

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Auratic Altair G1

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I reviewed an Auratic Altair back in May 2017 but that was a rather different beast to the Altair G1 you see on this page. Auratic's early products were a bit piecemeal when it came to casework with the small curvy Aries looking totally different to the larger but still compact Altair. With the G1 and G2 ranges Auratic has made its life easier and created a distinctive aesthetic that means their products are easy to spot. The difference between the two ranges in casework terms is that the G1 models are fabricated from plates of aluminium whereas the G2 models have solid, hewn from billet boxes for extra rigidity.

The Altair G1 is the most affordable one box streamer and DAC that Auratic now makes, it sits at the same £1,898 price point as the Aries G1 which is a streamer/bridge requiring an external DAC and has a front panel knob that can be used to select functions and control volume. The Altair also works as a digital preamplifier with four inputs alongside the ethernet connection for streaming purposes, those digital inputs include USB which is an unusual feature on a product like this because it provides most of the functions that a USB source can. However, if your streaming platform tastes run to the likes of Soundcloud, Amazon HD or even free Spotify then you'll need a PC to access them which makes this input potentially very useful. Having said that you can of course stream these via Airplay or Bluetooth on most network streamers. USB is a universal input on DACs but very scarce on streamers and thus a clever move by Auratic.

The specs are strong on this streamer, it can for instance be supplied with a 2TB SSD (there is no specific capacity limitation – only your wallet) drive onboard and act as a server with the excellent Lightning DS software, you can use Roon to control it (with an external core) or use the Lightning app on your iPad or iPhone, there's still no support for Android though. Analogue output is available in single ended or balanced forms and there's a full bore headphone socket on the front, and if you don't want to run an ethernet cable it can be run on wifi. Onboard streaming services provided include Qobuz and Tidal and it naturally has access to net radio via the vTuner service. Spec spotters will note that it doesn't have MQA decoding capabilities which is relevant to some of the content on Tidal but not all that essential for musical enjoyment.

On the tech front there are dual femto clocks, a gigabyte of cache and alternative filter modes are provided alongside a linear power supply to keep noise at bay. The numbers are high when it comes to sample and bit rates accepted, these extend to 32/384 for PCM and DSD512 natively or via DoP, which are both near the top of the game. Wireless inputs run to Airplay, Bluetooth and the local network.

Setting up the Altair G1 by following the instructions in the Lightning app is slightly confused by the presence of a graphic that shows the previous Altair and not helped by the fact that that model had a remote control which was used in set up. I have some experience with Auralic set up so it wasn't a challenge but these are details that should be addressed.

Sound quality

Once set up the Altair worked as smoothly as you like, the Lightning app isn't perfect but very few are, that's mainly why Roon exists, and my situation is complicated by the fact that things don't sit still for long. Swapping pieces in and out of the system isn't what network audio was designed for, it's made for accessing and enjoying music and in this respect the Altair proved highly successful. It's one of those source components that does everything well, including the tricky things like timing. This it does very well compared to some of the competition, play a track like the Grateful Dead's 'Cumberland Blues' on it and it delivers all the instruments in well separated but totally coherent form. This track can throw some components, I've had two in recent times where it fell apart because the complexity of so many instruments ploughing slightly varying furrows makes it difficult to coalesce their output into a musical form. The Altair does it easily, delivering a truckin' drive and plenty of character from all the instruments and voices. Something made me want to play Robert Johnson's 'Hell Hound on my Trail', probably a blues documentary, so I looked it up on Tidal and found two versions. A rather sanitised one



from 1994 and a far more gritty, higher res version from 2015, the Auralic made the differences abundantly clear and proved that unlike vinyl the earlier versions do not always sound better, even if the original is properly ancient.

It does bass very nicely too, double bass having texture and muscle and lots of inner detail. I found a jazz version of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' (Robert Glasper) that had both life and teeth, thanks largely to the transparency of the streamer and original recording. There are more heavily featured streamers available at this price point but few that can compete with the resolution and coherence that the Altair offers. More important is that it makes you want to listen, the music it plays is engaging and involving which is inarguably the most important quality in a (an) audio replay source. If it doesn't do that then it might as well be a toaster. I used the 'smooth' filter setting which seems to suit my tastes and system well but there are other options if you drill down into the app, in fact there are a number of things you can change there if that appeals, including upsampling incoming signals to a specific amount depending on their origin. You can upsample 44.1 to 172.4 or take 96k up to 384k, being a purist I didn't try this but it's something to experiment with and many seem to prefer the sound of higher sample rates. If you want to go even deeper there is the option to tweak tonal balance with parametric EQ and adjust gain and output level, the latter being possibly the most useful for matching the Altair to a power amp.

Most of my listening was done with a preamp between it and the ATC P2 because I usually have an analogue source on the go, it worked well without it however, the volume control does introduce a bit of compromise especially with regard to openness but it doesn't undermine the entertainment factor. The Altair's sound is of course dependent on the source its streaming from, I used an Innuos Zenith SE for the most part and that is a very good server indeed. In the past I have contrasted an Auralic Aries G2 with onboard drive against the Innuos and got very close results, so the option to add a drive to the Altair is well worth considering. I note that you can purchase it with a kit that allows the installation of a drive of your choice, which makes this approach marginally more affordable.

As a DAC with an ATC CD2 player used as a transport and connected by coax cable it provides a more forward and dynamic result than the player alone, there's more emphasis on



the groove, the punch and drive in the music. This surprised me a little as it doesn't sound this way when used as a streamer, so this may well reflect the nature of the source and the coax connection, which is a bit of a compromise unless BNC connectors are used.

The Altair G1 provides a very similar feature set to the more pricey Vega G1 but with fewer fancy sound quality oriented parts, as a result it doesn't offer the same degree of finesse but the fundamental presentation is the same: an even handed balance with good tonal rendering, separation and strong timing. It is notably less characterful than certain alternatives which means that the music is coming before the hardware and while the feature set isn't as big as some it has everything you need to enjoy your music. More features rarely mean more musical enjoyment. The Altair G1 may be Auralic's most affordable streamer/DAC but it's at least as good as the competition up to and above two grand. Don't think of the Altair G1 as a cheap Auralic, think of it as a great value music streamer.

