for decoding since the truth is that they reach resolutions higher than MQA. Makes sense.

The heart of the C|AQWO is composed of two AKM AK4497 chips, one per channel, without a doubt and in my opinion I dare to say that the Asahi Kasei Microdevices are currently the most musical chips in the current scene. As it was in the C8S I had, in the c|AQWO there is the possibility of optionally passing the signal through a pair of Philips NOS JAN 6922 valves. Finally, the power section, always critical (and more in digital components), consists of four Nuvotem Talema low

noise toroidal transformers for PCB mounting and eleven separate and independent regulation lines implemented through an immense and oversized electrolytic capacitor bank.

With regard to the external construction of both the power supply and the decoder nothing to object to, it is a robust product, well built and executed and with a sublime touch. Built like tank that will delight the most demanding in this section.

The front panel of the Elektra power supply has a small blue LED with dim lighting and the decoder itself has a 6.5" touch LCD panel which can be varied in colors and intensity (even leaving it completely off). From the menu of the panel itself you can access the 6 filters for PCM that the device offers: Sharp roll-off, Slow roll-off, Super slow roll-off, Short delay sharp roll-off, short dealy slow roll-off and low dispersion short delay. No possibility is offered in DSD. In addition, you can choose between three calibrated levels of analog output, 1.4V, 2.5V and 3.0V, which I could check correspond to the output offered by the RCA jacks.



As I said before, the remote control allows you to access the main functions and leave it in the standby position. In addition, it is possible to turn off and on the signal flow through Philips valves.

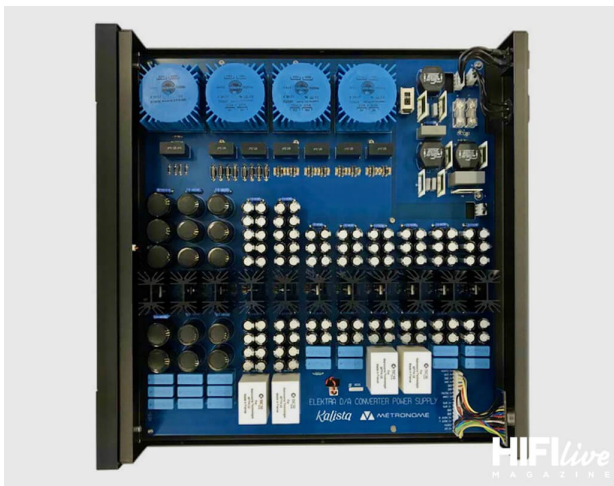
The c|AQWO replaces the magnificent C8+, a decoder of price and similar aesthetics and according to my colleague Alberto Pascual gave excellent results in his system, as you can read [HERE](#).

PCM, DSD, MQA, bits and kiloherzs

I do not want to miss the opportunity that this article offers me to make a reflection for which I will surely question the opinion that some unconditional Hifilive reader may have of me. I am somewhat disappointed after visiting good amateur houses and / or reading specialized press articles where when commenting or communicating about the quality of a digital component does not prevail common sense. It is at this point that I realize that in some moments these people, in some cases even hobby veterans, instead of looking for attributes and qualities related to how the music itself is heard through these components (the apparently obvious) are more involved and obsessed in compatibility of extravagant formats and / or resolutions.

It comes to my mind that even some manufacturers of digital sources (readers, streamers, decoders ...) the first attributes that stand out are not as recently done, where the use of music chips, the capacitors of this or that brand was praised or how the difficult and always complicated feeding section was executed. Now, without obvious judgment, it is said that they are compatible devices with resolutions up to infinity and beyond and therefore and badly, I am sorry to encourage fans to listen to the music that is only offered in the market to these absurd resolutions. Where is the rest of the music (the vast majority) that the market does not offer in high resolution? Can't you hear because it is of inferior quality?

Every time we read on the screen of our digital source information such as MQA96Khz, DSD128 or PCM192Khz it is important to forget about it and simply listen carefully to the music that the equipment offers. Do not pay any attention to this point, forget about it, it is more to turn off the screen if possible! From the resolution offered by a CD, music on a high-end equipment is perfectly enjoyable without having to get lost in absurd resolutions that lack any other meaning than what the industry wants to instill.

