



## Aqua Acoustic Quality LinQ

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When it comes to streaming there is more to life than UPnP. That protocol might be the most popular game in town but as MPD, Roon and latterly Squeezebox have shown alternatives do exist and Italian digital audio specialist Aqua Acoustics is the first to build a modular streamer than can accommodate more than one. The Aqua LinQ has slots in the rear that accept circuit boards for different streaming engines including UPnP and Squeezelite but their preferred solution is one of the least well known.

HQPlayer started out as a software player for PCs, a bit like Audirvana and JRiver, and still exists in that form. Aqua however has taken the initiative to integrate HQPlayer into a streamer and appear to have struck audio gold in the process, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. In this implementation HQPlayer is controlled by Roon which has a means for selecting an HQP core within its set up, put in the appropriate IP address (which can be summoned on the LinQ's display) and you can control its actions. This does of course require a Roon subscription and a core to run Roon software and while not inexpensive does bring with it the best control app in the streaming business. You can run a Roon core on any PC or one of Roon's dedicated Nucleus servers, some choose to build a core on a fanless mini computer and others own an Innuos music server which have a core built in. I started out using an Innuos but got better results when running the core on my Mac desktop computer.

The Aqua LinQ has the usual array of digital in and outputs for a streamer with the network input on an etherCON connection (an RJ45 socket with an XLR type metal housing) which accepts regular ethernet plugs. The outputs do not include USB but there is an etherCON for the AQLink that allows an I2S link to an Aqua DAC, the company makes three converters and supplied a La Scala MkII for the purpose of this assessment. The lack of a USB output on the LinQ and the absence of an AES/EBU cable in my collection meant that all of the listening was done via this DAC, which was a very enjoyable experience but made it hard to assess how much benefit the AQLink brings to the party. I did however assess the DAC on its own prior to using it with the LinQ so got a pretty good idea of the streamer's capabilities. It's worth noting that both Aqua components come with better than average power cables and in the case of the LinQ an AQLink with etherCON connectors, which saves quite a bit on a decent USB cable.

### Sound quality

The review system was headed up by a Melco N10 music server and the output of the La Scala MkII was controlled by a Townshend Allegri Reference preamp feeding a Moor Amps Angel 6 power amp which in turn got a grip on both PMC twenty5.26i and Bowers & Wilkins 802 loudspeakers. A pretty decent system but one that has rarely sounded as good as it did with the LinQ, a streamer whose qualities became apparent from the first track played, Van Morrison's *The Way Young Lovers Do*. This dense piece can often sound chaotic and brash yet in the

LinQ's hands was so well timed that everything fell into place and came through with an effortless fluency that allowed it to swing in a way that rarely happens. The vagaries of the recording were still apparent but it was much easier than usual to hear through them and appreciate the brilliance of the musicianship and composition. Van's voice is a little too powerful for the mic but you can hear this limiting for what it is, there's nothing being added by the electronics which often seem to exacerbate such shortcomings.



On a more up to date release, Christian Scott's *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow*, the pinpoint imaging and dynamics are extraordinary, revealing many of the benefits of modern recording technology. The drums in particular are superb with a visceral immediacy that is very hard to achieve with any medium let alone 16/44.1 digital. The LinQ also brings out the emotional impact of the music, I found Fairport Convention's *Tale in Hard Time* on a Fourtet compilation a while back but haven't been able to rediscover what makes it so compelling very often, here it brought a lump to the throat that showed the emotional message was getting through even if it was hard to pinpoint why. Ultimately it comes down to the musical data being presented in a coherent manner, a trick that analogue sources tend to excel in albeit without the advantages of low noise that digital provides. Coherence or timing is ultimately what counts and here it's nigh on perfect.

Radiohead's *Desert Island Disk* is one of many gems in their catalogue that offers up an insight into the way that the various sounds are faded into the mix with the degree of resolution provided by the Aqua pairing. You might expect such high transparency to undermine the music's mystique but in this case it brings out the magic to a remarkable degree, leaving the listener entranced by the results. And bringing revelations like the sense that the bass sound on Beck's *Paper Tiger* is a dead ringer for that on Serge Gainsbourg's *Melody Nelson*. It also becomes apparent that modern recordings have an advantage over those from the past, some may have suffered losses in the conversion to digital but digital recording itself is clearly not a limitation, quite the opposite in fact. Rymden's *The Odyssey* by Bugge Wesseltoft and Esbjorn Svensson's rhythm section can often sound bombastic and 'loud' but that effect would seem



to have been coming from previous streamers and DACs because here you get the dynamics without the hardness. Pitter Patter from the same band's live release is nothing short of a stone cold killer here with some spectacular playing from all the members of this rockin' jazz combo.

I played quite a bit of stuff from Qobuz too and that sounded better than usual too, particularly Clara Baker's storming Things to Burn, where her raw vocals and the intensity of the playing coalesce to produce a sound that is greater than its component parts. While there are plenty of high resolution, high end digital streamers and DACs to choose from this one manages to put the musical message ahead of the detail. It delivers mountains of detail but presents it in such coherent fashion that you are not distracted by its presence. Imaging is also extremely strong for this reason, with acres of depth on certain recordings and room filling scale on the best, all of which gives the music the power and majesty to really sweep you along with it. This result is undoubtedly related to the La Scala MkII DAC but take the LinQ out of the equation and send a direct USB signal from the Melco and you lose some of the magic and gain a sense of the digital that the LinQ manages to banish.



That Aqua have achieved this result with what is not an excessively expensive streamer gives hope to all of us seeking audio nirvana on a real world budget. I suspect that the HQ-Player software has something to do with this but it's rarely just the components or software that makes a good piece of equipment and nearly always the way they are used. It would be very interesting to hear how other streaming software engines perform in the LinQ, but I'd be surprised if they could get close to the results achieved here. This is a genuine high end streamer at a not very high end price and a strong contender for our best of the year winners selection.