



SEPTEMBER 2014



ARIES

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



CHINA

Reviewer: John Darko

Financial Interests: click [here \(http://www.6moons.com/financialinterests.html\)](http://www.6moons.com/financialinterests.html)

Sources: Macbook Air 2011 w/ Audirvana+ and Resonance Labs Concero HD, Antipodes DXe music server, VPi Scout 1.1 w/ PS Audio NuWave Phono Converter

DACs: Schiit Bifrost Uber, Resonance Labs Concero HD/HP, AURALiC Vega, Aqua La Scala MKII, PS Audio DirectStream

Amps: Redgum RGi60 [on loan], Redgum RGi35 Black Series [on loan]

Speakers: Zu Soul MkII, Magnepan MMG

Headphones: MrSpeakers Alpha Dog [on loan], Sennheiser HD800 [on loan], Audeze LCD-X [on loan], KEF M500, MrSpeakers MadDog

Headphone DAC/amplifiers: Resonance Labs Herus and Concero HP, Schiit Vali, AURALiC Taurus MKII

Cabling: Light Harmonic LightSpeed USB cable, Blue Jean speaker cable and interconnect, Zu Mission interconnect, Schiit Audio Pyst interconnect, Grave Science balanced interconnect

Review component retail: \$1'599/€1'499 for standard version(reviewed, \$999/€999 for LE version

Burst bubble. In considering the Aries digital audio streamer from Beijing's AURALiC, don't expect the attractive brushed aluminium finish of their Vega DAC or Taurus MKII headphone amplifier. A metal chassis isn't conducive to reliable WiFi reception without antenna. Thus, the Aries is an all-plastic affair. It's also smaller than AURALiC's own press shots might suggest. At 25 x 20 x 7cm and 0.8kg, the Aries is about the size/weight of a chunky hardcover book. Adding weight to the scene is AURALiC's Pure-Power™-based 10uV low-noise external linear power brick. Stateside retail pricing is set at \$1'599. If you find such pricing too robust for your wallet, an SMPS-powered LE version is available for \$999.

The extra 600 clams don't just get you a better power supply. They also net you "two individual 240fs Femto clocks for both USB audio host and digital outputs; and a low noise internal design to eliminate jitter". The Aries doesn't offer any user-accessible internal storage or internal D/A conversion. Once connected to your home network (wired or wirelessly), it streams music from externally hosted sources to your existing DAC.



