

hardware review

Auralic Altair G2.2 one for all

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Auralic Altair G2.2 streamer DAC preamplifier

With their very similar if precisely executed cases you could be forgiven for not noticing differences between Auralic components. The flagship G2.2 models all look very much alike in their two thirds width, black anodised aluminium chassis with a central display, the only differentiation is the presence or otherwise of a rotary control. Nowhere is this more distinct than with the Altair G2.2 and its sister the Vega G2.2, here the external difference is in the presence of two rather than one headphone output(s). They even provide much the same functionality, combining the Lightning streaming engine with a Fusion DAC, but there are differences and they can be seen on the back panel. The Vega G2.2 is has a broader array of in- and outputs including a pair of Lightning Links for hooking up a separate streamer and upsampler, and a word clock connection for the Leo GX1 master clock.

Auralic considers the Altair G2.2 to be a 'digital audio streamer' their ultimate one stop solution for preamp, streaming and digital to analogue conversion needs, while the Vega G2.2 is a 'streaming DAC' that can be upgraded in a number of ways. It's for those who appreciate that with digital audio more is usually more. In the modern home however that's an ethos that is out of fashion so a single box source and preamplifier has a lot to recommend it, especially one that is as well thought out as the Altair G2.2.

It runs the 64 bit Tesla G3 platform, which doesn't mean that it runs on batteries and accelerates faster than a Ferrari (albeit you could argue that it does so sonically at least), but rather that it incorporates all of Auralic's know how on digital signal processing. Which is a lot. For instance we have direct data recording which is a buffer or reservoir that stores the data stream so that it can be sent to the DAC in a controlled and precisely timed manner. The Fusion DAC is part of the Tesla G3 suite and combines ladder and delta sigma conversion technologies, something we are seeing with a growing number of the more interesting brands. Auralic use a DAC chip but bypass the internal PLL, filter and oversampling circuits so that it

can apply its own discrete circuits in order to deliver a result that is unique to the brand. Both the Lightning control app and front panel display reveal that all incoming signals are upsampled prior to conversion, which to a non oversampling enthusiast like myself is painful, but the results suggest that in this implementation at least it works and works well.

The Altair G2.2 will accept digital inputs of most varieties but omits AES balanced from the roster in favour of analogue line and phono inputs, that's right, you can plug your turntable into it and so long as it has an MM cartridge, and the vinyl will sing. There's even a ground connector albeit next to the line inputs. That's not all, the eARC input will accept an HDMI connection to a TV or set top box, so the Altair G2.2 really can be the centre of a complete home entertainment



system, just add active speakers and you're in business. Network connection can be done wirelessly via a pair of antenna or wired with ethernet cable. Analogue outputs are on the usual connections with Auralic having a predilection for the balanced variety, but that said the single ended RCA option sounds pretty tasty to my ears.

While the Altair G2.2 is Roon ready Auralic's Lighting DS control app is a nicely executed example of the genre, developed in house rather than a copy of a generic app it offers features that are rarely seen and has an appealingly clean and tidy appearance. You can also use it to drill down into the myriad features in the 'Additional operations' sub menu, where things like upsampling limits, fixed/variable output, three filter settings and two tone options (I picked 'smooth' and 'clean') and many, many more can be adjusted. There is a separate menu accessible via the front panel of the Altair G2.2 which provides other functions including setting up any IR remote control to provide functions not available via the app such as on/off and a quicker play/pause option for when the app is resting. Not that it's inclined to rest, it will keep your iOS device awake until you switch it off.

Sound quality

Given the all things to all audiophiles versatility of the Altair G2.2 listening commenced with it connected directly to a pair of PMC active twenty5.22i loudspeakers, sources were a Melco N10 server and the Qobuz streaming service. The result was extremely precise and clean, live and direct in fact with a sense that little was getting in the way between digital signal and analogue sound. These speakers have a pro monitor like quality that matches the open, immediate sound of the Altair G2.2 so the combination was thrilling with good recordings such as Bill Laurance and Michael League's *Where You Wish You Were*, a pairing of piano and various mostly fretless instruments including bass and oud, that was taut and vibrant in the room, especially when the level was raised to lifelike volumes.





The other reason for setting up a remote is that it gives volume control from the listening seat, I did this with a random handset and saved some legwork. It's a relay based controller so you get clicking with level changes but that's hardly intrusive and usually means higher quality attenuation. I enjoyed the slightly compressed sounds of Edrix Puzzle, a sort of British Snarky Puppy, with lush double bass and a chewy, expansive instrumental groove that the Altair G2.2 and active PMCs delivered in very expressive form. The pairing revel in good live recordings too, exposing the immediacy and dynamics available in highly convincing fashion, in truth they made all the better recordings I played sound palpably immersive, not least Gillian Welch's recent release *Woodland* where the voices and guitars came through in particularly crisp and tasty fashion.

The longer I used the Altair G2.2 the more I came to appreciate it, the DAC in particular is exceptionally linear, quiet and revealing, the better the system gets the more you hear from it. I tried using it with my modified Lumin streamer and the Icon 5 preamplifier and this raised the standard from very good to spectacular. No matter how extreme the system I put it with there was nothing to criticise, its signature if such exists for it is remarkably neutral is an open, clean transparency that delivers dynamics, three dimensionality of image and timing in a convincing and realistic fashion. There are warmer sounding alternatives on the market but that's not to say that this Auralic is cold, it sounds entirely well balanced, neutral and unusually insightful.

I enjoyed some particularly engaging music with the Altair G2.2, it has an ease combined with clarity that is rare and this means you can appreciate delicacy and fine detail as easily as driving beats and visceral impact. I love the way that it offers up the sound of the room alongside acoustic instruments, allowing you to hear the difference between natural and artificial reverb in the character of the sound. The sense of ease is particularly welcome with more intense material too, this is the stuff that can get overly aggressive with some streaming DACs because they add a little bit of extra bite to the attack. But here I enjoyed the complexity and fire power of Elephant 9's *I Cover the Mountain* (a modern variation on King Crimson), with Terje Rypdal's inspired guitar amping up the intensity, material that would be very hard to enjoy without the Auralic's innate composure under fire.

The final system I tried the Altair G2.2 in was valve powered and rather special, consisting of SJS Electroacoustics amplification and Living Voice R80 speakers, this system is warm, open and always inviting and I feared that the transistor output of the Auralic might sound

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amiss. Yet it fitted right in and even inspired the speaker maker to look into streaming more seriously, which for a vinyl and CD diehard is quite an achievement.



Conclusion

Auralic products may not be all that well differentiated to the untrained eye but the G2.2 range consistently delivers sound quality that is well above par. The Altair G2.2 is no exception, the fact that it can't be upgraded within the Auralic metaverse doesn't mean that it is limited. You can add separate sources and preamplifiers with ease, but it's a very strong package on its own and one that should see many a long way down the path to digital audio delight.



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.