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**METRONOME AQWO 2 HYBRID DAC, SACD/CD PLAYER &  
STREAMER**



Stuart Smith takes a listen to the €19,990 Metronome AQWO 2 DAC/SACD and streamer from esteemed French brand Metronome Technologie.

French brand Metronome are based near Toulouse and in my opinion makes some of the most interesting kit out there, and as well as making kit under the Metronome name also create the

highly distinctive Kalista Dreamplay X CD player and Mantax DAC – if you have ever seen them then you will know why I make that comment. They dare to be different, and, in a HiFi world dominated by black/silver boxes, that is great to see.



However, as well as the distinctly high-end Kalista range of products, they also produce three other ranges of more affordable kit: Digital Sharing (A streamer and pre, a network player, and a DAC), Classica (a more affordable range of CD player, DAC/CD, DAC, and Streamer) and the AQWO (aimed at the CD and SACD enthusiast and which includes the AQWO 2 that we have here for review, the 2+ that adds a power supply, t/AQWO 2 that is a pure transport, and there c/AQWO 2 which is a DAC.

The AQWO range falls into the black (silver and gold) kind of mould but they are beautifully finished and reek of high-end luxury, though the aesthetics are going to be subjective and down to whether they appeal to your taste or not – personally, I love the purposeful and (dare I say) quite masculine looks of the range.





## METRONOME AQWO 2

As the title of this review suggests, we are looking at the Metronome AQWO 2 that is a hybrid DAC, SACD/CD player, and streamer in one box.

Given that lots of folk still have a load of CDs that they haven't got round to ripping yet (or perhaps they still really like the format) it makes a lot of sense for a product to have onboard streaming, a DAC, and the option to play CDs (and SACDs) too. I say this a lot in reviews, but not everyone wants to have a million and one boxes to clutter up their home and this product fulfils this option in a very nice looking bit of kit

The AQWO arrives double-boxed and very nicely packaged. The actual unit itself arrives wrapped like a Christmas present in white tissue paper which I thought was a nice touch. In the box you get a power chord, a remote, a Delrin puck for the CD player, and screw-in antenna for using this in

Wireless mode, though I'll be using it wired most of the time as that's how I have our system is usually wired up.



One of the little things that is really of no consequence but I like a lot is that inside the box with the AQWO 2 you also get a nice envelope that has a voucher to get ROON free for a couple of months, and a certificate of conformity carrying the number of your unit and signed by Chief Designer Jean Marie Clauzel and Production Manager Frederic Esteve. There's also a warranty registration form and a glossy instruction booklet.

The Metronome website tells us that AQWO is derived from the ancient Greek word akouo that apparently means to listen or to hear well...now you know. The AQWO 2 is available in black (that we have here) and silver too, though the website also shows a somewhat blingtacular gold version.

## FEATURES AND SPECIFICATIONS OF THE AQWO 2

The first thing you will notice about the AQWO 2 is that 7 inch touch screen that adorns the front panel and the second thing you will notice is the top loading SACD/CD mechanism that has a fabulously smooth and weighty slide to it as well as a Delrin puck that sits atop your discs.

The AQWO connects to your network via either the ethernet connection or WiFi and there's also a USB input. Digital inputs include a type B asynchronous USB, S/P DIF(RCA), and AES-EBU(XLR) meaning that you can use the AQWO 2 as an external DAC for other sources you may want to send through it. Outputs of the digital variety include I2S on HDMI, S/P DIF and AES-EBU, though I suspect these will be superfluous to most users. For analogue outputs, you have RCA and XLR stereo pairs and thee can be linked to an additional tube/valve board at the time of ordering – a nice touch for those that want it.

Inside the box, you have 3 toroidal transformers with Schaffner Lines (Schaffner is a company that makes filters) and 10 independent regulation lines.

It's a pretty standard box dimensions-wise at (LHD) 425x130x415mm and it weighs 17Kg.



## SET UP

Set up was thankfully as easy as plugging the unit into the network and hooking up to the preamplifier ( you can hook it up straight to the amp and use the onboard volume control if you want and I will look at this later in the review process). A message popped up on the massive touchscreen to tell me there was an update available, I pressed OK, the unit downloaded said update and that was that. I enabled the unit in ROON and a moment later there was music.

