

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Auralic Aries G2.1

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Auralic products can be idiosyncratic at times, the Vega streaming DAC doesn't have the Lightning Server onboard for instance so isn't as complete a streamer as an Aries, but it is admirable for its commitment to product improvements and its unequivocal stance on the thorny subject of MQA. Those unfamiliar with this acronym should know that it's a compression system developed to allow high resolution files to be streamed over the net without high speed broadband. So far it has been adopted by a handful of studios and Tidal whose Masters library of high res albums are encoded in MQA. To get the full benefit of this tech requires two stages of unfolding as it's known and a hefty licence fee for hardware makers. Auralic considers MQA to be a lossy compression method and not "a part of true high-performance audio" which is fighting talk by the polite standards of the industry. Auralic "do not employ any official form of MQA decoding or rendering" but have "developed a playback technology that simulates the sonic character of MQA's digital filter."

The Aries G2.1 is the flagship streamer in Auralic's product range, it inhabits the new Unity Chassis II which unlike its G2 predecessor is not hewn from a single lump of aluminium in the popular high ends style but fabricated. The chassis consists of an inner box made of copper that's chosen for its shielding abilities and an external case in anodised aluminium. The G2.1 models are very similar to their predecessors but have a protrusion underneath the display and if you look hard you can see that they're made of more than one part. The other change is the addition of springs within the feet which are employed in an effort to keep vibration at bay, there may not be any moving parts inside but even resistors and capacitors seem to be sensitive to vibration.

Connectivity wise the Aries G2.1 has the usual gamut of options for a network streamer with outputs on optical, coaxial, AES and USB sockets alongside a Lightning Link output on HDMI. This latter is a proprietary link for the matching Vega G2.1 DAC and there's an inexpensive HDMI cable in the box for this purpose, it isn't an I2S connection as is the case with some proprietary links but sends the digital signal and allows one unit to trigger another for power up or down. There are four G2 series components so linking like this saves you switching them on and off separately, what's more the Aries actually has a front panel standby switch.

The other options on the back panel are for network connection via ethernet or wi-fi and a USB A socket marked HDD for connection to a hard disc drive or a CD/DVD-ROM drive, the benefit of the latter is that you can play CDs with an inexpensive peripheral drive and use the processing power of the Aries. If you don't have a dedicated music server/library you can install a 2.5inch SSD or HDD within the Aries and use it as a combined server and streamer.

Our sample didn't have an installed drive but past experience indicates that this can be a high quality yet inexpensive option.

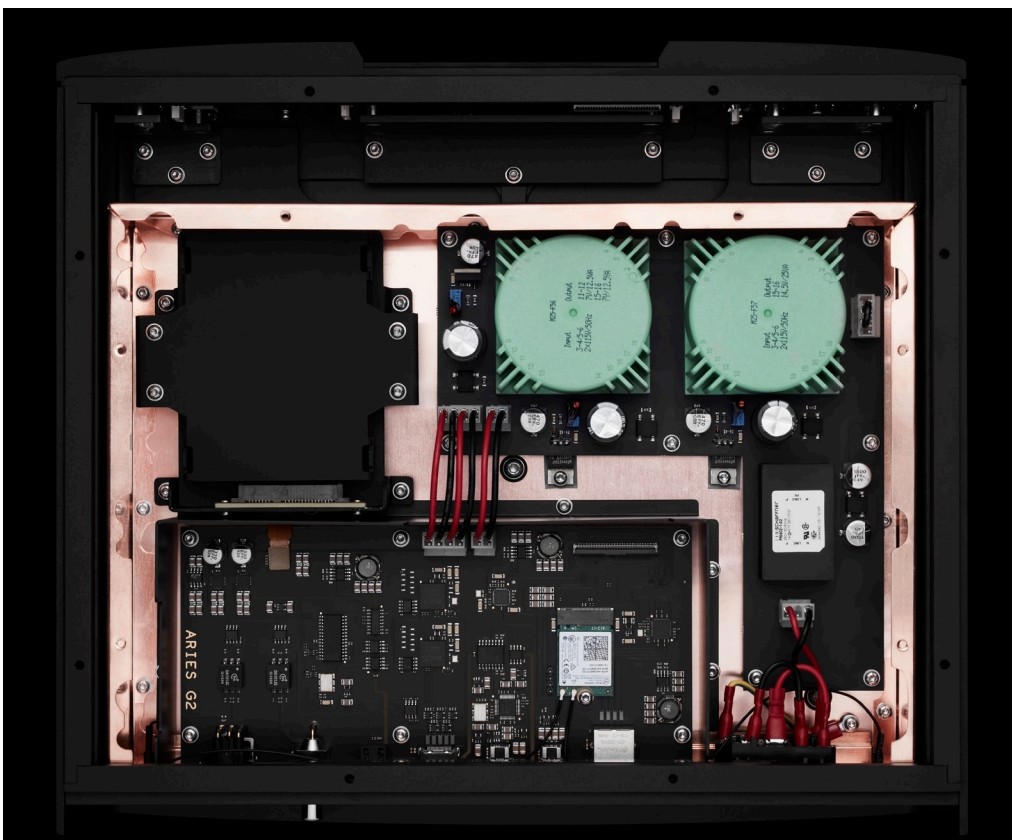
Controlling the Aries G2.1 is best done on an iPad with the Lightning DS app, you can use Roon if you feel that its features and reliability are worth the asking price but in our system



where the Roon Core is provided by an Innuos server Lightning DS sounds notably more transparent. Lightning DS also offers a selection of controls for tuning the sound to suit your tastes and system, it has parametric EQ and a speaker placement balancing system that uses delays to compensate for irregular set ups or difficult rooms. You can also choose which sample rates to send to the DAC, for instance if your DAC can't convert DSD the Aries can convert it to PCM, or if it won't work with sample rates above 96kHz then all higher rates can be reduced. The latter is not often a requirement but some non-oversampling converters don't like 192kHz and higher.

