

Review of CD/SACD/DAC' player AQWO by Srajan Ebaen, 2018.09, on :



AUDIO REVIEWS



AQWO



Limeys. Frogs. Krauts. Humans seem famously suspicious of other cultures. Hence derogatory war-time terms for the enemy focussed on diet. Being from Germany, I never acquired a taste for Sauerkraut. That makes me a reluctant Kraut at best. But I adore limes. And perhaps grenouille dégustation is in my future. Just as with music, why judge a person by their culinary appetites? How about curiosity, expanding one's horizons and all that Jazz? If audiophilia has its own form of cultural preconceptions, what is it for French hifi? Frankly, je ne sais quoi. Perhaps it's best to ask the French themselves, about what they believe distinguishes their fine audio culture. For today, I follow such advice for the intro. For his domestic scene, French contributor Joël Chevassus has his ears far closer to the ground than I ever could from across the Channel. Having previously introduced Métronome in his [review](#) of their C8+ player, let's revisit that history. Dominique Giner founded the firm in 1987, making it today 31 years old. He'd been working as a furniture maker. As a music lover, he also designed A/V furniture and his own speakers. Those had the shape of a metronome and at more than 1'000 pieces sold, became a runaway success. Subsequently Mr. Giner launched his own audio manufacturing firm Métronome Technologie. Based in the country's South West in the city of Roquemaure in the district of Tarn near Toulouse, they would specialize in digital front ends to start as a subcontractor for Jadis and their CD players. Later on, impressive models like the famous Kalista CD transport launched under their own brand and gained global renown.

As Joël explained in 2016, "international recognition and status don't necessarily equate to commercial success. Métronome never developed a broad distribution network. They remain small and artisanal. Certain hazardous promotions through the previous Tecnodis 2000 partnership did not help to significantly grow sales within the audiophile market even though the very upscale industrial design of their digital transports found some shelf space especially in certain parts of Asia, Russia and the Middle-East. Even today, 90% of their sales are export. Still, the challenge remained to increase market share in the mature US and European sectors. Perhaps this pressure added atop the dire necessity to develop network players and servers compelled Mr. Giner to pass the torch and sell off his firm. The final handover became reality by mid 2014 when Christian Bat and Jean-Marie Clauzel, arriving from two completely different business backgrounds, acquired the company. The first one had worked as a finance director in the car industry. The second was an agricultural engineer. Today their business counts 6 employees and a few subcontractors which are located mainly in France. Métronome Technologie remain one of our very few manufacturers who still assemble printed circuit boards by hand. This supports a very limited number of units sold each year—roughly 250—of which their entry-level CD player accounts for ~50%. This small group employs the two new owners, one electronics engineer, one production supervisor, one production operator who solders all components by hand, and one accountant. If their strategy remains focused on the highest possible quality, I presume that their output can scale up for a certain period of time but then will require the hiring of a greater work force. »

When in late August 2018 Jean-Marie Clauzel emailed me their PDF of the new AQWO, I'd not seen an upscale CD/SACD transport with DAC and 6.5" touch screen coming. For them, SACD compatibility was a first. Those discs remain popular especially in Japan; clearly popular enough for Métronome to issue a matching player. Its streamlined very contemporary cosmetics are a far cry from the futuristic Kalista style. A full assortment of digital i/o makes AQWO far more than just a disc spinner. There's asynchronous USB, S/PDIF x 2, AES/EBU, Toslink x 2 for inputs; HDMI-carried I²S, coax, AES/EBU and Toslink for outputs. Given the deck's 32/384kHz dual-mono internal DAC with native DSD decoding, it's of course unlikely that many customers will look beyond the RCA/XLR analog outputs to only use it as a massive 15kg transport. Its mechanics modified for top loading are sourced from D&M. Denon's descriptions call the core assembly a reference-class advanced vibration-suppressing hybrid whose various parts use stainless/copper plating for the top panel, diecast aluminium for the tray and 2mm steel for the brackets. "Improvements in high-mass vibration-resistant properties and the dispersal of resonance points contribute to a high level of vibration resistance. In addition, the low center of gravity suppresses any vibration occurring inside the mechanism due to disc rotation and the structure also effectively suppresses external vibration. This minimizes servo-related operations, controls and current consumption. »

