

Auralic Vega G2.2 goes the extra mile

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Auralic Vega G2.2 DAC

The Vega G2.2 is currently the only digital to analogue converter in Auralic's seven strong range of streaming oriented electronics, the Vega G1 never made it to G1.1 status so at present there is a hole at that entry point for the brand. They do however make an Altair G1.1 which is a streamer with DAC onboard and given that one box solutions are so popular at the affordable end of the market that makes sense. The Vega G2.2 was launched at the High End show last year and includes a lot of what makes Auralic DACs more interesting than most.

For a start it's built in a substantial machined aluminium chassis with the extra rigidity in the base and sprung isolation feet, it's so heavy that the small gap beneath makes it a less than comfortable lift unless you have finger tips of steel. But that's because this DAC is chock full of tech, some examples of the breed contain not much more than a PCB and a switched mode power supply but Auralic go quite a lot further. For a start the Vega G2.2 functions as a preamplifier with multiple digital and a single analogue input(s) alongside outputs on RCA and XLR which can be hooked up to a power amplifier or active speakers. The digital inputs include the usual SPDIF suspects alongside USB, HDMI eARC for TVs etc, ethernet and Lightning Link HDMI inputs.

The ethernet socket indicates that this DAC also functions as a streamer and Auralic's proprietary Lightning Link can be used for connections to an Aries streamer and a Leo master clock. It is not as might be supposed an I2S connection which often use HDMI, Auralic's CEO Wang Xuanqian has a pretty low opinion of using this means of digital signal transfer from one device to another, in fact he considers it "a complete joke" because so much jitter is added in the process.

Volume is controlled by a resistor ladder rather than digitally as found in too many streamers, and you can adjust it with the knob on the front or pretty well any IR remote handset. The actual digital to analogue conversion process uses a combination of discrete ladder and

delta-sigma technologies, achieved by controlling clock, filtering and oversampling discretely and leaving only the simplest task to the DAC chip. It's an approach that gives Auralic a lot more flexibility than can be achieved with purely chip based approaches.

What really differentiates the Vega G2.2 from the majority of its competitors is the presence of what Auralic call direct data recording, a fancy name for a large buffer that records up to 4GB of the incoming data prior to outputting it to the DAC using dual high precision femto clocks.



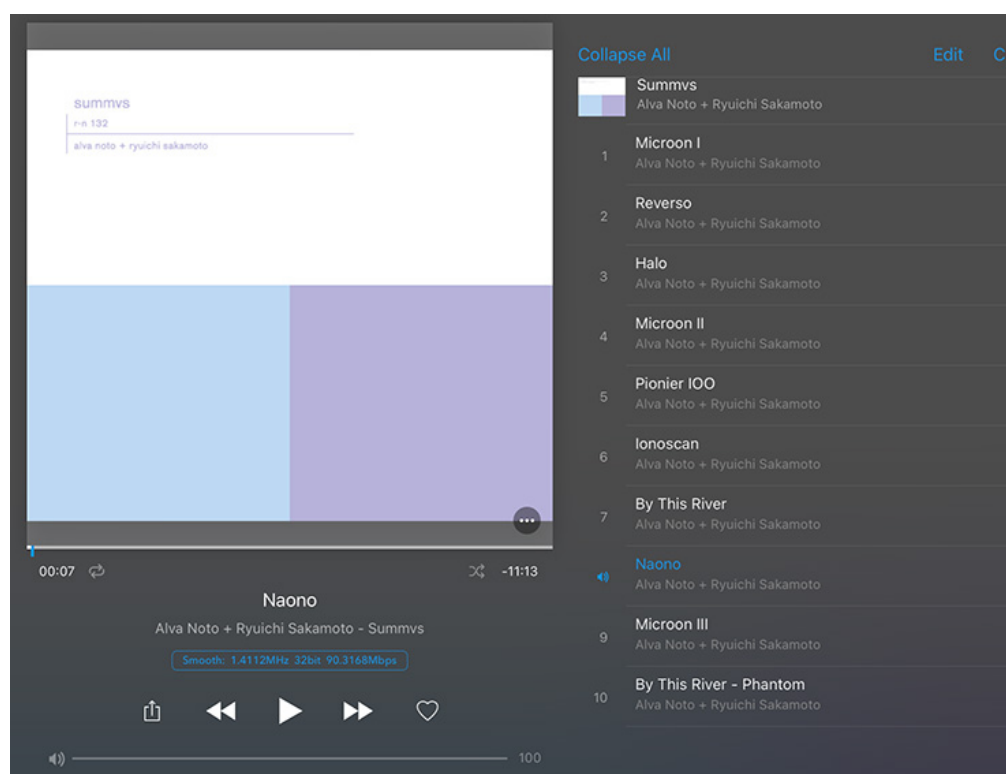
This is not unheard of but very rare in DACs, it effectively means that up to an hour of binary music signal can be stored in a solid state 'music battery' which according to Auralic makes this DAC immune to distortion and jitter in the incoming bitstream.

