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SEPTEMBER 2011

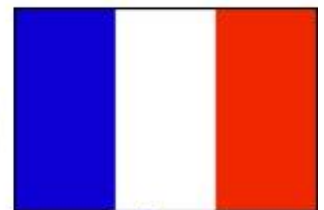


A SYNDICATED REVIEW FROM GERMANY



AUDIOMAT ARIA

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



FRANCE

This review first appeared in the September 2011 issue of [hi-end hifi magazine fairaudio.de](http://hi-end-hifi-magazine.fairaudio.de) of Germany. You can also read this [review of the Audiomat Aria](#) in its original German version. We publish its English translation in a mutual syndication arrangement with the publishers. As is customary for our own reviews, the writer's signature at review's end shows an e-mail address should you have questions or wish to send feedback. All images contained in this review are the property of fairaudio or Audiomat - Ed.

Reviewer: Jochen Reinecke

Sources: iPod Classic 80GB, Pure I-20 dock, Marantz SA 7001 CD/SACD, Yamaha CD-S 1000



Pro-Ject Xpression III with Ortofon OM 30 Super

Amplification: Funk LAP-2 preamp, Myryad MXA 2150 power amp, NuForce Icon, Trends Audio TA-10.2 SE, Yarland FV-34C III, Miniwatt M1

Loudspeakers: Neat Momentum 4i, PSB Acoustics Synchrony One, Nubert nuBox 101 with AW 441 subwoofer, DIY TL with F120A widebender

Cables: AVI Deep Blue interconnects, Kimber 4VS LS speaker cable

Review component retail: €4.650



To go properly French, I had real déjà-vu when, soft necklace of sweaty pearls draped across my forehead, I heaved 26kg of Audiomat Aria from its shipping carton. 'twas the spitting image of our March tester [Arpège](#). Same chassis, same triple spike interface, same semi-translucent dark acrylic fascia, same volume and source selector left and right. Instead of the central power mains however the Aria has two switches, one for power, one for mute. Closer inspection revealed another difference – five rather than four inputs. Et c'est ça as Hercule Poirot would say. How



about under the hood?

This gets lengthier. Like the stable mate the Aria run three ECC83S drivers into two EL34 per side. Even so the circuit isn't identical. Like the costlier Opéra Reference—reviewed [here](#) by Paul Candy—the Aria according to the spec sheet works in class A for 23 of its 30 watts whilst the Arpège transitions to class B at 10. The output stage operates in push/pull and for biwire fans there are two pairs of terminals per channel and 8-ohm as well as 4-ohm taps. Another difference over the smaller brother is circuitry not specific to signal buffering or amplification. The Aria gets remote over volume and mute and automated pre-heating.



Upon power-up the motorized Alps returns to counter-clockwise zero, the outputs get muted and the valves slowly ramp up over one minute before the circuit goes fully on line. Visual confirmation is via blue power LED. It blinks during the process before turning steady for go. The owner's manual recommends to use the 'mute' switch before changing sources. Apparently the designers are keen to coddle their (your) valves. They also claim to have gone the extra mile to combat microphony beyond the three grounding spikes with 'damping tack' applied to specific parts – *activated* damping tack as Arnd Rischmüller of German import house H.E.A.R. added. Though Aria and Arpège share a fundamental house sound which might warrant revisiting the latter's review, the Aria does eclipse the smaller sibling. But let's start at the beginning.



Strong of character. My audition began with Bill Callahan's "Riding for the feeling" from his latest *Apocalypse* effort. Clichés would call the song tailor-made for valve amps – suitably down tempo, sparse instrumentation. Think shrum-shrum acoustic guitar base, lone and lazily decaying e-guitar tones, a few Wurlitzer e-piano chords, mellow percussion and last but not least Bill Callahan's gristly baritone pipes. First impression and word in my note book? 'Live!' - very lively, very realistic. Callahan's cracked nearly inebriated vocals radiated unbelievable warmth despite their porous nature. The Wurlitzer piano seemed to be in the room. It was tacitly obvious how this electro-acoustic contraption was recorded via its built-in speakers, not by direct wire to the mixing console.