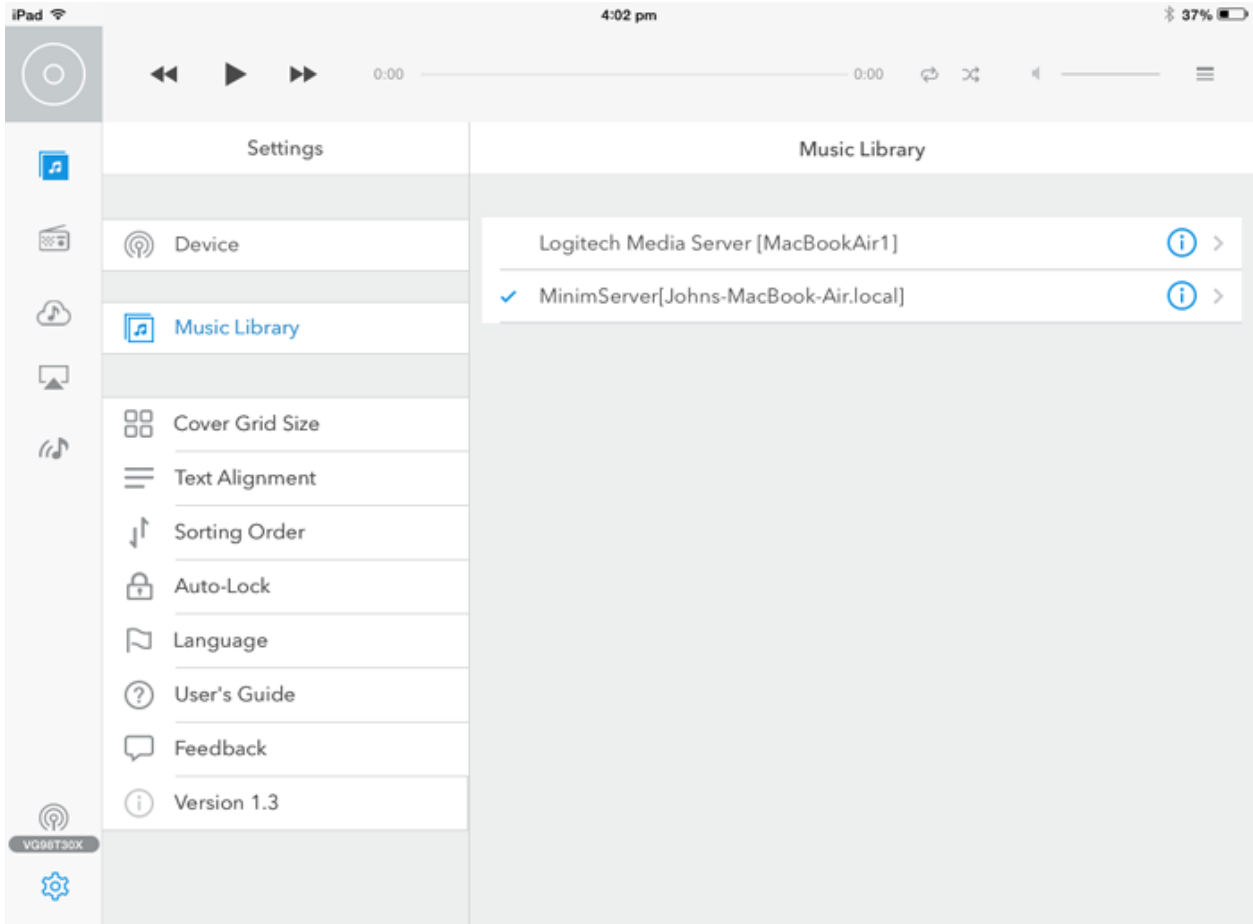
This is *not* an off-the-shelf solution. AURALiC’s engineers have developed their Tesla hardware platform from the ground up as "a quad-core ARM Cortex-A9 processor running at 1GHz with 1GB DDR3 onboard memory and 4GB of internal storage". A 4MB custom Linux operating system handles the digital audio stream from input to output.



On the front panel, the orange-on-black glow of a 3-inch OLED display—a scaled down version of that found on AURALiC’s flagship Vega DAC—shows playback status, playlist song count and progress bar. Around back there are inputs including Gigabit Ethernet for direct connection to a home router and USB for hooking in an external storage drive chock full of tunes. The Aries can decode AAC, AIFF, ALAC, APE, FLAC, MP3, OGG, WAV and WV and even WMA! It also plays nice with .dsf and .dff files – DSD to you and me.