If you haven't spun CD or SACD in ages because PCfi got the better of you, AQWO would ask that you take a walk on that wild side once more. At worst it'd be a reality check on whether your streaming audio really sounds better than (wait for my strategic three 'ohs') *optimized old-fashioned optical* retrieval of music data. That's still a thing. And in the surrounding tide of virtual media, Métronome are a true bulwark for actual disc users. As such they remain true to their DNA. Without an amplifier or standalone preamp in their portfolio but a streamer, a digital sharer, 3 DACs, 3 disc players and 3 transports, our French team around Christian Bat and Jean-Marie Clauzel truly do specialize in digital sources. The Kalista range adds yet three more digital models; plus one loudspeaker. Limeys, frogs, krauts. In audio, the enemies aren't the chaps with the unfamiliar foods across the border. They aren't the folks who do hifi different to still spin vinyl or reel to reel, who prefer R2R over Sigma-Delta DACs, DSD to PCM, tubes to transistors, widebanders to multi-ways. In audio, the real enemy is data loss. And what's lost at the source can't ever be recovered. Today's assignment thus is a source-first assignment. It looks at feeding AQWO various digital foods as carried on polycarbonate discs, USB and AES/EBU bit streams. It serves up frog legs with Sauerkraut and limes; all together...

Popping the thick hood revealed unusual parts density to explain the unexpected weight of this machine.



The first thing to strike the eye would surely be the shiny black 'helipad' for the discs. It's supported on three massive rubberized pillars for effective decoupling from what the AQWO sits on.



The next thing to say hello were two small valves surrounded by Métronome-branded boxy white caps and two tiny transformers; and stout filter capacitance across the aisle with heat-sinked voltage regulators and two small fully encapsulated blue toroidal transformers.

Turning things sideways revealed four more blue power transformers hidden beneath the top layer's power supply section for a total of six; and a 115/230V voltage switch to make for global happiness without rewiring.

