

DIGIBIT ARIA PICCOLO MUSIC SERVER REVIEW

Product Name: DigiBit Aria Piccolo

Product Type: music server

Price: \$3800.00

Reviewed By: Best Buys Audio & AV

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Distributor: Absolute Hi End

Who Sells What/Website: Aria



The CD may be sliding slowly away into a silvery grave, but what of the collections we have amassed since its arrival 30 years ago — all that music, all those discs in the attic, their pits slowly rotting, is it all to be lost? Of course not. Music fans the world over have spent the last decade ripping those discs into computers for playing direct from file, and loading onto smartphones. With music downloads also spiralling southward as people switch to subscription music services, these files and discs may be the last bastion of actual music ownership, short of the black stuff.

But how best to rip CDs? And how best to store the files? The Aria Piccolo, from Spanish company DigiBit, aims to offer a neat solution, and it turns out to be positively festooned with clever abilities.

Equipment

The is an attractive box, clearly high-end, yet adorned with just a single button, which turns it on. Inside is a hard drive, available in two storage configurations — with either a 2TB HDD or a 1TB SSD — but additional capacity can be added with an external HDD or a NAS. You fill the hard drive with your music, then you play it, controlling the Piccolo using its tablet-sized app for iOS or Android.

Sounds simple? Ah, it always does, but such networked servers often turn out to be bewilderingly complicated. The Piccolo could have been especially so — it doesn't only play music in one room, it can send music out through the home network to several zones at once. So what impressed us initially with the Piccolo was that everything just worked — we were playing, loading, ripping and even DLNA-pushing tunes around the house without even picking up the manual (which turned out to be excellent, with two versions for iOS and Android). And the app proved not only effective and attractive, but highly versatile. This is, believe us, most unusual.

As the price indicates, this is also a unit designed using high-quality construction and audio tech. For a start the casework is luxuriously all-aluminium, and fan-less, so where a NAS drive often has to be kept away from the music room lest it wheeze all over your music, the Aria is entirely silent. The Intel Celeron motherboard inside is labelled

“industrial grade”, while the optional DAC section is capable to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD256, outputting through analogue RCA sockets.

There is, however, an option to have no DAC inside, with the Piccolo serving music digitally either through your network or from its digital outputs into an external DAC — there are USB, optical and HDMI digital outputs. So with the different drive options, that’s four variations in all.