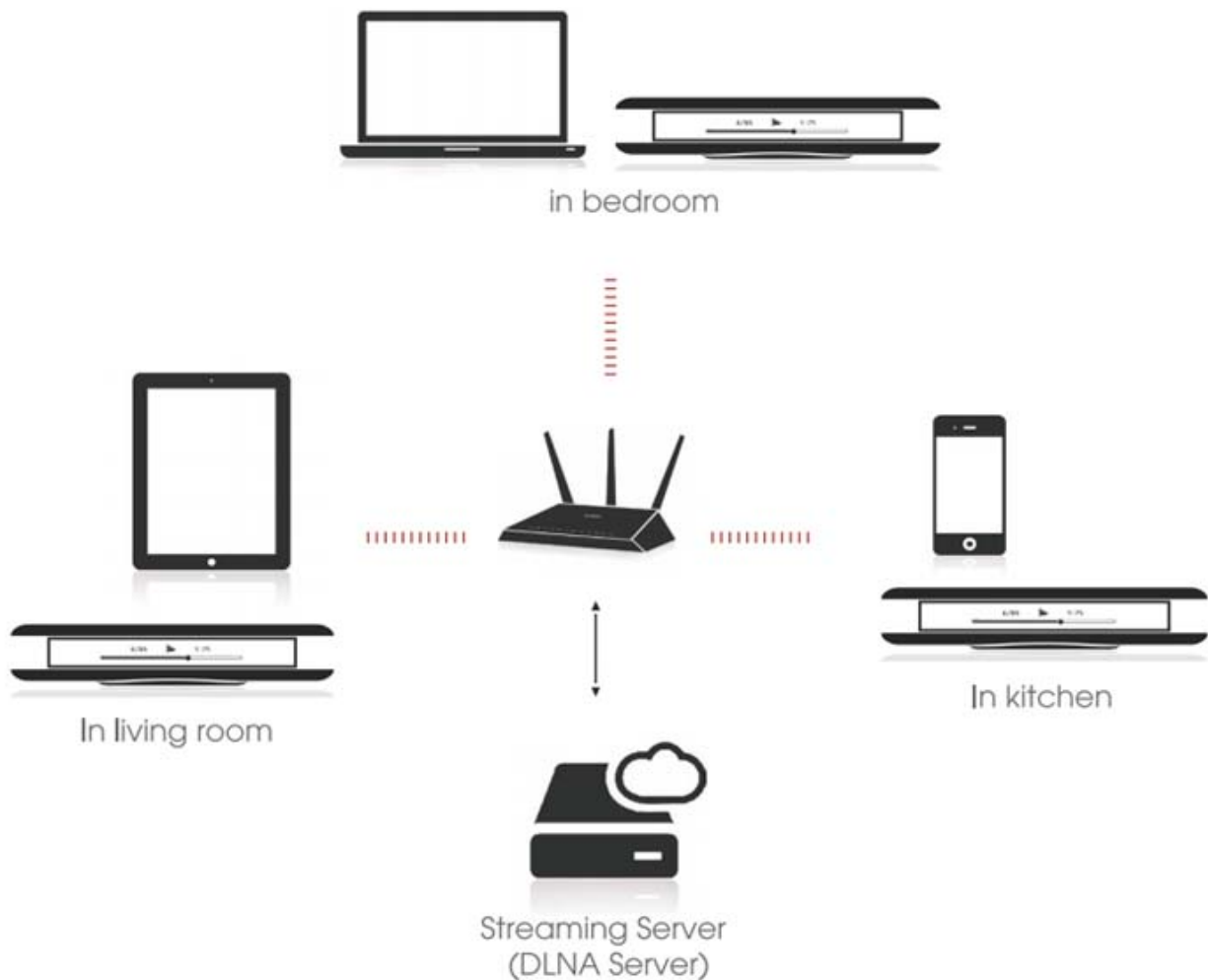


Of broader appeal is digital audio streaming from any UPnP/DLNA server. But DSD compatibility currently demands the use of Minimserver. Here Windows, Mac OS X, Linux, QNAP, Synology and ReadyNAS versions are available. Installation of Minimserver on my MacBook Air necessitated the installation of a Java Runtime Environment. Once up and running (in the system tray), Minimserver announces the contents of a user-nominated folder to the network. It is from this folder that the Aries streams digital audio.



