

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Aries G2

ORIGIN
Netherlands/China

TYPE
Network streaming transport

WEIGHT
7.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 80 x 320mm

FEATURES

- Digital outputs: 1x Lightning Link; 1x USB-A; 1x AES; 1x coaxial; 1x optical
- AirPlay; aptX Bluetooth wireless
- Tidal and Qobuz music streaming services; internet radio
- Internal bay for add-on HDD

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic

WEBSITE
auralic.com



Sign of the times

The Aries G2 represents Auralic throwing the kitchen sink at networked audio. **Ed Selley** looks into the future of music streaming in this exclusive review

Network audio has become a big part of our hi-fi listening habit as more of us get more comfortable with the prospect of streaming music from pay services like Tidal and Qobuz or from a networked server containing a music library at home. It's an area that's seen considerable expansion in the last decade, but is still pretty much dominated by a few familiar names.

For any company to make inroads into this sector, it needs to have a front end that goes the extra mile at a competitive price. Auralic has been impressive in this regard and first began to carve itself a reputation for well thought-out and capable products at competitive price points with the likes of its Aries Mini music streamer (HFC 425) and the Altair

DAC/preamp with music streaming (HFC 428). The Aries G2 on test here might best be seen as phase two of the company's plan, and is the first of its new G2 Series of components (see boxout). It's also a little unusual in that it is a streaming transport that's dependent on users adding an external

The Lightning DS app leaves most rivals standing in terms of its responsiveness

DAC to route music from it to a hi-fi system. Historically, this hasn't always been the most suitable approach for DSD music files, as the selection of digital connections will struggle to transmit this to an external converter.

Happily, Auralic has ensured that there are two connection options to overcome any such issues. The first is via a USB-A port that works in a driverless configuration and over the course of my time with the Aries G2, it works seamlessly with any DAC I try. The other option is all new and entirely bespoke. The Aries G2 is fitted with Lightning Link, which is a bi-directional 18Gbps digital hookup that uses an HDMI connection rather than anything proprietary. What this means in terrestrial terms is that the add-on G2 components – Vega, Sirius and Leo – have the means to handle all sorts of extraordinary hi-res files and also to lock the components together and suppress jitter – a standard criticism of the two-box approach. For those music streaming fans that aren't quite on the bleeding

CONNECTIONS



edge of technology, the Aries G2 is also fitted with AES/EBU, coaxial and Toslink digital outputs that cater for transmission of PCM files at up to 24-bit/192kHz.

These legacy connections access the company's Tesla streaming platform that is capable of handling files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512. These files can be accessed over wired and wireless network connections (although Auralic suggests that if you are looking to use the larger file types, you should go for a wired setup), but there is an interesting addition to the G2's spec in the form of an internal bay for a 2.5in hard drive. This allows the Aries to become a self-contained server. You can additionally attach a hard drive externally via a dedicated USB connection if the idea of rooting around inside your shiny new streamer doesn't appeal.

New look

Externally, the Aries G2 is all new. The case is built to a three-quarter-width size and has a new industrial design. It's clean and ultra-modern, but not entirely free of foibles. Auralic has dispensed with the rotary push dial control that is used by the Altair and instead substituted four fixed buttons. These are beautifully recessed into the front panel, but are so dark they are almost invisible even in a well-lit room and the legends are impossible to discern. These are partnered with a 3.97in colour display that shows album art, track title, time and play/pause – but not album title or sample rate – for the file being streamed. The top plate extends over the rear inputs making it look extremely neat, but connecting cables into the socketry and ports from above is harder than it need be. The fit and finish is extremely good, though, and the Aries G2 has the presence and sense of quality that fits with the relatively high asking price. Auralic's Lightning DS control app is another priceless advantage that the



An elegant and modern design in a three-quarter-width chassis

Aries G2 has over its rivals. This is unchanged from the version that we've seen on previous components, but this really doesn't matter. By rendering the library on the control device, Lightning leaves most rival control apps standing in terms of its speed and responsiveness to accessing music files. Its unfussy playback options (there's no need to queue material, for example) and the integration of Tidal and Qobuz streaming services is extremely good. The only downside is that it is only available for iOS, but if this is the price of such a good piece of software, it's an acceptable trade-off.

