

AN ART'S EXCELLENCE REVIEW

Astell&Kern A&ultima SP1000M

Midprice Top Performance



Astell&Kern A&ultima SP1000M

There is really no need anymore to introduce Astell&Kern as a brand, is there? After I wrote reviews about the [AK Jr](#) and the [AK100.2](#) (Dutch only), the [AK70](#) and the [AK300](#) (Dutch only), the [AK XB10](#) (Dutch only) , and the [KANN](#) and [Michelle](#) (also Dutch only), we can skip pleasantries and cut straight to the chase on the SP1000M, the 'smaller brother' of the mighty and costly SP1000. One thing I will reveal in advance: the M definitely doesn't stand for Mini.



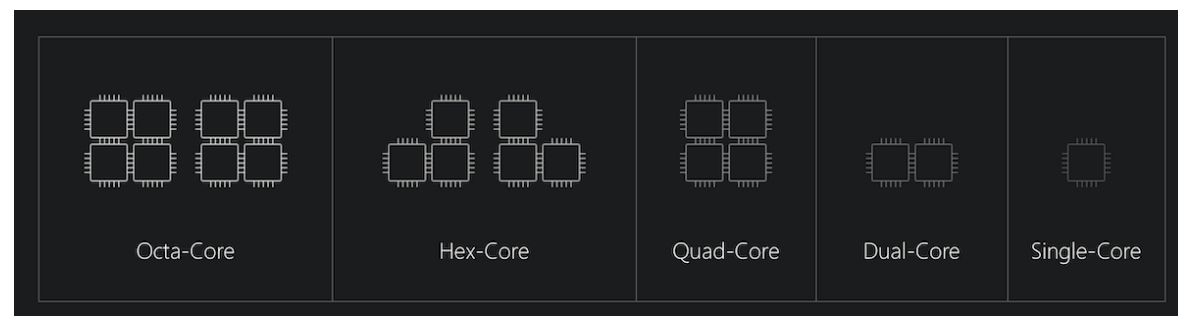
Unboxing

Unboxing the Astell&Kern SP1000M is an Apple-like experience. Why mention Apple? Because they were the first company to put into practice what many consumers already knew: that the fun starts at the opening of the box. The AK1000M comes in a black box that is beautifully finished and closing tightly. In it you find, besides the SP1000M, a USB cable for charging the battery and uploading files, two sets of self adhesive protection foils for the display and the backside, some usual paperwork like the manual, and also an incredibly smooth and soft leather case that was made in the Tuscan workshop of La Perla Azura, that fits the beautiful aluminum body of the SP1000M like an Italian tailored suit. The cleanly lined aluminium body has a Lapis blue finish, and the backside has a high gloss black-and-blue carbon mesh pattern. The display is 0.9 inch smaller than the one in the SP1000, but it's high screen resolution makes it easy to read. In total, the SP1000M is 18% smaller, which makes it just a little nicer to handle. The biggest difference, however, is the weight. Because the SP1000 has a stainless steel body, the aluminum SP1000M brings 48% less to the scale. And that makes it quite a bit more 'portable'.



Features

Besides the smaller size there are a few other things that could be seen as 'disadvantages': the battery in the SP1000M is smaller, which reduces battery-life from 12 to 10 hours, the internal memory has been reduced from 256GB to 128GB, there is no optical digital output, and no option for docking an external Amp module. The 'problem' of the smaller internal memory can be fixed by adding an external mini-SD card (up to 400GB), and the SP1000M already has a very good amplifier on board. It's 3.5 mm