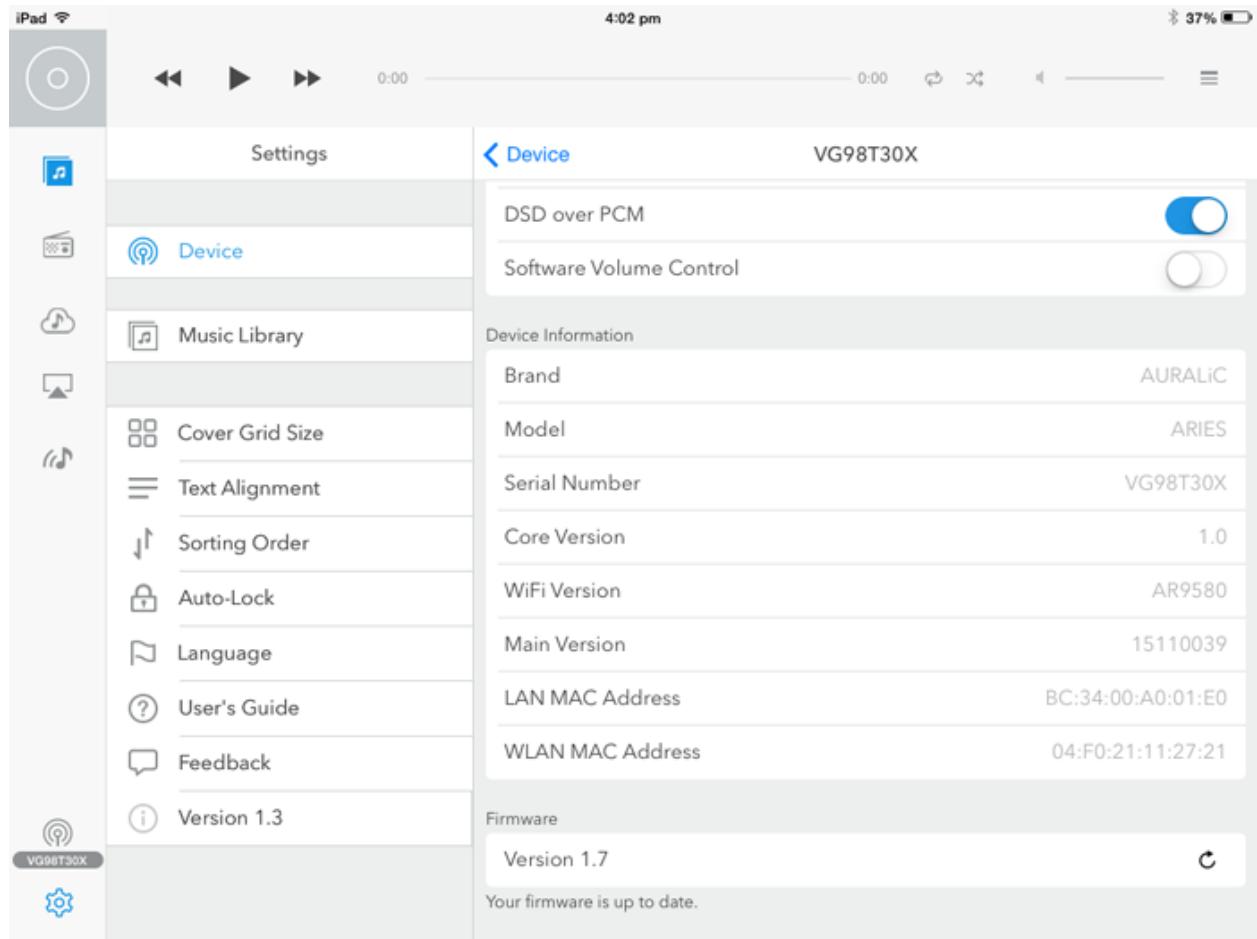
The supplied plastic RC-1 infrared remote is the same which ships with the Vega DAC. Only useful for play/pause, previous/next and numerical track selection, it's nothing to write home about. And the Aries is quite particular about the RC-1 being pointed directly at its screen. Firing horizontally or vertically off-axis was a hit and miss. My advice: ditch it in favour of the iOS app....