That 7" touch screen I mentioned has all the information you need to know about what input is playing, the usual transport/playback controls, the track number, and the time of the track you are playing. It will also show you the sample rate etc. and if streaming shows cover artwork, sample rate etc. I love the idea of a touch screen, even though you barely need to touch it after initial set-up – it makes the menu diving very simple...though that's not so much of a dive as a bit of a



paddle in the shallow which I like – I really dislike menu-diving and so for me the simpler the better!

You can also access all the different setting menus via the touch screen and these include menus for Digital, DAC, Stream, Display and Other device information and reset options. The DAC menu allows you to change the digital filter between a choice of 8 and also allows you to change the output level of the analogue stage. Stream allows you to change whether you display metadata of the track you are streaming, enable WiFi and for the streamer to work in gapless mode – the latter is something that is a make or break feature for me and no doubt for many others, particularly those who listen to classical music and mixes. The Screen control allows you to change the brightness of the screen and to choose from 5 different backgrounds.

The remote is pretty nice though nothing spectacular and I'd have liked to have seen a remote that echoed the very high quality of the casework on the AQWO 2. Anyway, all the functions are available on the remote and full instructions are given in the instruction pamphlet, though it's pretty obvious.

## **SOUND OF THE METRONOME AQWO 2**

### **STREAMING**

I'd been playing with the excellent AURALiC S1 and PSU before pugging the AQWO 2 into the very same system and one album that was on my playlist for that review was Dub Syndicate's Strike the Balance. From a usability perspective, you load the album up on ROON (that's what I was using for streaming throughout the review process) the artwork pops up on the front screen and there is immediate music. Immediately there is a sense of this being a very good product to play tunes on. Percussion throughout Hey Ho on this album pans left and right and the soundstage is absolutely incredible and all-enveloping. Some may argue that sound staging is a product of amp and speakers but whether that is the case or not, there is something going on with the AQWO 2 in the system that lifts this aspect of the listening experience somewhat – but then it should, as it's about ten times the price of the AURALiC unit. The AURALiC was no slouch but this is Premier League stuff I'm hearing here...and that unexpectedly comes at a cost. Everything is "better" from the bass depth and texture to small details you hear in the mix such as the string sounds on Je T'aime that seem to float above the aural picture and a little "mmm lovely" vocal part that comes at a minute thirty six and which I don't recall having taken much notice of before. And that bass! It seems from the outset (and I'd really not meant to listen to that record all the way through) that the AQWO 2 certainly seems to be playing to my sonic fancies.

On Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars, Bowies' vocal on Five Years sounds like he is putting his whole soul into the performance. He obviously is and it's there for anyone to hear on any bit of kit to a greater or lesser extent, but with the AQWO dealing with the zeros and ones it's very connecting and easy to "get". This is a hard one to describe and in the greater context it's kind of why HiFi Nuts pay huge sums of money to get them emotionally closer to the recording and the musician's artistic intent. As with the Dub Syndicate tune, the layering apparent in the mix is etched into the image before the listener, but certainly not in a way that feels the image is artifice. I just sat, relaxed, listened, and became fully absorbed in the performance that was laid out in front of me. Yes, there are all the requisite bits and bobs there; sounstaging, texture and reality to the instruments, tight bass, and all the rest of it, but what grabbed me most about listening to this album from start to finish (I'd set out just to listen to the opening track) was that I got lost in the music and particularly Bowie's vocal performance which was simply enthralling! I don't know if this is because of the clarity of the midband vocal or whether it's because everything in the music just seemed to gel together so well, but something happened between my ears, brain and whatever bit of that system triggers an emotional response to music.

I did have a play with the filters on the DAC section of the player and ended up preferring Linear Phase Fast, though that's purely subjective but good to know users can have a bit of a play themselves.