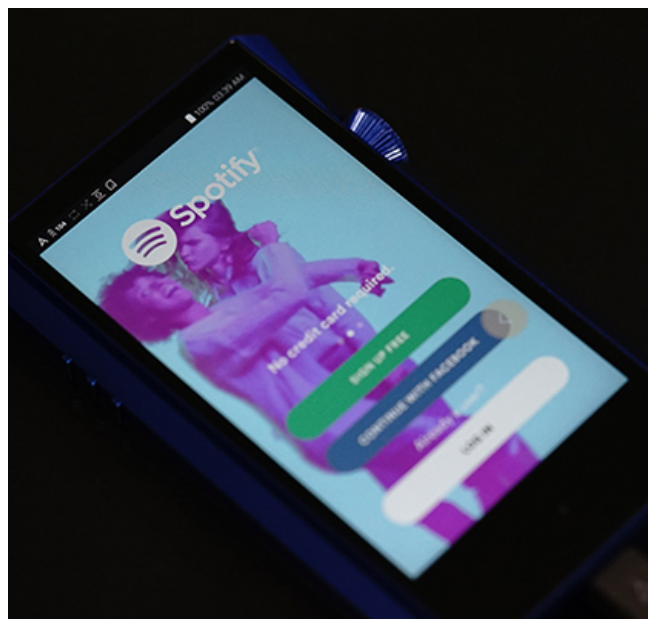


single ended output has 0.1 V less output than the SP1000, but the balanced 2.5 mm output has 0.3 V more. In practice, you will hardly notice the difference with a single ended headphone, but the higher balanced output has a small but audible difference in loudness, in favour of the SP1000M. The digital circuit in the SP1000M is practically identical to that in the SP1000, so I feel comfortable in stating that the SP1000M will give you at least 90% of the SP1000's sound quality.

The operating system of the SP1000M has the same Android core as the SP1000,

and it took the convinced Apple user that I am a very short time to get used to. The 'hidden Home-button' at the bottom of the display posed the biggest challenge, but the left-right-up-down swiping to get access to different settings and display modes was a doddle. The SP1000M can play native DSD to a resolution of 11.2MHz (quadruple DSD) and PCM to a resolution of 32bit/384kHz. At this time, I feel it is appropriate to tell you that, as far as I'm concerned, the perceived increase in sound quality of those super high resolutions does not outweigh the ginormous increase in file size. But it is nice to know that the Octa-Core processor in the SP1000M will be freewheeling most of the time.

Open APP Service



The biggest innovation that Astell&Kern has introduced with the SP1000M (which was also rolled out to their other current players in the recent 1.10 firmware update) is the Open APP Service. In practical terms that means that you can now add third-party apps to the Astell&Kern operating system. Apps like Spotify and Tidal. A number of these apps have been pre-installed in the



new firmware, so all you have to do to start using them is add your user credentials. This also means that you can download tracks and albums to 'offline' modus in Spotify and Tidal, so you can listen to them later without the need for WiFi or any other wireless access point. Nice to have on a long flight or in the countryside where mobile data coverage is low. It's a welcome addition to an already great set of features. And there's more; Astell&Kern have also announced 'Roon Ready' and MQA Decoding for 'future firmware updates'.

The Setup



The DAC and Streaming features of the SP1000M are meant to be used indoors. You can hook it up to your computer as an external sound card, and you can stream music from your NAS over WiFi, providing that you have the appropriate UPnP server software installed on our NAS. But because I see them more as 'extra's' I will leave these features at saying that they both performed flawlessly. The SP1000M is a portable music player, so that is how I used it mostly. Quite a few headphones and in-ears were used. The relatively easy to drive AudioQuest NightHawk Classic, the well known high-end Shure SE846 in-ear, and a selection of 4 models by Campfire Audio. To assess both the single-ended and the balanced outputs the best I could, I did not only use the standard cables, but also the extremely high end silver Portable Duet, Double Duet and Dream Duet by Crystal Cable. A number of recent albums were transferred to the SP1000M by means of the free Android File Transfer app for MacOS. All albums were at least lossless (ALAC) and some of them were AIFF hi-res or DSD.

