



## Aavik S-180 and D-180

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Aavik is part of the same Danish company that makes Borresen loudspeakers and Ansuz electronics, cables and vibration control devices and the motto within this triumvirate appears to be: kill noise. They see noise as the enemy of good sound and there's a very strong argument for this theory in my book. Noise that's produced mechanically and electrically as well as noise picked up from radio frequencies and on the mains is the plague of digital audio in particular but is a major limiting factor across the board when it comes to reproducing music.

In an attempt to combat mechanical noise Aavik have dramatically restructured the majority of its electronics products by using the same casework for every component in a 14 strong range across a wide price band. The top 580 line models looks more attractive/expensive because the cases have a titanium X on the top that reaches all the way across the box, but the 180 models look very good as they are. Using the same casework across many models has obvious advantages in economies of scale and in Aavik's case where the resonant character of metal is considered a bad thing, it's probably more important. The cases are made of a composite material that is probably based on HDF but has a very good fit and feel, the sculpted sides look particularly good and the black finish contrasts nicely with the feet on the corners.

The feet are machined with a ring shape channel underneath so that they can interface with ceramic balls supported by Ansuz Darkz isolation feet. You can also stack the 180 components using three ceramic balls between each top cap and foot which means only one set of Darkz feet is required for a whole system. And given that there is a phono stage and integrated amplifier alongside the streamer and DAC considered here, that makes for a considerable saving and a cool stack of gear.

These components are notable for large displays which in the case of the D-180 DAC is limited to the name of the selected input, the S-180 however can reveal details of the music it's streaming in large type. With names longer than the display can reveal in one go this information scrolls across but only once, it would get a bit distracting if it was constantly on the move. In fact in a less than bright room these displays are a bit too much of an eye-catcher, you can dim them to 40% or 10% but given that all the info you need is on the control app it's quite nice to set them so that the displays disappears after a chosen period of seconds. Then all you

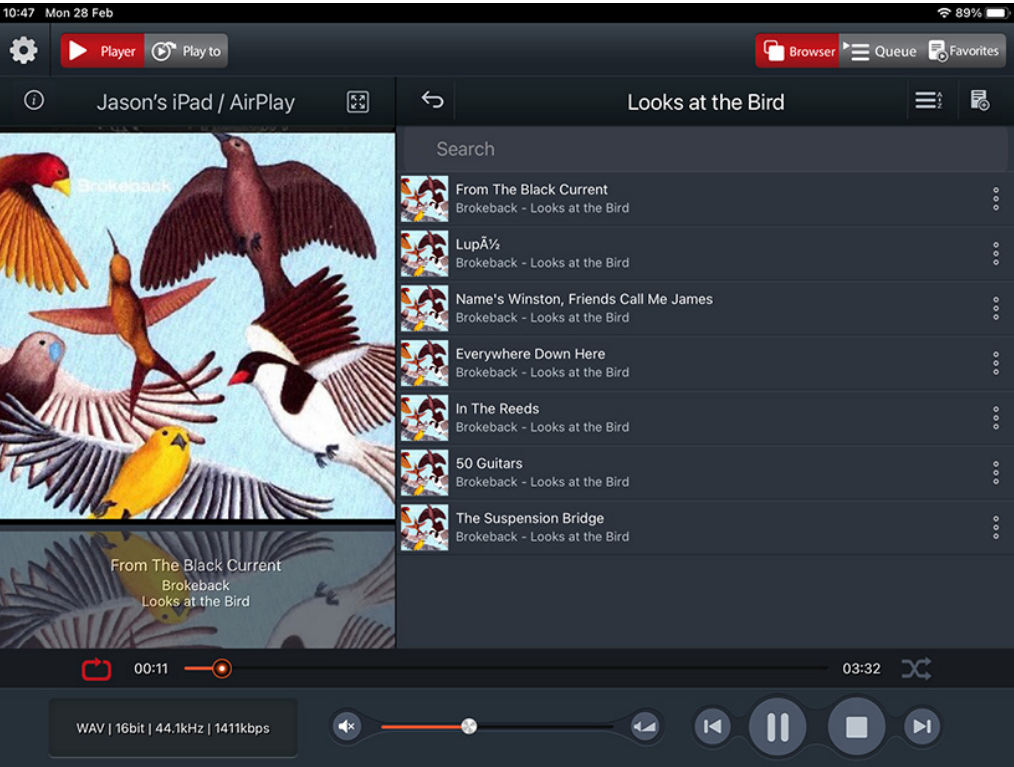
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get is a single red dot on the bottom right; when the unit is in standby that dot switches over to the other side.

