

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Auralic Vega G2

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Last year Auralic introduced two new products that significantly upped the standard of build seen in their range up to that point. It's not that the standard Vega or Polaris aren't well executed and finished but rather that the G2 products are bigger, more substantial and have a form factor that fits in with high end components as a whole. That said the G2 Vega and Aries are still not full width devices, rather they have machined from solid aluminium cases that are as large as they need to be. The fact that they are so nicely made gives them the quality feel that you should expect at this price point, the fact that some other brands still offer basic steel cases with a thick fascia at this level is testament to the value offered by Auralic.

The Vega G2 is a DAC with a streamer built in, it has a four inch colour display that you navigate with the multifunction knob and a volume control that when combined with five digital and one analogue input makes it a preamplifier into the bargain. There are two headphone outputs on full size jacks and connections for Auralic's proprietary Lightning Link bus, used when combining G2 units. Two more G2s are due, the Sirius reference processor/upsampler with room correction and the Leo reference clock, so that link is pretty crucial.

The Vega G2 incorporates a 4GB buffer for incoming digital signals and runs a quad core processor at 1GHz that can be updated automatically via its Ethernet connection regardless of whether this is used for streaming music. With my sample arriving early this facility proved useful for ironing out the hiccups that streaming products in particular seem to be prone to, but by the time the new year came around everything was working as it should be. The actual DAC in the Vega G2 is a Sabre chipset customised for use without PLL (phase lock loop) so that it operates independently of the source frequency using dual femto clocks as a reference (one for 44.1kHz and up, one for 48kHz sample rates and multiples thereof). Which is a rare approach to clocking and quite possibly as unique as Auralic claim. The DAC can work with PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD512, which is not quite as high as the numbers go but more than high enough for real world music.

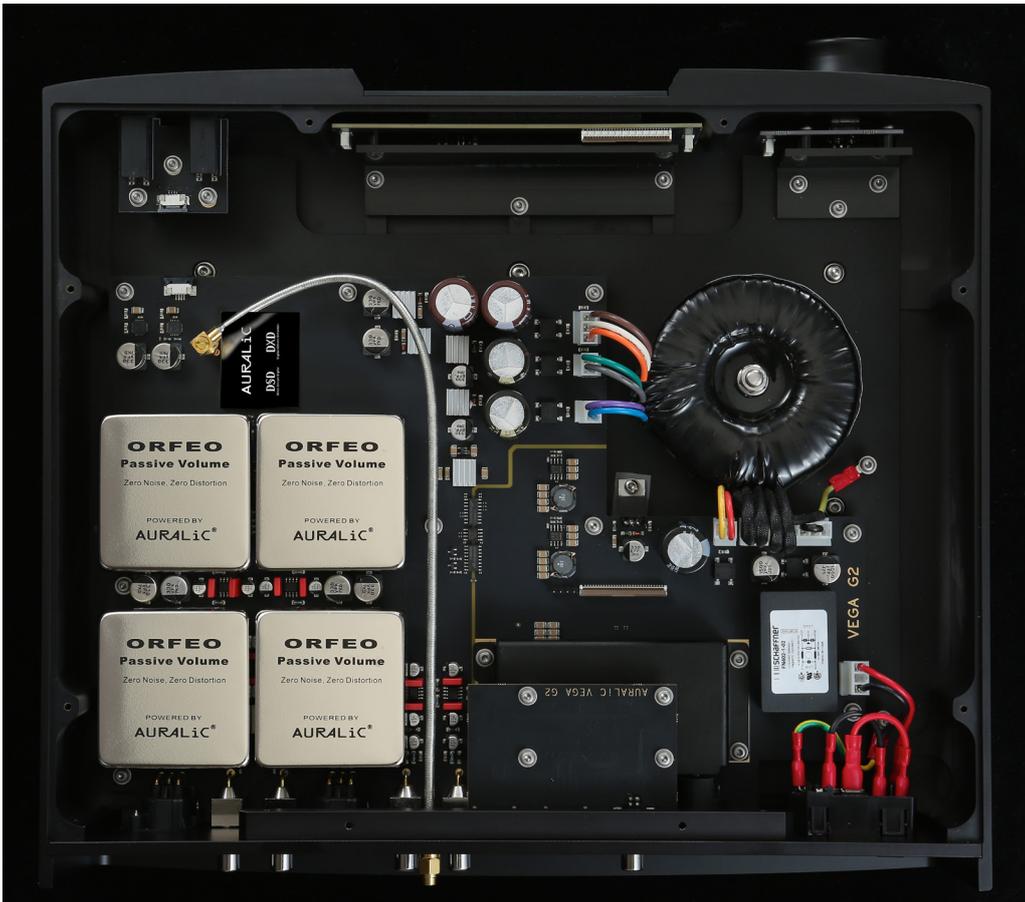
The volume control is a 256 step resistive ladder that is effectively passive once the level is set, so should you use this DAC with a separate preamplifier its max output is effectively the same as a fixed output. Level is indicated on the display using a scale that anyone understands; high numbers equal high level rather than the negative decibel system found in too much high end gear. Output is via a class A stage with single ended and balanced connections on the back of the box. This shapely chassis has sprung feet that are actually stiffer at the back to compensate for cable weight, they don't seem quite compliant enough to offer total isolation but are clearly a step in the right direction.

