



HIFI-TEST

Test: Métronome AQWO 2 | All-In-One-Lösung

# Talentshow

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## REVIEW

### MÉTRONOME AQWO 2

*Receiving a package worth over 22,000 euros doesn't happen often. The joy is therefore all the greater when it does, as was the case with the Métronome AQWO 2 universal player. This French product combines a CD/SACD player, a DAC, and a streamer all in one device. It can be ordered with a Class A tube output option, which was already integrated in the unit tested. After being delivered in temperatures below ten degrees Celsius, the AQWO 2 (<https://h-e-a-r.de/>) had to thaw for 24 hours before it could be gently warmed up. However, even after extreme cold exposure, it didn't miss a single note from the first seconds...*

No, the digital specialist Métronome Audio, established in 1987, is not an

ordinary Hi-Fi manufacturer. This is evident not only from the price tag but also from the moment you unbox the tested unit, which is handcrafted: what elegance! Certainly, the gold front of the AQWO 2 is more a matter of taste and might appeal to owners of Accuphase amplifiers. According to Arnd Rischmüller from the German distributor H.E.A.R., this gold finish is a special color offered at no additional cost. For those who do not appreciate this choice, more understated variants in silver or black-grey are available. Weighing 17 kilograms, the unit exudes a luxury comparable to that of a safe.

The eye is immediately drawn to the top tray of the player, featuring a gold aluminum cover that slides with remarkable fluidity and exemplary solidity when a CD

is inserted. The playback mechanism comes from the production lines of Marantz or Denon, whose finished systems at Shirakawa are renowned and also equip their own high-end products. The team led by Jean-Marie Clauzel, the CEO of Métronome, has made modifications to certain aspects of this mechanism, referring to them as "proprietary improvements" aimed at extracting every minute detail from CDs. The silver discs are held in place in this top-loading player by a CD puck that attaches magnetically – click! – and stays firmly in place. Made of Delrin, a thermoplastic engineering plastic, this accessory is called the Delrin Puck by Métronome. An alternative to metal, Delrin is ideal for industrial and mechanical applications. The entire CD insertion process is

a particularly pleasant tactile experience that makes you want to keep going. Click, then "Play."

## The conversion section

It's no surprise: first presented at the 2023 High End show in Munich, Métronome's AQWO 2 is part of the brand's reference series, known for its artisanal and



sonic perfection. This flagship player doesn't just play CDs and SACDs: it also functions as a converter. A look at the back of the device reveals digital connectivity options for other equipment: AES/EBU, S/PDIF, Toslink, and USB-B.

This French gem is capable of processing PCM files up to 32-bit/384 kHz as well as DSD files up to DSD 512. According to Métronome, the AQWO 2 decodes DSD files natively, without DoP transformation or quality reduction through downsampling.

Compared to its predecessor, the still available AQWO (€16,990, plus €2,190 for the optional tube output), the interior of the AQWO 2 model has already undergone notable changes. The converter now uses the eight-channel ES9039PRO chip from the ESS-Sabre Pro series, considered the flagship of ESS Technology. Additionally, Métronome has revisited the electronic design as well as the firmware. The 2018 AQWO model, on the

other hand, relies on two AK4497 DAC chips in a Dual-Mono configuration. The German distributor explains this choice due to the unavailability of the previous chip. It is worth noting that in October 2020, a fire ravaged the AKM chip manufacturer's factory for three days.

The converter of the Métronome AQWO 2 can be adjusted via the main menu, controlled by a touchscreen (with the option to choose different background colors) under the "DAC" option. In other words, the owner can test

various filters, adjust the analog output level, and activate or deactivate the Class A tube output (two JAN-6922 tubes) if this option was ordered. According to the distributor, about 50% of buyers opt for this option at the time of purchase.

In total, eight different PCM filters are available, influencing the impulse response and rise and fall phenomena. The analog output voltage (the device has RCA and XLR outputs) can be adjusted at three levels: 1.4, 2.5, or 3 volts, which is particularly appreciated. Many configurations can also be made with the included remote control, although I found it more enjoyable to experiment directly on the touchscreen.

There are also digital outputs: S/PDIF, AES/EBU, and I2S via an HDMI connection. However, I wonder why one would use these outputs, given the exceptional quality of the DAC.

## Streaming

Another tab in the menu ("Stream") reveals an additional feature of the Métronome AQWO 2: unlike its predecessor, it integrates a streaming module. This feature is the main difference compared to the AQWO. When I asked Métronome about this, they told me that the streaming function is based on the same circuit board as the one in the DSS 2.

