



Blast from the past

Acoustic Research makes a welcome return to audio with this hi-res portable player. **Adrian Justins** takes a look

Proving that hi-fi brands never die, Acoustic Research has reemerged after years of apparent hibernation. Owned by the Vox corporation in the US, the once-renowned speaker maker has been rebooted as an electronics brand. A whole raft of products is slated for release, the first of which is the AR-M2 hi-res audio player here.

In terms of spec, price and looks it goes up against Sony's imminently expected NW-ZX2 hi-res Walkman, with both models featuring Android-based displays and playback of all common hi-res files including native DSD and DXD (with limitations), although the AR-M2 has its own hi-res audio path that bypasses the Android OS. It also takes on Astell&Kern's AK120 MkII, arguably

the benchmark among audiophile portable HRA players. Unlike the AK120 MkII, the AR doesn't have the option of an unbalanced headphone output and it can't be used as an external DAC with a USB-connected source, but it does have a line out, allowing it to be used with an external amp and speakers.

Physically, the AR-M2 is quite a handful, measuring 13.6cm in height, it could pass for a smartphone but its thickness and weight (245g) put paid to any thoughts of carrying it in a shirt pocket or even holding it in your hands for too long. And my advice is to wear a belt if carrying it in a trouser pocket or you'll end up looking like a teenager, revealing your 'Basildon cleavage'. Still, this substantial presence is a result of audiophile-levels of design and

DETAILS
PRODUCT
 Acoustic Research AR-M2
ORIGIN
 China
TYPE
 24-bit/192kHz-capable digital audio portable
WEIGHT
 245g
DIMENSIONS
 (WxHxD)
 71 x 136 x 15mm
FEATURES
 • Burr-Brown PCM1794A DAC
 • 64GB internal memory
 • MicroSD XC slot (128GB max)
 • 5in HD screen
DISTRIBUTOR
 ATC EnergyTech Corporation Limited
TELEPHONE
 07734 064360
WEBSITE
 acoustic-research.com

construction. The unit's body is fashioned from a combination of metal and Duralumin, and, like the external control buttons, looks and feels highly durable. Pleasingly, it is not as brutally hard-edged as the AK120 MkII and it has a symmetrical design that's easier on the eye than a lot of other portable players.

Naturally, the M2 can handle WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, APE and the aforementioned DSD and DXD files. It boasts a bespoke high-current high-output Class A amplifier, plus an audiophile-grade analogue volume ALPS potentiometer. Within its body are a number of critical components including a flagship-grade Burr-Brown PCM1794A DAC and a high slew rate headphone amplifier that can service cans with an impedance from 16 to 600ohms.

The 4000mAh battery will deliver a claimed nine hours of life (Sony claims 33 hours of HRA playback on the ZX2), although this depends largely on the resolution of files being played, as well as the headphones' impedance and sensitivity, and how much onscreen faffing around takes place. Being naturally averse to all things Android I'm a good test for these players that insist on using it as their operating system.

The M2's GUI is pleasingly stripped down of most unnecessary clutter and is relatively easy to get to grips with, but I often find myself going round in circles to get to a playlist. You can

It looks the business, but the weight comes as a real surprise

browse the web using a wi-fi connection, which also provides access to NAS drives thanks to DLNA support. You can download music streaming apps like Spotify, though sadly Tidal isn't available (yet).

I encounter a number of irritating minor problems with copying hi-res files on to the M2. Downloading and installing the Android file transfer application is simple enough, even on an iMac. When connected by USB to the computer, the player simply appears as a folder on the desktop in to which you drag and drop tracks. Sometimes the player locks itself during the copying process and a message appears onscreen telling me to disconnect it, unlock it and reconnect. Many of my tracks are in

It does a terrific job in terms of clarity and headroom and is at its best with DSD

the form of complete albums and when I try to drag and drop them I am told it isn't possible to copy a folder. To add insult to injury, I am then instructed to restart the player and reconnect it after which I am then able to copy all the tracks in one go. With Peter Gabriel's *So* (a 24/48 FLAC remaster) for example, track number four *That Voice Again* appears on its own in a duplicate album.

The M2 maxes out at 128kHz when it comes to DSD and DXD, which hugely frustrates me, but at least this is on an equal footing with Sony's NW-ZX2. The AK120 MkII trumps both as it can support 5.6MHz DSD playback (albeit after conversion and down-sampling to 176kHz PCM).

Happily, it is very simple to drag and drop tracks from within the iTunes interface to the M2, but all playlists are lost and working out how to

create playlists is not obvious. On the plus side, all the files that I do manage to copy over are accompanied by their metadata, including album artwork.

