

Métronome Technologie AQWO

Bucking the trend that sees 'physical media' in decline, the latest model to emerge from the French company's disc player/DAC line-up is also its first SACD machine
 Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Coincidence is an interesting thing: at the same time I collected the curiously-named Métronome AQWO for review, the mainstream news was buzzing with the decline of both physical music media and file downloads, and the seemingly unstoppable rise of streaming services. It was also echoed by editor PM in his Welcome page [HFN Feb '19].

So perhaps this may not be the best climate in which to launch an SACD/CD player/DAC selling for a couple of quid under £13,000 and available in a choice of silver or black, let alone one with a tube stage option for an extra £1570? Oh, and AQWO is not an acronym, but a phonetic twist on the word ἀκούω from Ancient Greek, meaning 'I listen, or hear'...

What's more, although SACD was launched 20 years ago, and remains a very niche format, the AQWO is Métronome's first player to spin the 'Super Audio' format. So why an SACD player now? Well, it should be noted that Métronome is hardly a lone voice crying in the wilderness: in recent times we've seen a number of new SACD-capable players from the likes of Marantz and Pioneer, whether as pure audio devices or 'universal' machines with SACD playback plus DVD/BD video format compatibility.

AND ANOTHER THING...

And there's another reason – while the supply of new SACD releases may have slowed to little more than a trickle, mainly from smaller, audiophile oriented labels, the DSD technology behind the discs is having something of an Indian summer, with various download sites either offering, or specialising in, content in the single-bit format. Some have a few DSD releases – or at least releases offered in DSD – while one, *NativeDSD.com*, claims only to sell recordings originated in DSD. At the time of

RIGHT: Métronome's blue encapsulated Talema transformers feed PSUs [top right] for the tube [top left] and solid-state analogue outputs. Two AK4497 DACs [left] support both CD/SACD via a 'floating' top-loading transport

writing, it's offering some 1500 albums, or over 22,000 tracks, from 64 labels, many of them in both stereo and multichannel, and in formats up to DSD256.

So that's what Métronome is up to, the AQWO having not just a transport able to play both CDs and SACDs, but also digital inputs including an asynchronous USB-B that'll accept formats all the way up to DSD512 (should you be able to find any such files). At its core is a pair of AKM's AK4497 DACs from its 'Velvet Sound Verita' series, which can accept not only high sample rate DSD but also 768kHz/32-bit PCM. Examples of the Velvet Sound DAC series are already found in Métronome's own DSC1 network player [HFN Apr '18], in Esoteric's Grandioso player/DACs [HFN Oct '18], and at the heart of Linn's latest-generation Katalyst DAC.

With that DAC comes a choice of six digital filter settings [see PM's Lab report, p49] that give plenty of scope for fettling, but I'm bound to say the small variations in sound when switching filters are all but masked by the inherently 'characterful' quality of the AQWO itself – and that's before you switch in the optional tube output stage. That tube kit, by the way, can be specified for factory installation at the time of ordering, or added later if required.

TOP-LOADING MECH

The player itself is built on a grand scale, offering a third variant on the disc-loader mechanism within the Métronome range. Here the top-loading drive is located to the front of the chassis, with a hefty sliding cover to match the solidity of the main casework, and a magnetic puck supplied



ABOVE: Métronome's *je ne sais quoi* extends to a button-free front panel: instead, all the controls are located on a large touchscreen display – tap the logo to explore the menu

to hold the disc in place. The substantial weight is to an extent accounted for by the use of multiple power supplies and the three-point support structure that at least partially isolates the CD/SACD mechanism from outside vibration.

Meanwhile, the fascia panel is dominated by a large (6.5in) colour, 21:9 'widescreen' touch-display, offering not just the usual status readouts but also a range of set-up and operation options, including the ability to change the colour of its illumination to match your tastes and décor. If I may be forgiven for resorting to an obvious stereotype for a moment... it's all very French!

As well as the disc playback and the aforementioned USB-B input, the AQWO also has a range of 'conventional' digital ins – two each of AES/EBU on XLR, S/PDIF coaxial and optical – and digital outs on the same trio of connections, plus an I²S output on HDMI should you have a DAC able to accept it. Mind you, it would seem slightly odd to spend some £13,000 on a player such as this and only use it as a

digital transport. Consequently, analogue outputs are provided on both balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA) sockets.

A NEW EXPERIENCE

The rubric of these reviews requires that one sums up the sound of a product succinctly before going into greater detail,

'The "Velvet Sound" DACs are taken to the extreme'

and I think in this case I can do so in one word – 'unusual'. The Métronome AQWO sounds unlike any other high-end player/DAC I have encountered, in that it has a sound largely based on warmth and smoothness rather than

the extraction of every last detail on a disc or in a digital file.