As I'm sat about I popped on The Hills Of Katmandu (original album version) by Tantra and apart from that high-energy bassline, what I noted was the percussion, particularly the fingers and palms slapping on the skins of the drums. There's a negative connotation to the phrase "the devil's in the detail" but to spin that on its head a bit, there are angels in the detail too. Detail is great, but too often you hear a product that has clearly been "voiced" to push that mid and upper-mid band to create the illusion of detail, that's not the case with the AQWO 2 and from top to bottom there's detail aplenty with, as I've already mentioned, odds and sods hidden in the mix on lesser players becoming more apparent...but not in a way that is over the top or over-emphasised. As this tune plays, I look over to our Solid Steel rack that is strewn with boxes and think to myself "wouldn't it be great just to have the AQWO 2 streaming content from the NAS, the pre/amp we have and a pair of speakers – and for some that will be all they ever want or need...an end-game box that offers a streamlined way to enjoy your tunes...I'm not sure I'd even use the SACD/CD player if I ever cured my box addiction, but it's there should you want it.

And that brings me on nicely to the disc player.

## **THE METRONOME AQWO 2 AND CDS**

I still have an embarrassingly large CD collection and it takes up a lot of space up in the second listening room, but there are some corkers in there that I still want to keep and if you are keeping one you might as well keep the lot – that's my justification. And, anyway, like vinyl I do like the physical aspect of CDs, despite the claim that it may be a dead format, or a format that is the next big thing, depending on who you talk to.

So I hoof it upstairs and grab a handful of CDs from the groaning racks. As I put the first CD on the top-loading player I'm reminded as to why I enjoyed the previous CD player from Metronome that I got to play with. The metal slider is heavy and slides back like you'd imagine it would had Bentley door designers designed it. It's a joy to use. The CD mechanism is exposed, you pop the CD on the "spindle" and then the puck. And even that is a sensual experience as the magnet in it pulls the puck to the mechanism and secures the CD in place. If you do buy one of these players, do keep this safe as without it the CD player isn't at all happy and it could easily get lost.





To get the CD player to play you obviously need to change the source on the touch screen from NETWORK and to SACD, though you can also do that on the remote, though I struggled to get the remote to control the CD transport for whatever reason...no doubt her error and a case of DNRM - Did Not Read Manual. Once I did read the manual and put the remote in CD mode it worked effortlessly and obviously, though the rewind and forward wind controls relay to the machine being a bit clunky and haphazard. It works fine but I struggled to get to the part of the song I wanted – in review-mode I tend to listen to a tune all the way through and then go back and listen to parts that I want to pull out or comment on.





First up was Neil Young's Zuma which is an album I play a fair old bit and is probably my favourite Neil Young album. Pardon My Heart changes the tone of the record from the previous two songs and just as with the Bowie record I streamed and laddered about above, I felt the tone of Young's plaintive vocal came across wonderfully and with emotion. Detail of the acoustic guitars and the hollow wooden taps you hear come across fantastically well, as does the lead guitar that is well back in the mix. Again, the tone of the latter is clear to hear, even though it is well back in the mix. From a listener's perspective on this tune you can easily visualise Young in the studio – I had him atop a barstool, guitar across his body, eyes closed and getting well into the meaning of the vocal. I wanted to play Cortez The Killer as it always makes me think of my mate Tommy and I know it's one of his favourite tunes. Not particularly because this is a testing track for a bit of kit to play, just purely for the thrill of the listen – and I wasn't disappointed. Young's guitar straddles the very fine line between genius and broken on this track and the AQWO 2 gets this across magnificently. Billy Talbot's bass lollaps along languidly and Ralph Molina's "lazy" drumming is perfectly timed. I listen to the tune through and it's fabulously rendered by the AQWO 2's drive and DAC. Again, I look over and think "This is a retirement kind of system, but do I need the SACD player if I'm downsizing?" – but that's hopefully a few years away from today and we'll see where we end up when we end up at that time! By the time I've stopped pondering my future the closing bars to Through My Sails close and I realise I've been completely lost in my thoughts and the music.

The Strokes' *Is This* It came out 23 years ago in 2001 and when we first got it I played it over and over. I've never tired of this record for its raw and live feel – and some belting tunes to boot. Look, I'm running the risk of repeating myself but the AQWO 2 plays this record beautifully too and I get the same kind of rush that I got all those years ago playing this through a much modest system – it's all about the music, maaaaan! There's that effortless detail the AQWO 2 brings to the party and a feeling of balance across the audio spectrum that comes together as a whole to bring excitement and an edge-of-your-seat thrill to proceedings.

All in all the CD/SACD section of this player brings pretty much the same qualities to the listening experience as streaming does...and why shouldn't it?

I didn't use the AQWO 2 as a DAC for external sources.





