

DigiBit Aria Mini music server

by Steve Dickinson

If you're new to music servers, as I am, then I commend to you the DigiBit Aria Mini. Partly, that's performance-based, of course, but a goodly chunk of my approval stems from the fact that setting it up is barely any more taxing than it is for a conventional CD player. The Aria Mini, junior sibling to the Aria, offers a significant percentage of the bigger product's performance. DigiBit has eschewed the Aria's fancy, and weighty, casework in favour of an unconventional, upright case of interesting, asymmetric profile (it looks a bit like one of those awards big companies will give out to the Southern Regional Salesperson of the Year). It also doubles as a place to rest your iPad, which you'll be needing to control the unit. DigiBit has made some other savings in shrinking down the Aria – most notably the use of a wall-wart switch-mode power supply and fewer outputs – but the electronics hardware, and software remains pretty much the same for both units.

On opening the box, the first thing a new owner sees is a roughly A3-sized sheet of printed card with basic setup instructions. The legend "Enjoy music in a few minutes!" is the encouraging opening line, followed by

a clear step-by-step guide. As a long term Windows PC user, you will imagine my scepticism that this could possibly go to plan, and my consequent surprise when it did exactly that. I estimate that from unpacking the unit to hearing music took me perhaps 10 minutes, and every stage of the quick setup guide worked exactly as described.

Technically speaking, the unit comprises a low power consumption, industrial-grade motherboard, and features a Windows operating system that has been stripped back to essentials to minimise disruption to sound quality from extraneous processes. There is an onboard DAC capable of handling PCM to 384kHz at resolutions up to 32 bits, or DSD 64 to 128, outputting ▶

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▶ analogue via conventional phono connectors, or a USB digital output to an offboard DAC of your choice. The review unit contained a 2TB hard disk drive, but a 1TB solid-state disk is an option. The chaps from DigiBit pre-populate the disk with a small selection of music, mainly to help get you started straight out of the box, but ripping your own music is obviously the order of the day. Streaming from an external NAS drive or from online sources is available via the LAN connection, which you'll also need to connect to the Internet for control of the Aria Mini, and to download metadata for your ripped disks. The unit also supports Apple Airplay, and streams quite happily via the ubiquitous iPad.

The Aria Mini doesn't have an inbuilt optical drive, so ripping discs requires the use of an external USB drive. This is optional, but a small Asus DVD unit is recommended and was shipped with the review sample. The power supply is also external, and in this case a wall-wart; a linear power supply, as fitted internally to the Aria, is said to be expected soon, as an optional upgrade.

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takes perhaps five minutes to rip; the drive starts automatically when you load a disc and spits it back out again when finished. Having ripped the disc, the Aria automatically searches various online databases depending on the genre of music being ripped, downloads the cover art and other metadata (at no cost to the user), and presents you with the finished article in your music library. I only managed to flummox the unit once: the Graham Fitkin album *Flak* [Factory] ripped without any problems, but the Aria Mini failed to locate the cover art or metadata, presenting me with just an icon in my music library. The album plays just fine, the track listing is correct, and I could easily manually add artwork and metadata. The metadata can be edited and extended, custom fields added as the user chooses, and these can be used to categorise and catalogue your music collection. Track data can also be edited. The Aria rips to FLAC by default, and cleverly can be set to output hi-res files downsampled to whatever your DAC can handle if needs be. The stored music is presented in various different ways, sorted by metadata fields such as artist, album, genre, composer, period, or bit rate. DigiBit's first great success was the Sonata music server program, which is commonly considered to be the best system for those of us who listen to a lot of classical music, thanks to its enlightened metadata wrangling and search facilities. It's clear that the company has classical enthusiast's interests at heart, and that is enough to endear the DigiBit Aria Mini to many still clinging to their CD collections.

The unit also supports multiroom playing. You can have various zones each playing different music simultaneously. This isn't something my home is equipped to test with any rigour, but streaming one file to my iPad while playing another through the system was trivially easy.