Setup is simple enough. A wired connection requires no work at all and the wireless setup is logical and easy to follow. The USB output is also entirely straightforward. I find the most reliable method is to make the connection and then turn the DAC on first. The Aries G2 works happily with

The display shows album art, track title, time and play/pause



a Chord Electronics Hugo 2 (HFC 428) and an Oppo Sonica DAC connected in this way and proves entirely stable and shows the identity of the DAC it's connected to via its USB port on the control app's screen.

Sound quality

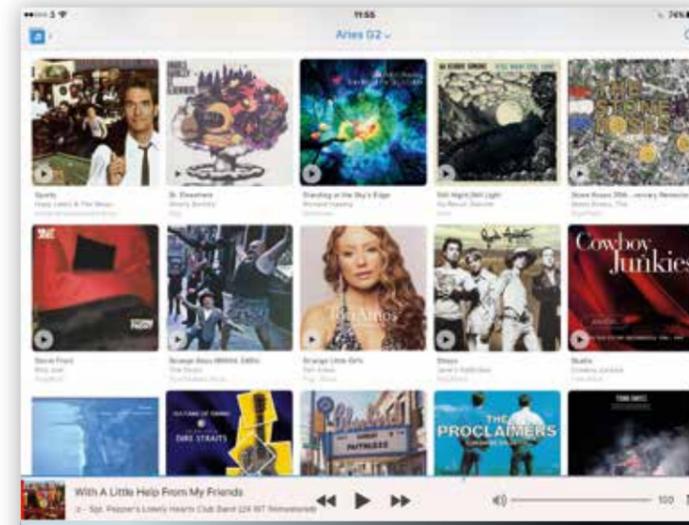
As the Aries G2 is fundamentally a transport rather than a complete playback device, its performance is shaped by the DAC that you choose to connect it to, but within that statement are some caveats that largely come out in favour of the Auralic. The first is that across the three devices I use for listening – the aforementioned Hugo 2 for USB, a Naim ND5 XS (HFC 352) via optical and a venerable Audio Note DAC 1.1 on the coaxial input – the connections are all silent and extremely stable, with no clicks and pops or interruptions to playback. The gapless playback mode works perfectly on every format I have at my disposal.

The Auralic gives the best possible start for your decoding device and the performance it offers with the Hugo 2

The character of the performance is largely defined by the partnering DAC

playing a 24/88.2 download of Lynryd Skynyrd's *I Need You* is very impressive. The music rises from an utterly silent background and there is an almost analogue warmth to Ronnie Van Zant's vocals. There is a huge amount of sophistication present in the mechanics of both of these devices, but the manner in which it is deployed is so beautifully seamless in its execution that it never so much as snags the attention, letting you focus on the music instead. DSD is also transferred without issue and the DSD64 download of Depeche Mode's *Clean* is relayed with real potency and depth.

The character of the performance is largely defined by the DAC and changing to the more forceful and tonally darker Naim ND5 XS shows this to good effect. The muscularity of the Naim with a 24/48 download of Yossou N'Dour and Peter Gabriel performing *In Your Eyes* is very apparent. There is an effortlessly deep and controlled bass that underpins this sizeable stadium recording and greatly aids the general sense of believability. The Naim's innate rhythmic ability is also completely unaffected by receiving the signal



CLOCKING ON

The Aries G2 is the first member of the four-strong G2 Series that can be combined in various arrangements depending on your requirements. Its most logical partner is the Vega G2 DAC (£5,499). This has matching Lightning Link input to lock both devices together for best results. The Vega G2 is capable of decoding anything the Aries G2 can send to it and has a selection of digital filters to adjust the sound. Confusingly, the Vega G2 also has streaming hardware built in so it doesn't need to be partnered with the Aries G2 to work as a network streamer.

