Star attraction

Auralic's Vega G1 streaming DAC builds on the success of its Aries transport series, but as **Ed Selley** discovers, there's a twist

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Vega G1

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Streaming DAC with preamp

WEIGHT
7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 80 x 320mm

FEATURES
● Supports sample rates up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512
● Wired Ethernet networking
● Digital inputs: 1x USB-B port; 1x coaxial; 1x optical
● Streaming support: Spotify Connect; Tidal; Qobuz; internet radio
● Roon compatible

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic

WEBSITE
auralic.com

I t has been a busy 18 months for network streaming specialist Auralic and both its £3,899 Aries G2 and £1,899 Aries G1 streaming transports – reviewed in issues 431 and 441 respectively – received high praise with coveted Recommended and Editor's Choice badges for their implementation of one of the most capable and easy to use platforms available to network audio fans. The recently introduced Aries series represents a move to a new casework design and construction with both housed in beautiful black chassis with an attractive LCD colour display and tactile front panel controls.

While both Aries transports will work with a huge selection of DACs, Auralic would of course like you to choose its own decoding and the Vega G1 is the matching option for its Aries G1 streaming transport. As with any DAC, the Vega takes the digital signal from the back of the Aries and turns it into an analogue output signal to be connected to an amplifier. Additionally, it has a selection of other functionality that puts it in a slightly different category to many other

There is enough propulsive force to ensure the bass engages the listener

rivals, satisfying your network streaming requirements without the need to purchase the matching Aries.

Along with its streaming digital-to-analogue-converter capabilities, the rotary volume control on the front panel allows it to operate as a digital preamp to become the larger part of a digital music system housed in a single chassis. As well as the network port at the rear, other digital inputs include a USB-B port, AES, coaxial and optical connections selectable from the menu, plus stereo analogue outputs via stereo RCA and XLR sockets. There are also two 6.35mm headphone sockets on the front panel.

Internally, the Vega is equipped with audiophile components mated to hardware that's more in keeping with a desktop computer. It features 1GB of DDR RAM and a quad-core processor to keep the streaming section running smoothly. This is partnered with an ESS Sabre DAC that ensures support for PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD512. In keeping with Auralic's design philosophies, great attention has been paid to the clocking, with timing ▶

accuracy promised into the realm of femtoseconds as well as four digital filters to allow a degree of performance customisation.

The eye-catching 4in front panel display shows album artwork, track name (but not album title), track number and time elapsed. Using it to navigate system menus requires you to get up close to the screen, as the text size is very small indeed. There is no dedicated remote, but the large silver dial acts as a slick level control as well system menu options.

Sound quality

Hooked up to a Naim Supernait 2 integrated amp and Neat Momentum 4 floorstanding loudspeaker and taking a feed from a Melco N1A NAS drive (*HFC* 397), the Vega's cut-down Lightning interface (see boxout) doesn't like the library information it acquires from the Melco and falls back to organising it on the app alphabetically by song writer. This isn't ideal, but thankfully selecting the Album List option from a sub menu allows it to see albums and organise them in the same way as the Melco.

Whatever the additional functionality of the Vega, its ability to deliver in terms of sonics is not compromised.

Starting with a 16/44.1 rip of Yazz Ahmed's *Jamil Jamal* gives a good overview of what it is capable of with a very well-judged balance between detail and an extremely vivid presentation that never tips over into sounding bright or overly forward, even when the recording isn't one for the ages. Some of these traits can be identified as being down to the presence of that ESS Sabre DAC, which possesses a definite character of its own but there is also a tonal richness that continuously makes its presence felt. Ahmed's trumpet is wonderfully vibrant and convincing with a notable decay to notes that brings a level of detail that ensures the Auralic delivers a performance rather than a mere reproduction.

If you ask for something a little more energetic, it responds admirably. The 24/48 remaster of Peter Gabriel's *Sledgehammer* has the scale it needs to sound right and has an excellent and useful level of definition. The bass is pronounced without dominating and there is enough propulsive force to ensure it engages the listener. Compared with some rivals that last ounce of rhythmic excitement isn't present, but this is something that could probably be achieved with some prudent system matching.

The 4in display shows album artwork and track info as well as system control menus

This is perhaps the most significant attribute of the Auralic. It would be wrong to say that it has no character of its own, but it comes across as a device that's determined to give you the contents of any recording with as little of itself included as possible. Although it does offer a series of adjustable filters, these do not hugely alter the overall performance and I enjoy the consistently agreeable presentation of Precise, which appears to be the default setting.

Moving to the range of supported streaming services doesn't really alter this balance of realism and transparency – serving instead as a reminder that this section of the Lightning app really is very slick indeed. Streaming The Cinematic Orchestra's album *To Believe* – which

If you don't plan to pair the Vega G1 with an Aries G1, Roon is an incredible option

benefits from a 24/48 release via Qobuz – sounds sumptuous on the Vega. There's a wonderful coherence to the way that *A Caged Bird/ Imitations Of Life* reaches the listening position with a remarkably open and three dimensional presentation. It is an annoyance that the browsing experience from a streaming service is better than the somewhat compromised experience viewing my own music library stored on the Melco NAS, but there is a solution to overcome this hiccup.