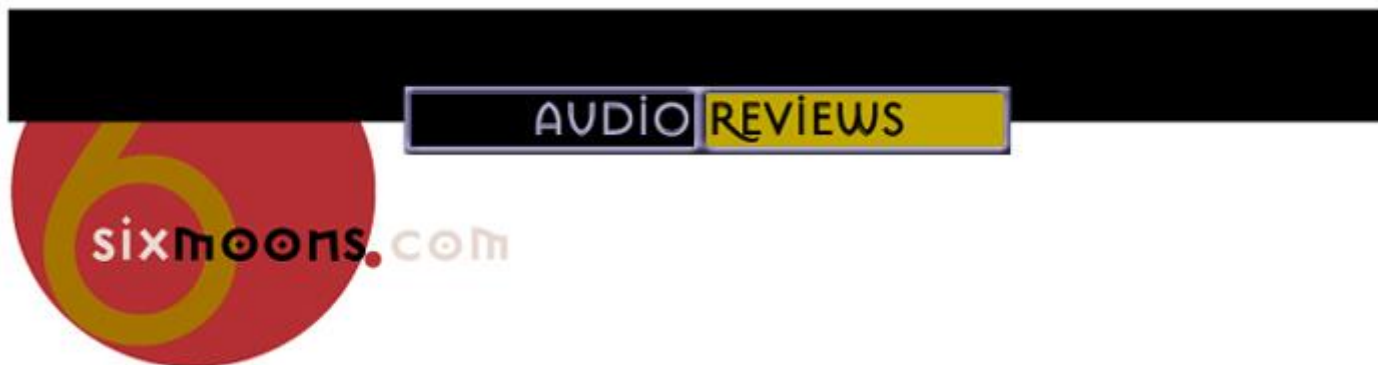


Each membrane flicker was audible, each echo trail of Wurlitzer's built-in tremolo effect rushed unimpeded through the room. The percussion meanwhile seemed nearly hyper realistic and particularly so the sheer breadth of nuance and thus believability of the various cymbal timbres. Even so these details summed into a harmonious picture for a successful merger of cohesiveness and precise individuation. I was surprised how much room the Aria granted each virtual source. Where other amps will nail down instruments more specifically into the panorama, this presentation



focused on exceptional airiness and live energetics. If this reads too amorphous, let's invoke a live performance where musicians aren't nailed to the floor like stiff salt figurines but *move*. And the Aria portrayed exactly that atmosphere of constant physical fluctuations. Very interesting.

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Set to shuffle mode, the obviously lossless and digitally tapped iPod progressed to Sting's "Fortress around your heart" from *The Dream of the Blue Turtles*. From the first guitar picks I was on alert like a drawn bow since this 1985 production in retrospect is quite wet and dense to be little fun with overly analytical modern-day hifi. I was thus pleasantly surprised just how good this number worked with the Aria. Granted, it couldn't completely transcend the enveloping overripe hall sound from what now seems like the Stone Age of digital reverb. Even so the Aria seemed mostly correct. This reading is dynamic and imbued with a certain *pulsation* across a smaller but well-lit stage. Things also get quite pressurized particularly during the refrains which carry noticeably stronger vehemence. Surprisingly effective! This seems a perfect opportunity to bring up reader letters by Caspar Holz and Matthias Baumgarten who kicked off an interesting forum discussion about whether it's really an asset or liability when components render inferior recordings more listenable.