## CONCLUSION

This is an excellent sounding bit of kit that is masterly put together by the French team at Metronome. The casework is lovely in a quiet luxury kind of way and little details like how the CD top plate slides and the puck clicks into place add to the experience. The remote is a bit of a let down in my opinion and I'd love to see Metronome create one that matches the mastery of the casework.

Whether you are listening to CDs or streaming content from your NAS, or whatever streaming service you use, the AQWO 2 has you well covered and presents the music in a way that you (or I at least) really connected with. Yes, it has all the detail and ticks all the audiophile boxes that you are looking for when reviewing a piece of equipment, but it also has that rare ability to really engage you with your tunes. I don't know how this is achieved or what special sauce is used by brands that manage to get this emotional connection but Metronome have done it with the AQWO 2 and I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the unit, to the point it had me questioning what a final game system might look like at HiFi PiG Towers.

The timing on this thing is impeccable and the way rhythm sections play off each other is wonderful. Vocal details and spatial cues are well evident and overall the sound is powerful, clear and detailed without being forced.

I'm giving the Metronome our Five Hearts, but that is a HIGH Five Hearts that border on Editor's Choice. I'm being Uber-harsh here and knocking points off for the remote that whilst it works, just doesn't have the same luxurious feel as the rest of the AQWO 2

## AT A GLANCE

### **Build Quality and Features:**

Stunning build that exudes quiet luxury

The CD slider is top notch and the puck feels great when you put a CD on

Great specifications that cover all bases

Remote is a bit out of keeping with the rest of the offering

Offers a streamlined route to a high end system

Great and big touch screen

**Sound Quality:**

Add a good amp and a good pair of speakers, sit back and enjoy!

Highly detailed without being over the top or forced

Great timing, especially with regards to rhythm section

Beautifully balanced without any one part of the audio spectrum coming to the fore

**Value For Money:**

It's not cheap, but you are getting a top end DAC, Streamer, and SACD/CD player for your money

**We Loved:**

Build quality

The connection it gave to all the music I played through it

Feature-rich

Could become the hub of your digital audio world

The touch screen is excellent

**We Didn't Love So Much:**

Remote

I can't currently justify buying one, but would strongly consider if I wasn't reviewing and decided to keep my CDs

**Elevator Pitch Review:** At a few nicker off €20 grand, the Metronome AQWO 2 is not a cheap product, but from the moment you open the box it's clear that you are dealing with a high quality bit of kit. That feeling continues whether you are playing CDs or streaming your records. Sonically it is uncoloured and balanced across the audio spectrum. Whether it is timing accuracy I don't know, but bass, drums and the whole myth section just feel so right. Likewise, vocals exude a rightness that connects you to the music. Sound staging is superb without being pushed in any frequency. If the specs and features of the AQWO 2 match what you are looking for in your HiFi system, then get online, find a dealer and get yourself in front of one with some tunes you know well and give yourself a couple of hours – you can thank me later!

Price: €19,990

**Stuart Smith**





## SPECIFICATIONS

### PLAYBACK MECHANISM

- \* SACD D&M with customizations and Delrin® puck

### NETWORK

- \* 1 Ethernet connector, built-in Wi-Fi
- \* 1 USB input

### RESOLUTION

32 bits / 384 kHz

### DIGITAL INPUTS

- \* USB asynchronous type B (32/384)
- \* S/P DIF 75 Ohms RCA
- \* AES-EBU 110 Ohms XLR

### DIGITAL OUTPUTS

- \* I<sup>2</sup>S HDMI proprietary
- \* S/P DIF 75 Ohms RCA
- \* AES-EBU 110 Ohms XLR

### ANALOGUE OUTPUTS

- \* Asymmetrical 3 V RMS @ 0dB – 47 kOhms, RCA connectors
- \* Symmetrical 3 V RMS @ 0dB – 600 Ohms, XLR connectors
- \* Optional tube outputs with additional boards

### POWER SUPPLY

- \* 3/4 toroidal transformers with Schaffner filters, 10 independent regulation lines



## VOLTAGE

- \* 120/240 VAC – 50/60 Hz

## OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

- \* Consumption : 40 VA  
Dimensions (LxHxP): 425 x 130 x 415 mm  
Weight : 17 Kg