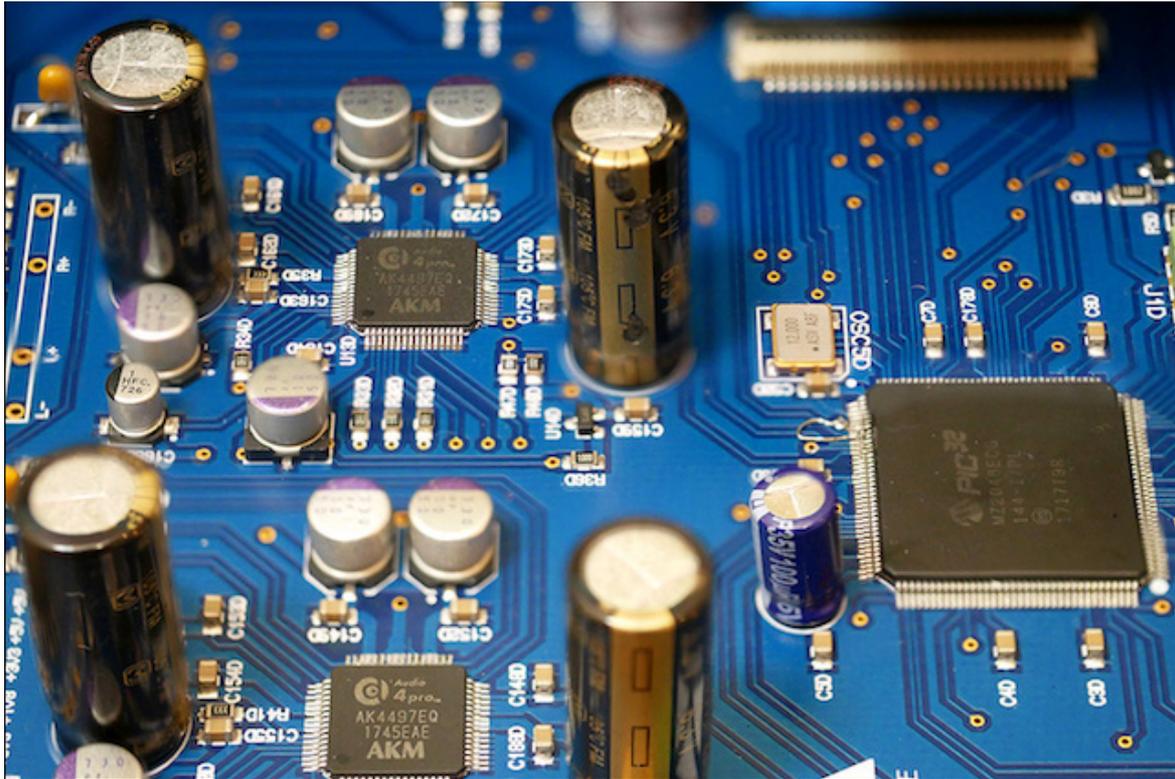


Here's a closer look at the tube buffer's triodes and adjacent D/A converter board

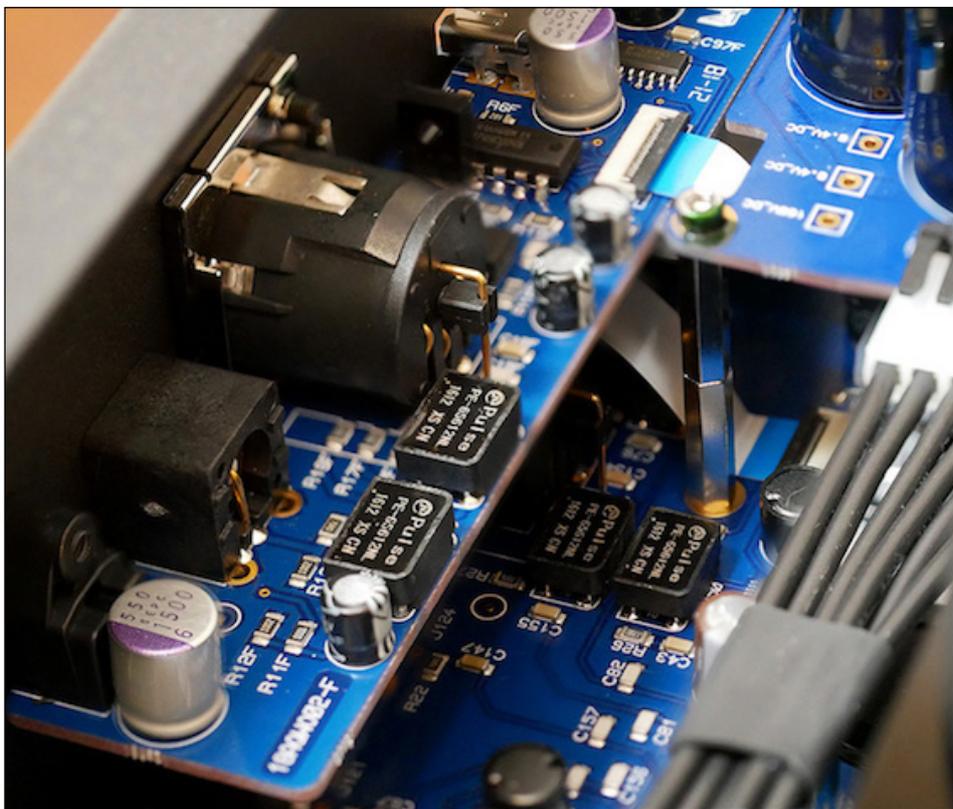


An AQWO buyer clearly doesn't pay for a mostly empty box. Au contraire.

Closer inspection showed...