In practice the overall presentation is one of scale and richness and, yes, there's still plenty of information on offer, including a persuasive sense of the presence and ambience of a fine recording – especially when playing SACDs or DSD files. However, this is a very long way from the 'maximum information' school of audio

design some find almost unlistenable, with the side-benefit that even rather brash recordings are tamed.

What's more, switch in the tube output stage and these characteristics are amplified in their effect – I hesitate to use the term 'enhanced' – to the extent that you'd have to be quite a big fan of the lush school of listening to consider this option.

What is very clear, however, is that the AQWO offers a consistent performance whether music is played from disc or file, and whether using the USB-B connection or the S/PDIF inputs in the case of CD-quality or above PCM content. Connected to my usual Naim/PMC reference system, and with digital sources including my 'optimised' Mac computer and the digital outputs of the Naim NDS, the Métronome player/DAC never sounded anything less than highly impressive and utterly engaging.

And all this despite a nagging sense that the content might have more to give, and the information available being mildly subsumed by the overall balance. It's almost as if the 'Velvet Sound' labelling on the DACs was being taken to the ultimate extreme. Experiment

as I did, I couldn't help thinking that some listeners would be hankering for a bit more bite and punch from the player.

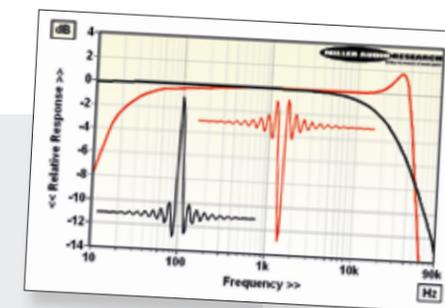
STADIUM ROCK

Spinning the SACD release of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon* [Parlophone 7243 582136 2 1] was a case in point: the sound was, without a doubt big and magnificent in its weight and deep bass, for example in the rhythm section of 'Money', but some of the finer details in the mix were



TUBE TACTICS

Métronome's General Manager, Jean Marie Clauzel, suggested that the 'Sharp roll-off' option in AK's bank of six filter algorithms is the default for the AQWO. While these various filters trade distortion in the time domain [see impulses, inset Graph] for greater/lesser aliasing and a modified treble response, in practice there's a bigger difference in frequency response 'shape' between the AQWO's standard solid-state output [black trace] and its triode tube option [red trace]. A close look inside the AQWO [see picture, p46] reveals the tube stage is transformer-coupled and this influences not only its low frequency distortion [see Lab Report, p49] but also its bass response of -2.7dB/20Hz and ultrasonic peak of +1.5dB/32kHz followed by a steep roll-off of -6dB/48kHz to -27dB/90kHz (and steeper still at -21dB/60kHz to -50dB/100kHz with SACD). The standard output [black trace] offers a 'sweeter' treble with a gentler overall roll-off, reaching -2.2dB/20kHz (-3dB for SACD), -6dB/42kHz (-10dB, SACD) and -13dB/90kHz (and -35dB/100kHz for SACD). The inset Graph also reveals that Métronome's tube option is phase-inverting – adding yet another 'hidden' ingredient to the subjective sound quality mix. **PM**



MÉTRONOME AQWO



ABOVE: Two Toslink optical, two AES/EBU and two coaxial digital inputs are joined by an asynchronous USB-Type B. Outputs include single-ended on RCAs and balanced via XLRs, plus digital on Toslink, coaxial, AES/EBU and DSD as I²S on an HDMI socket

slightly muted, and the character of instruments and voices a little, well, too richly gilded. As a recording to wallow in, this was peerless, but I listened in vain for any new, penetrating insights.

Similarly with the eponymous Dire Straits album, whether played from CD [Vertigo 800 051-2] or SACD [Vertigo UIGY-9032], the sound was more akin to the larger-scale production of the band's later outings, lacking some of the anticipated 'early days' rawness. The explosive attack when the band kicks in on 'Down To The Waterline' was never edgy, just as the menace of 'Six Blade Knife' slipped away into the overall warmth.

It was arguably more akin to stadium-rock, rather than the bar-band mentality of what remains possibly the group's best album. In the same way, the AQWO plays up the slickness of the production of Boy George's Culture Club comeback album, *Life* [BMG 538398012], rather than bringing out the singer's now lower-pitched and somewhat rougher textured voice.

Almost from the off the sound of the player is apparent, as the chorus of opening track 'God & Love' kicks in and the AQWO goes for the 'big wash of audio' option rather than crystallising the details of the recording. It certainly delivers the rhythms here – and there are some fine grooves in this set – even though it's the power and weight of the drums and bass guitar that leads the charge rather than



LEFT: Direct track access, skip, search and menu navigation are available via Métronome's system remote. 'Volume' adjusts display brightness here

of thrill of brass or the crispness of the accompanying percussion.