So, how does it sound? Straight out of the box, via its own DAC and into my Focal 1028Be's via Albarry's preamp and M1108 monoblocs, it sounded very good indeed. Fundamentally, the music played through the Aria Mini has vitality, decent dynamics, and timing. It majors on clarity rather than body and substance. Fitkin's *Flak* is a powerful and rhythmically complex piece for two pianos and through the Aria Mini's own DAC it is entertaining, although the pianos are a little harder and more aggressive in tone, and there is less sense of energy in the louder passages (they are merely louder compared to my reference point). This, it must be said, is an unfair comparison, because that reference point is a dCS Puccini CD player with its own U-Clock: a dedicated CD/SACD player that is considered one of the best in the business. You could also buy seven Aria Minis for the cost of one Puccini/U-Clock combination, so it should be better, but what impresses about the Aria Mini is how much of the

► core of the music is retained even in comparison. The rhythmic complexity is well portrayed on the Aria Mini, even if the subtle timing cues, and the way the two parts work together and against each other, is rather glossed-over.

What's more, I think a lot of the sonic gap between these two devices falls to the on-board DAC on the Aria Mini. This allows some considerable room for improvement, where if the server part of the deal hobbled the player, improvement would be fairly limited. Another track from the same *Flak* album, the imaginatively-titled 'Piano Piece Early 89', relies on a series of chord progressions which never quite resolve as the listener expects. This piece is all about delayed gratification and the build up of expectation, so that when it does finally resolve, the rewards for the listener are magnified. This is not teased out well by the Aria's DAC and the music makes less sense as a result.

The onboard DAC and output stage is certainly good enough to make differences between 16/44.1 PCM and higher resolution files abundantly clear, but the extra resolution and body in the hi-res files cry out for a better DAC.

It was time to try the Aria Mini via USB to an offboard DAC, so I connected it to the Puccini's DAC via the asynchronous USB input on the U-Clock. The sound quality was immediately significantly elevated. The dCS' familiar agility, detail, and texture was there, and timing had that 'locked together' feel that I think dCS does so well. All of which is entirely expected, of course.

Except that it's not quite that simple. I tried various USB cables, from freebies (briefly!), through mid-priced Nordost Blue Heaven, which gave very good results, before eventually settling on the excellent £500 Linus cable from The Digital Music Box. This exercise got me progressively closer still to the performance I'd expect from the Puccini player. Ultimately, I preferred the sound of a CD played live through the Puccini's own transport to the ripped versions of the same on the Aria Mini, but the differences weren't quite as massive as the price differential between them might imply.

'Smells Like Teen Spirit' from The Bad Plus album *These are the vistas* [Columbia] was, when played directly from CD, more purposeful, with more drive, energy and emphasis, particularly from the bass and percussion. The ripped file was a touch aimless in comparison, bass and percussion not being quite as 'locked-in' to the music. And, to the extent that any Bad Plus track can be accused of having a tune, the rip was not as tuneful as the CD. At the opposite end of the jazz spectrum, the more contemplative tones of the Tord Gustavsen Ensemble in 'The Swirl' from *Restored Returned* [ECM] was sinuous, the vocal was intimate, dark and almost conspiratorial, there was a strong sense of intrigue – a very noir vibe.

Comparing hi-res files against ripped Red Book CD on the Aria, I found that with the hi-res files, there was a greater sense of solidity and definition to instruments and performers, which tend to coalesce into their own space more distinctly. This happened whether listening via the Aria's own DAC, or through the dCS Puccini at 24/96 resolution ►



- (I haven't upgraded my dCS Puccini for DoP replay yet). But again, it's not quite as simple as you might expect.