In terms of clarity, the 5in IPS screen is nice and clear, with good contrast and detail. The resolution isn't quoted, but to the naked eye the pixel count looks about the same (854 x 480, FWVGA) as the Sony NW-ZX1 (and ZX2). It's also a nicely responsive screen when pressed, and is backed up by a beautifully crafted volume control thumbwheel on the top and physical transport buttons and a power button on the right side.

This is where you'll also find the microSD XC card slot, which can be used to boost storage capacity from 64GB to 192GB with a 128GB card. For an outlay of around £65 (if you shop around) you can carry around 3,000 FLAC files at 96/24 resolution, each of approx five minutes duration.

Selecting tracks or albums is an easy process, but annoyingly the metadata (including the resolution and file type) is displayed on top of the artwork. This means it's often illegible against complex backgrounds, especially those with words on them. This is a fundamental fail.

Sound quality
 When it comes to sonic quality, there's not much to complain about. The AR-M2 does a terrific job in terms of sheer clarity and headroom, and without a doubt it's at its most revealing with DSD tracks. Vivaldi's *Concerto in D minor (Allegro)* for example, sounds simply superb with sumptuously textured cellos that sound so sublime they hypnotise and beguile you. The violins too, are expertly presented with real verve and sparkle. The flat bass is ideal with classical music, with the landmark recording of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major* (ALAC) by

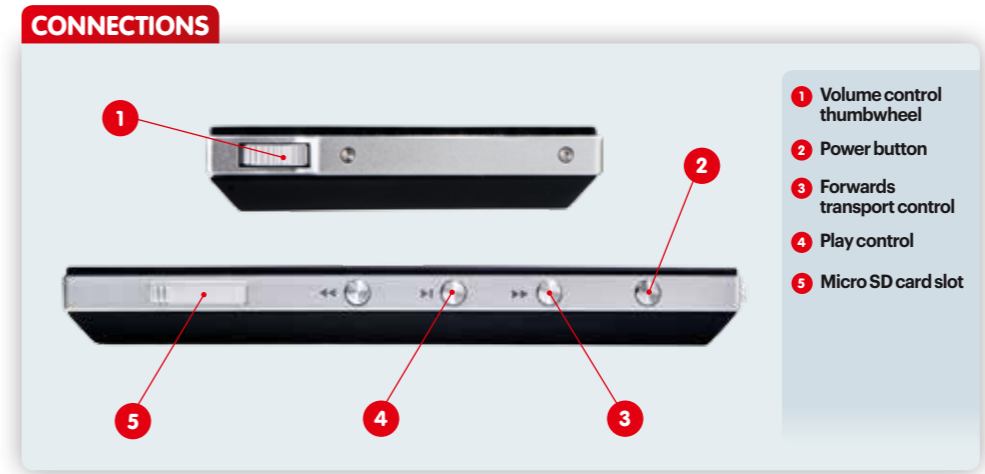
the Dunedin Consort proving equally engaging, anchored once again to a perfectly measured bass response. You're acutely aware of the fact you're listening through headphones rather than speakers, and the experience is no way comparable to being at a live concert, but the player is able to place you at the heart of the action and is very effective.

Switch to rock music and you may have to alter the EQ setting from the range of presets. I find the kettle drum in Peter Gabriel's *Red Rain* (24/48) over extended and in need of tempering. You can't argue with the detail, though, especially in the higher frequencies.

Bob Marley's *Could You Be Loved* (a 24/96 download from Linn) is an inspired blend of percussion, guitar and mesmerising vocals that the AR-M2 presents adeptly. You just need to find the right EQ for the bass, which can be incredibly meaty.

Another minor irritation (that could potentially grow to become a major one) is an occasional click that occurs at the start of a track when initiating playback from standby. I hope that Acoustic Research addresses this. The player has phenomenal power reserves and you can seriously damage your ear-buds if you're not careful with the volume control.

Conclusion
 Overall, the AR-M2 is a versatile, not-so little, machine that has plenty going for it. It doesn't quite cut it in terms of ease of use thanks to its adoption of the slightly flawed Android operating system and the laughable way in which metadata is displayed on top of the album art. But in terms of performance, it has undoubtedly got the tools to extract every last bit of sonic goodness out of your hi-res music collection. Choosing the right EQ setting is, however, often the key to success ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
 ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Capable of top-notch sound from all formats

VALUE FOR MONEY
 ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Bass needs managing; poorly displayed track information

BUILD QUALITY
 ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A class act with one or two minor operational flaws

OVERALL
 ★★★★★