The Aavik electronics share the same remote control, that is, each one has its own Apple IR handset with which it is paired. In theory you could pair two components with one handset but that would probably result in confusion, which happens anyway if you have several 180 series components because each Apple handset looks identical. In my system I have a Townshend Allegri Reference preamplifier which is also controlled by the same handset, I



ended up putting a sticker on that one and leaving the Aavik ones in their transparent sleeves so that I could tell which was which. In practise you don't need to use the remotes for the streamer and DAC very often, if you have multiple digital sources then the DAC one would come in handy and it is possible to control volume with the streamer so you could end up wielding on a regular basis. Fortunately the Apple is a lovely handset albeit easy to lose down the side of the sofa.



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The Aavik S-180 streamer is unusual because it doesn't have USB among its roster of outputs, there are two USB sockets on the back but they do not emit a digital signal and are solely for USB drives or dongles. There are only two digital outputs in fact, Toslink optical and coaxial on a BNC connector, and the latter is clearly Aavik's preferred method for signal transmission. BNC is the only true 75 Ohm connector for coaxial cables, regular RCAs produce an impedance mismatch that while it doesn't stop them working is a compromise that limits performance. The S-180 also has line, analogue, outputs so there's an onboard DAC, making it a standalone digital source. Network connection is via ethernet or over wi-fi, I avoided the wireless route and connected it to an English Electric data switch with a length of Melco ethernet cable.

The Aavik control app is based on the popular mConnect platform that a number of companies are using, this implementation however is better at displaying artwork than some I've tried and worked seamlessly throughout the review period. Unlike a system like Auralic's Lightning DS it relies on the server within the network storage which puts more emphasis on the quality of that computer so results will vary depending on whether you use a NAS or a dedicated music library from Melco or Innuos for instance.

The D-180 DAC is more conventional in its connectivity and offers two optical and two BNC coax inputs alongside USB, the only obvious omission is AES/EBU on an XLR socket which is a popular connection in some quarters. Despite the available real estate on the back panel both digital and analogue connections are a little crowded on one side, presumably this is a sound quality choice based on layout within the box. On the analogue output front there are no XLR connectors either, just a pair of good quality RCA phono sockets, which in my experience sound better than balanced connections unless cables are very long.

I asked Aavik electronics engineer Frits Dalmose about the connection choices in these two units and he said: "We follow what our ears tell us. Where most manufactures go for complicated solutions we do in most cases prefer the simpler construction. Unfortunately, this does also mean trying to fight the tide. So many enthusiasts see XLR connectors and balanced designs as the 'professional' way. Balanced connections can have their advantages, but that is only in AV, where you need long runs off interconnects. From a musical perspective, it does not make sense to double the number of components used – especially not when the negative and the positive sides of the balanced circuitry need to be precisely matched if you do not want to lose out on timing in the music. And as you know - two circuits are never 100% matched.

"We do not provide all the possible connections. Things like AirPlay and Chromecast have been rejected even though they are part of the software/hardware package we use and pay for. They have been left out simply because of their negative influence on the performance. Furthermore, if you want more inputs and/or outputs you also need to be able to switch the signals. Which is absolutely no good for performance neither."



### Sound quality

I used a fairly ancient BNC coax cable from Tom Evans to get the signal from the S-180 to the D-180 and placed both units on separate glass shelves of a Townshend rack. Glass and metal is not generally a happy combination and I was inclined to put something soft under the metal feet but as Aavik are anti damping I restrained myself on this front. The sound produced was vital and alive with strong immediacy and impressive low level resolution; all the effort that Aavik makes to keep noise out of their electronics clearly pay off in this respect. Image depth was



strong and I was struck by the quality of Doug McCombs' guitar tone on the track Everywhere Down Here (Brokeback), maybe there's something in BNC connections that (nearly) everyone else is missing. A more familiar track in Pitter Patter (Rymden) was impressively detailed, to the extent that it seemed as if other transport/DACs are masking things. All the instruments, keyboard, bass and drums had a fresh vibrancy that seems apt given the live nature of the recording but which is not always apparent, even on similarly priced hardware. I was using Bowers & Wilkins new D4 series 802 loudspeakers which clearly help and quite possibly made it so easy to follow what was going on in the most intense passages, but the signal was coming from the Aavik pairing that much was clear.

