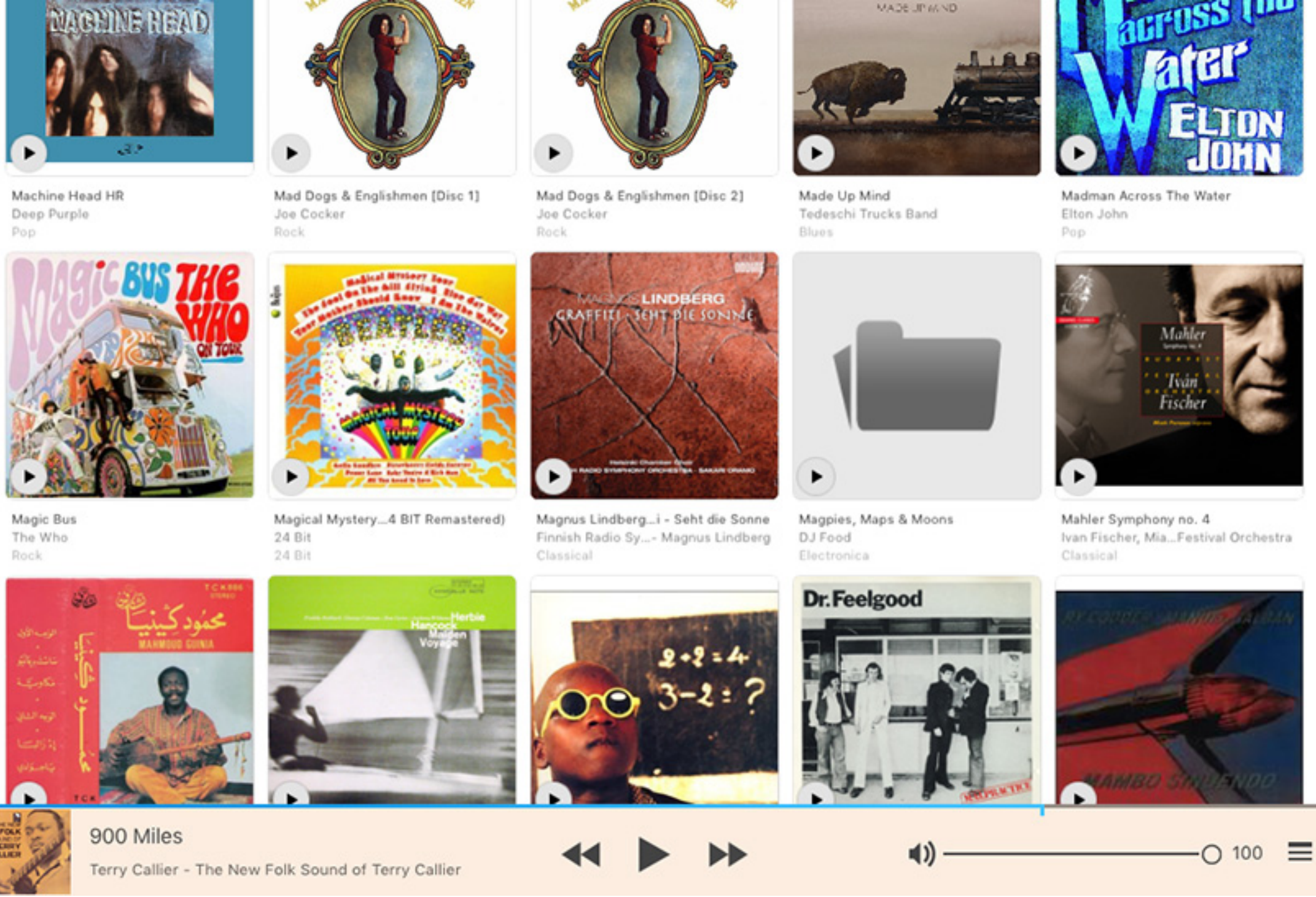# Auralic Aries Mini
network streamer and DAC

There are a few different ways to get music streaming into your life, you can hook up a laptop to a DAC or you can connect a hard drive and a streamer to your network. The former approach is popular because many of us have laptops, but compromised by the electrically noisy nature of such devices. Streamers on the other hand can be built with audio sensibilities and controlled by apps on a phone or tablet. They are not as flexible as a computer but the good ones offer pretty much everything the music enthusiast needs, the Auralic Aries Mini is from this camp.

