# AURALiC VEGA S1
## streamer/DAC

Jason Kennedy

At the Munich High-End show last year, AURALiC unveiled two new ranges; the G2.2 is an upgrade of the previous G2.1 range, while the G3 is a flagship range at distinctly higher prices. Thus far, we have only seen the ARIES, VEGA, and most recently, ALTAIR G2.2 models; G3 has yet to enter the market. The likely reason for this has just arrived in the form of AURALiC's new entry-level series S1, which comes at lower prices and in a somewhat different physical form to the current G1.1 models.

There are three S1 models: the ARIES S1 streamer, the VEGA S1 streamer with DAC, and the S1 Purer-Power supply, which are optional add-ons for both units. Both ARIES and VEGA S1 models have the same £1,999 asking price while the Purer-Power supply is £999. They inhabit smaller and plainer casework than the G series models, which will have helped to reduce costs, yet offer the broad range of features that the brand is known for, including Lightning DS server software, which has previously not been available in the VEGA models.

When you look at the specs, AURALiC is offering more than it does in G1.1 for a lower asking price; this is likely a response to the fact that the competition at this end of the market is getting stronger. Unlike some competition, AURALiC does not include large touchscreen panels and myriad wireless connections but concentrates on delivering as much sonic bang for the money as possible. There are plenty of options in the software; however, with both Tidal and Spotify Connect, Airplay 2 and Roon readiness, why you would want to spend money on control software when the Lightning app offers such an attractive interface is debatable.

## Upping the ante

In hardware terms, the VEGA S1 offers all the benefits of AURALiC's Tesla G3 streaming platform; these include tone and filter adjustments, a Fusion DAC with PureDAC mode operation and galvanic isolation. Its femto clock matches the 60fs of the G2.2 model alternative. It includes Direct Data Recording, which stores up to 512MB of incoming signal in memory and reads it using Direct Memory Access. Essentially, this is like a reservoir for the signal that allows

jitter to be reduced and for the processor to clock the data in with minimum disruption. The only features a VEGA G2.2 offers not found on the S1 alternative are the UnityChassis II with its copper shielding, Lightning Link for direct connection between AURALiC devices and eARC socket for AV interaction. Mentioning 'AV' can send shivers through the audio purist's soul, but this has a pure analogue input linked to its resistive ladder volume control, so panic not!

On paper, at least, the VEGA S1 leaves the G1.1 for dust, but that model inhabits a far more rigid chassis, which does have a bearing on sound quality; whether it's enough to warrant keeping that model in the range, however, is another question. The S1 is a DAC and a streamer, of course, and has coaxial, Toslink optical and USB inputs for external sources such as a CD player or PC. Analogue outputs extend to both single-ended RCA and balanced XLR. The other connections include the LAN ethernet port above a USB A, marked HDD and can be used to access music files on a connected drive. This is where Lightning DS server software comes in handy. The VEGA S1 will import all the metadata from the drive to present the library in the iOS app for you to browse and play. Streamers without server software can only show the music data in the way it has been stored on the drive, which is not usually so easy to navigate.

A new feature not seen on previous AURALiCs is Tone Mode; this comes in two flavours: Clear, which delivers the best clarity and transparency, according to the spiel, and Mellow. AURALiC President, CEO, and chief engineer Xuanqian Wang says this latter adds "harmonic elements. This mode imbues the music with a heightened emotional resonance and an additional layer of warmth and richness. It does not change the frequency response curve." Tone Mode is part of latest AURALiC's V10 software update.

## Screen and controls

The entire front panel of the VEGA S1 is a glass screen, the centre part of which can be used to display artwork, title, track number and progress or where external sources are used: the input, volume level, filter and tone settings and sample rate info. A third option is to have artwork presenting a larger version of the album cover. Those after maximum sonic delight, however, should consider letting

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the VEGA S1 turn off the display after a chosen period so that its operation isn't compromised by electrical noise from this quarter. Alternatively, you can teach the AURALiC to turn the display on and off with any IR remote control via its 'Smart IR' learning function accessed through the front panel menu. This can make the remote do a wide range of things, including volume control, play/pause and standby, so it is a valuable feature.

I mentioned the volume level there. You can select a fixed line-level output from this streamer, or use the analogue volume control to change the output level. As a rule, the volume control in an amplifier should sound better, but it is undoubtedly worth contrasting the two; it also means that you don't have to have a preamp at all. The playback screen in Lightning indicates that everything you stream is upsampled to 32-bit and 32x the incoming sample rate. »

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Lightning Server scans the library for all the metadata; if you have an extensive music collection, this can take a while, but it's a one-time deal.

AURALiC VEGA S1 Streaming DAC

RIGHT OUT   LEFT OUT   LAN   EXT PSU

TOS #2   TOS #1   COAX   USB   HDD

This is shown on the play page and cannot be altered. I am told, however, that it is not upsampling per se but another form of processing.

### Power purity

The last connection on the back of the VEGA S1 is an HDMI marked Ext PSU, which, as you might imagine, is a power supply upgrade port to be used with the S1 Purer-Power external supply. This inhabits a case the same size as the VEGA S1 but without the glass front panel. It has a power inlet and an HDMI outlet with the requisite cable in the box. This is the first time I've seen such a connection made with HDMI connections, and they relate to AURALiC using this connection for its Lightning Link inter-component connections. All will be well if no one decides to connect an S1 power supply to a G series Lightning Link port. The S1 Purer-Power is a linear power supply that offers double the capacity of the internal supply and takes over all power duties in the streamer. It also ensures total galvanic isolation between the processing and audio circuits within the VEGA S1, aiming to minimise the amount of interference and noise in the latter.

