

INPUT SOURCE

- 1: AES
- 2: COAX
- 3: STREAM
- 4: TOSLINK
- 5: USB HS
- 6: BACK

Shoot for the stars

Looking for a DAC with considerable input flexibility and wireless streaming to boot? **Ed Selley** thinks the Altair holds the answer

The boundary between what counts as a digital-to-analogue converter and what might be more accurately described as a digital source with some additional digital inputs has got rather blurry of late. There is an increasing number of DACs on the market that go beyond what might be expected of a conventional converter. Few companies have taken this as far as Auralic. Its Altair is described by the company as a wireless streaming DAC and believe it or not, this is only scratching the surface of what this smart unit is capable of.

Around the back, you will find a quartet of digital inputs including a coaxial, Toslink optical, AES and USB-B connection, which gives the Altair a considerable if not outstanding flexibility as a means of connecting up all your digital sources. These connections are made available to a pair of RCA and XLR outputs that

can be used at line level or as a preamp with the volume adjusted in the analogue domain as with its Aries Mini (HFC 425). There's a 6.35mm jack socket on the front for use as a headphone amp, too.

The Altair is also equipped with the same streaming hardware that is fitted to a number of its other products. This means it has the relatively unusual ability to access a music library stored on something like a Melco N1A2 NAS drive (HFC 424) via the USB port or the network connectivity. It makes use of the same Lightning DS control app as the rest of Auralic family of streaming components. This iOS-only system assembles its own library for faster and more stable access and is one of the slickest and most consistent apps I have experienced in quite a while.

The networking facilities don't end there. Native support for Tidal and Qobuz is supplied along with internet radio services and you can stream

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Altair
ORIGIN
Netherlands/China
TYPE
DAC/preamp with wireless music streamer
WEIGHT
3.2kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
330 x 65 x 230mm
FEATURES
• Wi-fi and Ethernet streaming up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256
• Digital inputs: USB-B; coaxial; optical; AES
• Outputs: stereo RCA; balanced XLR
• AirPlay; Bluetooth; Songcast; RoonReady
DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic
WEBSITE
auralic.com

services that aren't included via AirPlay and Bluetooth. And if the idea of streaming isn't something that appeals to you, the chassis can accommodate a 2.5in hard drive which turns it into a self-contained music server. In short, it has a comprehensive array of options for accessing music content.

Format compatibility is impressive with files up to 32-bit/384kHz supported along with DSD up to DSD256. Decoding is provided by an ESS Sabre DAC, which is mated to Auralic's proprietary master clock system. This promises accuracy to the femtosecond and is powered via its own specific power supply. One useful aspect of the clock is that it has two

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cycles: one optimised for multiples of 44.1kHz and one for 48kHz, which should benefit performance. The server's abilities are powered by a quad-core Cortex-A9 processor running at 1GHz supported by 4GB of internal memory, so even large libraries can be easily accommodated.

Aesthetically, the casework is attractive and finished to an extremely high standard. I'm not entirely sold on all the aspects of the design, though, and I find the navigation via a single rotary control on the front slightly annoying and the display doesn't show any form of

punchy and sufficiently lively that you are drawn into the music. The role of the Auralic's bespoke clock is hard to pin down, but there is a sense that some of the effortlessness that it displays in the face of fast and complex basslines is down to the assurance it has over timing. The Altair isn't a ruthless, metronomic device, but it consistently exhibits a fluency and cohesion that makes up-tempo material incredibly appealing.

There is little to criticise, but the tonality of some instruments – piano in particular – can come across as a little hard. A 24/96 download of *Touch And Flee* by the Neil Cowley Trio lacks some of the warmth and weight that I have heard it display on other devices and sounds a little cold and sterile here. Happily, this isn't the case with everything and even under provocation with poor recordings, the Altair never becomes especially harsh or aggressive.

Switching over to the headphone output and listening with Bowers & Wilkins' P9 Signature headphone (HFC 421) suggests that the same qualities hold true here too. Compared with a dedicated headphone amplifier, the Altair sounds fractionally constrained but is comfortably up to the task of a spot of late-night listening. Bluetooth hookup performs quite superbly with lossless files from a Pioneer XDP-100R personal audio player (HFC 407).

Switching to the network functionality, both Tidal and Qobuz implementations are effective and as someone that uses Tidal on a very regular basis, the Altair puts in an excellent performance. Switching between the stream of Genesis' *Dreaming While You Sleep* and my own CD rip of it shows no differences that I can determine

album metadata, which is a shame. A supplied remote offers some practical use if you're not within reach of a device to access the control app.