The Mini is a streamer that can form the basis of a system that need only include a pair of powered speakers to get up and running. Auralic makes a range of Aries streamers of which this is the least expensive. The top model, Aries, has dual femto clocks, offboard linear power supply, no DAC and Roon control software embedded, it costs £1,495. At nearly half the price the Aries LE is very similar but doesn't have the femto clock or linear PSU. The Aries Mini is a compact, Apple TV size, unit that can operate wired or wirelessly and incorporates a bay that accepts a two and a half inch hard drive for onboard storage. It has USB and coaxial digital outputs but its internal Sabre DAC is ready to convert PCM up to 32/384 and DSD up to DSD256. For the £449 asking price the Mini is supplied with a basic wallwart power supply but a linear PSU is available for an extra £249, and if sound quality is important that is a worthwhile upgrade. You can use the Aries Mini with wireless devices over Bluetooth and Airplay and incorporate a number of them in a multiroom set up.

There aren't many alternatives on the market that offer this degree of flexibility and specification at the price, the Bluesound Node 2 (£430) has greater connectivity but isn't DSD compatible, it does have access to more online music services albeit both devices can stream the better quality options, Tidal and Qobuz with appropriate subscriptions. So unless you need Spotify in your life it's a close call spec wise. What probably distinguishes these two the most is the control app, I've not tried the Bluesound option but hear that it's pretty solid. The Lightning DS app for Aries (iOS only) is however very nice indeed it has an attractive Roon like appearance and is easy to navigate with good reliability, I had a few drop outs where it needed restarting but nothing baffling, as can sometimes be the case. You get full artwork if you have been diligent with your tagging, and it plays whole albums if you tap on the first track. Even if you tap on the last track it will load the album into the playlist, a more selective tap will let you add just one track via a second menu. The latter is used to build up specific playlists and once you know how this is a quick and easy way to achieve what is not always an easy goal.

Aside from the in and outputs on the box there are three buttons on the top that can be used in different ways depending on how you set it up, so they can do volume, play/pause etc but 99% of the time it's easier to control the mini with its app. You can fix output via the app or use the onboard volume, as ever with this type of device the control on a preamp or integrated will be less deleterious to the signal.

Album covers shown (with labels):
- Machine Head HR — Deep Purple — Pop
- Mad Dogs & Englishmen [Disc 1] — Joe Cocker — Rock
- Mad Dogs & Englishmen [Disc 2] — Joe Cocker — Rock
- Made Up Mind — Tedeschi Trucks Band — Blues
- Madman Across The Water — Elton John — Pop
- Magic Bus — The Who — Rock
- Magical Mystery...4 BIT Remastered) — 24 Bit — 24 Bit
- Magnus Lindberg...i - Seht die Sonne — Finnish Radio Sy...- Magnus Lindberg — Classical
- Magpies, Maps & Moons — DJ Food — Electronica
- Mahler Symphony no. 4 — Ivan Fischer, Mia...Festival Orchestra — Classical

