

# the absolute sound

## Equipment Report



## Métronome AQWO Premium CD/SACD Player and DAC

### French Treat

Anthony H. Cordesman

**T**he Métronome AQWO CD/SACD player and DAC is the first product I have auditioned from Métronome—a French company I've heard good things about, but whose products I've never previously auditioned. Métronome's reputation proved to be well justified. It has produced an outstanding CD/SACD player and DAC that can decode DSD as well as any PCM format up to 32 bits and 384kHz.

The sound quality is particularly good with SACDs and real high-resolution recording, although the Métronome also gets the best out of regular CDs. However, its \$16,800 cost does raise serious questions about its price and about the features audiophiles need from digital technology at a time when SACD has become more and more marginal, and high-resolution streaming has become more and more common. Good as this particular player is, it doesn't incorporate streaming support, a feature that is starting to make its way into more and more DACs. You can, however, stream to the AQWO with a phone, computer, or music server.

#### Features and Technology

The fact that this player is French led to a minor language barrier in discussing its technology. Its English manual is well written, and Métronome was kind enough to provide some additional information.

Jean Marie Clauzel, Métronome's managing partner, described the player as follows: "First of all, AQWO is the first Métronome

er mechanism hidden underneath the cover. As for the internal design: The basic principle is the care we take with the power supply, specifically the regulation of power to each component and the use of a quantity of capacitors in order to maintain available power reserve in all cases. We chose long ago to use AKM's conversion processors, and we design the conversion stage on a separate board, which also makes a difference. In conclusion, I would say we have no big secrets, but the success of our recipe results from the right choice of components and knowing how to cook them together."

In practice, I found the player to be a cleanly designed top-loader with one of the best touchscreen displays I've seen. It is a very solidly built, 33-pound unit, and removing the cover reveals exceptional assembly and parts-quality.

As for technology, Métronome also stresses the quality of its power supplies, which are integrated into its drive and use independent supplies and regulation for the major sections of the player. Métronome also uses large toroidal transformers to minimize vibration.

The manufacturer states that the Métronome AQWO employs a D&M SACD mechanism, with proprietary modifications, and one AK4497 DAC chip per channel. Métronome states that these chips can not only deal with inputs up to 32 bits and 384kHz; they are also one of the few converters "available for decoding native DSD signals with a high requirement of musicality." The analog stage uses four OPA 604 op-

device in five years that has been designed from scratch. I didn't want anything in common with existing products, except for our *savoir-faire* in making digital sources that sound analog. This is also our first SACD player, and finally the first device based on a CD transport other than the Philips CDPRO. My basic idea was to develop a hybrid: a D/A converter and integrated player, and not just an integrated player with a couple of digital inputs. I also wanted to have a versatile product in terms of analog outputs; this is why there is a specific additional "tube kit," including a small tube board and a power supply, which can be added at the factory or later on.

"I chose a clear external design, with just a reminder of older products on the front plate. The touchscreen was to be big, and the top-draw-



amps in a Class A configuration to obtain a high bandwidth. The output impedance is low to avoid any losses of high frequencies. The tube output section also uses two JAN6922s, again in Class A.

The Métronome provides an unusually wide range of inputs and outputs. It has a high-resolution USB Type B input “based on an asynchronous communication protocol and very high-quality oscillators. This module provides an excellent-quality digital signal to the DAC, with very low jitter compared to the synchronous protocol.” In addition, the AQWO has two each AES/EBU, SPDIF, and TosLink inputs, as well as one each AES/EBU, SPDIF, and TosLink outputs. An HDMI jack carries the FS signal.

The Métronome AQWO has a unique approach to disc-loading. It is a top-loader with a sliding, manually operated door. You slide the door back, place a disc directly on the drive, and then carefully

place a small, circular, metal/Delrin clamp on the stainless shaft in the center of the drive, which then clamps the disc magnetically to the drive. This works fine with a little practice, but be careful loading discs. If you slip, the clamp is so small it can easily fall into the unit. Removing the top cover to retrieve it is no big deal, but you do have to unscrew and cautiously remove a plug-in wire from the cover to the main circuit board. You also have to remember to slide the top cover back—scarcely as complicated as playing an LP, but unusual in a CD/SACD player.

#### The Sound

As is the case with virtually all top-quality high-end audio equipment, you pay a lot with the Métronome AQWO for relatively small improvements in the nuances of sound quality, and for nuances that come across most clearly on a relatively limited number of very high-quality recordings, which all too often do not provide the best performances. In the case of the Métronome AQWO, its strengths consist in three key sonic areas—ones that emerge with all three major digital sources of music: CD, SACD, and inputs to the DAC.

The first nuance is exceptionally realistic dynamics and dynamic detail. These super-

rior dynamics are particularly apparent with really high-quality recordings and with top-quality SACDs, and with speakers good enough to reproduce this kind of detail at both really low and high sound levels. The Métronome is particularly good at handling complex high-level dynamics. Put simply, it makes “loud” sound more musical and more engaging.

The second nuance is very smooth and detailed high-frequency performance that does not exaggerate the upper midrange or harden strings, woodwinds, brass, and soprano voice. Getting the upper midrange and treble right is always a challenge for even the best front ends, and the Métronome is very, very good at it.

The third nuance is life and air. Once again, a great deal will depend on the recording, but the Métronome does an unusually good job of opening up the soundfield, providing lifelike imaging detail, and making the music come alive, even with some recordings I had previously categorized as “ordinary.” It does tend to make the music sound a bit “front row,” but any coloration of this kind is minor, and the benefit of engaging you more deeply in the music will more than offset its effect for anyone other than the most determined middle-to-rear-of-the-hall concertgoer.

