



SONATA IN A BOX

Only quite rarely do manufacturers grant us access to their R&D departments – and when they do, it’s because the exciting design phase is already over and we are there merely to wonder at the already completed products. But we have learned one thing over the years: the creation of a new device usually starts with hardware.

Even when network players and servers are being created, the developers first outline what is technically possible and makes sense, and only if everything works does the programming start on a suitable remote software to control the complex machine.

That’s a pity really: too often this means the remote app remains a raw product at launch, still requiring quite a bit of fine-tuning before it works smoothly. As a result, too often the customer end up being used as beta tester. There are few exceptions to this approach. For instance the Burmesters 111: its software got in the way of the hardware for a long time.

However, with DigiBit’s Aria it looks like the Spanish manufacturer already had the software and operation completed before they even had the idea of making some hardware to go along. That makes sense: until now the Madrid-based

company earned its bread and butter primarily with its „SonataDB“ database, which may ring a bell with classical music lovers

In contrast to the more commonly used AMG, Gracenote and the like, DigiBit’s metadata pool supplies plenty of information about conductors, soloists and labels, and in order for the customer to be able to access these expanded tags, the company integrated the

Up to now, DigiBit has mostly existed as SonataDB, a tag data base focused on the demands of classical music. Now it’s on a hardware offensive with the Aria music server – and it may just win us over!

Thanks to the in-house „SonataDB“, DigiBit’s music server offers exciting metadata especially for classical music lovers. ▶



database into a tailor-made distribution of the popular media software JRiver, thus creating SonataDB.

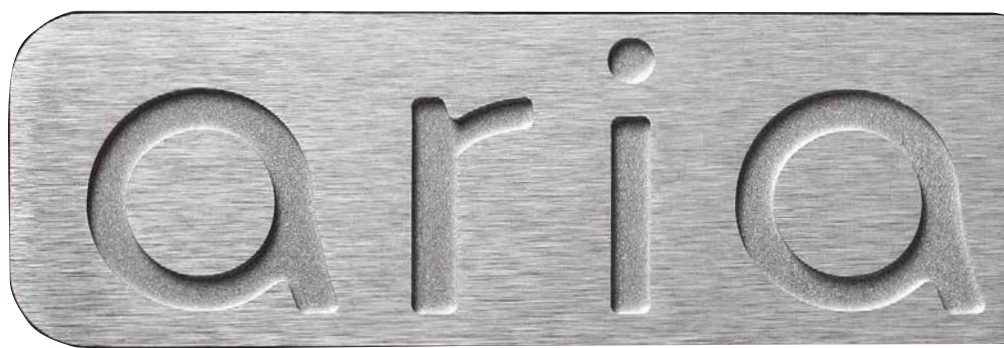
That program works flawlessly: since it contains JRiver's WASAPI driver, it's possible for it to control USB DACs directly, without a detour through the mixers of the operating system on which it runs. And since SonataDB supports JRiver's remote interface, it works with the outstanding „JRemote“, converting every iPad into a luxury remote control, which we still consider one of the best control apps. In fact, there's there is just one little thing that bothers us: if you wanted to use SonataDB, you had to have a computer in the Hi-Fi rack.

Until now, that is: for since the middle of last year DigiBit has also offered a suitable hardware platform in the form of the Aria music server, now also available in Germany via distributor Bowers & Wilkins. Put simply, Aria, this is a solid micro PC on the Windows Home Server platform, installed in an aluminum housing of original design and high-quality workmanship.

Further removing it from its computer roots, it doesn't even offer a monitor connection, which basically outlines the concept of the server: Aria wants to be an uncomplicated music source which handles many processes on its own and can be controlled via iPad remote – 'headlessly', in computer terms. Indeed, to get into the belly of the beast one has to go through a „remote desktop connection“, this is complicated enough to ensure that only advanced computer buffs can get probe its inner workings.

The compact motherboard takes up only a few dozen sq. cm in the housing, with a manageable 30GB of SSD soldered directly onto the board: this is where the operating system and programs live. Two 1TB hard drives, connected via SATA cables, are used as mass storage for the music, and while RAID1 (for drive redundancy in case of failure) is available, it's not used here. Instead, sticking to the maxim that „If something happens to the computer it will take down both drives anyway“, the user is reminded to perform external backups. IT's an argument that makes perfect sense: after all, RAID isn't designed as a backup strategy, and should never be treated as such.