It's not the sort of source that let's you stop a good track half way through, it makes the music so engaging that you feel that it would be a loss to end the fun. This is because it reveals an awful lot of what's good about each recording, it's scale, depth, tempo and character are all clear. This may be the most affordable digital source pairing in Aavik's portfolio but it's performance is anything but entry level. I have tried the DAC at the top of the range, the D-580, and it is more resolute, you can hear quieter sounds and make more sense of them but the D-180 is the same converter with less in the way of noise reduction tech, it's an excellent DAC. Especially if you turn it up, which gives a greater sense of substance to the music. I enjoyed Action and Tension and Space's new album *Tellus* on it several times and was gripped by the solidity that the Aavik pairing brought to the party, it's krautrock undertow drawing me in and holding attention. You can hear that Aavik are using a class D output stage, found across its product range, by a cleanness in the sound that makes other DACs sound a little thick in the upper bass. But there is none of the shiny, thin nature found with lesser class D designs. Rather there is a lightness of touch, a nimbleness that allows the sound to be as fast as the music requires, and as spectacular as the recording warrants.

I had a bit of fun contrasting two versions of Miles Davis' *In a Silent Way*, a DSD version which sounded smooth and refined and a CD based version that wasn't as relaxed but had a lot more rhythmic drive, which made it more engaging. I generally prefer PCM to DSD for its timing qualities but here the differences were more clear than usual and it was possible to see why some prefer the DSD approach. I also tried an Ansuz coax cable with appropriate BNC connectors and that brought more music to the table, peeling away a fine layer of what is essentially noise to reveal a more natural sound beneath. And that's not a way of saying the

sound lacks power, several times I was taken aback at the dynamics found on familiar recordings. This is proper iron fist in a velvet glove stuff.

I also contrasted the S-180 with a more expensive streaming transport albeit using BNC for the Aavik and USB for the alternative as it doesn't have BNC, and doing so via the D-180 which inevitably gave the Aavik an advantage. An advantage it picked up and ran with by producing a more relaxed and controlled version of events with excellent image depth and great tone. It's clearly a subtle and revealing streamer and you get a lot of that when using its onboard DAC, which isn't as dynamic, precisely focused or well timed as the D-180 but gets you about half way there.

I enjoyed the Aavik S-180 and D-180 combination a lot, the control app is reliable and consistent and the sound quality that the pairing produce is revealing and engaging in equal amounts. The character is more relaxed than competing examples in this price range and that means you can turn it up as loud as you like without fear of the mid or treble hardening up. There may not be as much noise killing going on in the entry level Aaviks but the result suggests that there's more than many alternatives apply. The non metallic boxes probably help here too, having electronics surrounded by thick slabs of aluminium might make it look serious but if you want to get closer to the sound the Aavik approach is hard to beat.



### Specifications

#### S-180 streamer

Type: Network streamer with DAC

Streaming protocols: UPnP/DLNA

Inputs: Ethernet, USB

Digital Outputs: coaxial S/PDIF on BNC, optical Toslink

Control Software: Aavik streaming app

Dimensions WxHxD: 102 x 400 x 384mm

Weight: 5.2kg

#### D-180 DAC

Type: digital to analogue converter

Distortion: < <0,005% (THD at 1kHz at 0dB)

Digital Inputs: USB fully isolated, 2x S/PDIF coax on BNC, 2x optical on Toslink

Analogue outputs: single ended RCA

Supported data rates up to: PCM 32-bit/192kHz, DSD128

Output Voltage: 4.5V RMS at 0dB

Accessories: Apple IR remote

Dimensions HxWxD: 102 x 400 x 384mm

Weight: 5.4kg