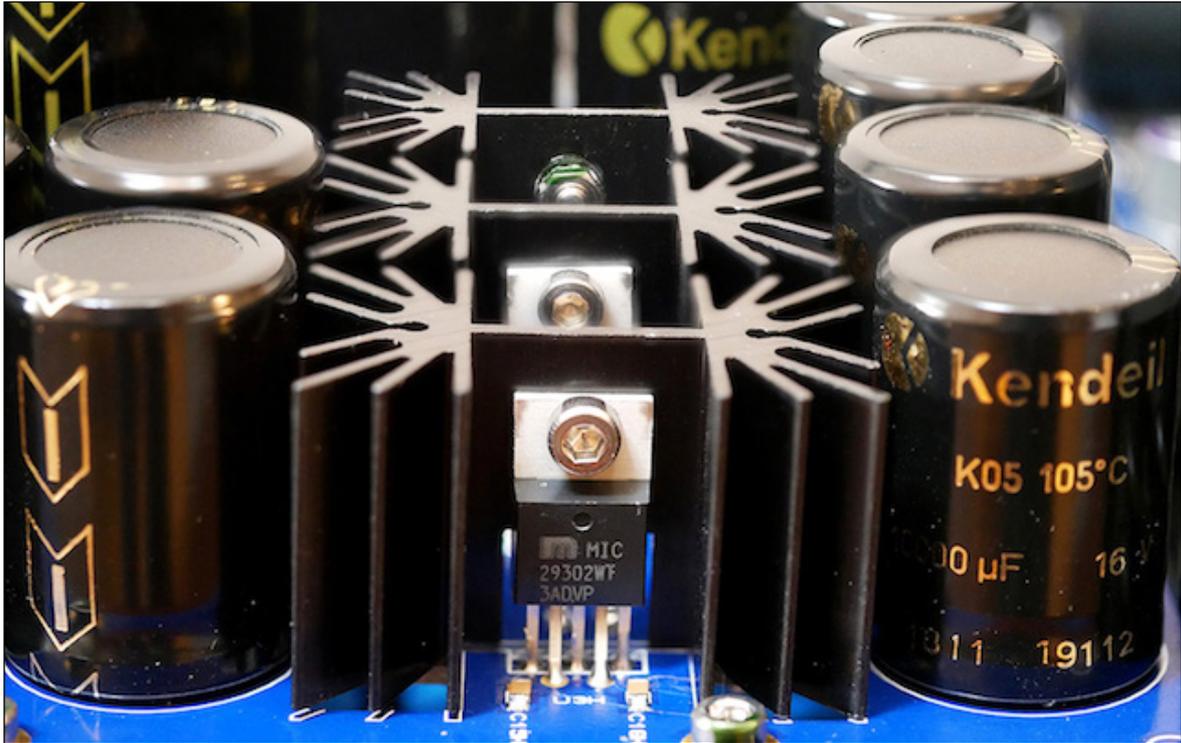


... the dual-mono AKM AK4497EQ 'Velvet Sound' Asahi Kasei PCM/DSD converter chips and an FPGA...



... plus copious use of digital isolation transformers at the inputs and outputs.

On the power supply end, we look at...



... one of the voltage regulators in closeup whilst...