Coming later in 2018, the other two members of the series are more specialised, but also more technically interesting. The Sirius G2 is an upsampling processor that can also apply room correction to a signal in the digital domain. The Leo G2 is an external word clock designed to sync up other devices connected via the Lightning Link. Auralic claims with the Leo G2 in place, the combinations offer best-in-class jitter and close in-phase performance. All components are built in the same casework that will make for an elegant and serious-looking stack.

from the Aries G2, which suggests that while Auralic might have some very clever jitter reduction technology in the pipeline, the performance of the unit is already very good.

Of course, you can go completely in the other direction and select something like the Audio Note – which is radically different in its presentation – and the results are no less impressive. A 16/44.1 rip of Martha Tilston's *Stags Bellow* is sublime. Her unique tone and singing style is presented with startling clarity and there is an immediacy and sheer realism to the performance that draws you into the music in a way that the more sophisticated DACs can sometimes struggle to achieve. The Audio Note shows up an unusual feature of the Auralic that is very useful in these circumstances. If you enter the IP address of the Aries G2 into a computer on the same network, you can limit the maximum sample rate to a fixed value that the DAC can handle – in this case 44.1kHz. Material at higher sample rates will be down sampled to work at this rate and it means that your whole library can be listened to even if the DAC can't normally handle some of the files it contains. It is attention to detail like this that marks the Auralic

out as a seriously impressive streaming transport.

Conclusion

What the Aries G2 does is take every aspect of network audio that the brand has been perfecting with its previous products and places all of its know-how into a seriously accomplished piece of hardware. The high price for what is in effect half a streamer won't appeal to everyone, but as the basis for an ultra-high performance and flexible and easy to use network audio front end, the Aries G2 really does need to be on any worthwhile audition list ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Capable and stable streaming platform; build and spec

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Front panel user interface takes some getting used to

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A seriously accomplished streaming front end with outstanding capabilities

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



An interesting comparison is the £1,699 Simaudio Moon Néo MiND (HFC 428). The Auralic is much more expensive, but does a better job of handling the limitations of streaming transports. By fitting it with the Lightning Link and the adaptive USB port, the Aries G2 can handle formats that the Néo MiND can't and is competitive with one-box units in this regard. The other area where the Auralic has the advantage is with control apps. Simaudio's MiND app is stable and easy to use, but the queue function is irritating and doesn't feel anything like as fast or intuitive as the Lightning DS app. The price difference between the two is considerable, but you can at least see where the extra cost of the Aries G2 has gone.

Q&A

Richard Bates

UK & EU sales & marketing manager, Auralic Europe



ES: What is the thinking behind creating a streaming transport for this range?

RB: The Aries wireless streaming bridge has been our most successful model and has gained worldwide acclaim. We launched the product in 2014, incorporating the very latest technology at the time. Over the last three years we've been striving for even greater levels of performance and improved sound quality. The new Aries G2 represents the highest levels of technology and sound quality performance in an elegant, distinctive design.

Is there a performance advantage to using an internal drive over a conventional NAS?

We believe the sound quality of an internal drive or network-attached drive should be very similar on Aries G2. However, the convenience element to using an internal drive means there is less reliance on network performance, and may give a better experience when playing very high-resolution audio.

Is the Lightning Link likely to appear on other Auralic products?

Yes, our proprietary Lightning Link interface will be used for two additional components to the G2 product range: Leo G2 (reference master clock) and the Sirius G2 (upsampling processor). We may consider introducing this interface on other products in the future.

What's can we expect from Auralic in the coming year?

The G2 series is a new product line we are launching, encompassing our very latest technologies and industrial design. There will be further product developments in 2018 at different price points. Our goal is to offer both affordable and reference-grade electronics.