The AQWO 2 can be connected wirelessly to your home network via the provided Wi-Fi antenna or through an Ethernet cable, which I found particularly easy to set up. For control, Métronome recommends the mconnect-Control app, available for free on both Apple and Android devices, which worked smoothly and stably during the testing period. The app supports Deezer, TIDAL, Qobuz, and Spotify, as well as Internet radio via vTuner. The AQWO 2 is also "Room ready" and connects seamlessly with the audiophile software Audirvana for PC and Mac.

The French have also paid great attention to the power supply,





knowing that it has a decisive influence on sound quality. Therefore, the Métronome AQWO 2 uses three toroidal core transformers with Schaffner filters and ten independent regulation loops. Additionally, the device is shielded against EMI and RFI, and its construction is more than solid, with a ten-millimeter thick aluminum front panel. Enough with the technicalities and considerations—let's now allow the ears—and instinct, heart—to judge. Click.

## Métronome AQWO 2 : Listening Test and Comparisons

I always let new test devices play in the background for a day or two before I consciously listen and carefully reflect on what I've heard. Often, the differences compared to what I'm used to are quite subtle, before clearer traits emerge over time. This is not the case with the Métronome AQWO 2: from the very first note, the sound is different! In other words, no test device has captivated me as much right from the start – first with two or three CDs, then as a simple converter, and a few days later, as a streamer.

From the very first listening session with the CD Girls Under Glass: Backdraft, I immediately noticed that the instruments were better separated, less cluttered. In comparison, everything I had listened to before now felt blurry and tangled. In other words, it wasn't as clear. With the Métronome AQWO 2, there was an astonishing sense of space between each instrument. However, and this is crucial, the soundstage did not disintegrate into disjointed pieces; on the contrary, it remained fluid and cohesive, creating a perfect sense of unity.

Let's now move on to the DAC



section of the French device: some time ago, I discovered the Australian artist Zaniyas, who on her third album Chrysalis offers a fully electronic mix of Dark Wave, 80s pop, EBM, and Techno. This album, recorded as WAV files on the Innuos Zenith MK3 server, is often played through the PrimaLuna EVO Tube DAC 100, which, for its price (€3,500), delivers an impressive performance. This DAC then sends the signals to the McIntosh MA8900 AC integrated amplifier."

When I replace the PrimaLuna EVO Tube DAC 100 with the AQWO 2 as the converter, the powerful work gains in clarity, sharpness of contours, and width: the soundstage, which starts at the speaker baseline, becomes wider and extends beyond my speakers (Sonus Faber Olympica Nova 3, €13,400). The extension of the soundstage towards the front is also immediately noticeable, especially on the single "Metrics"; here, there is much more space for the clearly separated instruments. They stand firmly in place, with crystalline transparency and three-dimensionality, something I had never experienced at home. This also applies to the depth of the soundstage: the voice floats at the center, slightly in front of the synthesizers, which are clearly set back but can move subtly back and forth. Impressive.

## Resolution: Warm sound

## and cold nights

I probably don't need to emphasize that this comes with exceptionally high resolution. This becomes especially evident with Sivert Høyem's new album, *On An Island*, recorded during the heart of the pandemic on a small Norwegian fishing island in an old church. The singer, known as the leader of the indie rock band Madrugada, deliberately avoided acoustically

treated recording studios and digital tools for his solo album, instead choosing a vast and lively space. There, he placed microphones everywhere with his musicians and sound engineer Bjarne Stenslie.

The final result sounds not only expansive but also warm, melancholic, and analog, although the cool dampness of the nights occasionally sneaks in. On the opening track, supported by sparse guitar chords and Høyem's unique voice, the strings resonate extremely long. The comparison shows that, with the AQWO 2, this resonance is slightly more persistent and precise than with the PrimaLuna DAC. However, despite this impressive resolution, the Métronome AQWO 2 never falls into excessive analysis; it remains always clear, homogeneous, and natural. No trace of digital harshness.

## The tonal orientation

The Métronome AQWO 2, tonally, has a similar orientation to my former McIntosh MC301 CD player (which then cost 5,650 euros): it leans slightly towards warmth. It manages to offer an extremely high resolution while never losing sight of the soul of the music. In other words, the AQWO 2 is not only a champion in terms of features, but also in sound, appealing to both high-analysis enthusiasts and those seeking musical pleasure. In

fact, I don't see any category of listeners who wouldn't be immediately captivated by it.

