



Auralic Aries G1.1

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Auralic is a small company with plenty of ideas, especially with regard to adding functionality to their range of streamers, DACs and associated components. They have been making these since launching the compact, curvy Aries nearly a decade ago, in that time their casework design has become more uniform and now there is only one shape and colour to choose. Today Auralic make two ranges with the newly launched G1.1 models replacing G1 and the established G2.1 range toppers augmented by the Leo GX.1 word clock. The G1.1 range has shrunk slightly with only an Altair streamer with onboard DAC and Aries streamer/network bridge included, there is no longer an entry level Vega DAC.

It's a little bit confusing however as both Aries G1.1 and Altair G1.1 are the same price despite one looking like a higher featured variant on the other. While the streaming engine in both is likely to be the same the absence of a DAC in the Aries means that the electrical environment within it is quieter and, this is the crux, there are multiple digital outputs on the Aries which means that its performance can be enhanced with DAC upgrades. The Altair is a fixed solution for those that want a complete streamer package and do not plan to upgrade in the future.

The main change since G1 is the addition of the high mass base from the G2.1 models, this is finished in anodised silver which tends to be the way that Auralic marks out its more affordable products, G2.1 kit is totally black. They don't have the multiply sprung feet of the 'bigger' components but this base is designed to provide a degree of vibration damping not found on the previous models, it also improves its looks, a little.

The Aries G1.1 has the option to be fitted with an SSD drive thus providing onboard storage for a music library, this is a major boon given that for the £400 asking price for a 2TB dealer installed drive you are getting a high quality storage solution that would cost several times as much if procured from Melco or Innuos, and drive capacity can be bigger if required. If you only intend to stream music from services such as Qobuz or Tidal it won't be very interesting but anyone that has compared locally stored files to those coming of the WAN (wide area network or internet as it's known) will realise the benefit of a storage system that is good and quiet in electrical and mechanical terms. I recall contrasting an Innuos server with an

onboard drive on an Aries G2 some time ago and finding it quite hard to hear the benefit of the dedicated server.

Rip and play

This drive can be filled over your network via a PC desktop or for those with CD collections it's possible to rip those discs to the drive via the Aries G1.1 and a USB disc drive. This is not a facility I have seen on other streamers and lets you rip your music to a very high standard, it

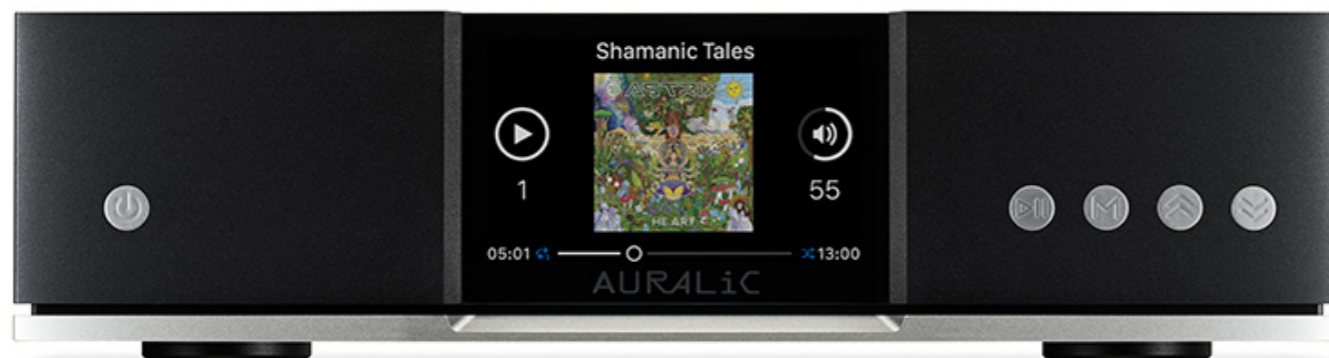


reads the disc twice and compares the metadata with the Musicbrainz music database to establish that there are no errors. If there are it will re-read the disc up to eight times to extract maximum data. You need to use a powered disc drive for best results but USB powered types also work if connected via a powered USB hub. The other aspect to this facility is that the Aries G1.1 can be used as a regular CD player in this situation with jitter reduction as an added bonus. Auralic go so far as to suggest that this approach competes with decent CD players.

As with all Auralic streamers Aries G1.1 is controlled with the Lightning DS app, this is key to the process because this device has an onboard server. The majority of network streamers rely on the server in the NAS or music library, the server being the computer that knows which music files are on the drive and serves them to the streamer which converts the output format (WAV, FLAC, MP3 etc) into something a DAC can cope with, usually either a PCM or DSD file. This is why the Aries needs to catalogue your music collection before it can play it, this takes a little time during set up but can be set to re-scan your collection at a desired frequency thereafter and thus stay in sync with new additions.

