

METRONOME AQWO

SACD/CD PLAYER/DAC

Reviewer Ian Frazer



△ THE MASSIVE COLOUR TOUCH-SCREEN DISPLAY IS SO BIG THAT THERE'S PLENTY OF SCREEN REAL-ESTATE TO SHOW MULTIPLE ICONS AND READ-OUTS SIMULTANEOUSLY, PLUS IT'S ALSO EASILY LEGIBLE FROM A CONSIDERABLE DISTANCE.

Metronome's AQWO SACD-CD Player/DAC is actually part of a trio, because the small French manufacturer decided it would be best to split the cost of the years of research and development it put into building its first-ever SACD player across an additional two models, which are essentially the 'building blocks' of the AQWO. So, at the same time the company was developing the AQWO, it also built a transport (tAQWO) and a DAC (cAQWO). All three are built by Metronome itself in its high-tech factory near Montans in the South of France, where it also builds a luxury line that it markets under the brandname 'Kallista'.

THE EQUIPMENT

The front panel of the AQWO (it's not a model number, by the way, it means 'I listen, I hear' in

ancient Greek, according to Jean Marie Clauzel, who's the General Manager at Metronome), is self-evidently dominated by a massive colour touch-screen display that measures 140mm by 70mm. The fact that the screen is so big means not only that there's plenty of screen real-estate to show multiple icons and read-outs simultaneously, but also that the screen is easy to read, even from a considerable distance. The thickness of the front panel (25mm!) may well be the reason Metronome decided not to put the mains power switch on the front panel, and instead put it on the rear panel. This is something I'd normally chide a manufacturer about, because in most set-ups it means the switch is difficult to access, but in the case of the Metronome AQWO, the switch will always be easy to access because it's a top-loading disc player, so you need to leave plenty of room above it to allow you to easily load and unload SACDs and CDs.

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Of course all the other controls you need to operate the AQWO are there on the front panel—it's just that they're on that large touch-screen, rather than on the fascia itself. The transport icons are arrayed along the base of the screen. From left to right they are: reverse track skip, fast reverse, stop, play/pause, fast-forward, and forward track-skip. All the icons are 'industry standard' except for the stop icon which is shaped like a bow-tie rather than the more usual square. Curious.

To the right of the transport controls is the section of the panel where you select inputs, because of course in addition to being an SACD and CD player, the Metronome AQWO also functions as a DAC, so it will convert digital signals from another transport, your DVD player, your portable digital player, your computer... indeed from any device that has a digital output. There are seven digital inputs—one USB (Type B), two AES/EBU (XLR), two coaxial SPDIF (RCA) and two optical (Toslink). The USB input will accept formats up to DSD512, while the other inputs accept up to 768kHz/32-bit PCM in addition to DSD up to DSD512/8xDSD.

The Metronome AQWO uses Asahi Kasei Microdevices Corporation's Verita AK4497 DAC, which allows manufacturers to choose one or more of several on-board filters. Quite a few manufacturers select just one filter and do not offer their customers any of the others, despite them being available. Metronome generously allows its customers to choose between six options: Sharp Roll-Off, Slow Roll-Off, Super-Slow Roll-Off, Short Delay Sharp Roll-Off, Short Delay Slow Roll-Off and Low Dispersion Short Delay.

Of course if you don't like the sound of one filter, you can easily switch to another. In practise, owners of DACs that offer multiple filters report that they use different filters depending on what musical genre they're listening to—one filter for classical music, another filter for rock music, another for jazz, and so on.

Obviously, the type of filter you choose will affect the sound quality of the AQWO, but there's another option you can choose that will affect sound quality even more. The AQWO comes standard with a solid-state output stage, however you can optionally choose one that has a second output stage, using valves, which then allows you to switch between the two output topologies. The valve stage uses JAN6922 triodes, which are military-spec editions of the 6DJ8/ECC88 valve type and are used in Class-A configuration in the AQWO and are transformer-coupled. This option adds \$3,395 to the RRP.

Unlike some hi-fi components that offer the choice of solid-state or valve output, but have separate outputs for each, requiring the user to



physically swap cables in order to switch from one to the other, the AQWO does all the switching internally: simply press the 'soft' button with an illustration of a valve on it that's immediately below the 'Random' function at the right-hand edge of the display. 'Random' of course, plays tracks on a CD or SACD at random, rather than in the usual play order. Above this 'Random' function is a 'Repeat' function that can be set to either repeat a track—or an album—indefinitely. These random and repeat play functions, incidentally, are the only programming options available on the AQWO—you can't program tracks for playback in sequence, for example.

Installing the AQWO is made dramatically easier because Metronome actually includes a data disc with Windows drivers for the USB and PCM/DSD inputs. At the risk of looking a gift horse in the mouth, it probably would have been better, more convenient and less costly to put these on a USB stick, but I'm not grumbling. And of course if you're only using the AQWO as a CD/SACD player you won't need to install the drivers at all (neither will you have to if you own a Mac, which does not require drivers at all).