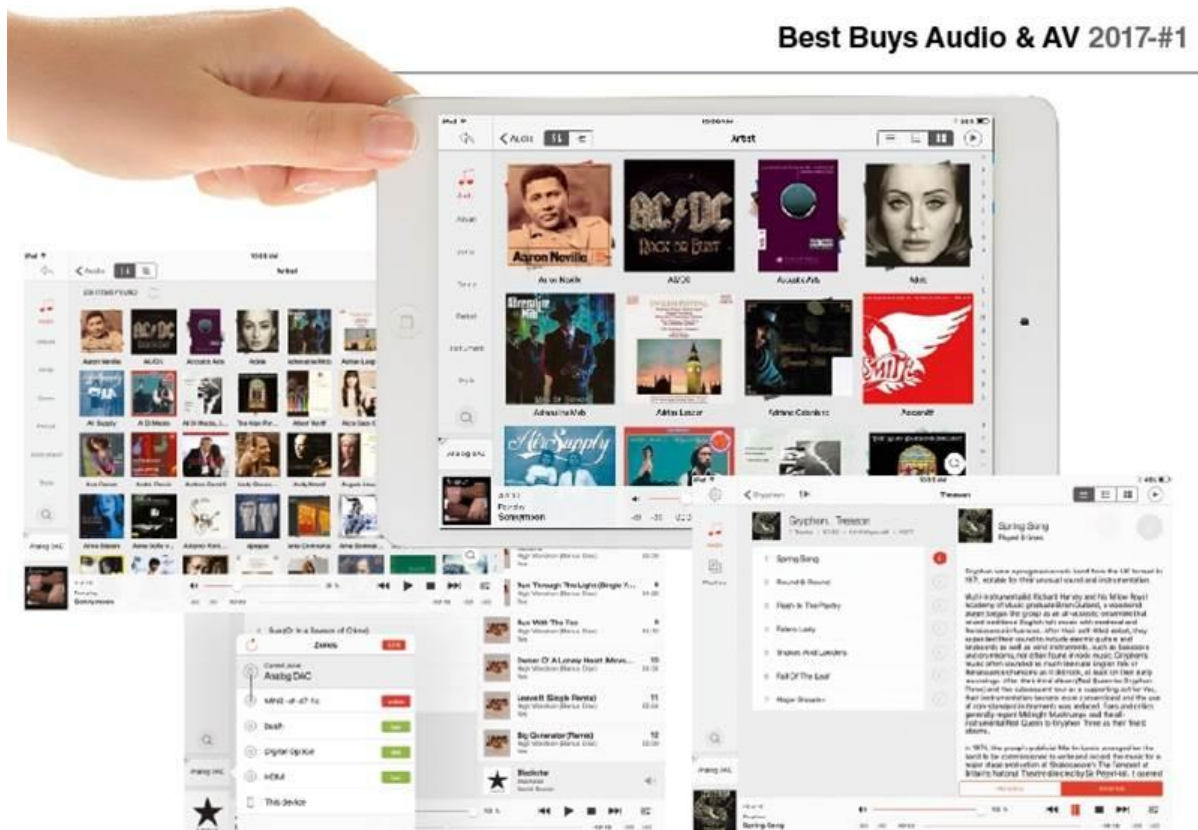


Performance

As noted, we were up and running in no time. We gave the Piccolo an Ethernet connection to our home network, which required no setting up at all, along with maximum reliability. Distributor Absolute Hi End had kindly pre-loaded a nice selection of FLAC, high-res PCM and DSD albums, and it was delightfully easy to add our own, via a variety of methods. The Piccolo’s drive popped up on our Mac via the network — we dragged in a high-res copy of David Bowie’s ‘Blackstar’, refreshed the app display, and there it was, ready to play. We also used the app to add music, navigating to a NAS drive, selecting albums and watching them copy over the network — again, immediately ready to play. There’s also the choice to link to the music, but not copy it over.

Finally we attached the supplied CD drive, a slimline ASUS model, to the rear USB sockets and shoved in a CD. We went through the app looking for a ‘rip’ button — you could choose the format (we chose Apple Lossless), but the app could see no music on the drive. Just as we were pondering this, the CD ejected — it had done all the ripping automatically. There’s helpful. You can also set it to rip to somewhere other than the internal storage.

Notably, everything arrived impeccably named, with artwork showing, and a host more information too, including artist bios. One of Aria’s strengths is that it not only uses AccurateRip, which promises 100% error-free rips by adjusting CD offsets for each specific drive model, it then accesses multiple premium music databases including AMG, GD3, SonataDB, Freedb and Musicbrainz, and merges metadata results from each of them, thereby promising “the best metadata results in the industry”.



The iAria app – pinch to enlarge artwork (top), push via DLNA (bottom left), excellent album info (right).

The app. That metadata, of course, feeds directly into the versatility of the app here, which is called iAria. It is up with the very best of its breed, having some lovely functionality such as the ability to pinch and zoom to change the size of album artwork (and therefore number of albums showing per screen), but most particularly in terms of information. Thanks to all that metadata, you can filter not only by artist and album but by genre, period (right), instrument, composer, conductor, soloists, even sampling rate — anything, in fact, for which there is a metadata field. And by going to an album and pressing the ‘i’ button, you can edit the metadata, even adding your own fields, apparently without limit. Geek heaven, then, and of particular value for classical music lovers — to rip a CD and have all this information instantly at your fingertips is a joy.

You add music to a queue (Aria calls it a playlist) by track or album — and again here, unusual versatility. You set your usual preference (e.g. ‘play next’, or ‘add to playlist’) so a quick tap on a song or album will do that, but press and hold brings up a longer menu, including the crucial ‘clear playlist’ option, and a Play Doctor, which has a crack at picking a connected playlist from your mass of metadated music. Playlists can be edited, saved and reloaded later.

Note that the app has an iPad version, Android tablet and phone versions, but none yet for iPhone — the free MConnect app for iPhone will control the Aria and even push from it to other devices, but MConnect is not a patch on the the quality of iAria (and it tried to sell us window shutters).

