



Auralic Altair

DAC, network streamer, preamplifier

Monday, May 15, 2017

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A few months ago I spent some time with the Auralic Aries Mini, a streaming bridge that connects a music server to a DAC and provides a control interface in the form of a very attractive iOS App. That product is the least expensive in Auralic's catalogue, further up the chain is the Altair that combines streaming capabilities with an onboard DAC and digital preamplifier. All you need to add to it is a hard drive on the network, amp and speakers (or even active speakers) and you have a streaming system.

The Altair comes in an attractive aluminium case that's very plain on the front and amply equipped with connections on the rear, inputs include USB, coax, Toslink optical and AES/EBU and outputs are available on single ended RCA or balanced XLR connectors. There is naturally a LAN port for your Ethernet cable but also a USB for hard drives and a DAC output on USB ostensibly for headphone amps. The Altair has a headphone output on the front but those looking for maximum thrill power with their on-ear speakers can improve on this with a dedicated converter/amp.



Auralic's Lightning control App is one of the nicest in the business but the option exists to use the Altair as a Roon endpoint, which gives even better insight into your music collection and integrates seamlessly with the Tidal streaming service. I find that Lightning looks great however, I hooked the Altair up to the direct Ethernet connection on a Melco N1Z server, registered myself with Auralic (which is a bit of a chore for a streamer) and once the App had scanned my music library I was able to access it with ease, see artwork and choose from either artist, album, genre etc or via the Melco's directory which is useful for accessing specific, non album track collections. The App is nice with its white background and large artwork but if you get in deep it can take a while to get back to the 'home' page where different categories or sources can be accessed. So if you have drilled down to a specific album and its tracks but decide to look on Tidal or Qobuz, both are supported, you have to scroll back to do so. There may be a shortcut for this but I didn't spot it. Instead I ended up on voyages into the unknown with the aforementioned streaming services, Qobuz in particular can be quite absorbing and while sound quality doesn't match your personal library it's easily good enough to enjoy.

Setting up the Altair is straightforward with a cable connection and only slightly more convoluted using wi-fi, the need to select the network and put in a password being the main difference. The presence of two wireless antennae allows high res files up to 24/192 to be streamed while the USB and Ethernet connections are good for up to 32/384 and DSD256. The Aries can also receive Bluetooth and AirPlay signals from your portable devices, making it a pretty universal digital hub. The only limitation is that the Lightning App is only available for Apple devices, the best workaround for Android is to use Bubble UPnP.