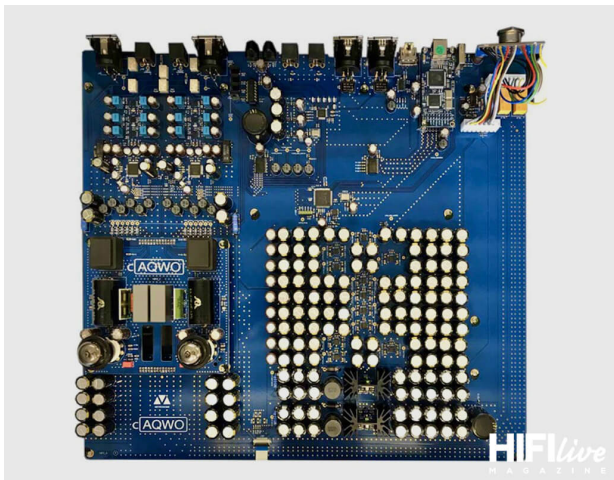


is often blinded by what will ultimately mean disappointment , more expense, or even abandonment of this exciting but complex hobby.

By this I mean that it is not important to have an updated decoder? Not much less, but simply to convey that from the resolution of a CD or if you hurry me of any resolution based on 24b, the sound offered by a good digital system is more than enough.

It is desperate to see devices of doubtful construction capable of restoring all kinds of formats and thanks to a good marketing campaign sold as churros and others not so compatible but built with absolute quality, criteria and that sound like glory as soon as they are implanted in the market. I find it as absurd as comparing to the one who buys a Kia loaded with extras against which a basic Bentley is bought. Which will be better vehicle?

I hope and wish that these lines are understood as what they are, a mere reflection on what the fan should pursue and where he should direct his efforts in the digital field, since unfortunately he



output offers for some reason that a slightly more muted, warm and sweet sound escapes me. The 2.5V and 3V outputs (the standard) have a neutral sound, with a natural timbral and scenic offer better focal accuracy and dimension. Indicate that in all cases these output values correspond to the RCA sockets, since they are doubled by XLR. Finally I adjusted to 2.5V (equivalent to 5V in XLR) since historically I have always been more comfortable with 2V outputs (4V in XLR) with digital sources and this was the closest value that Métronome offers in this decoder.

Mounting

The Métronome c|AQWO that Ars Antiqua Audio gave me for this analysis was premiere, so before making serious listening I left it a week "ringing". With more than 150 hours of operation, I began to play around its different options and possible configurations, seeking to optimize it to the maximum.

For its connection to the network I used an Acrolink 7N power cable, the digital connection was via USB through a Tellurium Q Silver Diamond and the SPDIF through a MIT of the Terminator series, although I was more satisfied by its greater versatility and degree of transparency the USB.

After multiple tests finally the listeners were mainly with the output to calibrated to 2.5V, the digital filter for PCM slow roll-off and the signal passage through its Philips NOS JAN 6922 valves. With respect to the three possible analog output values, the 1.4V output in addition to offering a more attenuated SPL than the 3V

With regard to the different filters for PCM after several tests with different types of music and quality of recordings from different eras, I finally opted for the use of slow roll-off (although in some moments I also selected sharp roll-off) since it is the that has offered me a more credible and close scene, as a greater presence. Thus, super slow roll-off, for example, lends a hand to recordings that may sound a bit flat and low dispersion short delay allows a scene with more air and dimension, although they may turn out to be somewhat artificial in the end. Over the weeks I have been able to understand that the incorporation of filters with effects on the signal passage is more effective when the resolution of the tracks is lower, Finally, with the selection of signal passing through valves, a little internal debate really sparked me. On the one hand, through stage valves the sounds obtain corporeality and scenic holograficity while without passing through valves they could



be defined as more punctual, but in both cases maintaining an irreproachable focus. Globally the sound with the passage through valves is more related to my way of understanding the music through an audio system, although subjectively it is slightly more precise and dynamic without its passage. On the other hand, at a global level the music flows in a more compact and velvety way with valves, more organic, but I recognize that it loses spark, a certain attack in the transient and the lower area suffers from a slight filling, always in terms of comparison direct. In my system,

The truth is that the c|AQWO although as I said before does not perform signal upsampling nor does it have variable volume adjustment, it is loaded with possibilities and the choice of these

will depend on factors such as global overall sound type available, room acoustics, type of music selected, personal tastes ...

at this point the important thing is that there are several options and each user will find the one that best suits their perception.



