

**Client:** Pellisari  
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# Bowled over

With an eye-catching design, the Zemi Aria is Francesco Pellisari's first mass-market speaker. **Adrian Justins** checks it out

**A**fter meeting Francesco Pellisari I think I have to concede that I probably don't have pitch perfect hearing, as he does. I suspect he is in a tiny minority because it took years to diagnose – as a child he cried in museums in his native Rimini, as hard reflective surfaces caused him to suffer from headaches. Francesco has since used it to become an audio designer (he studied speaker design and psychoacoustics under Roy Alison, founder of Acoustic Research), launching his own company, New Audio Concept or NAC Sound in 1997. Over time he has developed a

distinctive line of omnidirectional active speakers, which are handmade in porcelain, some of them having been designed in collaboration with Marantz's Ken Ishiwata. Priced in multiples of £10,000 they are as much works of art and most are intended to be hung from the ceiling.

The Zemi Aria is his first mass-market product and has been designed principally for sale through Apple stores. As such it boasts AirPlay, but also supports aptX Bluetooth and has a 3.5mm analogue line in and optical jack. Fashioned from ABS plastic (known for its rigidity), it is an active speaker that resembles a 10-pin

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Zemi Aria

**ORIGIN**  
China

**TYPE**  
Wireless stereo loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
5.1kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
270 x 270 x 240mm

**FEATURES**  
• 28mm fibreglass dome neodymium tweeter  
• 157mm fibreglass cone woofer  
• Quoted power output: 125W RMS  
• AirPlay & Bluetooth streaming; 24-bit/96kHz DAC via optical input

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Apple Store

**WEBSITE**  
zemiaria.com

bowling ball in appearance and weight (5.1kg), but it can be suspended from a ceiling (cables and brackets not supplied) or placed on its own rubberised holder. It has a marble coating on the inside and uses what Pellisari calls reflex technology, with a variable section pipe running through the middle to help generate Bessel (or non-diffracting) sound beams.

The brushed stainless steel concentric circular metal grille has been designed by industrial designer Ron Arad with holes that are big enough not to cause interference. Pellisari claims that higher frequencies are 92 percent free of interference, but the optimum sound comes by removing the metal grille and the acoustically transparent cloth-covered one beneath it. Doing so reveals a central 157mm fibreglass woofer cone with dual 28mm fibreglass dome neodymium Scanspeak tweeters on the circumference.

Pellisari told me Apple didn't want genuine stereo speakers, so to produce as effective a stereo image as possible from a single source the directional tweeters are angled slightly. Power output is a more than reasonable 125W (75W woofer, 2x 25W tweeters) and frequency response is quoted as 45Hz to 20kHz.

Various colour options are in the pipeline, but for now the Zemi only comes in a high gloss black finish. The unit is supplied with a Yorkie bar-sized remote made from solid brushed metal with just three large buttons (power, volume up and down). There's no display, but LED lights behind the grille indicate the power status and volume.

Although the Zemi can be used with non-Apple devices, its *raison d'être* is as an AirPlay speaker. I find it simple enough to hook the speaker on to my wi-fi network by tethering my iPhone to the Zemi's mini USB socket and accepting the automatically generated onscreen request to allow the speaker access to the network. The Zemi then appears as an AirPlay option in my iTunes on my MacBook Air. Selecting AirPlay in iTunes is obvious, less so when using the desktop Audivarna + audio player (it's located in the preferences) and when using Spotify or any other streaming service you have to delve around in the OS' Audio Midi utility to find the instruction to 'use this device'.

### Sound quality

It has a 24-bit/96kHz DAC (when used with the optical input), but over AirPlay using Audivarna + hi-res signals are transmitted as PCM with decoding at 16-bit/44kHz. The results are mighty good with just one or two caveats. Firstly, the soundfield is not as omnidirectional as Pellisari claims. Close your eyes and it's easy enough to pin point the source. Not that the sound feels cramped or constrained. It's light and airy and the twin



#### HOW IT COMPARES

The Zemi Aria has some pretty stiff competition in the wireless speaker stakes, coming up for example against the £595 Naim Mu-so QB (HFC 409) and Sonos' £429 Play:5 (HFC 405), both of which are similarly sized. The Sonos Play:5 has the ability to mesh seamlessly into a multi-room system – see page 33 – and can be stereo paired for greater sonic imaging, but the Aria's sound quality is fuller and more satisfying. The Mu-so QB is AirPlay compatible and offers comparable performance levels to the Zemi Aria, but is a tad more powerful and less particular when it comes to the handling of bass.

tweeters throw out a well imaged and enjoyable sonic footprint.

Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* can sound quite muddy in the midrange on inferior speakers, but here it has a keen, well-timed bass, distinctive guitar twang and smooth but refined vocals, particularly when Pharrell's voice hits the higher registers.

Radiohead's *Karma Police* as interpreted by the Noordpool Orchestra highlights the speaker's aptitude with multi-layered recordings. The trumpet and percussion are able to deliver a big sound that's not cramped, but has room to breathe. The low murmur of strings, the deftness of the piano and the grip it holds as the piece builds to

### It's a robust sound, coherent and powerful yet subtle and feather light

a crescendo combining to result in a powerful, distinguished big band sound. The Zemi almost comes a cropper with the bass, not in terms of extension but with reverberation, which does happen if it is positioned too close to a reflecting surface and if the metal grille is in place.

This is a shame as aesthetically the grille makes an impact. But removing it gives more punch to the midrange and more vitality at higher frequencies. Over on Spotify, another cover version – *Billie Jean* by Winterplay – reveals how classy the tweeters are. Helped in no small measure by the excellent timing and texture of the double bass,

the effortless underpinning of the bongos and the subtle verve of the lead guitar, the vocals have a gorgeous and incredibly well refined veneer and the speaker again proves itself adept at dealing with layers, with the trumpet coming in and blending assuredly rather than obscuring Haewon's voice. In terms of sonic placement and tonal balance, each instrument feels right, with the vocals just pushed slightly to the fore.

Back on the heavy duty stuff, Dvorák's *New World Symphony* in all its DSD goodness shows how adept the Zemi is with meatier, classical fodder. It's a robust sound, coherent, at times energetic and powerful, at others subtle and feather light. The definition of a good system is one that doesn't need any fiddling with the volume as the symphony fluctuates wildly from its pianissimo moments – a single French horn and piccolo – to the fortissimo, embracing almost an entire orchestra at full pelt. This speaker easily passes the test and draws you in to the extent that you can happily listen to it for several hours without feeling sonically weary.

I crank up the volume as the piece hits its crescendo just to see how far I can push it and the bottom end gets a bit shaky, but this is a complex piece that can derail a pair of floorstanders, never mind a single bowling ball-sized speaker. *New World* is also a good test for the speaker's Bluetooth capability: AirPlay has a bit more texture and sounds more dynamic, especially at the lower end where you can feel more vibration in the strings.

### Conclusion

The Zemi is not the perfect AirPlay speaker, but it's not far off. It's a bit too fussy about placement and it needs to be stripped of its metal grille to get the most out of it. That said, it's distinctive looking, easy to use and is versatile enough to cope with a wide range of sources ●

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Mini USB port
- 2 Analogue/optical line input
- 3 Rubberised stand

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Design; build quality; powerful, refined sound
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Over-eager bass at times; can't pair up for true stereo use
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> AirPlay speakers don't get much better than this. It's got achingly cool design to boot
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

#### OVERALL

