Aardvark
In-line network filter

Alan Sircom

Outside of audio applications, aardvarks are insect-eating mammals native to sub-Saharan Africa. In audio, however, Aardvarks are noise-eating in-line network filters native to Argentina. I think we won the Aardvark battle.

The product itself couldn't be simpler. You plug it between your Ethernet cable and your streamer or server. The RJ45 connector goes into your audio device and your Ethernet cable (and the outside world) plugs into the rectangular box.

Aardvark's website suggests the female end of the Aardvark (the bit in the box) is transformer-coupled. It also has two coils in that box, and they transmit data via inductance, thereby presenting no electrical connectivity between the two coils. That means proper fully passive galvanic isolation. It's that simple.

Of course, 'it's that simple' is never *that* simple and the Aardvark relies on high-grade micro transformers, hard-wired using silver alloy solder and carefully selected cables. Similarly, the RJ45 connector is selected for its shielding properties, hand built and then encased in its anti-vibration case.
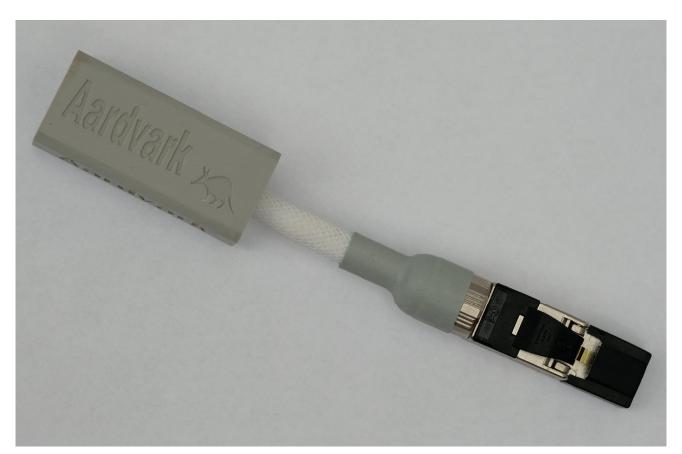
It's also the result of hour upon hour of listening tests, with each component in the Aardvark evaluated (over months, apparently) to ensure it does its job as well as possible. This inflexible little dongle is a true labour of love. No sensible human being would create the Aardvark in the quest for a fast buck.

Nerd toothpaste
The alpha nerds who make the Aardvark supply it in bubble-wrap and in a white card case, of a similar size and shape to those toothpaste comes supplied in, but with less garish colours. It does have what looks like a wax seal with a little aardvark in place »

> The Aardvark goes a long way to levelling that playing field. It gives a recording life and space and a vibrancy that it was missing before.

of a royal crest. The box has a pithy mission statement printed on two faces; "because digital audio is about time and silence." I'd cranked up my sarcasm catapult to say something snide about this statement, but it damn well holds in the performance of the Aardvark.

There are two sides to its evaluation. Does it work? And, if it does, does it work better than an audiophile network switch, and by how much? The TL:DR answers are 'yes', 'mostly' and 'it depends'. The Aardvark unquestionably works as a bulwark against noise distributed along an Ethernet cable. And, of course, if you have shifted to fibre optic Ethernet between your router and streamer, a lot of what the Aardvark (and other similar devices does) no longer applies.

Funny ha-ha or funny peculiar

About a year before he discovered he was really quite allergic to torpedoes, my grandfather worked on what came to be known as 'Hobart's Funnies'; a number of highly specialised armoured fighting vehicles built on converted tanks. These included mine-sweeping flails, amphibious landing tanks for laying pathways, armoured bulldozers and more.

I mention this because the Aardvark joins a plethora of audio 'funnies' designed to do a specific task and do it well. In this case, keep the network noise nasties outside the system. There are a lot of products that do the same thing, but few are quite as small, simple or elegant as the Aardvark, and only a handful do the job as competently.

It's very simple. The Aardvark strips away whatever it is in Ethernet performance that seems to make it appear artificial and flat-sounding compared to CD versions and allows the music to spring back to life. This was an easy test to make, as I have a number of ripped CDs stored on a NAS drive and comparing them to the original CD played through a CD player exposes the differences easily, clearly, and quickly. Notionally, at least, CD should sound inferior to the ripped version as its error correction is performed on the fly and is nothing like the bit-perfect ripped track. However, in reality often the CD sounds more alive and vivid, while the stored music has a flat soundstage and often sounds musically dull in comparison.

The Aardvark goes a long way to levelling that playing field. It gives a recording life and space and a vibrancy that it was missing before.

Another useful test here is to run a local music server directly into the streamer, then compare the sound of recordings on that with the sound of those taken from online music libraries. If the home server sound is 'flat' compared to the CD original, then external streamed sources have suffered a bizarre steamrollering accident. And it's here where the Aardvark really comes into its own. I'm surprised just how much of what we think is poor quality streaming sound is actually the bit between the outside world and your streamer filling the DAC with 'meh!'.

The Aardvark snuffles out noise like its African namesake does with ants and what's left is clean, vivid and three-dimensional. This really came alive when playing 'Drive Home' by top progster Steven Wilson on his *The Raven That Refused to Sing* album [Kscope]. This track maxes out on atmosphere and demands a lot of detail, but also plenty of space and soundstaging. These are traditionally aspects streaming nails, but played through the Aardvark, there's a holographic quality that is sorely missing elsewhere.

Like the very best of the 'Funnies', the Aardvark knows no fear. It's untroubled by the scale of the recording and is equally comfy used with lower and very high-end equipment. I've also used this with a number of decent network switches (in particular the Melco S100 data switch) and, while it doesn't raise the musical bar as high as it might when keeping the noise from some low-cost Netgear switch at bay, there is still improvement to be had. Once again, this is mainly in the soundstage, and bringing a vibrancy back to the music. Sometimes that's more literal than figurative, as it polishes up the tonal colour of a recording. But often it just strips away the musical flattening that comes with the network territory and breathes new life into the recording.

At the time this review is published, the year is still very young, so saying this is one of the most surprising products of the year so far doesn't have the same traction it might if I were saying it in September. But it doesn't matter; I think this is one of the most surprising products I'll hear all year... in a good way. The Aardvark might look small and simple, but it knows how to get the most out of networked audio. ✛

Price and availability

Aardvark In-line RJ45 Filter
£499/ $449

Manufacturer Aardvark
🌐 www.aardvark.com.ar

UK distributor The AudioWorks
🌐 www.theaudioworks.co.uk
📞 +44(0)161 428 7887