



**DETAILS**  
**PRODUCT**  
 Auralic Altair G1.1  
**ORIGIN**  
 China  
**TYPE**  
 Network-attached DAC/music library  
**WEIGHT**  
 7.4kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
 (WxHxD)  
 340 x 80 x 320mm  
**FEATURES**  
 • Optional 2TB SSD storage  
 • Inputs: Toslink optical; coaxial; AES/EBU; USB-B; USB-A; Ethernet  
 • Outputs: balanced XLR; RCA; 6.35mm headphone  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
 Auralic Netherlands  
**WEBSITE**  
 auralic.com

# Lightning conductor

Now benefitting from the latest updates to Auralic's superb streaming platform, the 'starter' Altair DAC also features a raft of mechanical and detailed design improvements

**A**lthough Auralic (promoted as AURALiC) launched the Altair G1 (HFC 455) relatively recently, the Chinese manufacturer already has its G1.1 update ready to roll. It appears together with the Aries G1.1 as the new and more affordable models within its respective tiers, with the Altair and Aries G2.1 (HFC 482 and 469 respectively) being the more expensive options. However, as all Auralic products share a very similar chassis design and carry names that are easily confused, it's sometimes difficult to discern precisely which box does what.

In the case of the Altair, brevity suffices – this digital hub doubles (or should that be triples) up as an ESS9038Q2M-based DAC, a streamer and a media server/music library, if so desired. The Aries, on the other hand,

is purely a digital transport, for use with an outboard DAC, while the Vega is a streaming DAC minus the server capability. Currently, there's only the Vega G2.1 (HFC 476) available, but priced at £6,800 it's not a straight alternative to the arguably more versatile Altair G1.1 under the spotlight before us here.

## Flexible friend

The Altair G1.1 is highly adaptable, lacking only digital outputs for use with an off-board DAC, even if the change in moniker from G1 to G1.1 doesn't sound like a clean-sheet approach to proceedings. In the IT world a '0.1' update typically indicates a minor tweak, and here the move from 1 to 1.1 is equally indicative of there having been an incremental polish rather than a wholesale change of core hardware.

The new satin silver plinth is certainly very eye-catching while the additional mass is claimed to better damp the ingress of vibrations. Auralic also counts a superior femto clock as part of the G1.1 upgrade, though jitter was always inherently low on the Altair/Aries/Vega platforms. The built-in headphone amplifier has been treated to a little extra beefing up and although this feature might not be high on every Altair owner's wishlist, it's reassuring to know it'll be able to comfortably drive more challenging cans.

Typically, the Altair G1.1 will be married with existing separates. That shouldn't be an aesthetic challenge, as the no-frills approach and the matt black metal case make it a suitably minimalist companion for most hi-fi components. That said, the finish is quite lush albeit in a rather sober and

understated way, with a single volume/rotary encoder provided to twist/push and browse your way through the various settings. A larger LCD screen displays album art and in a pinch can be used to adjust an option or two. But the bespoke Lightning app is easier still to use.

Although the emphasis here is on wired and wireless network streaming and, optionally, playback from internal storage (a 2TB SSD can be dealer-installed for an additional £400), the Altair G1.1 possesses a range of digital inputs. External storage remains an option too; just hook up an outboard drive to the USB-A port. Connecting a laptop is possible through the USB-B port, while optical, coaxial and AES/XLR options are there in case you want to connect a separate digital source, such as a TV or a CD transport. As you should expect at this price point, both single-ended and balanced XLR analogue outputs are provided.

Next to sound quality, ease of use is probably the most important quality of such a product. It's obvious now, but in the early days of streaming Auralic was considered something of a trendsetter in this regard with even early products controllable via the rather excellent Lightning app. Before Roon came along and other brands caught up, it offered one of the best user experiences available on a streamer. And, arguably, Lightning is still superior to many.

This slick app offers total control of the Altair G1.1, including everything from input switching to internet radio and playback of your local or network-based media library. A select offering of streaming services is accessible through the app. Qobuz, Tidal and Amazon Music are arguably the ones that'll interest most users, but there's also Germany's specialist



**HOW IT COMPARES**  
 Pitched into the world of sub-£3,000 network-attached DACs, the Altair G1.1 faces stiff competition from the likes of Matrix Audio with its M2 streaming DAC and Simaudio with its MOON 280D MiND 2 network DAC, both featuring balanced audio outputs and slick app-based control. Moreover there is a growing band of more affordable solutions available, including the £1,300 iFi Audio NEO Stream (p62), which sounds far bigger than it looks. In practice it's only when the Altair G1.1 is bundled with an internal hard drive that it gains a strong competitive edge as a fully fledged all-in-one 'music library' against costlier solutions like Aurender's very fine £6,700 A200.

highresaudio.com option. Beyond mere service integration, the app goes the extra mile by presenting metadata – including album art, release lists and bios – attractively, enticing you on a journey of musical discovery. Auralic seems to stay on top of things too, pushing out regular firmware updates to add nice little extra features, such as autoplay on Qobuz – which plays relevant tracks after your playlists have finished.