Being a streamer it provides access to online music services Qobuz and Tidal as well as being functional as a Roon endpoint, where you need Roon running on a local PC. It's not equipped to decode MQA in the conventional sense but offers upsampling at three levels which is designed to provide the same result. Control of the streaming side is via the attractive

if occasionally recalcitrant Lightning app, I couldn't persuade it to work with the Innuos Zenith SE server for instance, but it was happy with most other sources. Operationally it's possible to programme the Vega G2 to work with almost any IR handset and this can be useful for switching inputs but most of the time the control app is more useful as it also has a volume slider.

Sound quality

Most of my listening was done via the Townshend Allegri preamp with the Vega G2 at max output, the onboard preamp is good, better than most with decent openness and transparency but not as well timed. It does have decent bass weight though which is nice and with analogue sources the result reflects the quality of those sources well, you will need a decent standalone preamplifier to beat it.



As a streamer the Vega G2 is unusually revealing, it really let's you hear what the source is sending over especially when it comes to detail and texture. The balance is slightly on the exposed side so if you have a very revealing source and a slightly edgy recording it won't be smoothed over, this was apparent with a Bert Jansch album from the sixties and the Zenith SE server, it gave his playing so much attack and dynamic that there was a strong sense of being in the room with the man as he thrapped his steel string acoustic, but it could be a little edge of the seat for some tastes. However, the more polished the recording the smoother the result, so Samuel Yirga's piano and double bass had lovely weighty low end with shiny piano notes the sax that came in had beguiling tone. The wide dynamic range of the recording (*The Habasha Sessions*) making for a very compelling result.



With a Rotel RCD-1572 CD player as a digital source connected by coax cable the Auralic extracted significantly more subtlety and low level resolution than the player's onboard DAC. It's a relatively inexpensive player but the transport element is clearly quite capable, delivering spot on timing and much improved bass extension via the Vega G2. With a USB input the result is also very strong, with loads of fine detail and many of the characteristics noted above, however, as soon as you compare it with Ethernet it's hard to go back because this link offers



so much more resolution. It really feels like a doubling of data, the depth in particular dramatically increases and you can hear so much it's extraordinary. This result was in no small way enhanced by the source, my regular server good as it has always seemed, turned out to be the limiting factor to the Vega G2's potential. The server is after all the source so it's no wonder that a DAC won't be able to really shine unless this element is delivering the goods. Read the Zenith SE review to get a better idea about this but also note that I got more transparency and musical thrills with the Auralic than the three other streaming DACs I had to hand, one of which was a similar price and another more expensive.

Live recordings sounded especially magical, even the less spectacular ones have a vitality and presence that made them very hard to put down so strong is the sense of palpable reality once your eyes are shut. Ryan Adams and the Cardinals live version of 'Hallelujah' is a regular test track because it has so much scale and atmosphere, with the Auralic it was positively electric, with so much low level detail and immediacy that you could almost smell the excitement in the audience. I had a number of revelations using the Vega G2, the level of resolution they delivered was akin to a very good turntable albeit without the character of vinyl.

Towards the end of the review period I got hold of the matching Aries G2, the dedicated streamer in the range, connecting this up with the HDMI based Lightning Link showed that the Vega G2 is a better DAC than its onboard streamer reveals. The Aries G2 filled in the small gaps with fine detail, giving an even more analogue like result albeit with better bass than most analogue sources, and the bass was already pretty good. The slight exposure of the DAC/streamer's balance became more refined and relaxed once the strain of streaming was taken off its hands. That said the Vega G2 is very capable indeed on its own and provided me with many hours of spectacular music, the like of which I've rarely encountered with a digital source. Its performance is limited by the quality of signal you feed it but that will always be the way with streamers and converters. The Vega G2 is superbly built and capable of very high sound quality for the asking price, it has competition to be sure but not much of it combines such a broad feature set with such remarkable decoding abilities. I'll be impressed if anything comes along that can do much better for the money.