...which itself gives rise to another niggle. The *only* way to configure the Aries' digital outputs, set up network streaming, activate Airplay/Songcast or browse cloud-based libraries is via AURALiC's home-baked Lightning DS iOS app. Finding it in Apple's app store isn't as easy as you might think. Forget about searching for 'AURALiC' and/or 'Aries'. 'Lightning DS' is the search term required to net the right result. Then comes the kicker. The iOS app is iPad only. At time of writing, no iPhone-compatible or Android app exists. On the latter, AURALiC CEO Xuanqiang Wang says, *"the Android version is due October this year for a basic version and full version (with streaming) is coming by the end of the year."* And then, *"yes, we will have an iPhone version maybe by the end of this year"*. Control clients for OS X and Windows are also on the software development roadmap.



In the meantime, the Linn Kinsky app acts as a perfectly capable substitute when controlling song selection and playback from a local library. Think of the three devices deployed here as a networked triangle: server (Macbook Air running minimserver), renderer (the Aries) and control point (iPad app). Three clicks into the iPad app's menu system are all it takes to point the Aries at the Minimserver folder share. Those with larger libraries must allow time for the app to cache library data and artwork after which browsing for an album and adding it to the active playlist is an appropriately fluid process.

Readers wanting to dig deeper into network setup and basic playback functionality are directed to the quick start guide [here](http://www.auralic.com/download/aries_quick_start.pdf) (http://www.auralic.com/download/aries_quick_start.pdf) . Toslink, coaxial and AES/EBU sockets handle transmission of up to 32bit/384kHz PCM to the downstream DAC— that's fairly standard—but if you intend to stream single- and double-rate DSD, the USB output buffered by AURALiC's patented ActiveUSB™ technology is the only way to go.