Unfortunately, this lavish app is only available for iPad or iPhone (control of the Altair G1.1 is most satisfying on the former), which is a shame considering the large number of Android users that no doubt will end up owning the streamer. This is not

## Grungey guitar is fat and full-bodied, while acoustic songs have impressive clarity

quite the disaster it at first seems, however, as Auralic additionally offers compatibility with popular alternatives including Tidal Connect and Spotify Connect, plus it is Roon Ready. Alternatively, you can download a DLNA player app (such as BubbleDS), which will give you full control.

Auralic's Lightning app is also the gateway to a very extensive roster of options, although on a laptop or Android device you'll have to access

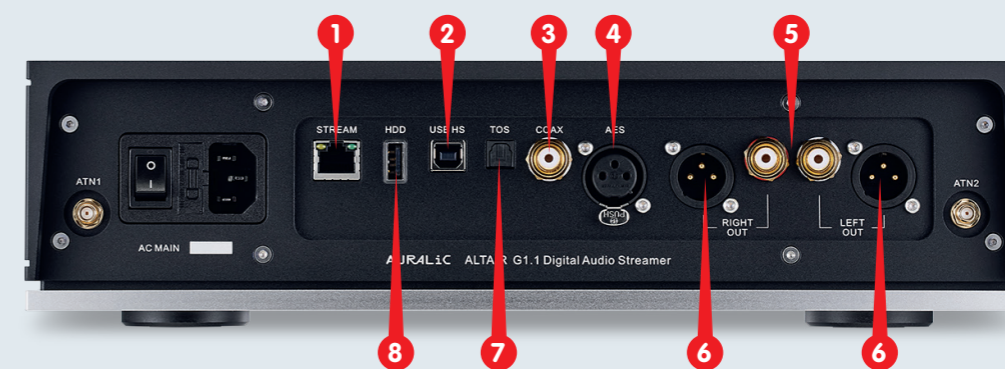
these features through a browser. There's more stuff here than you'll probably ever use, yet a lot of it is extremely useful such as the optional volume control or being able to disable unused streaming options. Furthermore, should you wish to invoke additional digital signal processors (DSPs), it's even possible to compensate for irregular loudspeaker placement or for a room mode via the app's parametric equaliser. So the Altair G1.1, beyond streaming, adds another layer of control over your system's sound.

## Sound quality

For some lesser brands, offering a copious feature set and superb user experience would have sufficed. But Auralic's entry-level streamer doesn't economise on audio quality either: the G1.1 is a smooth, organic-sounding performer, offering a vivid sense of detail and timing – without over analysing or offering the definitive insight you might discover higher up the range. Just as the Lightning app entices you to keep on consuming music, the same can be said about the way the Altair G1.1 presents music, regardless of genre.

'Keep on listening' is very much the mantra. Take the rousing portrayal of the second part of Blue Violet's *Vanished In The Night* or the duo's more enveloping, poppy *Poster Girl* on *Late Night Calls*: these are conveyed with a real feeling of intimacy by the

## CONNECTIONS

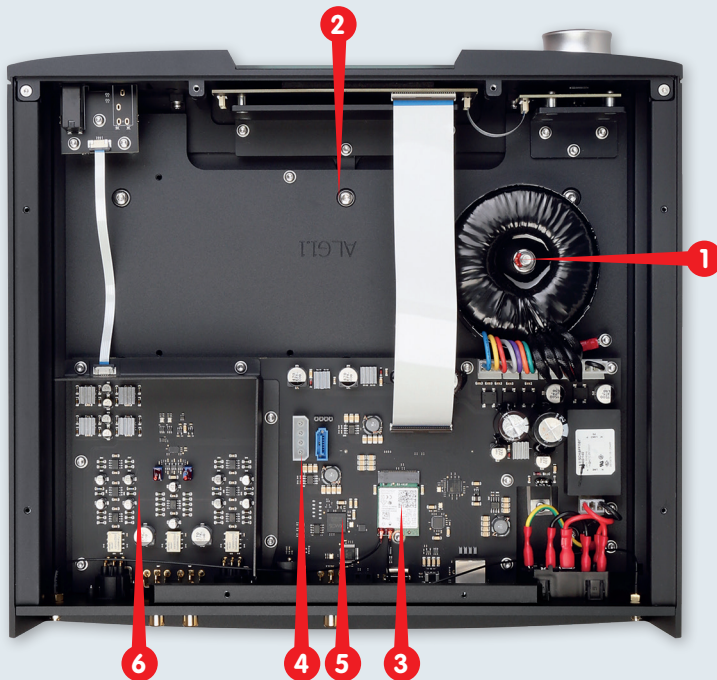


- 1 RJ45 Gigabit Ethernet input
- 2 USB-B (computer) audio input
- 3 Coaxial input
- 4 AES/EBU input
- 5 RCA outputs
- 6 Balanced XLR outs
- 7 Toslink optical in
- 8 USB-A input for storage devices