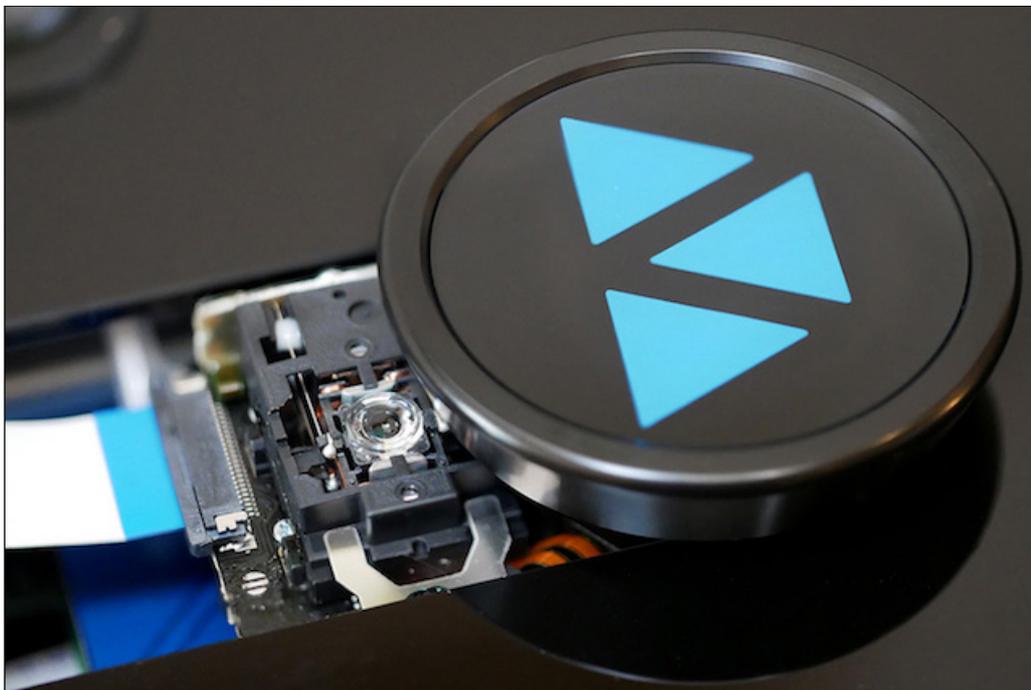


.. finishing up with the joint army/navy 6922 in their ceramic sockets and French-made SCR capacitors. The transistor outputs use 4 x class A-biased Texas Instruments OPA 604 opamps.

Under the movable lid meanwhile...

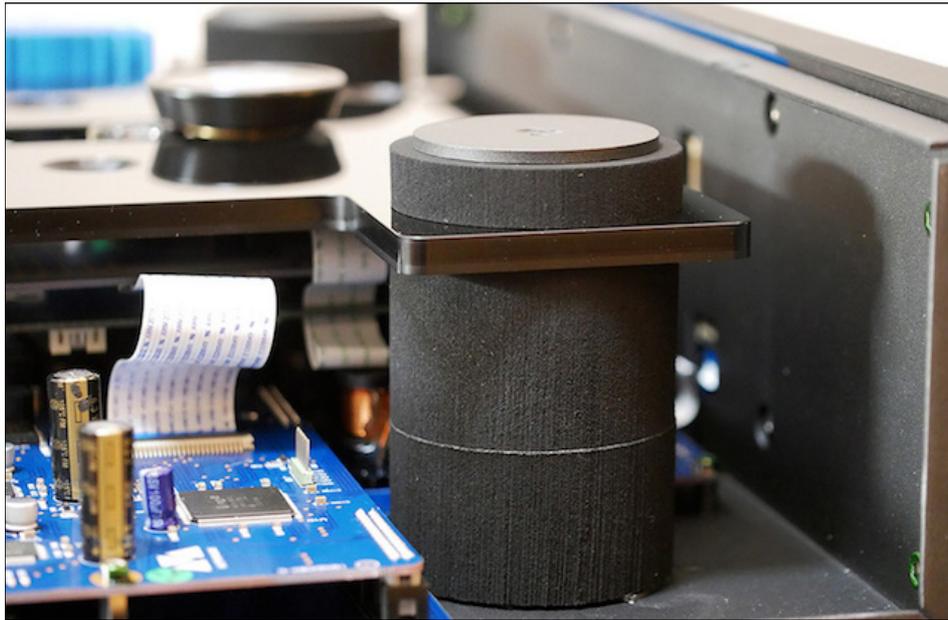


... one would see a puck-weighted disc bathed in blue light which of course stops spinning as soon as the lid opens; and upon removal of the disk...



... the optical head facing up to read the 1s and 0s represented by pit patterns in the tracks whizzing by.