Sound quality

I used the Aries G2.1 with a variety of DACs over two or three months and got consistently outstanding results with it, so much so that going back to the Aries G1 I usually use will be a difficult transition. On the one hand it's difficult to understand why this purely digital part of the streaming chain can be so influential but repeated comparisons and experience with alternatives reveals that this is certainly the case. A streaming bridge like this which has no DAC onboard is a bit of a luxury, you can easily do without it by connecting the USB output of your server to a DAC but inserting almost any network bridge in between these two elements brings instant rewards in terms of detail resolution, imaging, timing and musical engagement. There



are people that don't believe streaming can compete with CD let alone vinyl but I suspect that most of them have never heard a good streamer. The Aries G2.1 is a very good streamer. The first thing I played when it was hooked up to its natural partner, the Vega G2.1, with USB was an unfamiliar track by Arve Henriksen from his album *Cartography*, the sheer density and reach out and touch it soundstage produced was borderline astonishing. Henriksen is a restrained trumpet player but he can conjure up a powerfully atmospheric sound with electronics, this much is abundantly clear with this streamer and a variety of DACs although the Vega's transparency definitely helps. This pairing does timing too, I'm a big Bugge Wesseltoft fan but the album he made with Prins Thomas is patchy to say the least, or so I thought. Here it came through in spectacular fashion, with sparkling highs and lots of reverb to give a sense of space, the track Furuberget getting better and better in the last five minutes.

It works equally well with acoustic instruments even original ones, the Engegard Quartet playing Haydn sounding like an early version of math rock without the bass but with plenty of life and precision. I love the depth of image that the Aries can extract from a good recording, even the most familiar ones seem to have a bit more space on them than most



streamers deliver and this isn't because the G2.1 is in any way bright, it has no apparent tonal aberrations but this may be because DACs usually do and this masks subtler ones from the streamer. However it's entirely digital nature would suggest this is unlikely. What does make a difference is the chain in front of the Aries, you can hear changes in servers, cables and network switches very easily. This is the drawback with genuine high resolution, it reveals what's coming in with the signal only too well, but that said upgrading the network switch for instance just makes the system sound better, it takes away some of the 'digital' about the sound that you weren't aware of in the first place. I did contrast the two Aries just to clarify what spending twice as much as you have to on a G1 does. It gives you realism of tone, clarity of bass lines which in turn enhance timing, improves articulation and delivers a more relaxed and more analogue sound with greater coherence and transparency.

If you read the reviews of Merason and Métronome DACs on the site you'll get an idea of the results that the Aries G2.1 coaxed out of both, which was truly remarkable in the case of the Merason it has to be said. But coming back to the Vega G2.1 is very easy, and allowed me to enjoy stereo solidity that made voices and instruments seem tangibly in the room. I also tried using the Melco N1A EX server rather than an Innuos Zenith SE and have to say that it worked remarkably well with the Auralic pairing, it's calmer demeanour isn't as strong on absolute

resolution and timing but has appealing naturalness that made me want to use it more. The first track I cued up worked superbly, Joan Osborne's Pensacola is a beautiful bitter sweet ballad sung with gut wrenching emotion and recorded in high contrast, all of this, the dynamics, the superb guitar and the drive of the band is laid bare in the most musically compelling fashion by the Aries/Melco pairing. And it does so without adding any grain or emphasising the raw sound of the instruments and voice.

I had an opportunity to try a couple of Audioquest's latest 48 series HDMI cables with the Aries/Vega G2.1 pairing. These cables were developed to cope with the demands of the HDMI 2.1 video spec and are capable of transmitting data rates up to 48GB over four shielded pairs of cables. The Auralic transmits much lower data rates but these cables delivered a particularly precise version of events that while not as musically fluent as the CAD USB cable I generally use does seem quite revealing. I will let them run in for a while and see what transpires.

It should be evident by now that the Auralic Aries G2.1 is a rather special piece of kit, one that's capable of taking almost any streaming system to the next level. You need a commensurately good DAC to make the most of it and the source side needs to be sorted too, but if you're looking for a serious streaming upgrade this warrants serious consideration.



Specifications

Type: network streamer

Streaming protocols:

Inputs: Ethernet, USB, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth

Digital Outputs: Lightning Link, coaxial S/PDIF, TosLink, AES/EBU, USB

Supported File Formats: FLAC/WAV/MP3, etc

Supported Digital Formats: up to 384kHz/32 bit, DSD512

Control Software: Lightning DS (iOS only), Roon

Dimensions HxWxD: 96 x 340 x 320mm

Weight: 9.3kg

Finish: anodised black

Warranty: 2 years (3 years with registration)