

Metrum AMBRE ROON Digital Bridge by Lexicom Multimedia

Metrum : Timing is the key

“Pretty obvious we all are now exposed to the phenomenon of music being streamed. Whether this happens from your hard disk or through cloud music services like Apple Music, Spotify, Tidal or many others and regardless of the way the devices are connected - Wi-Fi or network cable, the music comes out of the device of your choice.

One of Metrum Acoustics premium Dealers - Lexicom Multimedia is known for their 360 solutions. They offer a wide range of brands like Devialet, Naim, Hegel, Bluesound, Auralic and others. Most of these brands do have a solution which integrates with one of the most complete music services, ROON.

ROON’s solution solves the problem of transition from physical to Digital media where something can be lost. According to them, we have more convenience than ever, but no feeling of excitement or engagement. The solution they provide is based upon a piece of software which looks at your music and finds photos, bios, reviews, lyrics, concert dates and makes connections between artists, composers, performers, conductors and producers.

“And the final result is a **searchable, surfable magazine** about your music”.

ROON dictates that their partners, whether playback devices or Digital to Analog converters, are certified devices which have been tested and approved by ROON - so their customers do get a seamless music experience.

Recently a new Endpoint, or as ROON calls it, a Digital Bridge has come to market. This new Endpoint, which only handles ROON between your library or music source and your Digital to Analog converter or integrated amplifier, is entirely focused on getting the most out of ROON and that’s it. With its entire focus on ROON, one should be convinced that this will do it perfectly !

This product, proudly designed and manufactured in the Netherlands, is the AMBRE”.



Lexicom Multimedia Report :

Gemstone

As already mentioned the AMBRE is a Digital Bridge between a ROON server, either ROON's own Nucleus, or devices such as an NUC or any computer in your household and a device which converts the Digital signal to an Analog output. The AMBRE by Metrum Acoustics has one input, a RJ45 ethernet port and several outputs to be compatible with any output device. The AES/EBU, XLR, SPdif, Toslink optical and I2S outputs provide enough flavours to please any device in your audio chain. Unfortunately I2S is not a well-defined standard - Metrum Acoustics claim this to be optimal connection from AMBRE to their Digital to Analog converters.

The max bit rate and sample frequency is 24/192kHz. The power source is in AMBRE, so no need to fool around with external power adapters and as said before, AMBRE is optimized to work with ROON.

Its sleek design only shows an on/off switch & two led lights on the front, one which indicates it is connected to the network and the other, which I think is genius, to indicate whether music is streamed or not. And this is what this is about - MUSIC !

Inside one can see that a lot of love went into this little device. Much focus was placed on the powering of circuits and even more on the digital clocks. Digital streaming falls or stands by the quality of the digital clock inside a device. Digital music adheres tightly to a clock and when the clock is off, we experience music as disturbed, unpleasant, sharp or whatever it is you want to call it. But all this misery is referred to as jitter in the Audio world.

For that reason and to avoid jitter, AMBRE has TWO precision clocks on board, one for 44.1 kHz + multiples 88.2 and 176.4kHz. The second clock for 48 kHz with its own multiples 96 and 192kHz.

The timing of the clocks and the ultimate suppression of jitter by Metrum is unique in the industry and from a listening perspective exceptional ! The AMBRE is on sale for €1199 and an additional I2S module for the Metrum Acoustics DAC's costs €109, both prices excluding VAT.

The landscape

At the moment of writing this article, we did not have the I2S module in house, so we connected AMBRE to a JADE Metrum Dac/Pre, using AudioQuest cables from the Cinnamon series. Optical, AES/EBU and RCA to set the scene. Testing AMBRE in every way - with a BlueSound Node 2 and a Raspberry PI with the HifiBerry Digi+ Pro board including external linear supply.

In the process of testing we received the I2S module for JADE and noticed an improvement in the quality of sound. While doing this I tested the AMBRE against a NAD M50 and M50.2 digital streamer. In the Lexicom showroom we connected AMBRE to a Devialet 440 Pro. In the showroom the ROON server runs on a NUC.

The set being used for further testing - consisting a NAIM NAC-N 272, NAP 300DR Amplifier with a NAP 300PS power source and AudioVector SR3 Super speakers.



Three cables, two flavours

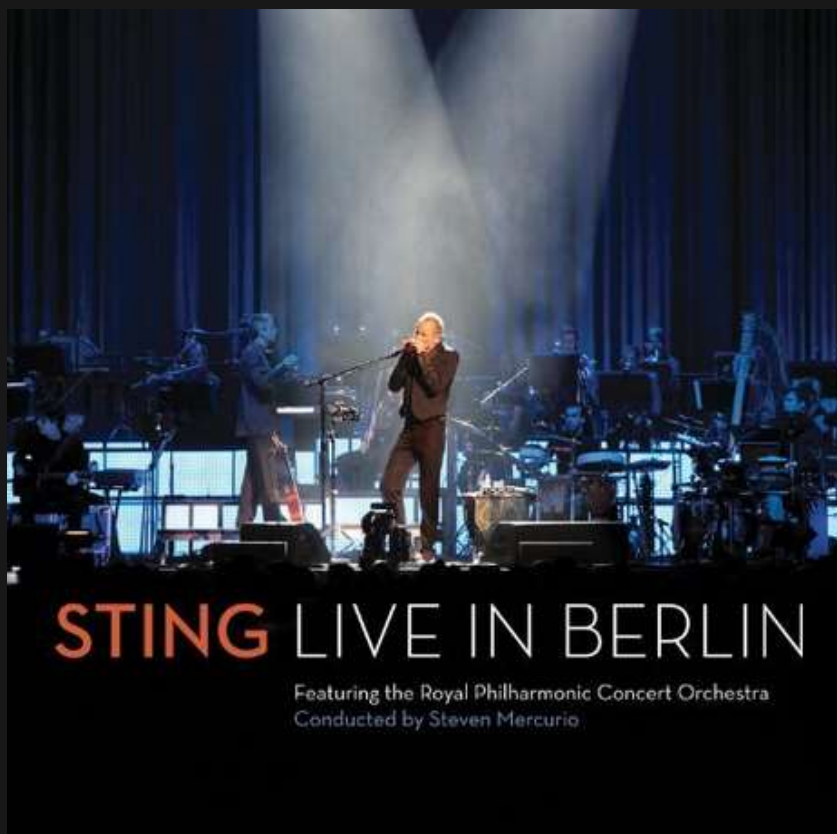
We started testing first by comparing the three Digital cables, making sure to understand the impact of each. Playing Patricia Barber's CD "Cafe Blue", starting off with "A taste of honey". Our preference is clearly for the AES/EBU cable because of its neutrality. The other cables did put a little too much emphasis on the lower tones, whereas with the Optical and RCA no difference was heard.

