

# Music in the Round #71

By Kalman Rubinson • Posted: Mar 11, 2015

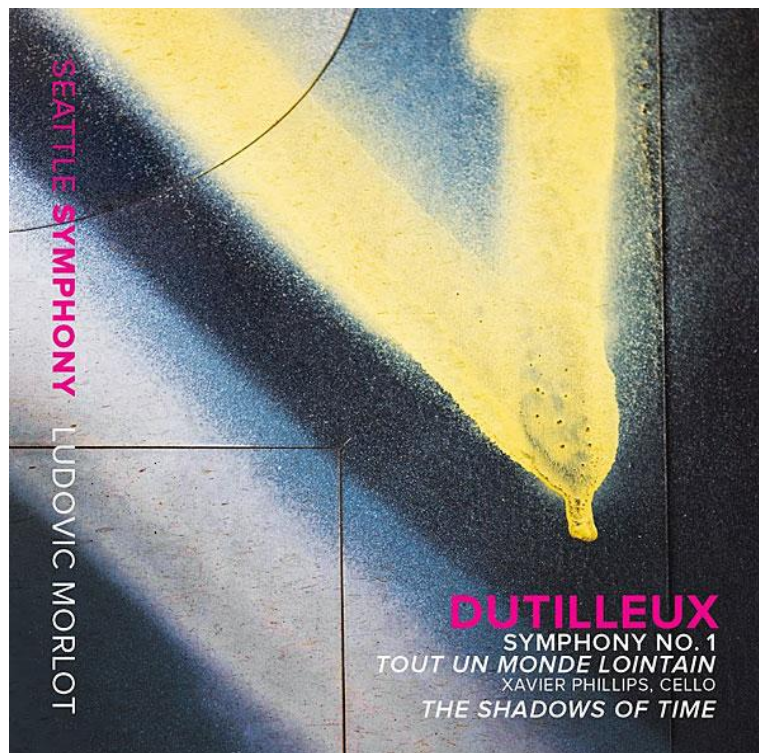


It seems that the rising popularity of downloading of music files is going to affect not only the distribution of high-resolution recordings but also the availability of multichannel recordings. Once freed from the technical, marketing, and distribution constraints of physical media, large hi-rez and/or multichannel files can more easily be made available. The established providers of music downloads, such as Acoustic Sounds, HDtracks, and iTrax in the US, are being joined by: sites that specialize in particular genres of music, such as the Classical Shop (UK); other sites, that focus on particular formats, such as Native DSD Music (Netherlands) and the Promates Music Store (DXD files, Denmark); and music producers, such as Blue Coast Music and the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO.org), that offer their work directly to listeners.

Its small size means that this market benefits even more from being liberated from physical media. An important example of this is that, with the appointment of Andris Nelsons as its new conductor, the Boston Symphony Orchestra has released his first recording with them on CD, but is offering on their website other formats, including 24-bit/88.2kHz FLAC (5-channel). This concert recording of Sibelius's Symphony 2 and Wagner's *Tannhäuser Overture* will probably not be released on SACD or Blu-ray Disc because of the market's smallness, but it's available as a download ([www.bso.org/merchandise/listing](http://www.bso.org/merchandise/listing)).

The Seattle Symphony Orchestra has taken a similar approach with an interesting and ambitious series under its new music director, Ludovic Morlot. So far, their half-dozen releases range from familiar to new music, and the latter are most exciting. I was particularly impressed with the music, performance, and sound of their recordings of music of Raskatov, Stravinsky, and Dutilleux; the last was nominated for Grammys for Best Orchestral Performance, Best Classical Instrumental Solo (by cellist Xavier Phillips), and Best Engineered Performance. These are available as CDs, as well as 24/96 FLAC downloads (<http://recordings.seattlesymphony.org/recordings>).