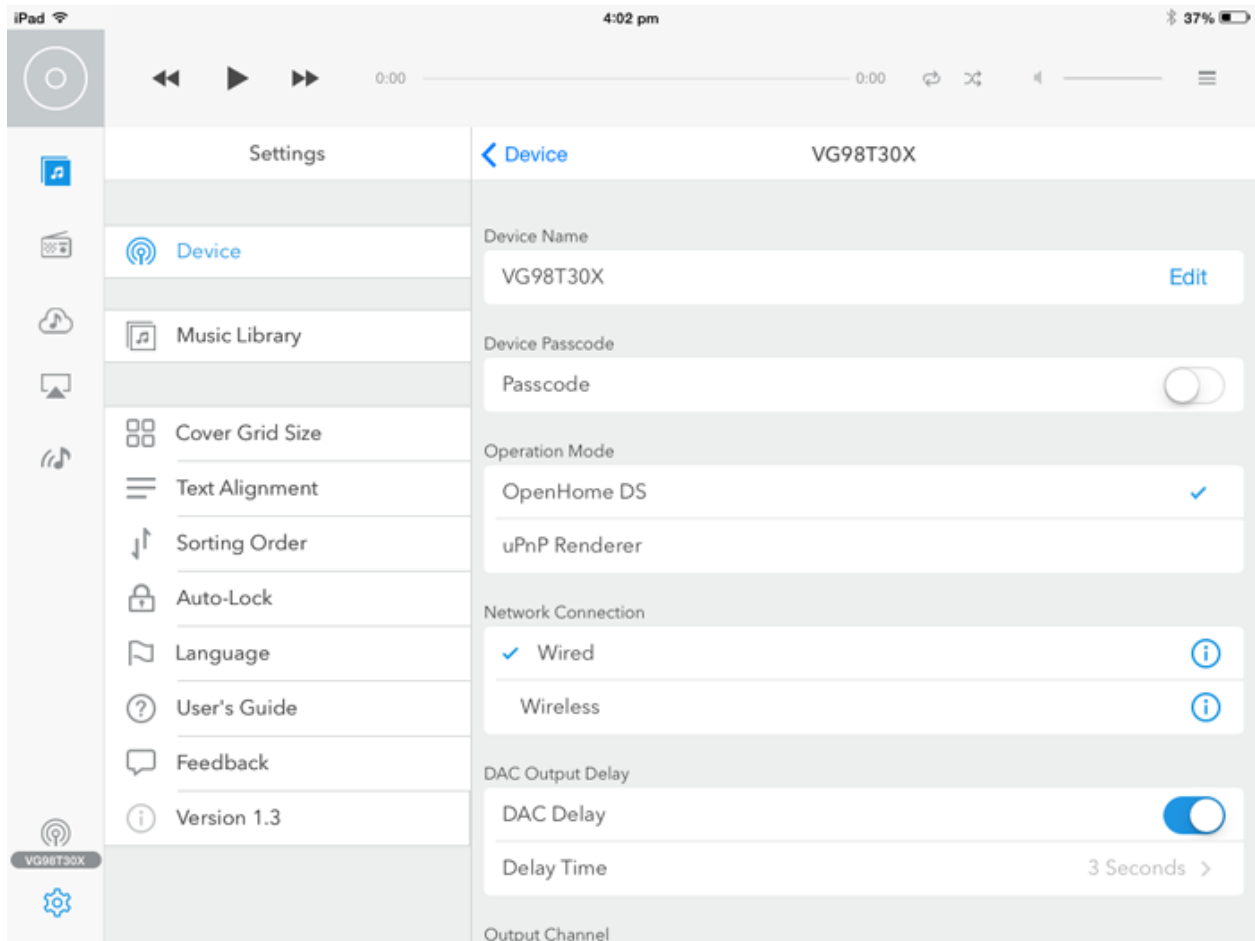


Any USB DAC can theoretically accept a digital audio stream from the Aries. The emphasis here sits on 'theoretically'. Both Audioquest Dragonfly v1.2 and HRT microStreamer were each recognized by the Aries but pushing play brought forth distortion artifacts. This was most obvious with the Audioquest device. The Resonance Labs Herus displayed no such distortion but even with its software volume at max, it played too quietly to achieve satisfactory SPLs. Odd.

Resonance Labs' Concero HD had no such issues and played flawlessly, putting paid to the theory that USB-powered devices need not apply. Perhaps DACs that rely on volume signal markers from the host operating system are the issue here? With the Concero HD verified as 100% Aries-compliant, it formed the basis of a headphone listening rig that also included a Schiit Vali amplifier and Sennheiser HD800. Loudspeaker action was taken care of by Zu Audio's Soul MKII powered by a REDGUM Black Series RGi35, all fronted by AURALiC's superb Vega DAC. The Aries connected to the home network with a generic Ethernet patch cable (comments on how Audioquest's Ethernet cabling stacks up is a conversation for another day).

Streaming isn't restricted to devices on the home network. CD-quality streaming services from Qobuz and WiMP arrive ready to rock out of the box. Enter username and password via the iPad app and you're immediately off to the cloud for song/album selection. WiMP's Hifi service offers lossless streaming from a ~25m song library for \$20/month. Even brief exposure to a CD-quality service like this makes justifying \$15 a pop on a CD or download that bit tougher.

With the Aries driving my WiMP account, the need to purchase CDs or FLAC downloads is relegated to those harder to find titles. WiMP's new release section is worth the entry fee alone. Eno and Hyde's