Here's a final look at one of the support stanchions before I put the lid back on.



Touching the glass screen's logo for two seconds accessed the menu's sub layer to reveal...



... colour options for parts of the readout as well as six digital filters, analog output level values of 1.4Vrms, 2.5Vrms and 3Vrms plus defeatable inputs. As shown, a loaded CD displays track number, time elapsed, repeat/shuffle modes, tubes on/off as well as back/next, fast forward/back and pause. With another source selected, the display defaults to displaying its name plus the sample rate and format of the data received. When I asked Jean Marie Clauzel to update Joël's company impressions from two years ago, "so many things have happened since, it's difficult to summarize in a few words. We built a new facility and are presently constructing an additional building. Our staff now numbers 11, we doubled our turnover and continue to grow. We launched a number of new products and added streaming with the Digital Sharing range and the DreamPlay Stream in the Kalista range." About AQWO the name, "I was searching for something without acronyms but different from what we've done until now. I then found that in ancient Greek, *akouo* means 'to listen' or 'I'm listening to'. I just changed the spelling which sounds the same." Relative to the switchable tube buffer, all I learnt was that "it has its own power supply section". About the digital filters, "we use AKM's on-chip code".

To get physical with SACD, I needed silvery discs, not files. Marja & Henk to the rescue. Their kind Dutch care package contained Marantz demo samplers and a dual-layer M.A. All cued up between 6-8 seconds. Clearly Denon's mechanism was no snail. All played without fuss. I simply couldn't figure out how to access the M.A.'s PCM layer. "It's a question we already had from a few customers. For the time being, we don't offer it." To gauge the signature of AQWO's tube stage, I picked Aqua's original LaScala with its vintage BurrBrown R2R chips. Because the deeper Métronome had to sit on top but its rear footer missed, I unscrewed all three Delrin cones, then parked the remaining thin bolts in small spike shoes. That fit just so. The evergreen Wyred4Sound STP-SE 2 Stage II preamp, a pair of FirstWatt SIT1 and Cube Audio's Nenuphar speakers completed the signal path via a full Allnic Audio ZL3000 cable loom. The direct comparison between AQWO and LaScala meant AES/EBU out from the Métronome to keep the digital transport identical. Quite similar on general tonality, the French did play it sharper in the upper midrange/presence region though otherwise slightly darker and less specific. Especially noticeable on explicit close-mic'd vocals, piercing pipes and incisive flutes, the Italian was the smoother sweeter operator. It also threw the denser images in the room corners for those outer soundstage quadrants which occur directly behind and outside the speakers. The French CD player did reach into the same areas but with less intensity and mass. For it, the associated impression was that image density between the speakers was higher than it was beyond them where the Aqua managed equal solidity/lighting wall to wall. Yet the magnitude of these differences was still small enough to quickly fade from awareness outside constant A/Bs meant to focus down on them



Display shows tube buffer engaged.

Using this A/B to peel out AQWO's converter stage, I'd rate its resolving power slightly below an Aqua Formula or Denafrips Terminator just like those two sit above a LaScala. At least for this model—remember, I've not heard others—Métronome's sonic aesthetic seemed informed by tubes even when I bypassed them for the next paragraph. This meant an attractive quarter shadow of darkness which mirrored what increasing black values does for a Photoshop'd image. Consider the next photo. At its exposure, AQWO's black chassis barely shows off its vertical ridges halfway between display and fascia ends. Whatever minor dust there might have been is obscured as well. Meanwhile the one above even shows the IR eye. By slightly stepping down its exposure, the AQWO enhanced its primary values for a subtle flavour reminiscent of tubes (lower photo). A Formula/Terminator type would render the above image.



