

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Auralic Vega G2.1

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When is a streamer not really a streamer, in Auralic's case that is when there is not Lightning DS operating system onboard. Auralic has been making the Aries which is purely a streamer with digital only outputs, and the Vega which is ostensibly a streamer with onboard DAC for some time now but the latter has never been happy to stream from the Innuos Zenith SE music server that I use as a source when using the Lightning controller. It will work if you use Roon, the Innuos has a Roon core, and is happy with Melco servers and probably other brands of UPnP server. The Vega's streamer is not as versatile as standalone units so it is first and foremost a DAC, and not just that it has volume controllable output and an analogue input, so it's a digital/analogue preamplifier to boot. In this product Auralic have gone for a passive volume control using a ladder network of resistors rather than the more conventional potentiometer approach.

The G2.1 is the latest and highest ranking Vega to date, unlike the G2 series models its chassis is not milled from a solid billet but takes a more sophisticated approach by putting a chassis inside a chassis. The chassis you see is in machined aluminium, the one beneath is copper which is renowned for its shielding capabilities and sometimes used for high sensitivity components within a case but rarely seen enclosing the whole circuit. It is not beloved of Japanese high end brands merely because they like the colour, but it is a nice colour so it's a pity you can't see it on the G2.1. Equally significant is the use of dual master clocks inside this DAC which re-clock the incoming signal for maximum precision and minimum noise. Digital re-clocking seems to be enjoying a resurgence at the moment, I've looked at two re-clockers in the last month, but this is the first time I've seen this in a DAC. It's a logical move and undoubtedly contributes to the remarkable results achieved.

Other changes for G2.1 include a new system designed to keep external vibration out of the box using sprung feet. This is a very encouraging move for those of us who have long held that real isolation (not spikes) can only be achieved with compliant support, and springs are one of the best ways to do this. I use Townshend Audio damped spring isolators under both my speakers and equipment racks and wouldn't change it for the world. Auralic's approach has been to use six springs in each foot with each spring tuned to a different frequency, this provides quite a stiff suspension but is a step in the right direction.

Internally Auralic has modified the USB input to make it more compatible with USB sources from third parties. Which presumably means that there were problems with this input on the G2 models although I never encountered them when reviewing the Vega G2. As far as inputs go the Vega G2.1 is fully loaded with all the usual options alongside an RJ45 for

streaming and Lightning Link for use with appropriately equipped Auralic sources. There are also links for the Leo GX1 external word clock via Lightning Link and an MCK socket. As mentioned there's also a single RCA pair of analogue inputs matched by analogue outputs in both RCA and XLR forms.



Sound quality

In practical terms this DAC is hampered by the absence of a remote control although you can select inputs and volume using the knob on the front panel, Auralic's solution is to provide a means to use any infrared remote handset and programme the Vega to work with it. Which is fine as far as basic functions like on/off, play/pause and maybe one or two input selections go but remembering which button relates to which input when the naming is quite different is a little challenging. The Lightning app provides volume and playback control when streaming but given the price point it would be nice to see a dedicated handset with this Vega.

I started out using the Vega G2.1 with a direct USB input from my Innuos Zenith SE server and got strong 3D imaging and good transparency to detail, I noted from the off that the output is very high and recommend that if you connect this directly to a power amp you start with it very low indeed. The output level can be reduced by 6 or 12dB however and this might be worth doing to deliver a wider usable volume range and thus smaller increments between the volume steps. The results with the source connected directly to the Vega were better than usually achieved with this approach, most DACs struggle to get a coherent sound which is why I generally put a streamer in between the two units. This was impressively rich and solid with decent space around the instruments and voices and powerful atmosphere on recordings that had it. One good example being Tom Waits' 9th and Hennepin (*Rain Dogs*) where "All the donuts have names that sound like prostitutes" and instruments groan in the background, rattling around like so much trash in the wind. His voice is fabulous too but the timing isn't what it should be. There are several filter options on the DAC, I usually go for the 'smooth' option on Auralic's but tried 'balanced' for a change which brought out more of the vivacity in recordings by



energising the mid and treble and adding a bit more edge definition. This increased the strength of imaging still further but didn't do anything for timing.

Switching over to the streamer input with a Melco N1A EX server moved things up another few steps, imaging, clarity and precision of detail all improved markedly and most importantly so did timing. Using this source meant I could use Auralic's Lightning control app rather than Roon which I was limited to when using the Innuos server, which is a better server, but the extra transparency that Lightning provided made this a better sounding approach. It was still not up there with what I expect of a G2 but getting closer so I did what I do with regular DACs and put an Aries G1 streamer in the chain, something that totally changed the result and turned the Vega G2.1 into a fabulous sounding piece of kit whose foibles were instantly forgotten. In this guise with a CAD USB cable to the streamer it is open, dynamic, fast and delivers a soundstage that reaches fore and aft and across the room width. Now its low noise, anti-vibration feet and all the many details that had been attended to combined to deliver one of the most joyous sounds I have had with digital for some time. It makes other DACs sound flat and lifeless, DACs that on their own don't seem all that limited, but clearly they are.



Krokofant's Nordic prog was totally bodacious and had me reaching for the air guitar and drums simultaneously, not easy. Shabaka Hutchings' version of Prints Tie makes musical sense in a way that digital rarely manages, being totally coherent and musically beguiling, attention being drawn to the tune and not the sound per se. Another track from the forthcoming *Blue Note Re:imagined* album, Jorja Smith's take on Rose Rouge sounds so much better than previous occasions that I wondered if my album review did it justice, even the densest parts make total musical sense rather than distracting from the groove. That's what great digital can do, it can take a busy piece of music that's hard to understand and appreciate and turn it into something totally natural and coherent. I felt the need to play St. Germaine's original of the track for the first time in a while and the hook of fast ride cymbal, piano and bass delivered a sense of propulsion that is hard to put down, when the kick drum comes in I was nailed.

The volume control on the Vega G2.1 is very good for a digital preamp but not in the league of serious standalone preamps like the Townshend Allegri Reference, taking the Vega's output to max and connecting it to the Townshend raises the stakes even further, especially in terms of dynamic contrast, ease and musical flow. The sheer subtlety of expression that it can deliver in this situation is absolutely beautiful and puts this DAC up with the best.

Use the Vega G2.1 as a DAC with a good source, an Aries G2.1 would be hard to beat, and it is a remarkably capable piece of kit, one that shows just how open, effortless and musically addictive good digital can be. The onboard streamer is good but doesn't let you hear what this Auralic is really capable of, which is to turn bits into sonic gold. It's not inexpensive but it's easily in the same league as many higher priced alternatives, if you are looking for the best that digital can do it warrants very close attention.