Inside the Aria, it's immediately apparent that the power supply is more up Hi-Fi standards than those commonly

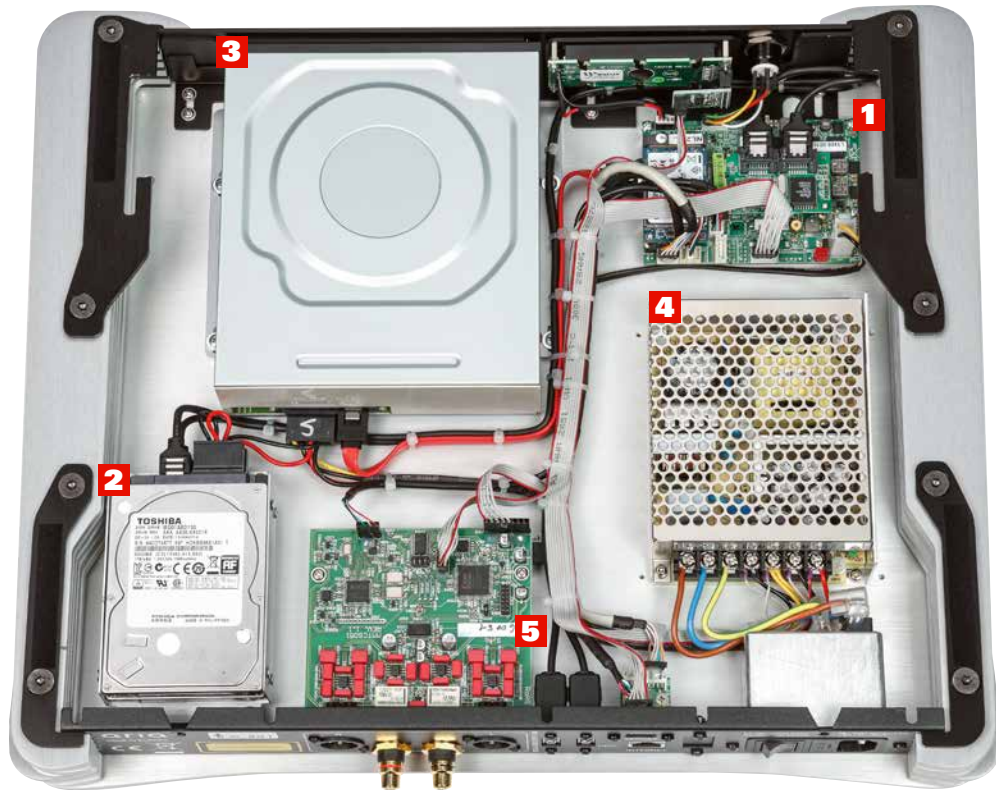


associated with than computers: it's carefully shielded and looks strikingly large in a computer context.

The final building block of the Aria is a TEAC optical drive, used as a CD ripper, although this isn't under the control of JRiver: although that software is very good for the task, DigiBit prefers to use dbPoweramp to rip, and with good reason. After all, this program is not only considered the best reading application, but with access to a total of five metadata bases – including SonataDB – it also delivers by far the most reliable album information.

Speedy CD ripper

During ripping, it soon becomes clear that DigiBit's designers not only have a good feel for high-quality software environments, but also never lose sight of practical considerations while fine-tuning them: the Aria reads media completely autonomously and imports files losslessly into its media library. The reader uses the fast „burst mode“, able to rip an entire CD onto the hard disk in about five minutes if there are no errors, and in our testing of about 40 rips it lived up to this claim. The time between inserting the CD and it being played from the hard drive never



▲ The interior of the Aria: **1**The brain of the server in the form of a tiny micro computer; **2** Music data is stored on the two hard drives **3**The cover of the CD drive. **4**As you can see from the screw-connections, this is certainly not a standard computer power-supply : instead it 's shielded, and meets HiFi specifications. **5**The main area of audiophile interest: the D/A converter and the analog output stage.

exceeded six or seven minutes, and in the subsequent listening tests all recordings sounded like the original.