IN USE AND PERFORMANCE

I've often been a little put off by the colours some manufacturers use on their displays. One that I can recall was a rather lurid shade of pink. So initially I was rather excited to hear that Metronome had been forward-thinking enough to allow the colour of the AQWO display to be changed to suit your personal preference. However when I started using the machine I discovered this not to be strictly true.

△ THE MECH USED IN THE AQWO IS MADE BY D&M HOLDINGS IN JAPAN, IS CLOSELY MODELLED ON THE PHILIPS DCM12PRO AND, LIKE IT, USES A TWIN LASER SINGLE PICKUP THAT HOUSES BOTH A 650NM WAVELENGTH LASER (FOR SACD) AND A 780NM WAVELENGTH LASER (FOR CD).



The filter you choose will affect the sound quality of the AQWO, but there's another option you can choose that will affect sound quality even more.



△ THE REMOTE IS BLACK, SLIM-LINE AND BEAUTIFULLY CURVY BUT IS MOST REMARKABLE FOR ITS LENGTH: 250MM! IF YOU HAVE A METRONOME AMPLIFIER, IT WILL ALSO OPERATE IT, BUT YOU'D HAVE TO SELECT EITHER THE 'CD' OR THE 'AMP' BUTTON ON THE REMOTE AS APPROPRIATE.



It's only the colour of the *print* on the display that can be changed. The background colour always remains white, while the transport icons always remain grey. The print on the display can be assigned one of eighteen different colours, including a pure black. I ended up using black because although it's not exactly the sexiest of the eighteen colours on offer, it was by far and away the easiest to read. After choosing your preferred type colour, you can then adjust the screen brightness through seven different levels—which includes 'off'.

In normal use, the screen shows elapsed time (track) in very large numerals in the centre of the display, while to the left of this is shown the number of the track being played and the total number of tracks on the disc. This is the only information that's available—you can't show remaining time in a disc or track, for example, and there is no CD-Text function.

Pressing and holding the large Metronome logo at the top left of the screen causes a second screen to appear, on which you can choose output voltage level (1.4V, 2.5V or 3.5V), your preferred digital filter, and preferred display print colour. At the top right of this second screen is a tag labelled Input ON/OFF.

Pressing this brings up a third screen that allows you to activate (or deactivate) the AQWO's digital inputs. This means that if you have only one device connected you can de-activate the other five inputs so that you don't have to cycle through them on the main screen input selector. If the Metronome's top-loading system is a bit clunky, that will be down to the user, because nothing at all is automated—it all has to be done by you... by hand. If the lid doesn't slide back smoothly, you're not pushing it smoothly enough. If it doesn't close smoothly, well you're not pulling it steadily enough. And if the player starts making strange moaning sounds when you do close the lid, well that's because you forgot to put the magnetic polyoxymethylene puck/clamp on top of the disc! It would have been nice if Metronome had included an optical sensor so the AQWO would not even try to spin up a disc if the puck/clamp was not present.

Although Metronome has used the most famous top-loading mechanism in the past, the Philips CDM12PRO, and still uses this drive in the Kallista DreamOne (thanks to its foresightedness in purchasing a large number of them—together with a shed-load of spare parts—before Philips shut down production), the mech used in the AQWO is made by D&M Holdings in Japan. It's closely modelled on the DCM12PRO and, like it, uses a twin laser single pickup that houses both a 650nm wavelength laser (for SACD) and a 780nm wavelength laser (for CD) in a single optical system. This technique ensures superior alignment and reduced radiation.

As with all SACD players, it takes a while to load a CD (around 11 seconds, compared to around nine seconds for an SACD) and, once loaded, it takes a further eight seconds to actually start playing music after you've pressed the 'Play' button. Track skip operations are also fairly slow: skip from one track to another and it will take around five seconds after you've pressed the skip button before music starts playing.

It's all worth the inconvenience and waiting though, because the sound of the Metronome AQWO is, well, pretty much what you want it to be, because with six different filters for the digital domain plus the choice of using either solid-state or valve amplification for the analogue domain, the AQWO has twelve completely different and unique 'sounds' available to suit your personal preferences, your musical tastes and the other components in your audio system. I started my listening sessions with a very clean-sounding CD of Davitt Morony playing Bach's *Art of Fugue* on harpsichord. It didn't take very long for me to decide I preferred the sound I was hearing from the solid-state stage over that from the valve stage.



△ THE USB INPUT WILL ACCEPT FORMATS UP TO DSD512, WHILE THE OTHER INPUTS ACCEPT UP TO 768KHZ/32-BIT PCM IN ADDITION TO DSD UP TO DSD512/ 8xDSD.