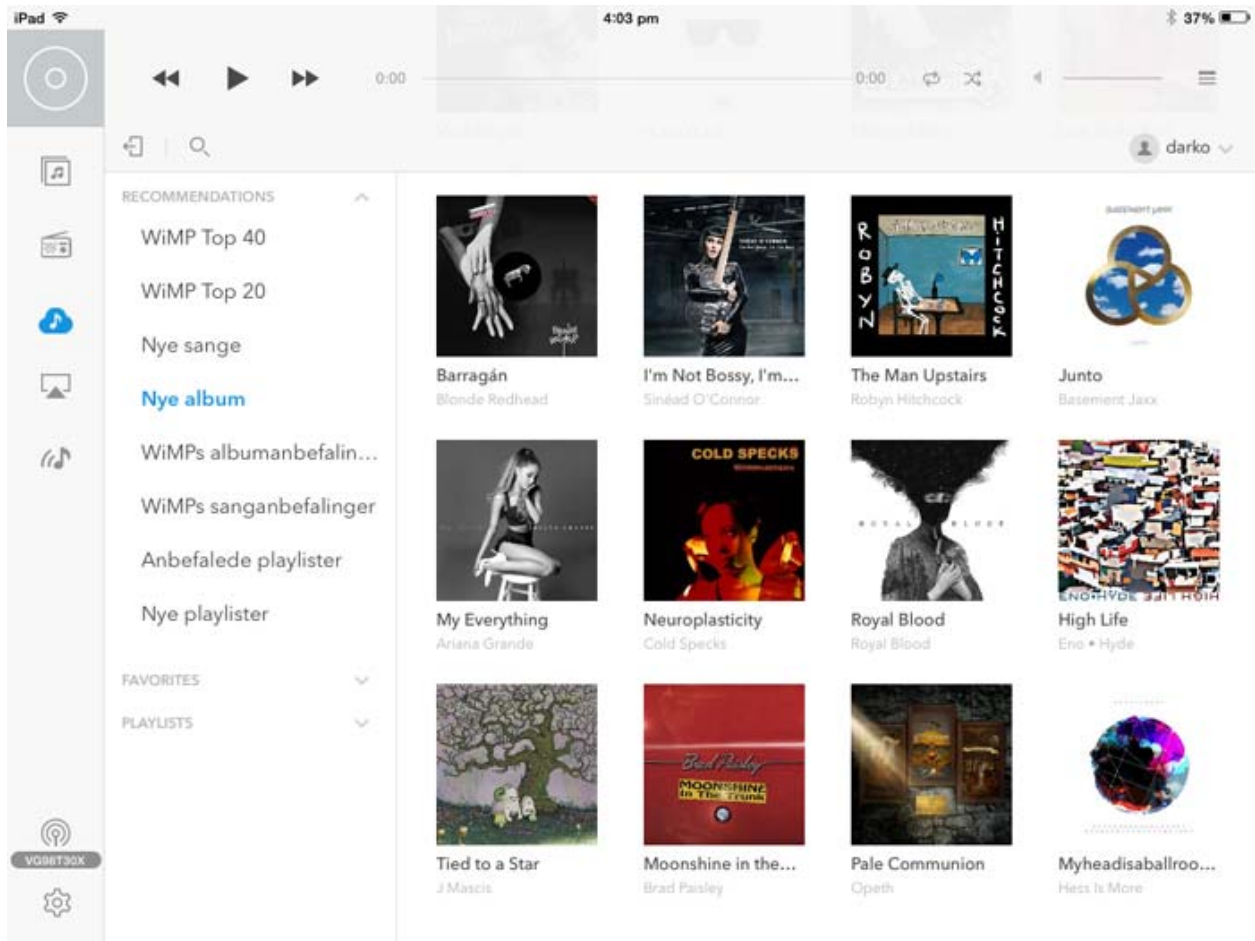


High Life came down the pipe without glitch or need to buffer. Ditto Interpol's *El Pintor* and Robyn Hitchcock's *The Man Upstairs*. All lossless, all of the time. First from WiMP and then with feet back on the ground for a Minimserve of Simian Mobile Disco's *Whorl*, gapless playback was twice confirmed. The catch? WiMP subscriptions are currently restricted to Denmark, Germany, Poland, Sweden and Norway. However, sub-brand TIDAL is set to launch a similar lossless streaming service in the US and UK in October/November.