Comparing actual bottles to just op-amps meant switching the tube buffer in and out. Just touch the logo on the screen. The valvular contributions basically limited themselves to subtly rounding over the leading edges. Take as high-octane a staccato track as "Gangaquivir" from **Indialucia**'s second album *Acatao*. Miguel Czachowski's flamenco guitar duels against Ambi Subramaniam's Karnatic violin. They are surrounded by four percussionists on table, ghatam, kannakol, cajón and other beat makers plus Maciej Garbowksi's bass. Turning the valves off heightened the crackling energy of the dense rhythmic hail storm. The valves subtly mellowed that fiery perspicacity. They simply did it at rather lower magnitude than public perception expects of tubes. Unlike Peachtree's old switchable valve buffer, the effects of Métronome's were far more narrow, far less opaque. You should not feel put out if the tubes died and you faced some downtime procuring replacements. As to CD vs. their aiff rips, I'd just weeks prior heard CD dominate in my Jay's Audio **CDT2 MkII** review to spill extra beans about it on a darko.audio **KIH** feature. Now hitting AQWO's USB port through Audirvana even with 64-bit based upsampling to 352.8kHz was *clearly* bested by CD again. Inside Métronome's menu—press logo on touch screen for two seconds—I defeated all digital inputs except USB. Because the CD kept spinning when I switched to USB, one press was all it took to A/B.

The colour palette for CD was plainly more saturated, its bodies more developed. USB was paler, leaner, thinner, flatter, starker and drier. In terms of exposure, it felt irradiated by neon light. CDs bathed in pure sun rays. That's a valid pointer also for how the difference *felt*. It took the €2'850 Soundaware USB bridge to minimize the delta but very critical listeners would still have accorded physical media a slight edge. Only the Soundaware's SD card feeding the tunes had things level to perfectly on par. That was no reflection on Métronome's USB implementation. A high-quality optical transport simply has it over direct USB. And one needn't spend €12'800 to find out. The €1'650 Jay's with Philips CDM4 top loader presented the same advantage. So would a more affordable Métronome like the €8'000 T5 Signature transport; or the €4'800 complete Le Player 2.



For readers now ill at ease, perusing Art Dudley's [writeup](#) of the Kalista DreamPlay One for Stereophile would merely compound the matter. He concludes with "... although it's been a long time since I last heard Naim Audio's 555 CD player, a discontinued product that until now I considered the world's best, I'm confident in saying that the more vivid, more spatially accomplished and no less musically accomplished Kalista DreamPlay One goes it one better. Music, sound, ergonomics, appearance - the DreamPlay One is without flaw in every regard but price." At \$43'000, that final word hits hard. Though approaching $\frac{1}{4}$ of said ask, the AQWO will still strike many as elusive despite its added SACD playback and DSD/12S out. Even a mid-priced Métronome remains a luxury item. Artisanal French production with hand-populated circuit boards in the country's hi-tech aerospace sector doesn't come cheap. But arguing with the results *would* be cheap.

With decades worth of derisive mud thrown at digital, it was predestined that certain boutique firms would offer alternatives informed by analogue references. Whether those solutions involved tubes, zero sampling, transformer coupling or NOS R2R chips, they were a reaction to 'digititis'. All counter movements tend to start out more or less extremist, then gravitate back toward the middle over time. That's where I peg the voicing for AQWO's converter to sit. It boards the anti-digital bandwagon on its return journey about a station or two before it re-enters today's digital default. It isn't thick, dark, opaque or fuzzy by any stretch. But it does celebrate echoes of that counter aesthetic like a fine distillate. It offers clearly more resolution than early attempts at "deep triode" digital but not quite as much as personal genre references. That effect is quietly flattering. It doesn't involve the romanticized soft focus or patina. It only applies minor cosmetic touch-up nearly invisibly to achieve a more flawless complexion. In public, hardcore audiophiles demand nothing but the truth, hand on the bible of textbook measurements. Out of the audiophile eye, they prefer their women to wear makeup. The AQWO is for those who do but nonetheless frown at fake lashes caked with mascara and glossy lipstick. All they hope for is some expertly applied foundation and subtle blush as the antithesis of *obvious*. Voilà, today's Métronome.

Srajan Ebaen