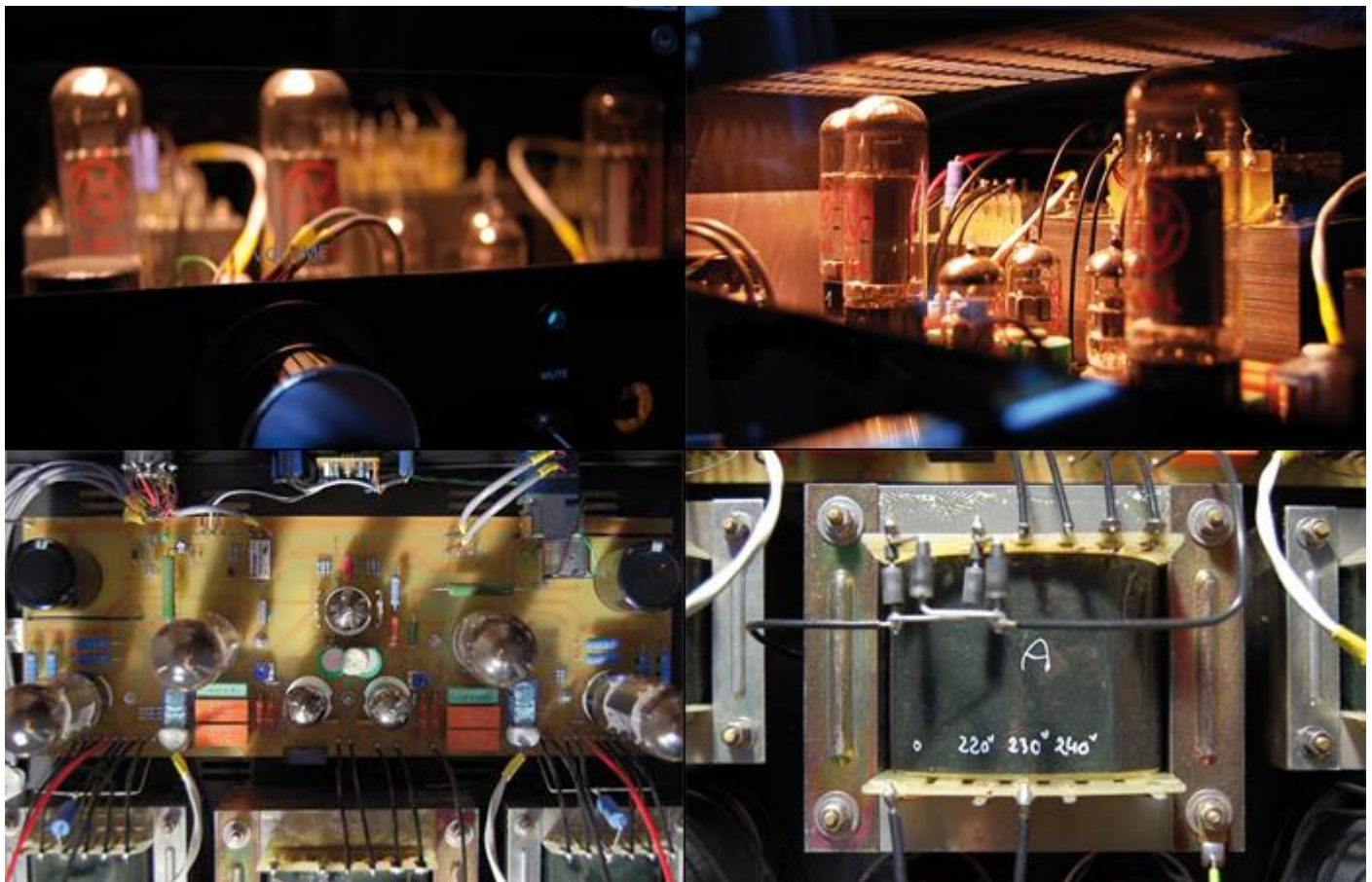


Caspar opined that "a truly superior machine will sound at least acceptable with a poor recording to not completely kill the pleasure of listening to it". Truly? Is a hifi machine's job to reveal a production with all its shortcomings – or should those shortcomings get 'harmonized' sufficiently to make access to pleasure more easy? It's not merely a tough question. It must remain an open question. It moves straight into the grey zone between studio and living room. The studio listeners—recording engineer, producer, tone master—*rely* on detecting the smallest of flaws. They need molecular resolution and unconditional candor. In my own home I'd rather be less conscious of flaws. But this decision is purely personal. I can merely note that the friendly 'equalizing' nature of the Aria had me finally listen to



the entirety of Sting's "Fortress around your heart" where I usually hit next as soon as that awful soprano sax enters.

From Sting I advanced to the melancholy but acoustically more complex diet of Beirut's "Port of Call" from their latest *Rip Tide* album. Here various instruments vie for space around the singer, from glockenspiel to ukuleles, guitars, piano, various woodwinds and clanking percussion. Immediately apparent was that the clearly not upscale glockenspiel did sound like a glockenspiel but also felt quite cheap. Metallic bite awoke childhood associations but the wonderfully lengthy decay still made it worthwhile. The guitars and ukuleles wove an undulating rhythm carpet to ideally support Zach Condon's plaintive voice which over the Aria acquired real 'fat', substance and sonority. As I'd already noted with Bill Callahan, the Aria particularly with voices really knows how to flesh out skeletons. Whilst this occurs without overt nonlinearities, clearly the midband undergoes a special transformation or 'treatment'.