Output

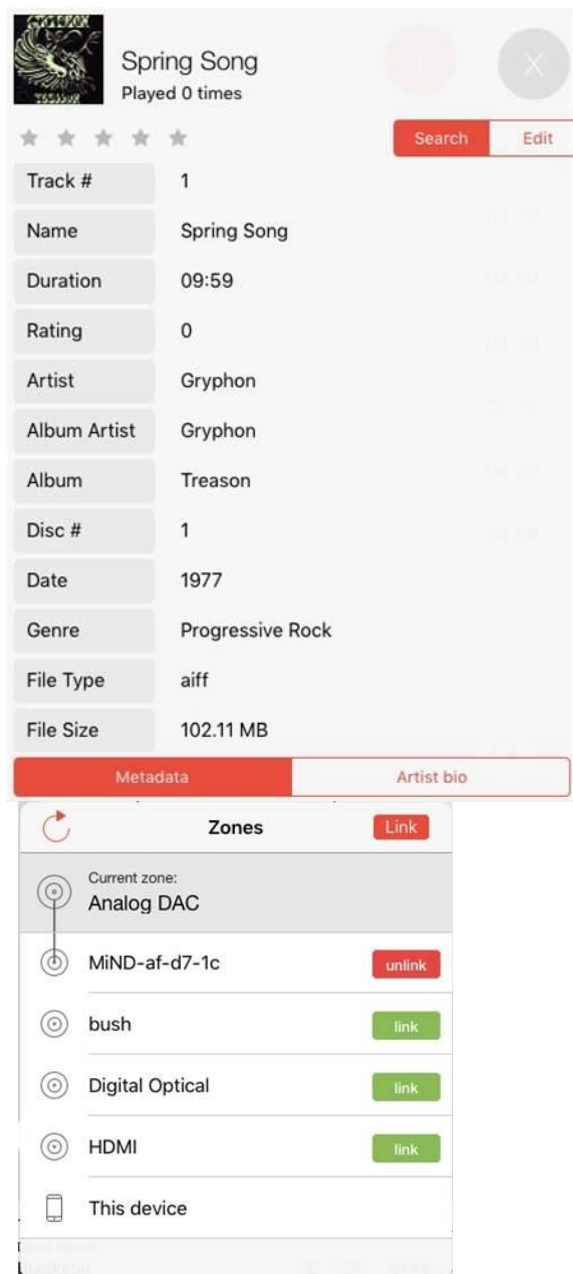
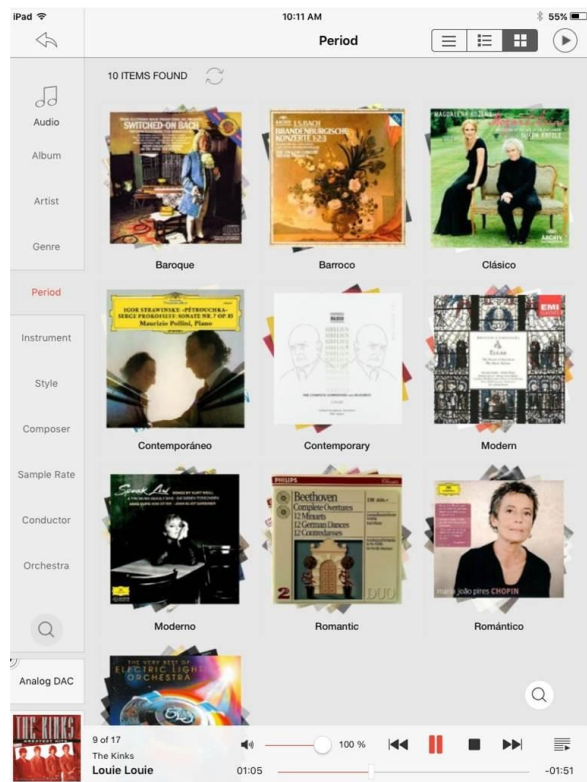
We could go on about the app, but enough — it’s great. How does the Piccolo sound? Excellent. It proved highly friendly across filetypes from low-level MP3s and AACs up to CD quality and beyond in WAV, FLAC, Ogg, Apple Lossless, AIFF and DSD to DSD256. We began listening through its analogue outputs from the Piccolo’s optional DAC stage. Remembering this DAC stage adds around \$750 to the cost of the digital-only Piccolo, it presented a good powerful and well rendered image, but things were definitely lifted a level when we exited digitally via optical into our regular standalone DAC (around three times that \$750). What joy of exploration to have such easy access to high-resolution files so superbly rendered. Our high-res collection tends to sit on a NAS drive left for special occasions; the Piccolo brought it all to our fingertips and had us hunting through these acquired delights, from the 24/96 Zeppelin FLACs that came with the recent boxsets to the rapid-fire dynamics of the Blue Man Group, endless high-res audio jazz and (Aria’s great strength via that metadata) classical selections. But information aside, it really had no genre weakness, it just served the data precisely as required.