A row of buttons on top of the VEGA S1 navigate the functions on the display; some are also on the Lightning app, but many are not. You can also use these to put the VEGA S1 on standby if you haven't programmed a remote to do this for you, a quicker and more accessible approach.

Getting this streamer up and running for owners of a music library requires a procedure whereby Lightning Server scans the library for all the metadata; if you have an extensive music collection, this can take a while, but it's a one-time deal, and it's easy to update when you add extra titles.

After this, I turned off the various functions, such as AirPlay, Roon, etc., that wouldn't be necessary, fixed the volume output, set the tone to clear, and set the filter to smooth, but I didn't switch in output protection. We reviewers live dangerously.

### The taut and the tame

Initially, the VEGA S1 was used with its onboard power supply in a system with Oephi Immanence 2.5 speakers and Oephi cabling in all but the interconnect department. This made for maximum immediacy with all warts revealed and proved too exposed for some of the sources tried with it. Not this AURALiC, though, which delivered a supremely engaging result, maybe not the richest in detail or tonal terms, but superbly timed with excellent definition and only the slightest hint of forwardness. I could have tamed that with the Mellow tone setting but feared that this might undermine the timing, so I stuck with it and found that it was not an issue with clean recordings. Remember, the Oephi system ferociously reveals higher frequencies, in particular.

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» But when I put on 'Flying Part 1' by the Keith Jarrett Trio (*Changes*, ECM), I could not turn it off, press pause or pick up the doom scroller; it had me in its headlights, and I was enthralled. I usually listen to this excellent music on the record player; I had no idea a streamer could deliver it so effectively, let alone one at such a reasonable price. I concluded that Xuanqian Wang had cracked the proverbial streaming nut (of which no one had yet heard).

Back in my regular and relatively real-world system with Townshend speaker cables and PMC twenty5.26i loudspeakers, I played something less refined in recording terms in the form of 'Heaven & Black Water' by the God in Hackney (*The World in Air Quotes*, Junior Aspirin) to see if

the VEGA S1 could cope with a bit more girth. No problem; the track crackled with electricity, creating a powerful vista in which only the musicians controlled the landscape; the grit in the recording was evident but not exaggerated, and the energy palpable. It was time to see what the S1 Purer-Power supply would bring to the party, so heeding the 'do not hot-plug' warnings on the back panel, I hooked up the HDMI lead, transferred the power cable to the power supply and switched it on.

The effect on the sound was not subtle; it felt like the data had doubled, and the amount of musical information coming through gave the impression of moving from a cartoon to a colour photograph. It was a bit uncanny. The »

» VEGA S1 is a stonking streamer on its own but does so without resolving fine detail in the way it can when both the internal power supply is shut down and a far more capable one is used.

## Upscale

You get a sense of the gaps being filled in, which expands the image dramatically in height, width and depth and produces a much richer tonal and more dynamically nuanced presentation. This brings out the colours and textures of voices and instruments, making them more accurate and tangible. It also reveals more significant differences between recordings because not everyone manages or wants to capture harmonics and natural reverb; some would compress the sound to produce a particular effect, but at least the VEGA S1 doesn't exaggerate such shortcomings. With an old analogue recording of Ike White playing 'Changin' Times' you get the easy groove of the band, the funky blues guitar playing and the slightly disconnected nature of the vocal recording. But the whole thing hands together well. Ditto Baden Powell's 'Marcia Eu Te Amo' (*Solitude on Guitar*, CBS), which sounds its age and lacks the depth of detail found earlier but delivers the magic of the music he made with Eberhard Weber.

AURALiC is to be congratulated on the VEGA S1; in terms of features, build and sound quality, it represents a benchmark at its price point. It is equally impressive that it only concedes one of these points when compared with the VEGA G1, which was discontinued three years ago. On its own or with the S1 Purer-Power, it deserves to bring AURALiC to a broader audience, especially those who appreciate that a music streamer is all about making music files sound great rather than the contents of a flashy box, for one, rather like the box as well. ✚

### Technical specifications

**VEGA S1**

**Type:** Solid-state network streamer, DAC, digital preamplifier.

**Analogue Inputs:** none.

**Digital Inputs:** One coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jacks), two TOSLink, one USB B, one USB A.

**DAC Resolution/Supported Digital Formats:** FLAC/WAV/ MP3, etc. Sampling rate for D/A conversion 384kHz/32 bit.

**Music services:** AirPlay 2, Tidal Connect, Spotify Connect, Internet Radio

**Analogue Outputs:** One stereo balanced (via XLR connectors), one stereo unbalanced (via RCA jacks).

**Digital Outputs:** none.

**Frequency Response:** Not specified.

**Distortion (THD + Noise):** Not specified.

**User Interface:** 4 inch LCD display, Lightning DS application software for iOS.

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 152x207x290mm

**Weight:** 4kg

**Price:** £1,999, $1,999, €1,999

**S1 Purer-Power**

**Type:** Dedicated power supply for AURALiC S1 series.

**Output:** HDMI

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 152x207x290mm

**Weight:** 3.7kg

**Price:** £999, $999, €999

**Manufacturer** AURALiC

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