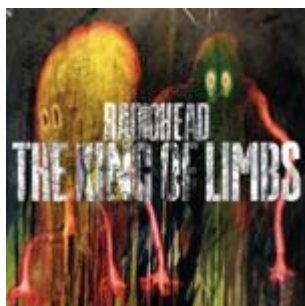


When the piano enters halfway into the piece, the stage actors seem to literally move back a bit to make room. This results in a truly room-filling width/depth panorama. As with Bill Callahan the performers again didn't seem nailed to the stereorama which instead seemed to *breathe*. The core mantra was highly organic live vibe. Time for the CD player and Tame Impala's "Desire Be, Desire Go", a contemporary Neo-Psychedelic band which starts where Can and Hawkwind of yore left off – driven hypnotic fare with various effects, plenty of fuzz pedals and an occasionally quite off-kilter doped-out hallucinatory atmosphere.



The Aria captured this groove with gusto. The guitars which here are exceptionally 'altered' with unusual EQ selections nearly glued themselves to my cochleas whilst the Aria blew them into the room with astonishing force. No wall-flower valve ampino here, no lame damping factor. This lass knew how to hit the gas when called for. Most tube amps fight with a reputation to walk their music on a long leash. It means things are chilled and relaxed but lack true punch and *gumption*. Macrodynamically the Aria would seem to defy this notion. Limitations occurred more tonally. The low bass was coiled and quick but not fundamentally saturated and compared to my usual pre/power reference of Funk LAP-2 and Myryad MXA 2150 less potent in amplitude.

Most impressive on this number is the treatment of the soundstage. From the ingredients on hand the Aria fashioned a nearly claustrophobic 'box' from whence the guitars blew their wild storm. Wouldn't this seem to contradict the two earlier experiences of opulent spaciousness? Quite so. That's my excitement in a nutshell. Though it might read somewhat esoteric, the Aria seemed to tune into each musical piece individually to 'interpret' it in an exclusive reading rather than clinically serve up the raw facts. Or perhaps the truth is closer to *somehow* underlining the intent of the artists and producers which has the listener feel more connected to their meanings and ambitions?



Radiohead's "Codex" was next. Here a piano plus strangely 70's retro synth pedals accompany Thom Yorke's voice whilst a lone synthetic bass drum provides a minimalist heart beat below. This became another lesson in realism. Thom York's throat turned into its own bona fide instrument. Each nuance, each hoarse resonance, each shift from chest to head voice was tracked so strongly by my Neat Momentum 4i speakers that a feeling of getting entranced was a given. Though voice and piano central occupy the same frequency range, their tone colors are wildly dissimilar. Here even the synth clouds felt most accurate to form a kind of acoustic/electronic yin/yang with the concert piano.



Intermediate conclusion. Audiomat's Aria is possessed of a quick but on substance not fully developed low bass which transitions seamlessly into a highly nuanced deep-color midband which nearly glows from within. In the treble the Aria is enormously *variegated*. Here I envision my colleague/editor Jörg Dames picking up the phone. Couldn't I please rephrase this with more scientific hifi-ish concise jargon? Nope sir!



The Aria is neither silken nor lit up. She commands *both*. This is particularly apparent on percussion and cymbals. Just a ride cymbals spans quite the gamut of tone colors contingent on how it is activated. A feathery brush elicits silky mids, a stick—perchance even aimed at the center—gets bright and sharp, a fuzzy-headed mallet hooded and growly. The Aria's astonishing variability serviced these and all intermediate timbre values to portray incisive bite with a cheap glockenspiel whilst getting contrarily mellow when called for.



Since I was inspecting percussion, the audition segued into the Tied & Tickled Trio's "Bungalow". This piece consists nearly exclusively of drums, bass and brass which act as background color first before later peeling out into more and more ecstatic solos. How the Aria dealt with this was very surprising. I could quite literally walk into the percussion section as though I'd stretched it apart on an iPad and drop-dragged it into the room. The depth perspective was awesome, treble resolution superb, nuances beyond astonishing. Snare trills, rim shots and ghost notes all occupied 3D space and even macrodynamic scaling was fun when the Weilheimer gents prime the pump halfway through. I sensed no restraint. Quite the contrary. The Aria dished out this free improv between drums and brass with true dynamic élan. Great!



Let's stick with loudness. The Münsterian band The Ghost of Tom Joad's last three albums could always be counted on for high-pressure precise Rock with attitudinal vocals, massive guitar broadsides and whipping drums. "Hibernation is over" starts with the hand brake engaged and a somewhat reluctant verse before converting into a happily massive refrain. I nearly cracked a grin since the prior visiting amp was conceptionally the near polar opposite. The Abacus Ampollo is a high-power transistor muscle affair with *very* steep feedback and naturally ultra-low damping factor. To juxtapose the sonic distinctions, I'll attempt a visual.