# MAIN TEST **AURALIC** ALTAIR G1.1 FROM £2,700

## IN SIGHT



- 1 Transformer for linear power supply
- 2 Bay area for optional internal HDD/SDD storage
- 3 Intel wireless card
- 4 PSU and SATA docks for optional storage drives
- 5 X MOS USB solution
- 6 Screened analogue PCB contains surface-mount ES9038 DAC, headphone amp and balanced audio outputs

### THE AURALIC STORY

While most hi-fi brands will often shout about their heritage, Auralic's origins are shrouded in mystery. The brand is not very old, established in 2009 after Xuanqian Wang and Yuan Wang met at the Waldbühne, Berlin's open-air venue best known for the annual end-of-season Berliner Philharmoniker concert. Their first product was the ARK MX, which was only available in China. It was followed by the widely available ARK MX+, a rather straightforward DAC sporting a futuristic industrial design later replaced by the more contemporarily dressed 'G' generation. Sources are currently

Auralic's primary focus, but previously it offered amps, such as the Merak monoblocks or the Polaris – a very early entrant into the now popular streaming amplifier segment. Auralic was also in the vanguard of hi-fi app development, at a time when other companies were floundering in this virtual space. Serendipitously, founder Xuanqian Wang had the skillset to make it happen. "I came from an engineering and software background so I knew how important user experience was, and how to organise a software team to develop such a product," he explains.

Altair G1.1, with a well-defined spread of individual instruments and a particularly fine delivery of Sarah Gotley's glorious vocals.

In this instance, the streamer shows itself to be an excellent complement to a Hegel H590 (HFC 449) amplifier and B&W's new 702 S3 loudspeaker. The sound only edges slightly into forward territory; not in a fatiguing way, luckily, but in a 'nice to discover there's more to this recording' way.

Swapping the B&W floorstander for Focal's Sopra N°2 finds grungey guitars on William The Conqueror's *Proud Disturber Of The Peace* portrayed fat and full-bodied, while the more acoustic songs are rendered with impressive clarity. This release hails from Cornwall, but at some points wanders off in the direction of Nashville, before quickly changing course for Nineties Seattle.

It's quite a journey on a finely recorded album, and the G1.1 renders

the genre-spanning rock tracks in a wholly satisfying manner, with a focus on the overall presentation – which allows the songs to really come together as a cohesive whole.

Blue Note-mainstay Robert Glasper released the truly excellent *Black Radio III* earlier this year, but it's still his 2015 *Covered* album – a live recording from Capitol Studios – which remains one of our particular favourites. This magnificent set has a cosy, small room feel to it, even more so when the audience reacts to the accomplished playing. Daimon Reid's drumming on *I Don't Even Care* is fast, intricate and full of detail, and the G1.1 offers it all up in appropriately thrilling fashion. This album features a coming together of some of the best jazz musicians of our time, and while this unit isn't Auralic's high-end DAC offering, there's nothing entry-level about the way that it delivers the performance here.

Auditioning the four digital filter options on offer is worthwhile too. These are custom filters, a mixture of linear and minimum phase types, with both slow and fast roll-offs. Regardless of their origins, they have a noticeable impact, meaning you can be rewarded for dabbling during listening sessions. 'Smooth', which according to Auralic was the most popular choice during its in-house subjective testing sessions, gives The Brodsky Quartet's *Homage To Bach* a slightly recessed but more coherent character, while 'Precise' lifts out the intricate, wandering solo violin in *Sonata No. 1*, to impressive effect.

Listening further, it's clear these two filter options represent the extremes of what's on offer. On the other hand, both 'Dynamic' and 'Balance' take a less outspoken approach, with the latter of those two lacking a bit of liveliness when heard in our particular testing setup.

## The Lightning app is the gateway to a very extensive roster of options

However, regardless of the filter selected, these sonatas by Bach are rendered engagingly with just the right amount of warmth and depth, giving you more than enough insight to focus on the subtle nuances brought by each individual stringed instrument of the quartet.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the sonic character of the Altair G1.1 can be described by the same 'do it all' terminology as its functional description. This is a streamer/DAC that doesn't disappoint, covering all bases very confidently and doing so with real satisfying panache ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lightning remains one of the best control options around

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing of any real note

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A very compelling sonic streaming solution

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

### OVERALL

★★★★★