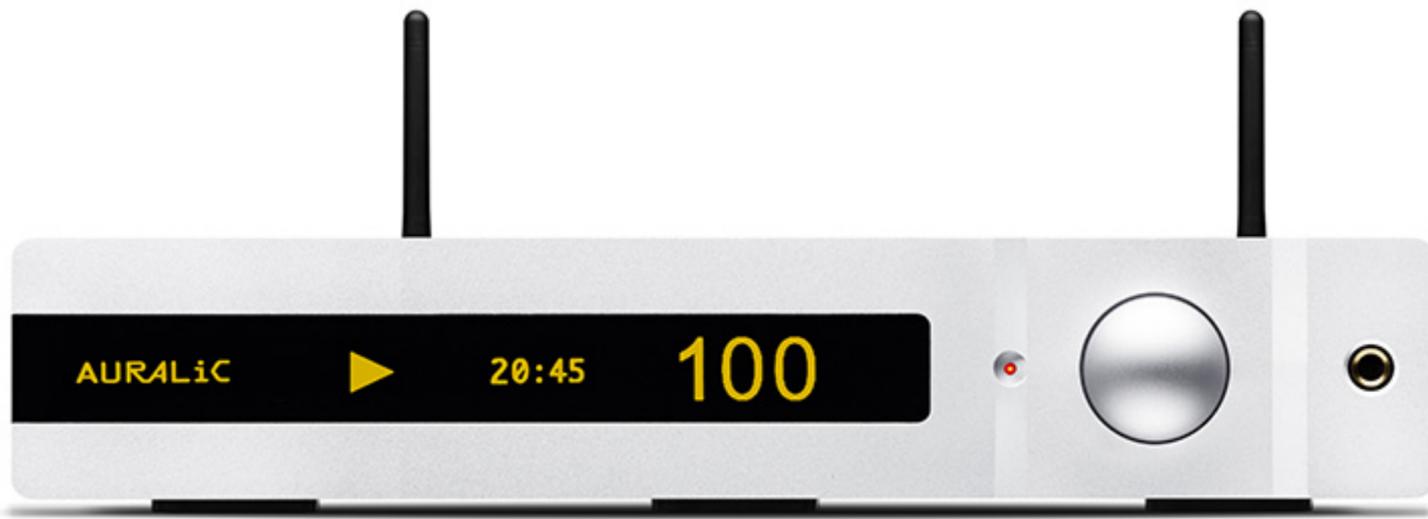
Sound

The Aries is a pretty relaxed and fluent sounding device almost regardless of how it's used. I got best results with the network connection but USB is very competent too. As is usually the case the Ethernet provided a more musically engaging result. Here Amandine Beyer's fabulous solo violin (JS Bach *Sonatas & Partitas BWV 1001 – 1006*, Zig-Zag Territoires) is all about musical flow and melody rather than specifically defining the reverberant character of the venue. There is plenty of detail and focus but the emphasis is where it counts, on the music.



After this I disappeared down a Qobuz wormhole, discovering a new album by Hadouk Trio (*Le Cinqieme Fruit*) that sounds pretty but doesn't have quite the substance of their earlier work. Along with a whole bunch of other stuff, it's quite absorbing to say the least. Going back to my own library I got rather more engaging results and thoroughly enjoyed pretty much everything I played. There were some tracks I couldn't play, these were WAV files that came from different sources. WAV can be problematic with metadata but most streamers can cope with this. I talked to Auralic about this who said that the solution lies in the way that the server and the streamer interact, it's necessary to set it up with the server acting as a network share which bypasses the Twonky server on the Melco.

I like the way that the Altair fades tracks in and out with play and pause, it minimises the shock of going back to a loud track midway through. You can also control volume from the App, which is easier when you have the 'play' screen up, here the volume slider is at its widest and doesn't require such a fine touch to get right.



Playing Patricia Barber's album *Smash* I was struck by how well the voice is projected, it has a presence in the room that's very convincing thanks in part to nice quiet backgrounds and the decent dynamic range that this allows. With Van Morrison's 'The Way Young Lovers Do' (*Astral Weeks*) I was struck by the analogue feel of this DAC, it allows you to close your eyes and drift with the music, enjoying all the full blooded passion, humanity and heart of the performance. It may not be the most revealing streamer on the block but it presents more than enough detail to thoroughly enjoy a great tune. Timing is also good for a digital component, which sounds like faint praise but that's only because I used the Auraltic as a reference when reviewing a group of cartridges and all but one provided better timing. But that is the vinyl advantage; the fact that one didn't is an achievement for the streamer in truth.

I also used this with an Eclipse speaker system ([TD510Mk2/TD520SW](#)) and had a ball of a time thanks to the speaker's remarkable speed and musicality. So timing is up there with the better digital options. I didn't have time to try the various filter settings that usually make a difference on the timing front, so it's possible it had more to give in that crucial respect.

I also used the Altair in a less critical set up just to explore new music and found it consistently enjoyable, which is a good result for a fussy bugger like me! The balance of build, features and accessibility makes the Altair a great streamer, it sounds considerably more engaging than a PC and a DAC and offers a control App that is among the best around. In truth it's hard to see what's not to like.

SPECIFICATIONS:

Frequency Response: 20Hz - 20KHz, +/- 0.1dB (precise filter mode)

THD+N: <0.0003%, 20Hz-20KHz at 0dBFS

Dynamic Range: 124dB, 20Hz-20KHz, A-weighted

Streaming Inputs: Network shared folder, USB Drive, Internal Music Storage (with optional 2.5-inch HDD or SSD), uPnP/DLNA Media Server, TIDAL and Qobuz streaming, Internet Radio, AirPlay

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

Analogue outputs: Balanced XLR (output impedance 10ohm), Single-ended RCA(output impedance 50ohm), 6.35mm headphone Jack (output impedance 5ohm)

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

Supported Digital Formats: PCM from 44.1KS/s to 384KS/s in 32Bit, DSD64, DSD128, DSD256

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

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

Power Consumption: Sleep - <10W, Playback - 35W at max.

Dimensions WxDxH: 330 x 230 x 65mm (13 x 9 x 2.6 inches)

Weight: 3.2kg (7lbs)

PRICE: £1,749

MANUFACTURER DETAILS:

Auralic

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DISTRIBUTOR DETAILS:

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