With the Ampollo The Ghost's music had maximum shove and the most intense aggression just as a live concert at Berlin's punk club Wild at Heart would have it. The Aria maintained the live concert atmosphere but a roadie had seemingly snuck in a plush Persian carpet before the band took to stage. Things did rock but were comparatively tamer and smoother. This was most apparent at the extremes of the tonality scale, i.e. on bass and percussion. Bass runs were quick as lightning but less massive. The kick drum tickled the brain but didn't punch the stomach. The aggressively struck half-open hi-hat had scalpel exactitude with the Abacus whereas the Aria rendered it as fluidly driven.

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AUDIO REVIEWS

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The Aria and large-scale classical music are perfect bed fellows. Using Bruckner's *3rd Symphony* for a test ride, the French integrated proved equal to the exploded bandwidth of luscious strings, martial kettle drums, elegiac solos and hard-as-nails brass tutti. The brilliant handling of individuated ring-out behavior of specific instruments and sounds made for opulent satisfaction also on smaller ensembles and chamber music. If you enjoy a concert hall atmosphere within your own four walls, the Aria happily complies with your wishes. How about various speaker loads where valve amps get pickier? I was positively struck by not having a speaker on hand that proved mismatched. My work horse and foundation for this review was Neat's Momentum 4i whose isobarically loaded woofers appreciate *current*. Save for certain small LF output limitation which I deemed primarily power-related, this combo played like a charm.

PSB's Synchrony One is voiced somewhat darker and more potent down low which did benefit overall incarnation factor even though fine resolution on the very top was slightly diminished unless I toed in the speakers straight at my ears. A true orgy of mutual admiration came by way of widebanders. This breed was represented by a DIY transmission line with F120A. Whilst here one duly forgets about low bass altogether, dimensionality wasn't of this world. Here the overused term *holography* had to be rescued from its carefully locked-up drawer. Awesome!

It's plainly worthwhile to experiment with the 4/8-ohm taps regardless of official speaker designation. As designer Norbert Clarisse confirmed by fax, you can't screw up the amp even with 2-ohm speakers hanging off the 8-ohm terminals. What transformer-coupled valve amps generally don't appreciate is being run without a load. But even here Audiomat's push/pull transformers are quite impervious if you don't starve them for too many hours. In general I had a preference for the 8Ω connection regardless of load. It sounded more dynamic, faster and richer in detail.

Finally some context within and without the Audiomat product range. Given a choice, I'd take the Aria over the Arpège. Whilst 50% costlier, there's an audible increase of color saturation in the mids and highs – and remote control is a lovely bonus. Compared to transistor muscle in this price range, the Aria wears its *tubulosity* on the



sleeve. Airiness and elastic 'freedom' are accompanied by a certain casualness in matters of staging precision. A better amp applies better sorting but can also seem more static than the inherently fluid and flexible Aria.



This showed both versus the Abacus Ampollo and my house combo of Funk/Myriad. After many days of Aria auditions I recabled the latter to encounter more macrodynamic control, stereophonic separation and a certain hot foot on the gas pedal – but also a narrower color palette and (here comes the stereotype) less *warmth*. For a very unscientific explanation, I sit bolt upright with my reference gear, perhaps even slightly forward to brace myself for the aural winds. With the Aria I'm leaning into the sofa and detect yearnings for a stiff drink. Audiomat's Aria is exceptionally musical, rich of detail and particularly color. The modest power rating conceals sufficient reserves for more than adequate room volumes. It's also quite the looker. Action items would be Rock, Jazz, acoustic, semi acoustic and particularly classical music. Steely thunder and lighting by way of massive loud bass and disco beats are obviously better served elsewhere.

Psych profile:

- An altogether clean and neutral progression across the audible range with a slight depression in the lowest



registers.

- Mids and highs are well above average in detail, plasticity and colour saturation.
- A great foible for highly varied sound staging which supports individual productions by approaching hyper realism from small rooms to cavernous concert halls.
- Depth layering is very realistic and contains plenty of air and space around each virtual sound source. Competing amps in this price class will apply sharper image localization however.
- Micro dynamics are excellent, macro dynamics above average for valve amps but well below party animals.

Facts:

- Concept: Integrated tube amp
- Dimensions and weight: 445x180x380mm (WxHxD), 26kg
- Trim: Black
- I/O ports: 5 x RCA in, 1 x RCA fixed out, 4/8Ω speaker terminals, biwire pairs
- Power consumption: ca. 150 watts at idle, no standby
- Warranty: 2 years
- [Website](#)

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