



LIGHTNING STRIKES

As well as offering control of your networked music library, the Lightning app allows for native access to Tidal and Qobuz and you can use the Aries Mini as an end point for Spotify Connect. Where it ekes out a further advantage over rivals is that it's the only device here that can access, decode and unpack the MQA signal embedded in Tidal Masters. If you are a Qobuz Sublime+ subscriber (HFC 440), you can also access and listen to hi-res content there too. The streaming service implementation is easy to use and because it renders your music library within the app, it makes some rivals here look a little slow and clunky. On the iPad especially, Lightning achieves the best all-round user experience.



Auralic Aries Mini £449

It may not look like much, but this small box packs a lot in and is a seriously flexible network streamer

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Auralic Aries Mini

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
Network music player

WEIGHT
500g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
135 x 28 x 135mm

FEATURES
● Wi-fi and Ethernet streaming up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256
● Outputs: 1x optical; 1x coaxial; 1x stereo RCA
● Streaming service support: Spotify Connect; Tidal; Qobuz Sublime; vTuner
● Internal bay for hard drive

DISTRIBUTOR
Auralic

WEBSITE
auralic.com

As the most expensive streamer here, the Aries Mini represents the first rung on the Auralic ladder – which extends up to its top-notch G2 Series. It's the only model in the group able to stream DSD files or decode MQA and is also unique as it's fitted with a USB digital out, allowing it to send audio to a USB DAC. It's well specified as a player too, with an ESS ES9018K2M DAC outputting via its single-ended RCA stereo out.

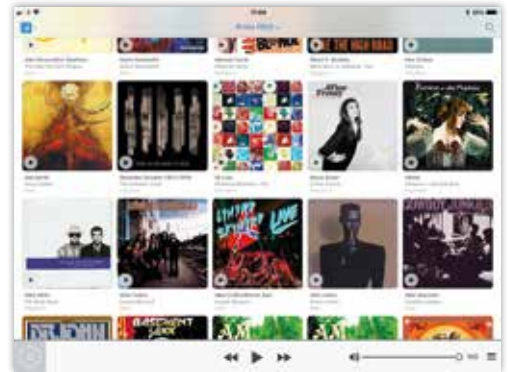
Like the Sonos offering overleaf, the Lightning DS app (iOS only) that's used by all Auralic products is cached on the controlling device and the best performance is achieved by letting it index files on the app itself. Lightning is also server software in its own right, so the Aries Mini doesn't need a NAS drive to render content. A drive bay on its underside allows it to be both a player and renderer. The chassis is well finished, available in black or white and there is also the option of boosting performance by making use of the optional linear power supply (£250).

Sound quality

Having followed the simple setup process, the Aries Mini quickly reveals itself to be a very fine performer. Its handling of the strings in *Adagio For TRON* is unforced, natural and a lovely

balance of supplying the detail of the individual instruments without losing the overall balance and scale of the orchestra as a whole. The entire frequency response feels like it has been delivered in a very even-handed way with no undue prominence given to any part of the frequency response. This is also the case with *Dissolved Girl* where the Auralic does a fine job of laying Sarah Jay Hawley's vocals on top of the deep electronic bass notes. The absolute bass depth on offer might not be the deepest in the test, but the control definition and detail that it possesses is extremely impressive nonetheless.

With the lighter and tonally sweeter Calexico recording, the Auralic is still capable of putting in a pretty decent performance. There is a slightly matter of fact edge to the presentation, which means that the Aries Mini isn't quite as sweet as some of the other players here, but the effortless sense of rhythm and three dimensionality that it weaves into the music goes a long way to compensate for this. With the superb recording of *Mr Clean*, the Auralic is in its element. The trumpet sounds tangibly real and leaps out of



the recording in a way that some rather more expensive drivers can struggle to replicate.

Additional testing with hi-res material shows the Aries to maintain these excellent playback qualities with larger file types. A test with the 24/88.2 download of Dead Can Dance's *Song Of The Stars* is a superb demonstration of timing, tonality and detail, and the Auralic is unfazed by any of the formats or sample rates that are thrown its way ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superb sound performance; flexibility for further expansion

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not especially pretty; no Android app

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** As a starter streamer, the Aries Mini is untouchable and has considerable upgrade potential, too

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★