I was testing with two streamers being used as transportation, the Bluesound Node 2i (review [HERE](#)) and the Lumin U1 mini (budding review). Finally, I chose to associate it with the Lumin U1 mini in order to analyze the most complete decoder since due to its USB output (the Bluesound does not have it) it would be able to reach resolutions higher than 24/192 and / or DSD. I currently do not have CD / SACD transport.

In order to confirm that everything related to the assembly and selection of variables offered by the c|AQWO were adjusted in the most appropriate way to my system, I invited Xubing in order to seek their assessment and approval since, as a

distributor of The brand is the person at the national level who best knows how to get the best match.

Sound

Once you are ready to evaluate the “real” sound and forget about all the accessories, the first thing that most attracts the attention of the c|AQWO is that there is no doubt that it reminds me of something, its imprint and sonic familiarity regarding Other products of the French firm heard before is patent. Globally, it does not obviously look for analysis or hyper-resolution, it is understood as such the listener's ease of getting lost in the micro-information of the melodies. I do not want to say much less that it is not available in high doses, but it is shown in a less obvious way to other decoders of the current scene. Métronome is committed to prioritizing quality over quantity and that is where this decoder seduces me from the start, this is the way to listen to music,



The tonal balance is absolutely neutral, making it suitable for all types of equipment, it is at this point that the person who wants a device that fixes deficiencies in his system to one side of the sound spectrum should look to another given side. From soundtracks loaded on serious frequencies like the one that a Hans Zimmer in a state of grace composed for Gladiator (Decca Records, 2000) to discs loaded with detail and analysis like the beautiful Magic Cavern (Columbia Records, 1983) of the Swiss Andreas Vollenweide, all Sounds and melodies find their space. Timberly it is rich and varied, stringed instruments, wind, percussion, vocals ... everything has a quantity of definition that evokes high levels of naturalness. Complicated recordings such as the fabulous Castilian drums of Dave Brubeck Quartett (Columbia Records,

With regard to the scenic sensation, as I have commented previously, it can be directed towards an effect of greater pinpoint or an effect of greater corporeality depending on the passage or not through the Philips valves. Courts associated with one of the best live recorded concerts such as Donny Hathaway: Live (Atlantic, 1972), the sensation of direct overwhelms, is simply to close your eyes and be in the fourth row of the armchair patio. It is a delight to enjoy such separation of channels; Maximum width, height and depth as I had rarely heard on my system. Recordings like the same first cut of the soundtrack of Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon performed by Tandum (Sony Classical, 2000) make me assume that I don't have some boxes that are almost a meter high,



As expected in a product of such price, the food section is taken care of to unimaginable levels (see photographs of the interior somewhere in this article) and it shows in terms of silence and transparency. The "black backness" that only the best designs offer in this one also appears, perhaps in a slightly more marked way without the passage through the valve, but which in the end thanks to the use of the USB socket - more transparent - is achieved in high dose, as I could see in ultra realistic recordings such as the latest album by Chinese singer Susan Wong: Close to me (Evosound, 2019).

Although I have already commented on the neutrality of its tonal balance, I would not want to miss the opportunity to try to convey how it has behaved in the different frequency ranges. The high part of the spectrum is rich in nuances, with great detail and has the additional corporeality offered by the inclusion of the Philips in the signal step. Details such as those offered by John Renbourn's Forty Eight album (Sanctuary Records, 2008) are perceived in a subtle but at the same time resounding way, this is done by very few gentlemen. Diverse media, complex and very velvety, it is addictive to hear voices as marked as the one Bruce Springsteen offers us in Streets of Philadelphia (Columbia Records, 1994). Finally, the lowest part of the spectrum is blunt, perhaps more articulated without the passage

through valves and therefore a little more expressive, but as I have already said, it is through valves where I liked the sound more globally. Is the wrinkle beautiful?