The end result is that the Métronome AQWO is one of the few SACD/CD players that rivals the sound quality of my reference Meitner XDC1. Here, however, I have to add two major cautions. First, its strengths with really good recordings can have the opposite effect with bad or mediocre ones. If a recording is slightly hard, this becomes more clearly audible. So do mikes or mike placements that exaggerate the upper midrange, or any efforts to highlight upper-midrange detail in the mastering process, or any over-editing processes in the assembly of the music. Put differently, the Métronome’s virtues are most apparent with naturally warm and detailed music. As noted, the AQWO can become overly revealing with lower-quality recordings.

I feel that I, and most reviewers, tend to understate the importance of synergy in judging any given component. Every high-end system is a collection of different elements that creates a mix of sound qualities and minor colorations that suit the taste of a given audiophile, and that are sharply affected by the listening room and listening position. Inserting any new item into that system will affect the system’s mix of colorations. No one can fully judge the impact of a given piece of equipment in a given room by reading about it, or by listening to it at dealerships or at shows. The only way that an audiophile can really make a valid final judgment about a given component is to actually hear it in his or her system.

This became very apparent in listening to the Métronome. I



## Specs & Pricing

**Frequency bandwidth:** 10Hz–50kHz ±0.1dB

**Signal-to-noise ratio:** Greater than 95dB

**Total harmonic distortion:** -95dB max

**Digital inputs:** One USB Type B, two AES/EBU XLR, two SPDIF RCA, two TosLink

**Digital outputs:** One (each) AES/EBU, SPDIF, TosLink, HDMI PS

**Analog outputs:** Unbalanced, balanced

**Dimensions:** 425mm x 130mm x 415mm

**Weight:** 15 kg

**Price:** \$16,800 (with tube output option, \$18,800)

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compared it to the sound of the Meitner XDS1, the PS Audio DirectStream Memory Player and DirectStream DAC, and the Oppo UDP-205 in three different systems. Its nuances almost seemed tailored to a system centered around the Legacy Aeris speakers. The Meitner XDS1 outperformed the Métronome, to my particular taste and listening biases, in a system based on the Magico S7s, and in another system with GoldenEar Technology Triton Reference speakers. The PS Audio combination was very close or equal to this setup. And while the Oppo UDP-205 did not compete directly, it still provided excellent sound for the money (in all three systems), and its performance served as a reminder that really good high-end gear can still be affordable.

#### Summary Recommendation

I have no reservations in recommending the Métronome AQWO to anyone who needs a dedicated high-end DAC and CD/SACD player, and who can afford a purchase at this price level. The unit provides excellent playback of PCM at 16-to-32 bits and 44.1-to-384kHz, and exceptionally good playback of SACDs. Even more importantly, in most practical ways it is one of an increasing number of digital players that gets the best of out of really good CDs and 16-bit/44.1kHz recordings.

Real higher-resolution recordings do sometimes sound better, although I've yet to hear any benefits in going beyond 24 bits and 96kHz, and I'm never quite sure where the higher resolution alone is the actual cause. However, today's best players and DACs show that many older recordings were actually far better than

older-generation players and DACs could reveal. If you have a large library of CDs and don't have a top player, you may be surprised at how good your existing collection of music can sound.

That said, for the reasons stated earlier, the AQWO raises questions about making a major investment in a DAC and CD/SACD player. The AQWO costs \$16,800 (\$18,800 with the tube output stage) and doesn't incorporate streaming services. You can, however, stream to the Métronome's DAC with an outboard computer or music server.

The Métronome does not have any preamp or other special features apart from a volume control, and does not provide the option to use an iPad or a similar device as a remote control. It also does not have MQA, unless you use the MQA option in Roon. *[MQA files streamed from Tidal via Roon will be "unfolded" to the signal's original sample rate, up to 96kHz. This provides better sound quality than no unfolding, but not the full resolution of which MQA is capable with a full MQA decoder built into the DAC. —RH]*

These limits don't make it any different than a wide range of other digital front ends, but the state of the art in high-end digital is evolving so rapidly that I'd have to advise almost all potential buyers of any such unit to think twice about investing now, at a time when devices with more advanced streaming and preamp features are becoming more common.

In my opinion, most commercial SACDs never lived up to their hype. Far too many jazz and popular music SACDs and DSD sources

**The Métronome AQWO's key sonic strengths—and they emerge on all three major digital sources (CD, SACD, and inputs to the DAC)—consist in superior dynamics; very smooth, detailed high frequencies; and exceptional life and air.**

failed to offer any real improvement in sound quality, although some popular music and jazz SACDs and combined CD/SACDs do seem to have cleaner mastering in the SACD rather than in the CD version. Certainly, simply converting an older recording into an SACD only seems to raise the price, not improve the sound.

The exception to my cautions may be the audiophile who has already bought a large library of modern U.S. and European classical SACDs. Some small European firms have issued remarkably clean and detailed SACD discs, although many of these now offer the same sound quality as commercial downloads.

If you already have a large collection of SACDs, and have an equally large budget to match, the Métronome is well worth auditioning. Just remember that its merits will depend on the synergy between its sonic nuances and those of your system. For \$16,800, there has to be an exceptional match between the player and the system—something no reviewer can predict. **tas**