The XLR cable provides the largest stereo image, possesses the fastest attack and has a pleasant representation of the higher notes on the AudioVectors - with tracks such as Yellow Car III. When playing the next track, Nardis, the XLR does not come out on top but overall the XLR scores best in this setup.

BUT when testing against the Node 2 and the Raspberry Pi, XLR is not an option, so to create an equal testbed its back to Optical and Coax.

The Coax connected to the Node 2 and using the Optical out on AMBRE. Nardis is played again but we do experience a less precise sound on the Node 2, messy in its representation, a little nervous for that matter. Overall less stereo image whilst AMBRE has much more impact with the music and provides more depth. My perception is that AMBRE provides additional dimension, hard to describe, yet noticeable and separates the artists apart, placing them in the right place on the stage.

The next track played in this setup, is Paper Plain from Alison Krauss. The AMBRE gives me a natural stage, creates ambiance and freedom, freedom the way music should sound. In comparison to the Node 2 which is too sharp in the high frequencies especially with high voicing - which makes listening not a joy.



The last track played is the live version of Englishman in New York, performed by Sting and Branford Marsalis in Berlin. This time the difference between the Node 2 and AMBRE couldn't be more striking ! The Node 2 compared to AMBRE puts you in a room with the artist whilst AMBRE puts you in a concert hall. I scream "dramatic", making the others in the room think I messed up something, yet this emotion says it all, AMBRE gives me the feeling I am sitting in the middle of this concert hall, in the midst of people applauding - enjoying Sting and Branford to the fullest extent !

Power of the AMBRE

The AMBRE versus a home built PI with an extra board and external power adaptor. A clever product for those who are handy with computers, software, downloads and Linux. Again, we play Sting and Branford, one cannot get enough of these master performers. AMBRE compared to the PI is deeper, darker, fuller, whichever word you can think of describing depth in sound. Definitely more powerful and more “Analog”, a bit scared mentioning this though. This is pure conviction ! After Sting and Branford, some sweet and warm Sade playing No ordinary love.

Fluent, loose, less stressful. As for the PI I am not disappointed. Still it is obvious AMBRE takes it many notes further, making it more complete, more detail, more separation of instruments and voices.



Last, ‘On Every Street’ from Dire Straits and ‘You and your Friend’ : Compared to the PI, we experience the same as before. My preference by now is pretty clear

AES/EBU

The Pi and Node 2 are not able to handle the AES/EBU output, which the AMBRE can. What is the result of this limitation in the Pi and Node 2 ? The differences are being enlarged when using AES/EBU connecting an AMBRE with a JADE.

The stereo image grows with every single note, especially guitars that go beyond your imagination. Suddenly there is a slight echo on Knopfler's voice which makes it even more intriguing listening to Dire Straits.

When connected to the Devialet 440 Pro, where AMBRE takes care of the ethernet connection and ROON, AMBRE directly controls the internal DAC of the Devialet, we experienced the same power of the AMBRE and noticed a more complete sound image.

Back at home I could not stop and repeated the whole experiment with a NAD M50 and a NAD M50.2. At first I had them play using their own BluOS and after that as a ROON endpoint. Compared them then with AMBRE using AES/EBU and arrived at the same conclusion. The AMBRE is a winner, a powerful gemstone enriching your listening experience when using ROON.

By now I have bought two AMBRE's, one for each of my audio setups - if that does not say enough. I already have two Metrum Acoustics' DAC's - in which I will place an I2S module in both. What a joy I had and having been the proud owner of several Metrum Acoustics devices for a long time, the AMBRE is the cherry on the cake for me!

Point of no return ?

Does AMBRE or for that matter an endpoint only have advantages ? No, because ROON does not provide me with a solution for internet radio, no access to Qobuz and other music services than Tidal. On top of that, a computer like an NUC or a NAS are required to run the ROON core. Yet, I love the fact that the AMBRE has an AES/EBU output and like the price point but it is only useable with ROON. A Pi is cheap but you have to build it yourself, manage the software yourself and add numerous extra components to make it work.

The BlueSound Node 2 can do more through BluOs using the BlueSound app when talking streaming services and internet radio. But do these points weigh more than the pristine sound of the AMBRE ? Not for me, especially not when using great Speakers, or for that matter a perfect Audio chain.

AMBRE has been THE revelation for me to buy into the ROON proposal, although I “WAS” using BluOS in several places at home. Once being exposed to the AMBRE has now caused A POINT OF NO RETURN for me.