MESMERISING MUSIC

For all that, this is a player that's more than capable of pleasing with demonstration-quality recordings, as it shows with the unusual trumpet and percussion pairing of Colin Currie and Håkan Hardenberger's *The Scene Of The Crime* [Colin Currie Records CCR0002; 96kHz/24-bit].

The spare recording suits the tone of the AQWO extremely well, and even with the tube output in play there's good presence, the brass slightly distant, the percussion sometimes subtle, sometimes hitting hard. All the same, this is mesmerising without reaching out and demanding your attention.

Moreover, the balance here is heard to fabulous effect with *Frage* [Sony Classical 19075889192; 96kHz/24-bit], the player delivering fine focus with Christian Gerhaher's lyrical, emotional baritone and the sympathetic accompaniment of Gerold Huber in this first volume of a complete recording of Schumann's songs. This simple recording has a lovely luminous quality, and the warmth offered by Métronome's AQWO enhances the music's intimacy to striking effect. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

To say that the AQWO is a matter of taste is no cop-out: indeed, so nuanced is this player/DAC that I would advise long and hard auditioning before one even considers a purchase. And that's especially true if you are tempted by the tube option. Bottom line is this – if you like the things it does, then you'll love it, bit it's not a straight swap-out for those plain vanilla player/DACs that offer the same compatibilities.

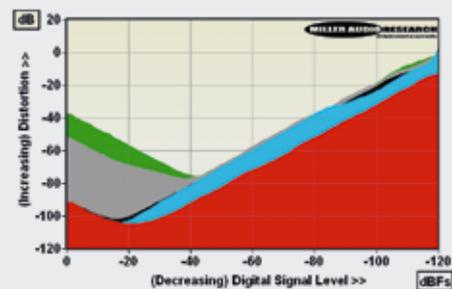
Sound Quality: 82%



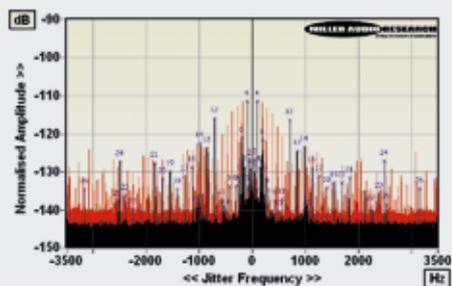
While Métronome's new SACD/CD player employs the same Asahi Kasei 'Velvet Sound' AK4497 DACs as its DS¹ network audio player [HFN Apr '18], only the AQWO offers access to the DAC's six in-built digital filter algorithms – Sharp/Slow/Super-Slow, Short Delay Sharp/Slow and Low Dispersion Short Delay roll-offs [explored in our review of the Teac UD-503, HFN Apr '16]. Tested in its default Sharp Roll-off mode – a linear-phase digital filter offering 70dB of stopband rejection (re. 22kHz at 48kFs) – the response 'shapes' do not correspond to those of the DS¹ and also differ substantially between the solid-state (SS) and tube output options [see boxout, p47].

Distortion increases substantially over the top 40dB of the player's dynamic range via the tube option, so while a *minimum* of 0.0003% is achieved via the SS output from 200Hz-20kHz at -20dBfs, the figure via the triodes is 0.04%/1kHz and 0.14%/20kHz at the same level [see Graph 1, below]. Distortion is high at low frequencies via both outputs – 0.4%/20Hz via SS and 40%/20Hz/0dBfs via the tube out although the source impedance is better managed via the former: 55ohm vs. 600-1140ohm (tube). The A-wtd S/N is substantially wider via the SS output at 116dB vs. 96dB (tube) re. 0dBfs, although the peak output levels are similar at 6.2V vs. 5.85V (tube) via the XLRs.

Not only is this S/N wider than that achieved by the DS¹ network player, so too is jitter very much better suppressed. The figure of 315psec via CD is only 200psec over the minimum achievable 16-bit level and remains comparable to the 340psec measured for 48kHz/24-bit LPCM inputs. Lowest jitter is via SACD at 225psec [black spectrum, Graph 2 below]. PM



ABOVE: Distortion vs. digital signal level over a 120dB dynamic range – 1kHz at 48kHz/24-bit LPCM, red; via CD, 1kHz, black (tube, grey); 20kHz, cyan (tube, green)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter spectra (48kHz/24-bit LPCM, red; and via SACD, black with markers)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	6.19Vrms / 55ohm (XLR out)
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD / SACD / Tube)	116.1dB / 116.0dB / 96.2dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0033% / 0.00035%
Dist. & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0019% / 0.00035%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to -2.2dB/-7.1dB/-13.5dB
Digital jitter (CD/SACD / LPCM)	315psec / 225psec / 340psec
Resolution @ -100dB (CD/SACD / LPCM)	±0.2dB / ±0.2dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption (solid-state/tube)	30W/31W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	425x130x415mm / 15kg