I've had experience with four music servers that support multichannel music files. The first was Oppo's BDP-105 or BDP-103, which opened the doors to multichannel DSD playback for many of us and continue to be viable options. There are significant limitations in the Oppos' interfaces with remote files via the network in terms of metadata, graphics, and sorting, and some users prefer sorting their files onto smaller drives connected directly to these players' USB ports. I've also worked with servers based on a fanless PC and on a stock Mac mini, using JRiver Media Center and a few other software players. These offer more options and, depending on the software used, widely ranging views and facilities with my NAS-based storage.



Most recently, I used (and bought) a Baetis XR2, a PC-based media server with many hardware and software customizations that made use and performance extremely satisfying. The only drawbacks to these three computer-based servers are related to their advantages. The user has complete control over included components and installed software, but that means the user also has the responsibility to maintain everything, as well as the power to mess it up. Baetis provides some insulation from the latter by preparing and testing the system, preconfiguring JRiver software, and providing excellent documentation as well as Internet support.

But the audio world is clearly split between fans of computer-based servers and those who want a preconfigured, prepackaged device dedicated to the single task of playing music. For the latter camp, the only options have been the Oppos, which also play discs and offer streaming services. The multichannel world needed a dedicated multichannel music player.

### **DigiBit Aria music server**

Enter DigiBit's Aria music server. DigiBit has been in the server business since 2008, and the debuts of its Aria and Aria Mini, and the Aria Kit for the Oppo BDP-105 and BDP-105D, mark the company's entrance to the hardware business. But when I went to their website, I found no mention of the playback of multichannel files, which was curious—the Oppos, after all, can do this. I was told that *all* Arias can play multichannel files. I passed on the Aria Kit, which requires an Oppo BDP-105D for DSD64 and DSD128, and I have only a BDP-105. I got an Aria without DAC because the DAC option is two-channel only, and I wanted to use the Aria's USB output for multichannel.

The Aria is impressively beautiful and solid. It looks like a stack of staggered, brushed-aluminum slabs interleaved with black areas. The fanless design, by the Spanish firm of Ochoa and Diaz-Llanos, is handsome and absolutely rigid, and requires no vents to disturb the lines, which sweep

around the sides to frame the front and rear panels. The front panel has only an on/off button, a disc drawer, and an open/close button. (DAC-equipped versions have a small window for a one-line display.) The rear panel has, in order from right to left, an IEC socket for AC, a power switch, LAN (RJ-45), USB (HDD) input and outputs, AES/EBU, S/PDIF BNC, S/PDIF RCA, and I<sup>2</sup>S (RJ-45).

Inside, my review sample of the Aria had: an N2600 64-bit processor running the Windows Home Server OS; 2GB of RAM; a 32GB solid-state drive (SSD) for the operating system, preloaded files, and programs; a linear power supply; and a 2TB hard-disk drive (HDD). I was surprised at the inclusion of the HDD—but other than when I put my ear directly on its case, the Aria was absolutely silent. The programs include heavily customized versions of JRiver and dBpoweramp, as well as proprietary software. Also included are a simple, one-page startup guide and a concise owner's manual. Configured as described above, the Aria costs \$6995. The options include: no internal HDD, a 4TB HDD, or a 2TB SSD; and/or a PCM/DXD (32-bit/352kHz) DAC with DSD64 and DSD128. A linear power supply is standard on all Arias sold in the US.

I connected the Aria to my home network and its S/PDIF output to the coax input on my exaSound e28 DAC, and powered it up. Then, from the Apple store, I downloaded to my iPad Aria's iAria app, which quickly found the Aria. A single finger tap later, I was playing music!

The entire process, from plugging in the first connector to the sound of music, took about 10 minutes, and required not a single glance at the manual. In fact, one can operate this system, with all its sophistication, simply by exploring the options in the iAria app. As a longtime user of JRiver Media Center, I could easily see the family resemblance, but DigiBit has set up JRMC in ways so inviting, useful, and intuitive that it's a model for all JRiver users to aspire to.

