



Auratic Aries G2
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network streamer
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The Auratic Aries started out as a compact network streamer in a curvy plastic case, it looked cool and sounded even better eventually spawning an alternate LE version with a lesser clock and basic power supply and a [Mini](#) with onboard DAC. Last year the company launched a flagship Aries G2 with a fancy milled case and the very best parts and tech that the company could muster. There is also now a G1 Aries at a lower price (1,899) that effectively takes over from the original albeit in a case that matches the G2 in appearance if not construction.

Unlike the [Vega G2](#) that we reviewed earlier in the year the Aries does not have a DAC or preamplifier onboard, it is purely a streamer that 'pulls' data from a server or NAS drive and turns it into a bitstream that any DAC can convert. It is therefore a pretty dedicated piece of kit and given that many high end servers incorporate their own digital outputs it might seem a mystery as to why you'd want another box in the signal chain. The only critical reason would be that it produces better sound, a better control system might be nice but it wouldn't be reason enough to spend this sort of money. And why would adding another processor to the chain improve matters? In the analogue world fewer boxes means cleaner sound, right? Inconveniently in the digital world it's not that simple, while a signal is in digital form you can do all sorts of things to it without theoretically losing anything. What you want with a digital signal is minimal corruption and maximum data retrieval, despite what the bits are bits brigade might say digital signals are remarkably easy to screw up, that's why it has taken so long to produce digital sources that rival the best analogue options. And arguably there is still some way to go. But streamers like the Aries G2 are getting us closer, that I can guarantee.



But back to the hardware which is very nice indeed (even if you can't see the buttons in a dimly lit room). Auralic have gone all out with the so-called Unity chassis, milled from a single piece of aluminium on all but the base it provides maximum rigidity and shielding from noise, and sits on sprung feet in order to filter out vibration. On the back panel all the usual digital output connections are available with electrical SPDIF on a coax rather than BNC connector, there is a second USB connector for an external hard drive and a Lightning Link socket for combining Auralic components intelligently. Network connection can be made via an RJ45 ethernet port or the two WiFi antenna, for the purposes of this review we used a direct ethernet link between the Aries G2 and an Innuos Zenith SE server.

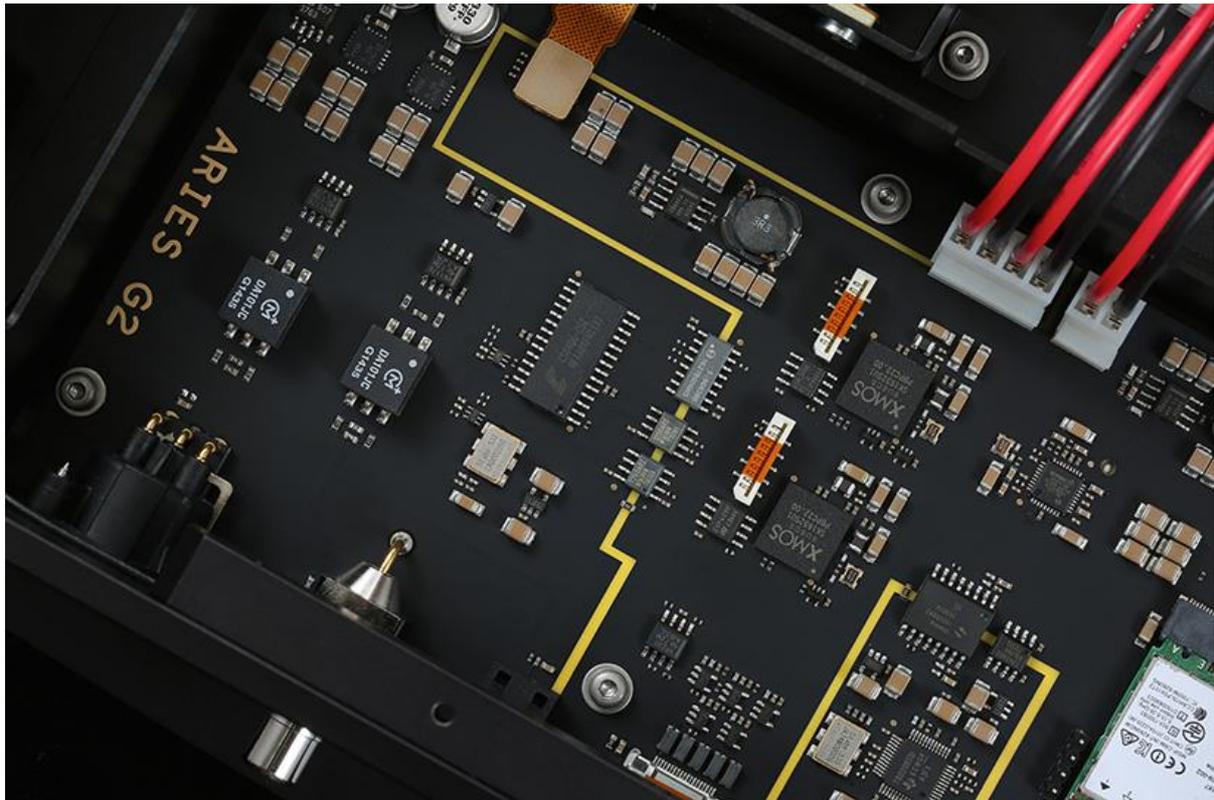
The feature set on Auralic streamers is enhanced by the company's Lightning DS control application, this attractively designed interface has Apple like clarity and offers access to both Tidal and Qobuz streaming services alongside internet radio and both Apple Music and Spotify (premium). The G2 is Roon ready and can hook up to Airplay devices but does not have Bluetooth capability nor is it fully supportive of MQA (it does the first unfold only), but neither of these is an issue from a sound quality POV. I used to have difficulties with Lightning DS using a 2011 iPad Mini but upgrading the tablet to a current model cured them overnight, the app will only run on iOS devices so this is a consideration.