## An extra soul

If you ask me now what it is, I have to answer: it is everything. The McIntosh CD player could also be called a "supplement of soul," but it doesn't reach the clarity, soundstage size, illumination, and resolution of the Métronome AQWO 2. It's no surprise that the French model costs four times as much. Even the Teac VRDS-701 CD player and DAC I tested a few months ago (€2,500) can't compete here in terms of resolution, clarity, and soundstage construction, although it does its job very well within its price range, even if it remains somewhat emotionally colder and more distant.

With this sound description, the tube output section of the Métronome AQWO 2 was activated. After deactivating it, the sound changes only slightly, becoming a bit more neutral, but still remains very, very captivating. Those spending nearly €20,000 on this device should opt for the tube output, as the additional €2,190 doesn't make a significant difference in terms of cost. Then, there are those eight different PCM filters to choose from. Métronome states: "The different filter models can subjectively offer better sound depending on the source material and your listening habits." After some experimentation, I definitely settled on the "Brickwall" filter. However, the differences between the filters are minimal, or even imperceptible to me. As for resampling options, the new owner can choose according to their preferences—from PCM 44.1 kHz up to DSD 256.

## CD player, converter, streamer – and a royal path?

Of course, I thoroughly tested all

three modes of access – CD player, converter, and streamer – of this universal source. The result: all are at the same level. Since I own the album *Within The Realm Of A Dying Sun* (1987) by Dead Can Dance in both the classic CD and Japanese SACD versions, I was able to check the advantage of SACD: more detail, even clearer separation of the speakers – somewhat like the advantages of many high-resolution downloads.

## The spirits I have invoked

Speaking of 1987: that year, the dark electro-industrial band yelworC was formed in Munich.

After a long hiatus, they recently released a fascinating new album in many ways, *The Ghosts I Called*. Upon my first listen, this album seemed relatively quiet for a modern electronic production without vocals. Over time, I understood why: it allows for a dynamic headroom (thanks to the loudness war). Some parts of this album (like in *Mute Voices*) made me jump, as the bass suddenly increases in level and depth in a dramatic way. This makes the album a perfect tool for testing bass and overall dynamics.

Already with my Innuos Zenith MK3 as a source and the integrated converter of the McIntosh amplifier, the precision and structure of the bass were fascinating. But with the Métronome AQWO 2 as the converter, these aspects reach an entirely different level: it's incredible how much becomes audible, with impressive depth. Despite this depth, the bass never becomes excessive, muddy, or lacks control: it always remains perfectly defined.

However, a small caveat: the overall dynamics do not quite reach this level. With "Mute Voices" by yelworC, the AQWO 2 reproduces the volume variations in a very dynamic manner, but not in a particularly explosive way. My tube DAC, the PrimaLuna, which is faster, handles this with a bit more liveliness. This doesn't



mean that the French model lacks character or dynamism—far from it. But as an aesthete, it isn't its main specialty: it favors a more continuous flow over sudden, sharp, and impactful changes.

The fact that the AQWO 2 demonstrates slightly sharper responsiveness in subtle dynamics does not alter its refined character: it reproduces subtle volume variations with stunning speed, clear contours, and remarkable clarity, even at low listening levels. The precision in detail retrieval and the fidelity of real-time levels impress across the board, as seen in the beautiful dream-pop track "Prayer Remembered" from Slowdive's latest album *Everything Is Alive* (2023). This piece glides like a gentle veil of clouds dissipating slowly, and the French model reveals every minute level variation without disturbing this dreamlike flow. Remarkable!

## Ascensions

Let's move on to the highs and mids: the former reveal an impressive amount of information,



but never irritate the listener despite their high level of analysis. We've already discussed the issue of resolution: everything that can be present is indeed there—yet nothing ever breaks away from the soundscape or feels isolated. Furthermore, I perceive the high-frequency reproduction of the Métronome AQWO 2 as very airy, with a slight touch of smoothness and fluidity that makes it particularly suited to long listening sessions. I never felt my ears were overloaded, especially since the high frequencies don't stand out in terms of volume, yet they never retreat either. This also reminds me of the PrimaLuna EVO 100 converter, but the Métronome offers higher resolution and overall greater clarity.

After the passing of guitarist Geordie Walker in November 2023, I listened a lot to *Killing Joke*, particularly the legendary *Night Time* album from 1985, which notably influenced Nirvana for their later works. On *Love Like Blood*, the band's absolute anthem, the AQWO 2 allows me to admire Geordie's guitar work with unprecedented precision and lightness—without ever feeling detached from the rest. Sublime.