Listening to the harpsichord via solid-state, the sound of the strings was crisp and truly had the twangy 'plucked' sound and I could clearly hear the individual layers of the other strings as they contributed their pitches and resonances. When I switched to valve, I lost a little of the crispness—though the 'twang' was still a 'twang'—but perhaps the biggest difference was that the layering thickened perceptibly, so I felt I was foregoing some of the intricacies of the ways the sounds mixed with each other. Initially I thought this may have been due to the filter I'd started out using (the 'Sharp Roll-Off' filter) so I methodically went through each filter in turn only to discover that whilst I did find a filter I liked better (the Slow Roll-off filter), I always preferred the sound quality of the AQWO when it was set to 'solid-state'... at least I did with this disc.

Things weren't so clear-cut when I started playing Eleanor McEvoy's album 'Love Must Be Tough' on SACD. Her voice, of course, is unmistakable, even allowing for her accent, and this time I quite liked the added sonic thickness from the valves, which gave her voice added personality, and the instruments a 'pub-like' sound quality that I found most appealing. The almost round-like way the different instruments take turns on *Mother's Little Helper*, for example, minimised the sonic complexity and even with valves' thickness I could still appreciate the sound of the piano, drums, sax... *et al.* The same was true for the almost *a capella* *If You Want Me To Stay*, with the deep-pitched drum sound almost heart-beating in the background and sounding super-depthy with the valves but strangely somewhat more back in the mix than usual. I then used piano to evaluate the Metronome's sound with Ian Holtham playing Chopin's *24 Preludes* (Op. 28), which is one of my favourites because of the way it cycles through the circle of fifths. His playing is beautiful and the sound from the Steinway D is absolutely extraordinary. Through the Metronome (via the solid-state output) the Steinway's higher notes sounded gloriously pure, and down in the mids and bass, the richness and sustain was exemplary.

Switching to valves actually increased the richness of the sound but at the same time I fancied there was a diminution in the lower-pitched notes, as if Holtham had eased off on his left hand a little, and was playing *piano*. Playing 'Conditions' (The Temper Trap) the Metronome AQWO reproduced their sound exactly as I remember hearing them live, with the band's etched and crafted sounds delivered to perfection. The sound of the snare sound on *Resurrection*, as well as that of the drums and other percussion is exactly rendered. Then there's the sound of Dougi Mandagi's soaring vocals—what a voice, and so wonderfully revealed by the Metronome. Again, switching to valve output changed the tonal quality of his voice... but I think he'd like the way the valves made him sound!

Playing music via the Metronome AQWO's various digital inputs, including comparing rips of the same music I'd already played in CD format, I found I could tell no difference between the CDs and the rips, so all my same comments would apply to playback via the AQWO's digital inputs. Playing back high-res recordings improved the ultimate fidelity, *per se*, but my impressions of the sonic character of the AQWO's sound remained the same.

CONCLUSION

Whereas most people can only dream of owning a Kallista DreamPlay One (it retails for \$74,995!), the Metronome AQWO is a much more reachable target. For sure, the DreamPlay is much better-looking, but the two machines are of equally high quality, are made by exactly the same company and whereas the Dreamplay One only plays CDs, the AQWO plays SACDs as well and puts in the extra yards by being an outrageously good DAC into the bargain. So what about the sound? I have not heard the two side by side, but I have heard both individually and quite frankly, in the dark, I don't think it would be possible to tell the sound of one from the other... at least not when the AQWO is in its solid-state output mode! So, basically, you're getting Kallista DreamPlay One sound quality at a Metronome AQWO price. Gotta love that! 🎧



SPECIFICATIONS

Metronome AQWO

Price: \$27,995 (Plus \$3,395 if you option in the valve stage)

Frequency Bandwidth: 10Hz–50kHz ±0.1dB

THD: –95dB Max

S/N Ratio: >95dB

Gain Error: 0.12B Max

Phase Error: ±1°

Output Voltage: 2.5V/2.5V (Balanced/Unbalanced)

Pick-up Mechanism: D&M SACD mechanism

D/A Conversion: 1 AK4497 chip per channel PCM+DSD 512

Digital Inputs: 1×USB (Type B), 2×AES/EBU (XLR), 2×SPDIF (RCA), 2×Optical (Toslink)

Digital Outputs: AES/EBU (XLR), SPDIF (RCA), Optical (Toslink), I²S (HDMI).

Touchscreen: 21×9 – 6.5 inches'

Analog Outputs: Unbalanced (RCA)/Balanced (XLR)

Power Supply: 3 toroidal transformers with 10 independent regulation lines

Power Consumption: 60VA (Max)

Dimensions (WHD): 425 × 130 × 415mm

Weight: 15kg

Warranty: Two Years

Contact: Advance Audio Australia on (02) 9561 0799 or visit www.advanceaudio.com.au