900 Miles
Terry Callier - The New Folk Sound of Terry Callier
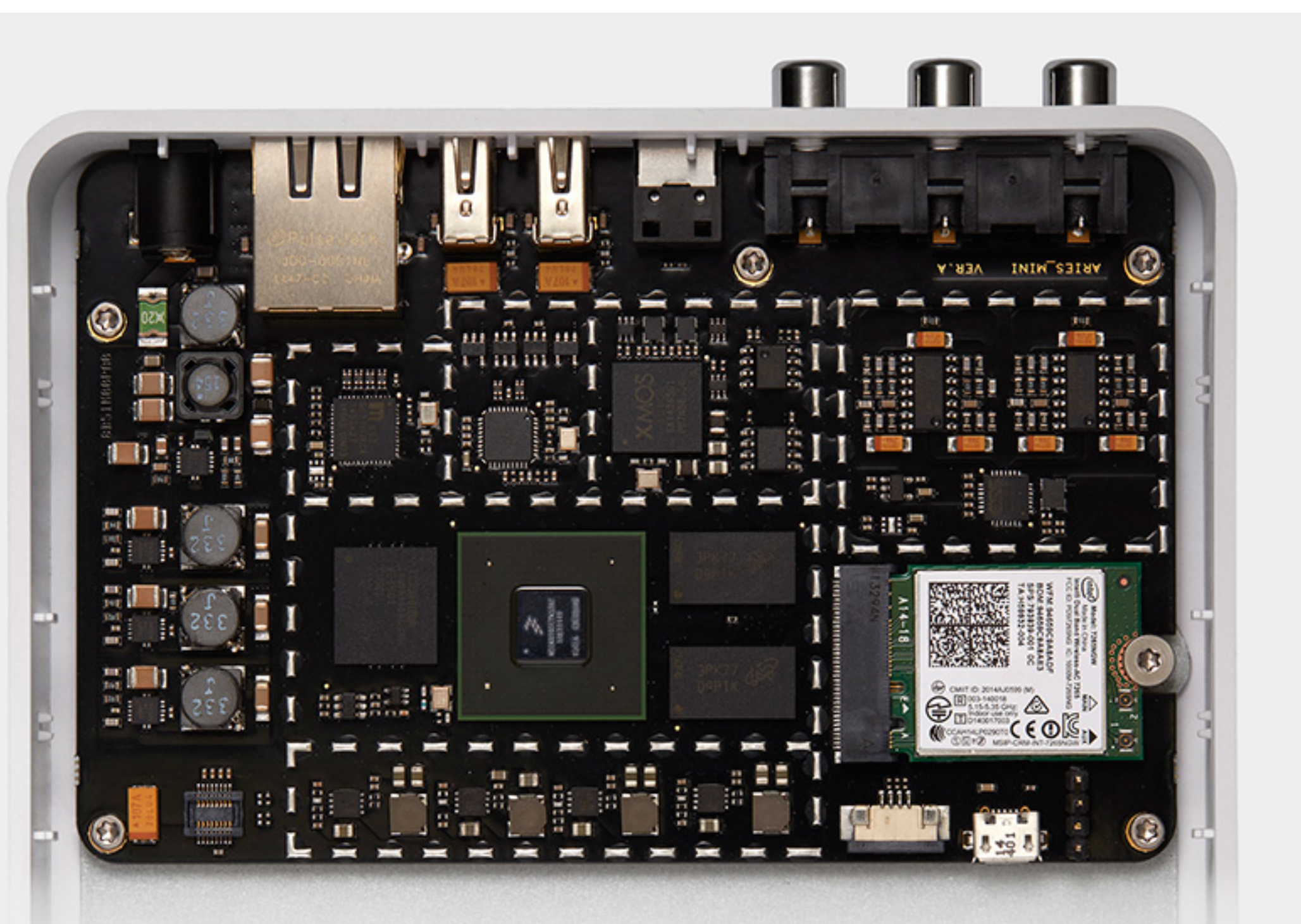◀◀ ▶ ▶▶   🔊 ──────────── 100 ☰

The Aries Mini will only let you see one library at a time, which won't be a problem in most instances and being able to have that library on a drive within the player means access is very quick. At the time of writing Toshiba HDD 1TB drives are just over £60 whereas Samsung SSD drives cost £150 for 500MB or £290 for a terabyte, Auralic recommends SSDs as do many in the streaming business. Alternatively the Mini can access a NAS or USB drive if you have your music stored that way. With my 1.3TB of music on a Melco N1A server it took the Aries quite some time to import all the metadata, no more than 10 minutes, but long enough to wonder if it was happy to be doing so. But you only have to do this once