In addition, the iAria app automates the importing of files in either of two ways. First, it can import files from a USB or NAS device to its internal hard drive. Conveniently, iAria monitors how much of the HDD is used, but ultimately, even a 4TB disk won't suffice for hi-rez multichannel files, many of which run between 5 and 10GB each. iAria's second method offers the option of linking to the Aria's library individual files, directories of files, or an entire drive. This process was remarkably fast; using up to five Internet databases, including DigiBit's own Sonata DB classical database, the Aria gathers cover art and metadata (18 fields are the default). Within minutes, the added files, with full links to views of artists, albums, and genres, have been fully integrated into the library. The user can then compile multiple playlists, or add individual items to existing playlists. I can do this with JRiver, but not nearly so effortlessly.

Ripping discs, too, is painless. As a result of the close relationship between DigiBit and software provider Illustrate ([www.dbpoweramp.com](http://www.dbpoweramp.com)), the Aria makes use of dBpoweramp and RipNAS to make CD ripping automatic. Just put a CD in the Aria's drive and close the tray. That's it. The file—in FLAC, AIFF, or WAV format—and all associated metadata are on the Aria's HDD and in your library in minutes. If you want it somewhere else—say, on a remote computer or NAS—all the ripped files are in a shared folder accessible from any device on your network.

What about multichannel? Just as with DigiBit's website, the Aria's documentation makes no mention of multichannel, but that's okay—the Aria handles multichannel files with the same facility as it does two-channel. The only difference is that you need to ask DigiBit to install the appropriate ASIO driver for your device. As far as I know, the list of such devices is short, and currently limited to the [exaSound e28](#). I e-mailed DigiBit to request the exaSound ASIO driver, and was told to leave the Aria powered up and connected to the Internet. When I looked at it the next morning, there was my e28 on the list of available devices. As far as the files themselves were concerned, the Aria handled

them transparently: Play a stereo file, get stereo. Play a multichannel file, get multichannel. I played multichannel FLAC, WAV, DSF, DFF, DXD, and even ISO files. But the Aria's built-in ripper won't rip multichannel discs. Damn.

It's getting hard to discern differences among file servers, so long as their processing is fast enough to ensure that the data get to the DAC on time and unchanged—unless, of course, you want to apply some sort of processing, such as upsampling or format conversion. A file server should be the equivalent of a "straight wire with gain" or a straight data pipe. With the exaSound e28 DAC, the Aria sounded just marvelous. At no time were there any unwanted noises, not at file initiation, not between tracks, and not when the format changed. The sound's impact and immediacy were advances on the same files played through the Oppo, but that might have been due to differences between the Oppo and exaSound DACs, as well as processor speed.



In fact, the Aria music server was beyond criticism. My only complaints are about the absence of things that DigiBit seems to have intentionally excluded. First, unlike the plain-vanilla implementations of JRiver Media Center, the user can't reprogram how music formats are handled and processed. Only DigiBit can do this, and in my case, they had to. The review unit arrived with a default setup that upsampled all formats to DSD128 for USB. Some people recommend this, but not all DACs can accept DSD128, and not everyone wants it. The e28 makes glorious two-channel music with DSD128 output, but the Aria stuttered when I switched to multichannel: I got bursts of sound from the front L/R speakers, nothing from the others. DigiBit removed the default upsampling, and all was well for bit rates up to 352.8kHz! I suspect that the Aria's highly efficient N2600 processor was pushed to its limits by a task that's handily dealt with by the i5 and i7 CPUs used in modern PCs.

A related matter is that the Aria user can't introduce other software or add-ons to the system. The Aria runs so well, does its tasks so smoothly, and sounds so good that this is mostly a good thing. However, I think that good room equalization is almost a necessity these days, and there's no way to implement that with the Aria, nor am I confident that the N2600 could handle the additional workload.

But all that is tangential to DigiBit's goals for the Aria music server. Designed to be a straightforward music player, it is a delight to use and makes no compromise in sound quality. Fundamentally, the Aria's sound was as satisfying as that of other high-quality, computer-based servers—but unlike them, the Aria's design, and a user interface so sophisticated that it's simple, make it plug-and-play with network expandability.