When used as a streamer the Vega G2.2 is unlike Auralic's dedicated streamers in not having Lightning server software onboard, yet in practice this doesn't hamper its operation with streaming services. The only area where there is a noticeable difference is that it doesn't load metadata from files that are stored locally but depends on the server software within the storage device, which means it's not quite as well sorted but that isn't a great hardship.

Sound quality

Used as a standalone streamer/DAC/preamplifier the Vega G2.2 produces a more than passable result, in fact it can be extremely engaging indeed with decent timing, dynamics and imaging. I got quite carried away with a classical piece and found an oft played live rock track to be more engaging than usual. Tonally it isn't as sweet as it is when used as a DAC alone but it





has an immediacy and directness that is easy to get carried away with. However when you switch to an external streamer there is a sense of ease and increased resolution that is very impressive, as a preamplifier you would have to spend at least half the Vega G2.2's asking price to beat it, and then add in the cost of another pair of interconnects.

The majority of my listening was restricted to its DAC capabilities with the output hooked up to a Townshend Allegri Reference preamplifier, Moor Amps Angel 6 power amp and a variety of loudspeakers including the mighty Dali Epikore 11s. I was able to try a couple of different sources with the Vega G2.2 but the majority of listening was done with its natural partner the Aries G2.2 and the results were very compelling indeed, the directness found in preamp mode is still audible but the sound is fleshed out with considerable depth of detail and a precise clear presentation. This could never be described as a romantic or soft DAC but neither is it hard and digital, it just resolves leading edges in a clean, clear fashion that lets you hear right into each piece that's played.

The bass is a clear strongpoint, it extends all the way down and has a degree of articulation and shape that indicates that the Auralic is a first class converter, most DACs can do powerful bass but fewer are able to show you the full attack and decay of each note with this degree of clarity. It's the full iron fist in a velvet glove experience and that makes for a physical as well as emotional listening experience, especially with a speaker that can delve all the way down in the bass and activate your internal organs to full effect. Voices are well served as well, they image with a degree of solidity and presence that is particularly appealing, in fact imaging all round is very strong and really puts the musicians in the room with a decent recording. Acoustic instruments, voices included, do this best of all because they have their own natural reverb that is more realistic than artificial effects, but both work well. Kraftwerk's *Minimum Maximum* live album combines electronica and live sound to tremendous effect and the power of the bass available from the Vega G2.2 brings real drama to tracks like Radioactivity.

Carbon connection capers

I have always wondered which connection sounds best between Auralic streamers and DACs but have never had the same cable in different terminations before, as a result audio oriented USB cables such as the Network Acoustics muon2 tend to win the day over more prosaic HDMI examples. But this time Audioquest loaned me a box of their Carbon digital interconnects with every connection type that the Vega G2.2 could accept. I started with the most basic option, coaxial SPDIF, which sounded musical, fluent and relaxed if a bit short on detail and image depth. Switching to Lightning Link with the HDMI terminated Carbon 48 cable brought about a brighter, more three dimensional result with greater detail resolution. Carbon USB sounded dry by comparison but also seemed to have quieter backgrounds but going back to the HDMI brought some welcome richness to the Auralic's tonal balance, sounding more sophisticated

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and delicate as well. Finally I switched to AES (balanced SPDIF) on its XLR connections, this was a shade brighter but timed really well whilst having the fluency of the coaxial connection. This was the connection that sounded best in my system but it couldn't compete with the muon2 USB at over seven times the price, no surprises there.

The Vega G2.2 can often display characteristics that it later transpires are coming from the source and or recording, this happened quite a lot with changes in cables, hardware and of course music which indicates that this is a very transparent DAC. That it reveals so much



variety in recordings is a particularly good indicator of this. Used in the smooth filter setting it can resolve an awful lot about the three dimensionality, timing and timbre of instruments and voices, in fact you'd be hard pressed to find a DAC with this sort of feature set that is clearly better.

Vega G2.2 verdict

In this Auralic you are also paying build quality, more affordable designs do not have copper shielding underneath machined and anodised casework nor do they offer the massive buffering incorporated into this Auralic. It is hard to tell what this buffer brings to the party but the Vega G2.2 is a lot more refined and has low level detail that its predecessor wasn't able to offer, so it's clearly helping.

That it also works well as a digital and analogue preamp is a real bonus, partnered with a sympathetic power amp or active speakers you don't need anything else to set up a top notch streaming system if you have an account with Qobuz or similar. But adding the Aries G2.2 does raise the stakes quite considerably and that streamer can store a decent library onboard to boot. That would be my preferred combo at least, all you need to decide is which digital