Sound quality

I connect the Altair to a Melco N1A NAS drive via USB to access my music library and wirelessly to my home network for music streaming services. This is a usefully flexible combination and one that shows off the Auralic's abilities to excellent effect.

Via USB the 24/88.2 download of Dead Can Dance's *The Ubiquitous Mr Lovegrove* is superbly presented. The vocals are almost liquid smooth, but manage to be detailed and lifelike at the same time. The brooding darkness of the piece is effortlessly captured without ever sounding dull or muddled as it sometimes tends to.

The rolling electronic undulation of Goldfrapp's *Strict Machine* is precise,



It is hard to avoid drawing comparisons between the Auralic and Chord's Hugo 2 (p16) as their price is almost identical. The Chord manages to combine outstanding accuracy with an effortless transparency and if you are solely looking for a USB DAC/preamp, it has the edge. What is noteworthy is how close the Auralic performs pitched against the Hugo 2 used via the same type of inputs. The Chord can't match the Altair's functionality with its network audio playback, streaming service support, app control etc. This makes choosing between these two exceptionally capable products a very hard choice that will be decided by your own specific requirements.

blindfolded, while sending the same material via AirPlay from the Tidal app on an iPad also produces only infinitesimal differences. While the twin aerial arrangement on the back of the Altair isn't the most visibly elegant piece of industrial design I've ever seen, it is entirely stable in the time that it is connected and up and running in my setup.

Conclusion

At first glance, the rather scattergun nature of the Auralic's specification can look a little like a product that has been designed by a committee, but the more time you spend with it the more sense it makes. Being able to run a drive on a closed network that can send material via USB and then being able to switch over to the network functionality to access streaming services is something that appeals to me very much. What's more this is a seriously capable product that delivers excellent performance across its impressively comprehensive selection of inputs. It might not be a DAC in the standard sense of the product category, but the Altair is something that needs to be on your shortlist of digital sources anywhere near this price ●

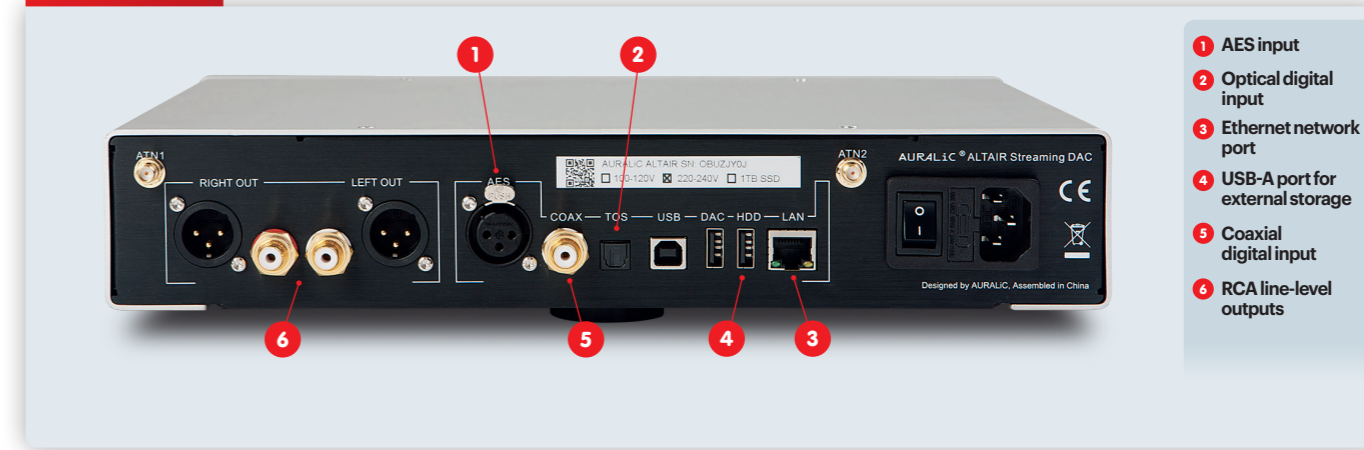
Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★
OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Connectivity and networking flexibility; engaging performance across all inputs
DISLIKE: Hard sound with some instruments; uninformative display
WE SAY: Excellent performance across an impressively wide feature set

CONNECTIONS



- 1 AES input
- 2 Optical digital input
- 3 Ethernet network port
- 4 USB-A port for external storage
- 5 Coaxial digital input
- 6 RCA line-level outputs