

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

AURALiC POLARIS wireless streaming amplifier

by Eric Neff



AURALiC titles its new POLARIS convergence device a 'Wireless Streaming Amplifier', which is shorthand for a wireless Roon-ready PCM/DSD streaming DAC with moving magnet phono preamplifier integrated amplifier. It can also be purchased with a 1Tb SSD driver to act as a music server as well! Essentially the POLARIS crams several class leading AURALiC technologies into this one device. There are elements of the VEGA DAC, the ARIES streamer and the MERAK Class D amplifiers. The fact that so much is available in a spouse-friendly and compactly-sized device of attractive industrial design makes the POLARIS so much more exciting.

When I arrived home to find the box waiting for me in the garage I was taken aback by its modest size. Having just reviewed the wonderful PS Audio BHK 250 amplifier (all 38Kg of it!) the POLARIS was positively svelte. Weighing out of the box at a compact 4.5kg, no assistance is required to place it where desired.

Once placed, however, there will be some effort making sure you have everything configured correctly. This is not at all a dig at the POLARIS, but rather it is a reality of the rapidly changing state of wireless tech. AURALiC's Lightning DS app for Apple's iPad/iPhone, available in the Apple app store, helps tie things together very nicely though. After I had ▶

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► placed the POLARIS on the shelf and connected an external hard drive along with my KEF LS50's, I fired up the Lightning DS app on my iPad and got to configuring the system. The clear in-app directions guided me through giving the POLARIS its own unique wireless device name. Next I established the Lightning DLNA server and it discovered the external USB drive and song file library. If you already have your own DLNA server, that may be used too. It took a while to import the 40,000 songs, but once imported I had access to everything via my iPad. You can sort by Artist, Album, Song, etc. as you would expect from any well-developed music app. Users of any wireless audio device should be mindful that whatever brand of wireless router you use make sure you have installed the latest firmware to improve your communication with the POLARIS or any other device you would be using. AURALiC sent along a Netgear Nighthawk 1900AC just in case. Fortunately, the Apple AirPort Extreme I am using was up to date and worked without incident. For homes that have in-room hardwired abilities, there is an RJ-45 input to make the connection. I had no issue with this either as I have the room wired for CAT-6 Ethernet. Either way, pretty soon the POLARIS functioned as advertised and served up beautiful music regardless of how I chose to access it.

And boy, can you access it! Starting with the streaming function POLARIS can access music from the attached USB, network stored files, the internal drive if installed, shared network folders and the DLNA/UPnP function. If you are a TIDAL subscriber, you can integrate TIDAL within the Lightning DS app. Qobuz is also supported. How about internet radio? Yes. It can access Apple's AirPlay. Spotify can run via your smartphone. It is also a Roon End-Point allowing Roon to be your music app of choice. All told you have a choice of 17 inputs! Assuming you install the SSD drive, you could conceivably have the one small POLARIS device and a pair of bookshelf speakers, and access tens of millions of songs all being serviced by the world-class DAC and Class D amplification AURALiC is famous for.

But what if you have shiny discs around? What about vinyl? There are two pairs of multi-function analogue RCA's that can be used for a CD player or another analogue device. I used my Oppo BDP-105D as well as configuring one input as a phono MM pre-amp. For this I hooked up my VPI Scout 1.1

with Dynavector 10X5 cartridge. You can also configure them to support a Pre-Out function and add an external amp if so desired. Donald Fagen's *The Nightfly* [2002 SACD Rhino] served up 'I.G.Y.' from the POLARIS with wonderful clarity. I have always enjoyed the MERAK Class D Mono's as being fast, clear, and precise. The POLARIS clearly has benefitted from this DNA as the KEF LS50's accepted the 120 watts into 8 Ohms and showed off their award-winning sonics to great effect. The word I kept thinking during the disc playback was 'clean'. It was an effortless delivery without edge. Moving on to the VPI, I played Leonard Cohen's 'Almost Like The Blues', the second track from his 2014 LP *Popular Problems* [Columbia]. The gravelly vocals and deep bass were framed by the tonally correct piano. This song on vinyl has a three-dimensional quality and that came through well via the POLARIS.