I had a go at ripping a CD but didn't succeed until I found the auto rip setting in the 'additional operations' part of Lightning DS, this is where all the serious set up stuff goes on and extends to a wide range of features. These include enabling Airplay, Bluetooth, Roon etc, parametric equalisation, sample rate adjustment to suit different DACs, library scan scheduling and output channel selection (USB or digital) among many other things. It's a part of the system that's worth investigating because it offers so many options and most of them aren't too complicated to work out.

As the Aries has plenty of in- and outputs it's probably worth mentioning a few of them, the digital outputs run the usual gamut of S/PDIF via coax and optical, AES on XLR and USB. The inputs are a USB A for either a USB drive containing music files or a CD drive for playback and ripping, and a LAN port for network connection. This latter can be done wirelessly by fitting



antennas to two threaded sockets on either end of the back panel. Front panel controls are for basic playback but provide navigation for the menu which is in a tiny typeface and not entirely replicated in the app. For instance you can program any IR remote for playback control, on/off etc.

Sound quality

The latest Aries shares its character with its predecessor and its more ambitious rangemate the G2.1, that is the tonal balance is very even and the presentation is extremely neutral and revealing. I used the G1.1 with my regular iFi Pro iDSD DAC for the most part and connected with a Network Acoustics Muon USB cable, a brief stint with a coaxial alternative confirming that USB gave the most revealing results. And these results were frequently excellent, vivid and dynamic with solid yet relaxed bass and a natural sense of power on the better recordings. The timing feels a little more propulsive than some streamers and this is possibly what makes the Aries G1.1 sound so tight and on the money. What it does do particularly well is image precision which lends the music presence and realism, combine this quality with a particularly well recorded piece of music and the instruments and voices really pop in the room.

It's an articulate presentation that lets you hear what the various musicians are doing right down to the amount of reverb on each note. Even lower fi releases like *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Kendrick Lamar) sound surprisingly good and the lyrics are crystal clear. I heard Christopher Cross's *Ride Like the Wind* on the radio and wondered what that AOR classic would sound like on the system, the answer is pretty good. The balance is very FM but it's a polished production with some exceptional BVs from Mike McDonald (let's face it all of his vocals were exceptional back in the day). The Aries G1.1 lets you hear right into the piece and picks out the nature of the production but allows the musical message to take centre stage to great effect.

I fell down a Little Wing rabbit hole after hearing Stevie Ray Vaughn's version and went through a few by great artists including Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton, each came through with mountains of detail and the mark of whichever musician was involved was as clear as day. None compete with the original for visceral connection but most manage more than the sub two and a half minutes that Hendrix considered sufficient for this masterpiece.

G1 to G1.1

I use an Aries G1 as a reference so it was interesting to contrast the two streamers, what

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surprised me given that they aren't that different under the skin was that the G1.1 sounded so much better. It has finer detail, is fuller and richer and even excels when it comes to melody, painting a much more complete picture of the music. There was one issue with this comparison however which is that the Lightning app couldn't get the G1's server software to take over from the G1.1, something to do with the newer model having got there first and the older one not wanting to step on its toes perhaps.



I like the Lightning DS app, it looks great and has excellent interfaces with the Qobuz and Tidal streaming services, that said the option to try Tidal Connect was interesting and the ability of the native app to predict the names of artists of tracks you are looking for is a bonus. You can search using just one part of a name in Lightning but it needs to be a unique part to work well.

With Tidal's high res tracks that are encoded in MQA the Aries G1.1 hands over decoding to the partnering DAC, Auralic are not big fans of the format, but this didn't stop the better examples shining. It's perhaps worth mentioning that all Auralic streamers upsample to 32-bit by default, this is revealed on the playback screen of the app and clearly helps the end result to be as strong and realistic as it is, this thanks to great dynamics and powerful bass that always remains in control. These qualities are clear when comparing the USB output of my Melco N10 music library with the same signal sent through ethernet to the Aries, the extra substance and focus that the Auralic's increased detail resolution bring to the party makes for a much more complete picture of every piece of music it plays.

Conclusion

The Aries G1.1 maintains Auralic's position as a serious competitor in the mid price streaming audio stakes, it isn't inexpensive but will give the alternatives a very good run for their money. The Lightning DS control app alone raises it above the majority. The option of an SSD onboard is one that I would encourage prospective users to take up, it represents a significant saving on standalone drives of a similar quality and takes up no space either. Auralic have done a fine job with this latest addition to the range and anyone looking for a top notch streamer at a sensible price should give it a try.