Over-the-air firmware updates to the Aries don't just squash bugs. Newer streaming services like TIDAL can be added as they become available. (My review unit currently ran firmware v1.7). *"The TIDAL is already in plan now"* says Wang. You might be thinking, *"I stream WiMP or Qobuz using their native desktop app and I play locally hosted tunes using Audirvana+, both with great results. Why should I consider an AURALiC Aries?"*

The first answer is one of aesthetics. With the Aries running front of house, your PC or Mac can be tucked away out of sight. Not every listener wants a computer in his or her lounge room or on the hifi rack. The second answer is more compelling: better sound quality. With 1) Antipodes DXe music server and 2) MacBook Air + Resonance Labs Concero HD already on hand, a three-way stand-off was conducted with AURALiC's own Vega as the decoder of choice.



The MacBook Air + TotalD1 USB cable + Concero HD (as USB converter) connected to the Vega over S/PDIF came out with all guns a-blazing, look-at-me detail delivered on the back of arresting dynamics as



qualities which lent the Vega visceral excitement and sizeable soundstage. The Concero HD hosed away some of the steel on leading edges when the MacBook Air connected USB direct to the Aries. It's a reason why USB bridges like the Concero, Audiophileo, Hydra X+ et al have become established methods of extracting more pleasing sonic results from consumer-grade computers. And if this were all you heard, you'd walk away suitably impressed...

...but the Antipodes DXe steps in to remind us that getting electrical noise and jitter as low as possible from the outset serves up greater musical potency than attempting to correct it after the fact Concero-style. Connected to the Vega with the same TotalD1 USB cable, the DXe presented itself as more relaxed, suppler with dynamic inflections, tonally richer and – best of all – free of the bike-reflector glare that still plagued the upper frequencies of the Mac-Concero combo. Take note: the delta here is larger than it is between DACs!



With two data points established quickly, the Aries went into battle. Again, the TotalD1 USB cable took data direct to the Vega. The result? Less stressed than the Mac + Concero HD but not as blissed out as the Antipodes. The Aries straddled the difference leaning closer toward the latter. In the context of the Aries' sticker price, that was an impressive result. Things became more interesting still when the Vega got benched in favour of running the Concero HD in DAC mode. A slight knock to macrodynamics aside, the Aries + Concero HD sounded preferable to the Mac + Concero HD + AURALiC Vega.

The glare and artificial sheen of lesser transports like the MacBook Air might not be obvious until one substitutes it for something superior like the AURALiC Aries (or Antipodes DXe). That's the power of contrast. And whilst the Antipodes box remains king of the hill on performance, in pushing close to five-thousand Australian dollars, it's also by the far the costliest option here. The more compact more stylish Aries doesn't rip CDs or play host to your music library but it'll run you fewer bucks than a MacBook Air + Resonance Labs Concero HD converter solution - and it'll sound better.



Even when mentally swapping out MacBook Air for MacMini and Concero HD for Audiophileo, the revised ~ \$1'200 total sees the Aries maintaining value composure. AURALiC have reportedly thus far spent in excess of \$1m in developing the Aries hardware, associated operating system and control apps – an ambitious undertaking. The end result already presents as just the ticket for the audiophile who is a) already in possession of an Apple iPad, b) not averse to wireless networks and c) already stacked with FLAC/ALAC on a NAS device or networked PC.

The Aries' appeal will likely widen as Android and iPhone apps come online. Once Windows and Mac clients hit the ground, WiFi can be dispensed with altogether (opening the door for possible use by our publisher). Look again at the rear of the unit. Due to be activated via a forthcoming firmware update currently slated for October, the second USB socket promises hard drive connectivity, obviating the need for a PC/Mac music server altogether. The AURALiC Aries poses a serious threat to the use of consumer-grade computers as digital audio transports but with so much still to come, the story isn't yet fully written. Let's wait and see what Santa lobs down the chimney...

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