Aficionados may interject at this point that dbPoweramp has mighty error correction capabilities, but they're not used as with them in use it can take 20 minutes or more to rip a CD. This would be quite annoying if you were planning to move your entire CD collection onto the server: with the Aria's ability to copy about 10 to 15 CDs per hour, even owners of huge media collection will eventually be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel!

However, if that use of burst mode really insults your audiophile sensitivities, you can always set the device yourself to dbPoweramp's „Secure“ or „Ultra-Secure“ mode (or have the dealer do it for you). After all, once you have access to the system via the remote desktop, you can find all the usual settings of the programs.

USB-DAC in da hous(ing) The Aria doesn't have a „sound card“ – at least in the classical sense: from the main board its audio signals (completely unprocessed thanks to WASAPI) are transmitted directly to the USB-DAC installed in the back of the housing. After converting the USB data into S/PDIF, the signal then passes through channel-separated D/A converters and into a symmetrical analogue stage feeding both XLR and RCA sockets.

The DAC chips process formats up to 32 Bit/384 KHz, meaning that, in return for their not insignificant investment, customers may rest assured that the Aria is future-proof. This is aided by the use of JRiver, which is one of the best-maintained media programs: if a new format appears it usually won't take long before

the American programming team has updated its software.

As a child of its times, the DigiBits server is also able to process DSD signals, SonataDB working with the DoP (DSD over PCM) protocol to translate the signals for the converter into S/PDIF data at 88.2 or 176.4 kHz.

For a music server, the Aria comes with an incredible multitude of possibilities, all of which are due to the versatile JRiver at its heart. The program not only handles media reproduction, but can also be used as a comprehensive UPnP/DLNA server, enabling other network clients or players on the home network to access its music data without restrictions.

If they are also DLNA-compatible, Aria can control also other network players as „external“ D/A converters, with the advantage that you can also 'drive' them with the outstanding „Aria Remote“ app, which – as we mentioned – is related to JRemote. From tag processing to the creation of playlists to configurability of the different views, this program has versatility beyond any other remote app, although to be able to enjoy these features you will have to get an Apple iOS device to host it.

Extra storage can be added to Aria by plugging in USB hard disks using the sockets on its rear. The same sockets can also be used to import data onto the internal hard disk of the Aria or, with a sufficiently large USB disc capacity, to back up its internal storage. All this can be set up without problems in the „Server management“ section of the remote app settings.

Neutral and dynamic


The Aria also convinced us in the sound booth: its sound is very linear, with no

coloration imposed on the music, and differences within a recording delivered faithfully. One could almost characterize it as „sober“ were it not for its dynamic abilities and bone-dry bass reproduction. No matter whether with the lowest register of a plucked double bass or a hefty bass drum, Aria pushes everything cleanly into the listening room, without any droning. And despite its neutral nature, this 'music computer' also displays vivacity and exuberance.

Put this sonic capability together with outstanding operation simplicity and flexibility, and clearly DigiBit's Aria is a more than successful debut.

Carsten Barnbeck

DIGIBIT ARIA



starting at € 4,500 (without D/A converter), Test model with 2 TB about € 5,220, Dimensions: 43 x 6.5 x 36 cm (W x H x D) Warranty: 2 years
Contact: Bowers & Wilkins
Phone: +49 5201/87170
www.bowers-wilkins.de

DigiBit hits it out of the park with Aria: thanks to its JRiver basis, this flawless music server is one of the most versatile on the market.


FEATURES

Audio server with integrated CD ripper, also usable as media player thanks to internal digital-to-analogue converters. It can control external DLNA streamers via the network, works as a UPnP-compatible NAS. Outstanding integration of media software (SonataDB) and remote app.

ACCESSORIES

XLR (balanced) and RCA phono outputs, LAN connection, 2 x USB for sticks and hard drives, plays all usual formats up to 32 Bit and 384 kHz, DSD via DoP, can convert all formats in real-time for external streamers; power cable, free remote app via Apple App Store, German manual included

STEREO - TEST

SOUND QUALITY	90%
PRICE/PERFORMANCE	
	
EXCELLENT	



▲ The back view shows the symmetrical audio layout of the server. Data storage can be connected to the two USB connections: any music on them is copied to the library of the Aria.