Distributor Absolute High End also offers a performance upgrade via a \$519 high-end power supply unit from SBooster.

Multiroom

Indeed it is quite the whizz at data serving — the other huge ability here is that the Piccolo doesn’t just play music in one zone, it can easily send it beyond. Bottom left of the app you select either ‘Analog Dac’ or ‘Optical’ or ‘HDMI’ to indicate which output you are using. But you can use all of them, either linked or playing independent playlists (running concurrent playlists can get confusing, however). That’s potentially three zones going at once from the back panel alone.

But it’ll also serve over the network. Also listed under this panel of the app were two other networked devices we had under review at the time — a little \$250 Bush radio streamer, and a Moon Neo Ace. Both of these are DNLA capable (Aria should also see AirPlay devices, and vice versa), and could not only see the Aria as an available server, the iAria app could actually push music to them. The Moon seemed rather taken aback to have AC/DC suddenly thrust upon it from the network, but out came Angus, rich and raw, as



if directly connected. If a rendering device can't handle certain file types, the Aria can transcode files over the network to a lower stream rate.

And one final trick. Know how you can't listen to FLACs and other high-res stuff on your iPad? The Piccolo will stream over the network to your tablet, and you can listen on headphones. Even without transcoding turned on, our iPad apparently rendered high-res FLACs, presumably with the iAria app's help. Sit in bed with iPad and headphones, streaming from the Aria. Nice.

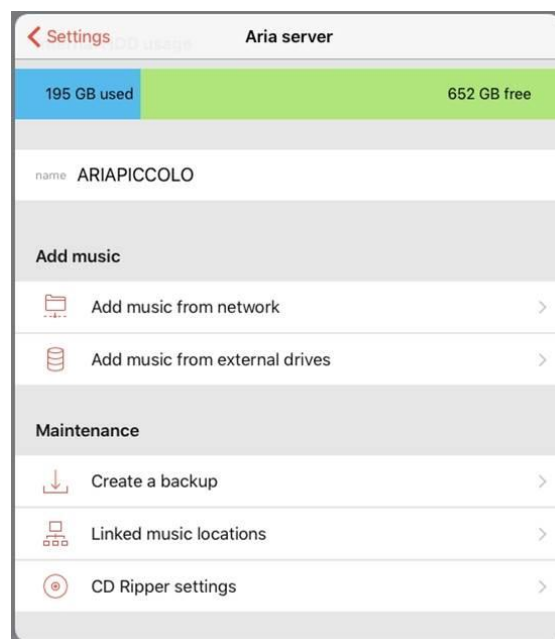
And, importantly, there's an easy back-up procedure available, detailed in the manuals.

We ended up with a single niggle. App control is excellent, but there's no alternative here. A small play/pause remote control, or a pause button on the unit itself, would be helpful when the phone rings. PC/Mac software would be reassuring for the longterm — will an app always be available for every device you might own in the future, for decades to come? PC control or browser-based software is more likely to work forever.

Conclusion

Flawless and intuitive operation, highly intelligent networking, a solution for high-res storage, ripping CDs, and serving all that music in a great many ways, simultaneously if necessary.

And if you already have a good DAC, standalone or in an amp, then the DAC-less Aria Piccolo looks a particularly attractive option. We shall miss it when it's gone.



DigiBit Aria Piccolo music server

Price: \$3800 (2TB HDD with DAC),

\$3050 (2TB HDD no DAC),

\$4430 (1TB SSD with DAC),

\$3660 (1TB SSD no DAC)

+ *Rips, stores and plays*

+ *Excellent app*

+ *Multiroom abilities*

- *Control is by app only*

Dimensions: 300 x 250 x 45mm

Weight: 3kg