

AURALiC ALTAIR G1 Digital Audio Streamer

by Alan Sircom



Heading into and out of the Great Lockdown of 2020, we all need music in the home, and thus need a music source that is at once good sounding, reliable, easy to navigate and operate, and in particular 'installer friendly'. At a time when we are still reluctant to let anyone into our homes and listening rooms, a product that requires some 'heavy lifting' – be it physical, mental or even financial – is hard to justify. Which is why it's perhaps no surprise that the ALTAIR G1 by AURALiC is very much in demand.

Lets unpick the above because I suspect it may come to define audio long after the current 'unpleasantness.' The ALTAIR G1 is an elegant, 'just add amplifier' all-in-one digital solution. Weighing in at a shade under 7kg, it's not going to task most people when it comes to hauling it onto a shelf. Having a set of understandable connections (for a product in 2020) and using AURALiC's now rock-solid Lightning app for both set-up and use, getting it to make sound is comparatively

unthreatening (as in 'not as plug-and-play as a CD player, but doesn't require an engineering degree to make it go') and the price isn't in the heart-stopping camp. For the appreciable future, I believe it's products like the ALTAIR G1 – as distinct from a product that weighs as much as a planet, is more complex to understand than a course in celestial mechanics, and costs the earth – that will set the standards for tomorrow's hi-fi components.

In terms of what's inside that G1 chassis, the ALTAIR is almost like a 'greatest hits' of AURALiC. It's sort of what happens when the ARIES and VEGA platforms drink a little wine and listen to some Barry White tracks, and its blood-line includes more than a little bit of G2 as well as G1. Granted it's in a G1 series pressed-aluminium instead of the 'forged by the dwarf lords of Moria' clamshell of the G2, but the internal organs of the ALTAIR G1 are impressive given its the cheapest entry into the full AURALiC streaming platform and DAC solutions. ▶

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▶ The hardware platform inside that case is AURALiC's proprietary Tesla G2 system with 1GB of RAM acting as a cache. Given that means the ALTAIR G1 could buffer an entire CD and still have room for more, this is both impressive and useful for streaming sources. Those streaming sources include Tidal and Qobuz and the new addition; the high-res service HRA, and it supports to 32-bit, 384kHz PCM, 512DSD, and MQA (although not pure Masters Quality). It also allows the user to upsample CD-quality tracks to high-resolution sampling rates should you choose. It's also a Roon endpoint.

The rest of the building blocks are impressive, too. It includes the company's own Purer-Power linear power supply and includes dual Femtosecond clocks. Its Ethernet connection is robust enough to work well with WiFi even if it's best with wired connections. It can be used with optional internal storage (there's an optional £100 SSD mounting kit, which is well worth considering), external USB storage, or a UPnP music server on the network. It can be used as a preamplifier in its own right (with both balanced and single-ended outputs) and as a component in an existing system. It also includes a very tasty headphone amplifier in its own right, outputting to a 6.35mm stereo jack. Sadly, balanced headphone output isn't on the menu. Lastly in terms of features, in the DAC section, there are four options for setting the digital output to your preferences. They are called 'Dynamic', 'Precise', 'Smooth' and 'Balance'. Couple that with the sampling options and you can fine tune this to any system.

In terms of system then, I used this in a system that I felt matched its context, connecting it (via the Synergistic Research Foundation cables reviewed in this issue) to a Mark Levinson 5805 (reviewed in issue 176) and a full-spec Primare I35 for an upcoming review, in both cases outputting to a pair of Audiovector R1 Arreté stand-mounts (also reviewed in issue 176). The equipment sat on Quadraspire equipment tables with no tweaks, pods or platforms; again reflecting the system context a product of the ALTAIR G1's magnitude.

The images here and on the front cover are very much on a Kraftwerk tip. That's not a bad reflection on what the AURALiC ALTAIR G1 does so well sonically. It absolutely knocks that tight, fast, leading-edge driven percussive sound out of the park. It's fast-paced, upbeat, energetic (without being frenetic), and starts and stops in a heartbeat. And with the combination of a rewarding sound and the recent passing of Florian Schneider of Kraftwerk, it's hard not to delve deep into Kling-Klang studio's past masterpieces out of respect.

