



G-whizz

AURALIC'S ALTAIR G2.1 IS ONE OF THE MOST COMPREHENSIVELY-EQUIPPED NETWORK PLAYERS YOU CAN BUY, ADDING PREAMPLIFIER FUNCTIONALITY, THE OPTION OF INTERNAL STORAGE AND EVEN A PHONO STAGE. IS THIS THE IDEAL ALL-IN-ONE NETWORK SOURCE, WONDERS ANDREW EVERARD

You might struggle to make sense of the range offered by US/Chinese company Auralic, not least because all the products look very similar and – at first glance at least – appear to offer similar facilities. The brand is built around network audio, and offers transport models with no onboard digital-to-analogue conversion, all the way through to units designed to be used straight into power amplification or active speakers. There are DACs, too, though even these have streaming capability, as well as an upsampling processor and an external master clock: the pinnacle of the brand's range is a four-box front-end combining the Aries G2.1 wireless streaming transport, Vega G2.1 streaming DAC, Leo GX.1 master clock and Sirius G2.1 upsampling processor, adding up to a total price in the region of £24,000.

However, you can keep things simpler, and still have a wide range of capability: the £4599 Altair G2.1 we have here is a remarkably comprehensive model, combining network audio and preamplifier functions, meaning it could be used straight into a power amp or active speakers via its RCA and balanced XLR outputs, or used as a conventional line source. It's based on the previous Altair, still in the catalogue at £1999, but has a wider range of facilities as well as being based around the company's latest G2.1 construction and platform, of which more later.

But this is more than just a network player with a variable level output: the Altair G2.1 also has analogue inputs – one set at line level and another feeding a moving magnet phono stage of in-house design – and these pass straight to the output stage and its analogue volume control, bypassing all the digital cleverness elsewhere in the unit. What's more, as well as playing music from a range of digital sources, including network stores, online streaming services, and USB ports for the connection of both a computer and storage media, the Altair G2.1 can also be fitted with a choice of internal storage devices in the form of SSD modules, enabling them act as both

a player and a music library. Auralic offers a 2TB SSD as a £400 option, but some of its retailers also offer drives of up to 4TB for similar money.

So, what's the whole 2.1 thing about? After all, the company offers both G1 and G2.1 versions of its Altair, Aries, and Vega models, while the Sirius upsampler only comes in G2.1 guise, while the Leo master clock remains as a GX.1 model. Well, it's all about the platform on which the units are built, and the way they're constructed: compare the different versions and the latter consideration is the more obvious, as the G2.1s are larger, being built with a 'box within a box' construction, the electronics being housed in a copper sub-chassis within the high-quality aluminium outer casing, the whole enterprise being mounted on a substantial aluminium plate sitting on sprung isolation feet.

Auralic calls this its Unity Chassis II, and it's all about keeping at bay interference – be it EMI, RFI or mechanical – as well as making the Altair G2.1 rather purposeful: this may be a 'no moving parts' electronic device, but it still weighs a pretty solid 9.5kg. Add to that an exceptionally high standard of fit and finish, and this is a product that feels all the money.