The midrange is reproduced by the Métronome AQWO 2 with a slight touch of warmth, captivating both the soul and the heart. The beautiful voices appear as transparent as they are deeply moving, reminding me of the previously mentioned *Within The Realm Of A Dying Sun* album by Dead Can Dance and the unique voices of Lisa Gerrard and Brendan Perry. In particular, the classical-inspired track *Summoning Of The Muse*, which I have listened to hundreds of times in my life, has never felt as emotionally striking as it does with the Métronome. Lisa

Gerrard's voice emerges with crystalline clarity, but the AQWO 2 neither exaggerates the warmth nor the richness of the timbres in the midrange, maintaining exemplary neutrality, except for that subtle silky touch.

## CONCLUSION

During the time the Métronome AQWO 2 was at my place, I tried my luck with the lottery. Because if the whimsical idea ever crossed my mind to buy this gem without



a substantial win, my wife wouldn't hesitate to shorten my life (and my bank would probably do the same). Unfortunately, my record win of 9.80 euros wasn't enough, and I had to, with a heavy heart and teary eyes, send it back to its distributor. This device combines a CD/SACD player, a digital-to-analog converter, and a streamer in one single unit. A true universal source or all-in-one system, it brilliantly replaces all these individual devices.

The Métronome AQWO 2 leaves a lasting impression not only with its "safe-box" quality construction, its remarkably smooth Top-Loader mechanism, and its large touchscreen, but above all with its exceptional sound capabilities.

The sound image, especially the

three-dimensionality and clarity of the soundstage, is breathtaking! With the extremely high resolution offered by the AQWO 2, one might easily think it would be a cold, analytical device that loses sight of the soul and wholeness of the music. However, this is never the case. On the contrary, the uncompromising French design perfectly masters the balance between analysis and acoustic enjoyment, making it an ideal choice for both audiophiles seeking precision and those looking for a pleasant, warm listening experience.

Only those with a preference for extreme dynamics might not find complete satisfaction with the Métronome AQWO 2. Aside from that, it's almost perfect—if only it had volume control to transform it into a full preamplifier, but that's a very high-level critique. For those who can afford it or are simply

curious, I highly recommend a listening session with the AQWO 2. But beware: personally, I won't be getting rid of the "spirits" I've invoked anytime soon – this French device has left an indelible sonic imprint on me. It's a reference that's here to stay, that's for sure.

## Métronome AQWO 2

The Métronome AQWO 2 opens up an immense musical scene that stretches widely on the sides and forward. The three-dimensionality, clarity of the image, and depth hierarchy are at an exceptional level. It excels with an extremely high resolution and detail reproduction, yet never feels too analytical or unforgiving, always remaining clear, cohesive, and natural. It appeals to both

audiophiles who enjoy pleasure and those seeking precision, as this all-rounder, despite its ultra-high resolution, never sounds harsh, digital, or soulless. It tends to be slightly warm tonally.

It reaches very deep into the sub-bass frequencies, remaining perfectly stable even during passages with very powerful bass. It delivers a strong coarse dynamic, but not brutally relentless, while the fine dynamics respond with more reactivity and incisiveness. The highs are highly resolved, airy, and slightly velvety, maintaining an enjoyable listening experience even during extended sessions.

It nurtures the mids with a subtle warmth and offers a vocal reproduction of great transparency. Perfectly built and featuring a large, eye-pleasing touchscreen, it combines a streamer, DAC, and CD player into a single device.

Model:  
Métronome AQWO 2

Concept:  
All-in-one player with CD player, D/A converter, and streamer.

Price:  
22,180 euros with tube output,  
19,990 euros without tube output.

Dimensions and weight:  
425 × 130 × 415 mm (W x H x D), 17 kg.

Digital inputs:  
USB-B, S/PDIF coaxial,  
AES/EBU, Toslink, LAN.

Digital outputs:  
S/PDIF coaxial, AES/EBU, I2S  
with HDMI connection.

Analog outputs:  
RCA, XLR.

Compatibility:  
PCM up to 32-bit/384 kHz and  
DSD512, MQA.

Power consumption:  
40 watts (in operation), 32 watts  
(in standby mode).

Colors:  
Aluminum Silver, Black, Gold.

Other: Remote control.

Warranty: 2 years  
Additional information: On the  
distributor's website.