Leema Sirius digital music streamer/server

by Jason Kennedy

Leema missed a trick when choosing the name for this their first digital streamer/server. It seems clear to some of us that it should have been called the Leema Prima Streamer. As it is the Sirius is in Leema's Constellation range so probably needed to adopt an astronomical appendage, and they chose the brightest star in the night sky, but you probably knew that.

So what is a Sirius? Well, on the one hand it's a network audio server with inputs and outputs on RJ45 connectors for streamers, and a USB output for DACs. So far so normal. What differentiates the Leema from most of its competitors is the presence of a built-in digital to analogue converter and concomitant analogue output stage. The majority of servers don't include this facility and have to be used with some form of DAC, and as Leema have a strong track record with the DACs in their CD players it must have seemed like a cunning plan to build one into a server.

But first they had to build a server, a rather specialised task that would be a headache and a huge drain on R&D reserves if attempted from the ground up. Instead Leema went to Innuos, a specialist in the field whose own servers have been making quite significant waves over the last few years (see my review of the Innuos Statement in the January issue, 167). The Sirius is based on an Innuos Zen Mk2 server but replaces a lot of the key elements with Leema tech. They have built a new linear power supply for the drive motors and added a DC power supply for the heart of the machine, the motherboard, as well as doubling the RAM of the base unit. This is a flexible server in terms of storage and you can buy it with anything from 2TB to 8TB of HDD capacity in 2TB increments. Adding HDDs increases the price but means that almost any library can be accommodated. Innuos fanciers can tell its origins by looking at the arrangement of ethernet and USB ports on the back panel but the biggest tell-tale is the my.innuos web interface that gives you access to the server's various features and allows editing of metadata and the importing of music files. I have had issues with this interface in the past but either it's got better or I've got used to it (or both) because it now seems to work effortlessly.

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There are a few ways of getting your music onto the Sirius' hard drives, the most straightforward being slotting a disc into the front of the box and letting it copy the music files (as WAV or FLAC rips) whilst looking up the appropriate metadata. If you already have lots of files these can be imported from a PC, NAS, or USB drive using either the quick import option, which just accepts the files as they are, or via a slower method that checks all the metadata and puts problem files into a quarantine folder for you to sort out. Controlling what the Sirius plays can be done with either iPeng on Apple devices or Orange Squeeze for Android; a more appealing but pricey option is to run the Roon Core on the server and use that excellent interface. If you find that control apps have a tendency to make you want to lob the tablet at the system Roon can be a great solace. That said, those after Internet radio are better off with the cheaper apps as Roon is not the most straightforward when it comes to adding stations. Both systems are good for online music services such as Tidal.

Leema chose a new ES9038PRO ESS Sabre DAC for Sirius and have gone on to integrate it in their latest products, and designer Lee Taylor is obviously impressed. The ESS Sabre DAC supports PCM up to 32-bits/384kHz and DSD256. If you want to use an existing DAC adding them to the XMOS USB output will give it a good chance of delivering the goods, but this does rather undermine the point of Sirius. If you just want a server with USB output, get a standard Innuos Zen, a Mk3 Zen at that. Obviously, the changes that Leema incorporates into this unit will give it an advantage as a server, but it's really the integrated DAC and output stage alongside the fancy casework that you are paying for. And as usual with Leema, the case is very nice with silver anodised aluminium for the front and top with black fins down either flank, not that this server needs much cooling.

In the system I initially used the Sirius as a server connected by Ethernet to an AURALiC VEGA G1 streamer/DAC where it produced a shining, open, and fluent sound with lots of tonal and dynamic contrast when playing Brendel's *The Complete Beethoven Sonatas* [Philips]. The clarity and involvement level are both at a high level, which makes this streamer an obviously superior source to most disc spinners. Moving over to the onboard DAC, which involves a quick change on the my.innuos dashboard, the results were a lighter, less fulsome sound with good timing and an appealingly open balance. But the more I listened to it the better it sounded because the Sirius has a lightness of touch that suggests it adds very little to the sound. That doesn't mean that the bass is light, no sir, drums for instance are very solid and have a vitality of presence that puts them right in the room with you. Brass has colour and texture alongside a rhythmic coherence that holds the music together in very engaging fashion.

Beethoven's 5th lacked a little of its awesomeness, it has to be said, but was found not wanting in depth and height of scale. The Michael Wollny Trio's live *Wartburg* [ACT] album is likewise expansive and very clean; it could perhaps have a ▶

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state music server with HDD storage and CD ripper

Storage: Minimum of one 2TB SSD hard drive

Network connection: RJ45 Ethernet

Digital Outputs: RJ45 Ethernet direct, USB 2.0

Back up connection: USB

Analogue outputs : balanced XLR, unbalanced RCA

Formats supported: WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, OGG Vorbis, AAC, MP3, DoP (DSD over PCM)

CD rip format: WAV or FLAC (zero compression)

Streaming services supported: Qobuz, Tidal, Spotify Premium

User Interface: Web browser, third party control applications

Other Features: UPnP server, DLNA device compatible

Dimensions (H×W×D): 110 × 440 × 310mm

Weight: 11kg

Price: £3,995

Manufacturer: Leema Electro Acoustics Ltd
URL: leema-acoustics.com

Distributor: Mian UK
URL: mianuk.com

▶ bit more dynamic oomph but is very involving nevertheless. And when the drums come in on 'Big Louise' it's positively diverting, such is the power and weight. It's also evident that the Sirius is a very quiet device and easily reveals the pristine nature of the recording. It clearly doesn't exaggerate dynamics for effect, yet when the real thing comes along you know all about it. A good illustration of this is that you can play louder than usual without any discomfort, as this recording encouraged me to do; distortion levels are clearly very low. It also reveals the quality of recordings with considerable ease and John Martyn's 'Head and Heart' [*BBC Radio 1 Live in Concert*, Windsong] is absolutely sublime, simple but very effective, while 'Company' by Patricia Barber [*Modern Cool*, Premonition] has superb bass textures if not quite the excessive weight that is usually the case. The cymbals shimmer beautifully and there's no glare from the trumpet; then, the drum solo comes along and you can't help but be inspired by the energy it puts into the room.

Given that the Sirius has a DAC onboard it would be useful to have a couple of inputs, these would need a selector of course, which adds to complexity and price but would make it a more flexible device. Putting the DAC in with a server seems like a logical approach as it removes digital cabling from the system, which is generally a good thing and shortens signal paths in the process. The Sirius is also one of the cleanest digital sources I've heard in some time; the counterpoint to this is that some will prefer a heavier more obviously powerful balance than it offers. That said, it responds very well to bigger systems and higher playback levels; the cleaner the signal, the easier it sounds at volume of course, and this goes a long way to offsetting the relative restraint at quieter levels.

The advantages of combining a server and DAC are clear in the Sirius, not least in the neutrality of the signals it delivers because it is a very low-colouration device. The DAC choice is a factor here, as is the server itself; the fact that Innuos have moved onto the next generation may well mean that Leema have to follow suit in due course. But that should only mean things get better if the feedback I'm hearing about the latest models is anything to go by. It also cuts down on boxes, cables, and clutter: all you need is an ethernet cable and analogue interconnects to the amp and Bob's your mother's brother. Great digital sound just got a little easier and there's a lot to be said for that. ✚