The wide variety of inputs requires a two layer deep on-screen menu. The menu is digital-centric, so level two finds the analogue inputs. My one complaint for the POLARIS is its remote control. It is fine for volume and mute, but the small grey on black button notation made it a challenge to read and change inputs quickly until I had learned my way around it from use. Getting to that second layer of menu was not intuitive with the remote. Fortunately, the on-screen menu was easy to interpret. The single volume knob can be pressed to access the menu functions and move through the many inputs without any drama.

Digital is the primary domain of the POLARIS. Picking up the iPad and activating the Lightning DS app, I scrolled through the library and selected the title song from Jethro Tull's *Song's from the Wood* [Chrysalis, CD rip]. It fired right up and began to fill the room. The front of the POLARIS showed the song time and countdown. Guitar work was well defined. Cymbals were crisp and had nice distance of shimmer. Ian's flute had the timbre and air that made the band so distinctive. Prior to the end of the song I selected *Aqualung* by the same band and the whole thing started again with another album. The transition was a lovely fade in/out and quite immediate. The cross-fade was elegantly performed and I appreciated the attention to detail in the Lightning DS programming. My time with the Lightning DS app was very enjoyable. Album art was clear and vivid. From setup to daily function it was apparent that AURALiC had worked hard to perfect this central tool. ►



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► At the time of the review the POLARIS was listed in Roon as an uncertified device, and discussions with AURALiC indicate they are near the end of certification with Roon. However, there was no lack of functionality in this current state. I use Roon as my primary serving and curating music software and selecting the POLARIS as a Roon device and utilising it as I would my primary device, the PS Audio DirectStream DSD DAC, I could navigate my library and TIDAL without incident.

This review has been long on tech and a bit short on musical impression primarily due to the extraordinary nature of the convergence represented by the POLARIS' included functions. I almost failed to mention the dual frequency Femto clock and hybrid analogue/digital volume control. Truly the tech just keeps on coming with POLARIS. This should be interpreted to mean the quality of the musical delivery was always strong and of excellent sonic character. At all times the DAC provided a near analogue performance and the amplification was fully capable of driving whatever speaker I used, from the LS50's to the Vandersteen Treo CT's to the GamuT RS5i's. Never did I sense clipping or distress from the amp even during a nice long Led Zeppelin fuelled afternoon.

I wrapped up my listening with a new album from the Vancouver garage rock band Japandroids, *Near to the Wild Heart of Life* on TIDAL. The POLARIS grabbed the Treo CT's and delivered a punk grunge dose of energy. This guitar and drums duo remind me of a Canadian version of the Black Keys. To me they are a musical metaphor for the POLARIS simple seeming as a Duo (Or single box audio device), but once you get into it you can enjoy the breadth without strain. Bravo AURALiC! Highly recommended. +

SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous Output Power: 120W/180W (8 Ohms/4 Ohms)

Frequency Response: 20 Hz–20 KHz, +/-0.1 dB

THD + N: <0.01%, 20Hz–20KHz@1W

IMD: <0.01%, 20Hz–20KHz@1W

Streaming Inputs: Network Shared Folder, USB Drive, Internal Music Storage (Optional add-On), uPnP/ DLNA Media Server, TIDAL and Qobuz streaming, Internet Radio, AirPlay, Bluetooth, Songcast, RoonReady

Digital Inputs: 1 AES/EBU, 1 Coaxial, 1 Toslink, 1 USB device to computer, 2 USB host to storage and DAC, 1 RJ45 Gigabit Ethernet, 1 802.11 b/g/n/ac Tri-Band Wi-Fi

Supported Digital Formats: AAC, AIFF, ALAC, APE, DIFF, DSF, FLAC, MP3, OGG, WAV, WV and WMA

Supported Digital Formats: All PCM from 44.1KS/s to 384KS/s in 32 Bit, DSD 64, DSD128, DSD256

Output Voltage: 4Vrms at 0dBFS (XLR) 2Vrms at 0dBFS (RCA)

Control Software: AURALiC Lightning DS for IOS
AURALiC RC-1 remote control
OpenHome compatible control software
uPnP compatible control software, Roon

Power Consumption: Sleep: <10W,
Playback: 450W at MAX

Dimensions: W 33cm x D 26cm x H 6.5cm

Weight: 4.5kg

Finishing: Matte Black or Matte Silver

Price: £3,499

Manufactured by: AURALiC

URL: www.auralic.com