Unusually for a high end streamer the Aries G2 has onboard storage capability, you need to add your own drive to do this but it does mean it can be run with no external server or NAS. Our sample was supplied with a small SSD drive onboard that's run by Auralic's Lightning server software. The latter proved useful in another way too, in most instances you use Lightning DS (the app) to choose a music library (on a server, NAS, USB drive) which it then scans and lists the contents for easy access. With the Zenith SE it was necessary to go through a couple of extra screens in the app in order to have Lightning server scan the library instead. It's a more complicated procedure but it's actually the way the Auralic recommends you do it. Less straightforward in some respects is comparing the sound of the onboard SSD with the Zenith SE because you can't tell which library a specific album is stored in. I eventually figured out that if you search by 'last import date' it was possible to tell which library was being used. This comparison favoured the Zenith SE because it had a more realistic, better timed sound, but it was pretty close which is a good result given that the Zenith costs more than the Aries G2 and is one of the best in in class.



The question of why you need a streamer if your server has its own digital output was the second thing I looked into, and it didn't take long to answer. I contrasted the USB output of the Zenith SE with that of the same server via the Aries G2 and the difference was dramatic. Fundamentally it gives you more of the music signal, the Zenith SE sounds pretty damn good on its own but put it through the G2 and you get much lower noise which allows loads more fine detail to come through. Reverb, harmonics, minutiae it's all there in the signal but it takes an extremely well shielded processor where attention has been paid to noise suppression to let it through. I asked Auralic CEO Xuanqian Wang to explain how it does this and he put it down to a number of factors including galvanic isolation, dual linear power supplies, the Unity chassis' ability to block EMI and what he calls "weight balance design" which is summed up as the reduction of noise and vibration in the circuit. As I discovered with the Zenith SE noise is the enemy of digital audio and this product reinforces that finding quite clearly. Quite how this improves timing is not so obvious but that is also the case, again it must come down to less noise means more signal.



Revelation

In practise the Aries G2 means you get to hear more of the music, a lot more of the music than most streamers. I used it with two DACs, a Chord DAVE and an Aqua La Scala II as well as Kii3 active DSP loudspeakers. All three made it clear that this is an extremely good streamer but the latter was the most explicit of all and the combination delivered a remarkable result. The transparency of the system revealed that putting the G2 between server and speaker/DAC dropped the audible distortion by a significant factor and focused all the energy on the music.



I also tried different servers to see if the Aries G2's qualities would mitigate differences between them. In short it does not, this is essentially a very transparent streamer, it may improve the output of the source but it can't make a good one sound as good as a great one. So you still need the best source of data if you want to attain digital audio nirvana. Usefully it will remember multiple libraries without having to re-scan them which makes the comparison much easier. One thing that surprised me was that the Zenith SE was better in the bass than the alternatives I had to hand, one of which was more expensive. I could go on about how it brought out the nuances, subtlety and musicality of many tracks with all manner of ancillaries, I couldn't stop using the G2 when reviewing other kit, but will limit it to the fact that this streamer is the best I have had the pleasure of using and it will be a real wrench when it goes away. It has delivered truly inspiring and transcendent music with everything from Laurie Anderson to Frank Zappa and makes it abundantly clear what's going on in all the music you play, so long as the rest of the system is capable of letting that through. In other words you need a good system to hear what it can do, which means a DAC of similar price and amplification and speakers of the same calibre. The Auralic Aries G2 is for the moment my benchmark for what a streamer can do, I hope to find something to beat it but will not be holding my breath until that happens.

Specifications:

Type: network streamer with optional onboard storage

Streaming Inputs: uPnP/DLNA via RJ45 Gigabit Ethernet, 802.11b/g/n/ac Tri-Band WiFi

Music services: TIDAL, Qobuz, internet radio, AirPlay, Songcast

Room ready: yes

Digital outputs: AES/EBU, Coaxial, Toslink, USB B, Lightning Link,

Supported File Formats:

Lossless: AIFF, ALAC, APE, DIFF, DSF, FLAC, OGG, WAV and WV

Lossy: AAC, MP3, MQA and WMA

Supported Digital Formats: PCM from 44.1kHz to 384kHz in 32Bit, DSD64, DSD128, DSD256, DSD512

Control Software: Lightning DS for iOS, OpenHome compatible, UPnP compatible control software

Dimensions WxHxD: 340 x 80 x 320mm

Weight: 7.8kg

Price:

£3,899

Manufacturer Details:

Auralic

www.auralic.com