Of course, if all the ALTAIR G1 did was leading-edge detail, you'd quickly tire of its performance. Fortunately, it has the sustain, decay, and release parts of the waveform well suited too. And if you set aside voltage-controlled oscillators for strings and soundboards, the ALTAIR G1 is there for you too. It's pretty much the sound of the full AURALiC stack with just some of the detail and soundstaging precision sanded down. The depth, articulation and even that remarkable ability to set out the layers in a soundstage of the big hitters are ▶

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- ▶ almost completely unattenuated, though. Play something dense and complicated – whatever the genre – and the ALTAIR G1 portrays it cohesively, and with good bass depth and texture. And tone and articulation are outstanding, even on female vocals like those of Joyce DiDonato. I’d cite further musical references, but I’ve run out of space!

A key element in the ALTAIR G1 is its CD-drive chumminess. Plug a USB CD drive into the ALTAIR G1 and it will act as a high-quality CD player, or rip to a hard drive. This is not as eccentric as it first seems; I have a number of CDs from the days when I was a major investor in polycarbonate and not all of them are likely to be played enough to justify ripping, while others might be compilations where many of the tracks are best left on the disc. In doing this, I used the excellent Melco D100 optical disc drive, but you could just as easily hook up Astell&Kern’s own CD Ripper Mk II or any one of the affordable USB CD drives designed for the computer market.

There’s not a lot to dislike here. AURALiC uses its standard G1 case, which doesn’t have the same ‘hewn from solid’ appeal of the more expensive G2 casework, but given that would add substantially to the price and the G1 case is still very sturdy by audio standards, that’s not too big a problem. More importantly, Lightning is an iOS app and, while Android users can use any OpenHome app (Bubble and Kazoo being popular options) as a replacement, I feel you miss out on the full AURALiC experience (in particular interface and access speed). Roon does even the score however. The ALTAIR/Android partnership isn’t so hobbled that the answer is ‘buy an iPad’, but the ALTAIR/Apple pairing is one heck of a bromance. At the same time, desktop users are limited to set-up only... but I’m not as concerned by that: the ALTAIR G1 is designed to end the need for a laptop or desktop computer in the audio system, so if the computer’s last act is to set up its replacement... so be it!

There isn’t a ‘game changer’ at the moment because so many aspects of the game of hi-fi are taking a bit of a rest right now. But I feel strongly that the nearest we get to a game changer is the AURALiC ALTAIR G1. Sure, it’s a more modest proposal next to the digital big guns (including the big guns from AURALiC itself), but I can’t help but feel it’s the right

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Digital Streamer

Frequency Response: 20Hz–20kHz ±0.1 dB

THD+N:< 0.0002% (XLR); < 0.0003% (RCA),
20Hz–20kHz at 0dBFS

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

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

Sampling Rate: PCM:44.1kHz to 384kHz in 32Bit
DSD:DSD64(2.8224MHz), DSD128(5.6448MHz),
DSD256(11.2896MHz), DSD512(22.5792MHz)

Control Software: AURALiC Lightning DS for iOS
AURALiC Lightning DS for web browser (device setting only). OpenHome compatible control software (BubbleUPnP, Kazoo). Roon (Roon Core required separately)

Audio Inputs: Digital Inputs: AES/EBU, Coaxial, Toslink, USB Audio. Streaming Inputs:Network shared folder, USB Drive, Optional Internal Storage, UPnP/DLNA Media Server, native TIDAL and Qobuz Sublime+ streaming, Internet Radio, AirPlay, Bluetooth, Songcast, RoonReady

Audio Outputs:

Balanced: XLR (4.5Vrms at 0dBFS, output impedance 10ohm). **Unbalanced:** RCA (4.5Vrms at 0dBFS, output impedance 50ohm). **Headphone:** 6.35mm Headphone Jack (output impedance 5ohm)

Network connections:

Wired: Gigabit Ethernet. **Wireless:** 802.11b/g/n/ac Tri-Band WiFi

Dimensions (WxDxH):34 × 32 × 8cm

Weight: 6.8kg

PRICE: £1,999

Manufacturer: AURALiC LIMITED

UK Distributor: AURALiC Europe

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proposal for the job right now. Best of all, that ‘more modest proposal’ makes few concessions to performance in absolute terms. It’s easy to set-up, easy to use, fun to listen to, and is priced to appeal to a wider audio enthusiast base than many of its contemporaries. In the audio world of 2020 and beyond, it makes all the right noises and ticks all the right boxes. +