At the macro level, the great orchestral bands move like a fish in the water, here the particular thing about the general does not stand out, the musicality, the globality and the intentionality of the musical expression stand out, this decoder offers a team game, there is no place for Stars that go by individual, it is the block that commands. It is delicious to enjoy Eiji Oue conducting the Minnesota Orchestra performing the Rachmaninoff Symphonic Dances at realistic sound pressure levels (Reference Recordings, 2001).



I want to conclude this section by leaving black on white that I am akin to the current Métronome sound philosophy, it is a complete, global sound, where the complexity of the color palettes and the timbral richness prevails over the resolution in excess, leaving a window of musicality that I have only glimpsed in the best reading sources associated with the king format. An addictive sound that invites you to listen to music for hours and hours without any fatigue and / or hearing fatigue. Jean Marie Clauzel has done it again, based on the designs of the Kalista Dreamplay DAC has created a jewel with a sound that I glimpse will be very similar to that one, but at half the price.

Conclusion

With the help of Ars Antiqua Audio, importer and distributor of Métronome Technologie for Spain, Hifilive has had the opportunity

to access a new product of this French firm based in the northeast of Toulouse. With more than 20 years of experience and led since 2014 by Jean Marie Clauzel, the vast majority of our regular readers will know that it was consecrated there by 2002 with the manufacture of what for many has been the most beautiful CD player ever built, the Kalista. With an absolutely renewed and current catalog, Métronome currently consists of a line of integrated Digital sharing streamers, a high-end AQWO line and a last more affordable Classic line. The C|AQWO replaces the great C8 + and takes a step forward to raise the levels of compatibility with the new formats / resolutions but maintaining the seal of sonic and constructive quality of the house, in order to present their credentials to English, Swiss firms and Japanese already enshrined in this difficult segment.

Compatible with signals up to PCM768Khz and / or DSD512 through its USB and / or I2S inputs, the heart of the AQWO c is composed of two chips, one per channel, of the Japanese AKM AK4497 being able to offer 6 digital filters of PCM at the user's choice. With exquisitely designed external power supply, it also offers the possibility of optional signaling through a pair of Philips NOS JAN 6922 valves thus offering greater sonic versatility.

The sound of c|AQWO follows the sound aesthetics of other products already evaluated by the French firm where attributes related to premium quality over quantity, which is why it may not be suitable for all audiences, given that adjectives more focused on timbral richness and nuances, transparency, definition, holographic and scenic corporeality or naturalness prevail over others more related to spectacularity, analysis or even, I am allowed the license, the pyrotechnics.

Without being the most complete decoder on the market, maybe some might miss control of variable volume or possibility of signal upsampling, I can say that in strictly sonic and musical terms this decoder is without a doubt the best analog digital decoder that I have been able to analyze .

If the price is not an obstacle, I can't think of another better product.

Model and serial number: CIA 001

Retail price : € 19,500.00 - €

Distribute Ars Antiqua Audio

SYSTEM USED FOR THE TEST

Acoustic boxes

- Wilson Audio WATT / Puppy System 5.1E
- Bowers & Wilkins ASW 3000

Sources

- Clearaudio Champion Level II
- Métronome Le DAC
- Bluesound Node 2i
- Lumin U1mini

Reading arm

- Kuzma 4point

Capsules

- Lyra Kleos SL Limited Edition
- Koetsu Urushi Vermilion

Amplification

- LFD MC-2 SE
- Mark Levinson No. 380S
- Krell FPB 600c

Cabling

- Nordost Valhalla
- MIT Shotgun S1
- TelluriumQ Silver Diamond USB

Network treatment

- Vibex One 7 Rhodium Version Powerblock
- Clearaudio S. Synchro
- Acrolink 7N-P4030 II - Transparent Power Link Super PLS - MIT Z-Cord II
- 20A dedicated line

accessories

- Clearaudio Outer Limit and Locator - Clearaudio Quadro XXL Clamp - Okki Nokki RCM MKII - Vincent KHV 111 MKII - Sennheiser HD 650 - Terpsicore Cable Sound Clear and Damper 30 - RPG Skyline - Shakti "The Stone" - Stillpoints ERS Cloth - VibraPOD - Cable Isolators - Audio Selection Spikes - Custom made ultra-rigid furniture - South African granite bases

(translated from Spanish by Google Translate)