The Aries Mini review sample was signed up to Qobuz so I played quite a bit of music from the French streaming service, the Roon like access experience is good, allowing you to search both your own library and that on Qobuz together. It doesn't sound as good as locally stored material but is more than adequate to establish whether something is worth investing in. Listening in anger started out with a USB connection to a Primare DAC30 and thence a Naim NAP300 DR power amp driving PMC Fact.8 speakers. The combination delivering masses of reverberation from the Lumen Drones self titled debut on ECM, this sounded crisp and shimmery and made a good fist of the power and tone available from the guitar, drums and Hardanger fiddle being played. The onboard DAC is not as focussed and has softer edges but that makes it easy to live with and forgiving of less pristine recordings. The sense of musical flow is always well preserved and it's easy to get absorbed in the music, in fact the balance is such that you can forget about the technology and be carried away with the tunes with little difficulty.

I tried the four filter settings on the internal DAC; Precise, Dynamic, Balance and Smooth. These all had subtle but distinct effects that largely reflect their names, with Precise being the best with most of the music I tried, some however might prefer the relaxed demeanour of Smooth. Nice! Using Precise via PMC twenty5.23 floorstanders made for a taught if small scale version of Talking Heads 'Crosseyed and Painless' (*Remain in Light*), with the groove dominating proceedings in appealing fashion. Orchestral music revealed that musical flow is its strong point, the internal DAC has limited high frequency openness but that doesn't stop its output being highly enjoyable. And with a Cyrus One amp in place it proved a perfect tonal foil to the tight, lean sound that's typical of that brand.

Adding the linear power supply provides a very clear upgrade even when the Mini is connected to an external DAC, opening up the soundstage and letting in the daylight. Removing a switched-mode power supply from anything in a system will improve sound quality across the board, which is why it's important to try and eliminate them from the home in general. And the Aries example is no different, high frequencies are the main beneficiary, they sound cleaner and more extended with the bigger supply, which does wonders for imaging.

All in all the Aries Mini is a fine device that's blessed with an attractive and largely intuitive control app. Its analogue outputs deliver a musical and engaging sound but the digital outputs have the potential to compete with streamers at twice the price. I'd say that the linear power supply is critical to this result however and it does bump up the price, but it remains competitive all the same. This product therefore works on two levels, as a simple and compact streaming source for casual listening or as a serious digital source in the main system. To get all this in a pocket size device at under £500 is pretty impressive, so put the laptop away and find out how good music streaming can be.

SPECIFICATIONS:

Streaming Services: Local uPnP/DLNA library content, TIDAL, Qobuz and WiMP online streaming, Internet Radio, AirPlay, Songcast and Bluetooth, USB hard drive files
Optional internal HDD/SSD
Supported File Types: AAC, AIFF, ALAC, APE, DIFF, DSF, FLAC, MP3, OGG, WAV, WV and WMA
Sampling Rates: PCM in 44.1Khz - 384Khz at 16 - 32bits, DSD64, DSD128, DSD256
Control Software: AURALiC Lightning DS, OpenHome compatible software
Media Server Compatibility: Built-in Lightning Server, Minimserver, Twonky, Asset UPnP, JRiver
DLNA/uPNP compatible server software
Inputs: RJ45 Gigabit Ethernet, Dual-Band WiFi, USB 2.0 for external disk
Digital outputs: USB 2.0, coaxial, Toslink
Power Consumption Playback: 10W at max.
Dimensions Approx WxDxH: 13.5cm x 13.5cm x 2.8cm
Weight: 0.5kg

PRICE: £449
          linear PSU £249

MANUFACTURER DETAILS:

Auralic
www.auralic.com