Interestingly, I found the difference between high-res downloads through the Aria Mini and the CD played through the dCS to be less than clear cut. Diana Krall's 'Lets fall in love' from *When I Look Into Your Eyes* [Verve] was, through the hi-res (20/96) file, blessed with creamy smooth vocals, but cursed with a subtle impression that things had been airbrushed. No surprise that many dismiss the delectable Ms. Krall as easy listening... The CD had more swing, snap, and flair, with more texture to the vocals, and the piano playing was much more nuanced and expressive. Similarly, Robert Plant and Alison Krauss 'Killing the blues' from *Raising Sand* [Rounder Records] gave, via CD, more sense of how the two voices work together. The bass had more weight and solidity and the overall impression was of a more tuneful rendition, while the hi-res file was, in comparison, not really conveying how the two singers modulate their voices to work in partnership. Conversely, a 24/88 file of Billy Joel's 'An Innocent Man' was more solid and convincing than the CD, with more 'snap' to the finger clicks and the harmonics played on guitar were more subtle.

This suggests to me there is no clear-cut 'winner' in a straight fight between CD-quality and high-resolution audio. In my opinion, the best works on a case-by-case basis. This also suggests the Aria Mini is capable of genuinely excellent performance, and to my mind it comes substantially closer to the sound quality I can get from my high-end CD player than any other computer audio system I've yet tried. And this was with the standard-issue wall-wart power supply.

Late in the proceedings, a development linear PSU arrived and I had the opportunity to replace the standard switch-mode PSU for a few days' listening. This had a significant and positive effect on performance, bringing a greater sense of ease and naturalness to the proceedings. It will not make the difference between 'like' and 'not like', but it does turn 'like' into 'like a lot'. It looks likely to be available quite soon as an extra cost option on Aria Minis and I'd urge purchasers to try it as it does raise the Mini's game quite usefully.

In conclusion, then, I really liked the Aria Mini, for its ease of setup, the simplicity and efficiency of the ripping process, and the simple, flexible, and intuitive user interface. The abilities of the onboard DAC are good, on a par with a respectable CD player, but to really get the best out of it an external high quality DAC is going to be necessary. Doing that, the sound quality is elevated much closer to the potential of whatever DAC you're using. While there is still something which holds back ultimate performance, in musical terms,

compared to a CD played through a first class player, in a more price-sensitive context, the Aria Mini fares very well.

As a way to add flexibility to a system, multiroom capabilities, and some backup and redundancy to one's music collection, the Aria Mini would certainly meet my needs. I may be a bit of a Luddite in still preferring CD, but the Aria Mini got closer than most, and I don't see any obvious gaps to the Aria Mini's portfolio and I'd be very happy to use one. I suspect most people would feel the same. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Music server/streamer with multizone support

Storage capacity: 2TB (2.5" silent HDD) or 1TB (SSD) (operating system on separate SSD card)

Software: Windows Home Server 11 (Linux planned for 2015); JRiver MC19; dBpoweramp (ripping).

Databases: Rovi, GD3 and SonataDB (for classical) (charges paid by DigiBit) and two alternative free databases: Freedb and Musicbrainz

Inputs: USB digital; Apple Airplay; external DVD-R; external USB HDD; 1 RJ45 (LAN)

Digital outputs: 1 USB; 1 RJ45 (LAN)

Analogue outputs: 1 pair, unbalanced RCA line level (2.0V output)

Supported file formats: Uncompressed (WAV, AIFF) and lossless (FLAC, ALAC); DSD, DSD × 2

Onboard DAC: Burr Brown 1795; PCM to 32 bits at up to 384 KHz and DSD64 / 128

Signal/Noise ratio: 106 dBA

Clock accuracy: 10ppm 0°–50°C, typically 2.5ppm at 25°C

USB link: asynchronous, USB 2.0 Audio class compliant

Dimensions: 260 × 285 × 130mm (W × H × D)

Weight: 2.5Kg

Price: Aria Mini, no storage £1995; Aria Mini, 2TB HDD £2295; Aria Mini, 1TB SSD £2795; external linear PSU approx £350 (to be confirmed)

Manufacturer: DigiBit

URL: www.digibit.es

Distributor: Auden Distribution

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