As with the Aries models, the Vega is perfectly capable of being used as an end point for Roon's playback software. The Auralic Vega G1 has a dedicated product profile, which

1. 2x 6.35mm headphone outs
2. Full colour 4in Retina display
3. Volume and menu control board
4. Customised DAC chipset
5. ORFEO analogue output modules

LIGHTNING STRIKES

With such an overlap in its functionality – plus full DAC capabilities – you may be wondering where the Vega G1 fits with Auralic's view of the streaming world, but there are some specification differences that should help to go some way to explaining the company's thinking. The first is that, unlike the Aries G1 – which supports both wired and wireless network connectivity – the Vega only supports a wired network connection, which is likely to rule out buyers seeking more flexible wireless connectivity options. The second sounds like a subtlety but is arguably more important, as although the Vega uses the Auralic's excellent Lightning DS app for control, it is not a Lightning Server. This may seem like a moot point, but it has a significant effect. Unlike the Aries components that use Lightning Server software to cache the music library information on the player and app to reduce the role of a NAS drive to pure storage, the Vega is dependent on the storage device to render the library. The result is a different user experience and a music catalogue that doesn't look the same via the Lightning DS app on the Vega as it does on, say, the Aries. The result is still easy to navigate compared with some control apps, isn't as fast at displaying a music library but does have support for Tidal (with MQA), Qobuz and Spotify streaming services.

Q&A

Richard Bates

UK & EU sales & marketing manager, Auralic Europe

ES: How important is it that products like the Vega G1 have network capability as well as more conventional decoding?
RB: An increasing number of consumers are seeking a single component to drive active loudspeakers for which this product is a great solution. Network capability brings an eminently usable streaming function to the DAC, controlled from our Lightning DS app. The Vega G1 is – first and foremost – an exceptional DAC and preamplifier, which can be the heart of a digital system. The DAC implementation is the same as that used in the Vega G2, albeit without the resistive ladder analogue volume control.

Does Auralic see the Vega being used more on its own than partnering the Aries?
We designed Aries G1 and Vega G1 to provide elements of the G2 Series performance at a lower price. The Aries G1 is an exceptional way to add high-performance streaming to an existing system where a DAC is already present or with a preferred DAC or digital active loudspeakers. While there is an overlap, they do provide slightly different functionality in a variety of system types. As we're living through a transition in what types of features customers need, we believe this makes good sense.

As the Vega G1 is effectively half a system in a single box, is Auralic considering any form of partnering amplification for the future?
We have a good deal of experience with power amplification. Our Merak mono-block hybrid Class D design launched in 2011. More recently we developed an amplifier based upon N Core Hypex for the all-in-one Polaris streaming amplifier. We have a prototype G2 mono-block design completed, which we have used at a number of shows with excellent results. The addition of a G1 Series stereo amplifier to partner is at the concept stage and we will consider bringing this to market when we feel it appropriate to do so.

automatically selects the relevant settings, and can be controlled over Ethernet via the Roon app. In the Aries models this feels a little superfluous, but here it works like the missing piece of the puzzle. If you aren't planning on using the Vega G1 DAC alongside an Aries G1, then Roon is a transformative experience because it lets the Vega demonstrate its unquestionably excellent sonic performance while enjoying the control experience of Roon. Of course, this is not exactly a cheap solution and adding a lifetime Roon subscription at $499 to the cost of the Vega DAC takes the total expenditure to near £3,700.

Some other aspects of the Vega's specification do help it look rather better value, though. The volume function enables it to offer considerable potential as a digital preamp and connecting it to a pair of active speakers, the Vega G1 gets an awful lot done in a single chassis. Running into the AV bypass function of my resident Naim Supernait 2 integrated amplifier, it displays a beautifully even volume ramp and the performance is utterly consistent from the audible threshold upwards.

Conclusion

Despite its undeniably impressive DAC and streaming capabilities, the Vega G1 is not the same straightforward solution as the Aries G1. At the price, it faces stiff competition and even though it has one of the best apps around, it is slightly handicapped. Despite this, the ability it demonstrates with such a wide selection of music, coupled to the excellent functionality and extremely solid build means that it can more than hold its own. Auralic's golden run continues and we can't wait to see what's next ●

HOW IT COMPARES

The Naim's ND5 XS 2 (*HFC* 446) makes an interesting alternative to the Vega G1. The Naim may lack preamp functionality, display and controls, but it costs £1,000 less than the Vega. It supports wi-fi, AirPlay, Bluetooth and Google Cast wireless streaming as well as also being a Roon endpoint. Meanwhile, the Vega excels as a preamp. Both devices are very well made, but the display on the Auralic makes it easier to use at a glance. The existence of both products (as well as Auralic's Aries G1) highlights that there is a streaming solution to fit almost any requirement.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★½

OVERALL
★★★★½

LIKE: Even and consistently engaging performance; build

DISLIKE: No Lightning server support; price

WE SAY: A streaming DAC with bags of finesse that should fit into a variety of systems with ease

CONNECTIONS

1. Ethernet port
2. Coaxial digital input
3. Optical digital input
4. USB-B port
5. XLR analogue out (right channel)
6. RCA analogue stereo outputs