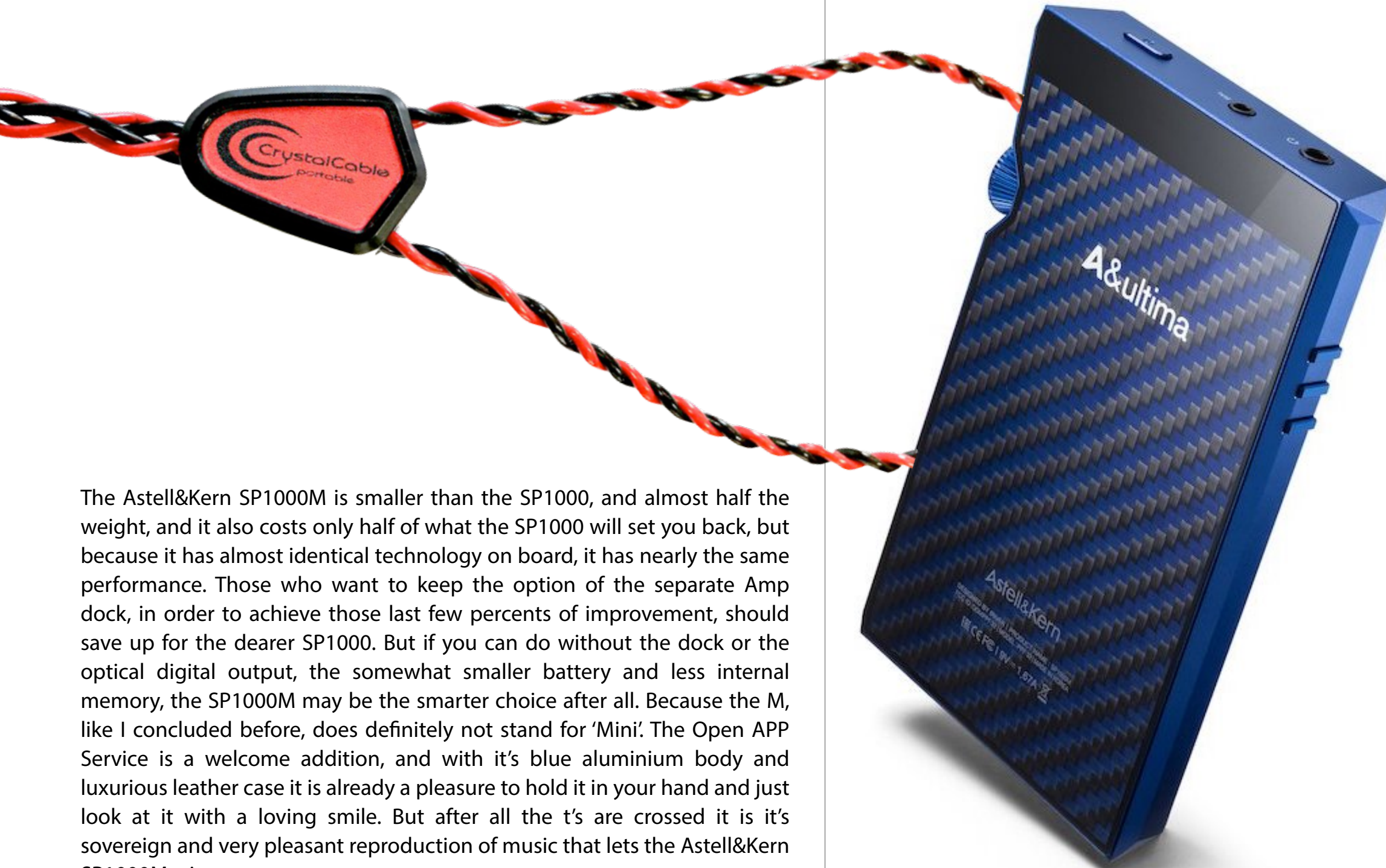
Listening

The first thing I recognised was the ease and the power with which all Astell&Kern's top notch players perform their musical duty. Like the SP1000, it sounded completely effortless. The balanced output did not only have a higher output, but also a lot more finesse, so I decided to use that during the rest of the listening sessions. The familiar characters of the AudioQuest NightHawk and the Shure SE846 were, in a manner of speaking, laid out in many decimals, without ever sounding coloured or restrained. Ólafur Arnalds' piano on the title track of Re:member had an enormous wealth of tonal color and texture, even the smallest details in the spacious recording were an incredibly obvious part of the mix.. The bass that - almost stealthily - enters at about three minutes was deep and sonorous, and the drums that kicked in about a minute later were fast and dynamic, without any overhang in the even lower tones of the kickdrum. When walking outside with this music on, it was easy to imagine that I had a very good separate headphone amplifier tucked away in my jacket's pocket. Another track that was perfect to reveal the sophistication of the SP1000M was Nobody Here by Tunng, from their album Songs You Make At Night. At the start of this song, you hear raindrops falling, and when you have the best of the best playback, you can 'see' that they are all different in size. About 10 second into the song, there's a cavernously deep blow on an undamped floor tom,

and the power and dynamics that you need to hear the full impact were delivered with epic ease by the SP1000M. After 1 minute and 45 seconds the song really takes off after an electronic drum break, and I was taken aghast by how thoughtfully the SP1000M seemed to place the infectiously rhythmic combination of synths, numerous percussion sounds, guitar and vocals into their own spaces of the image. Ever since the first time I heard it, this track has been a good example of how sound can get cluttered when the reproduction is less than optimal, but it was no challenge at all for the Astell&Kern A&ultima SP1000M (that is, in fact, it's official name - that I find very hard to pronounce or even to write, but I had to mention it for the sake of being complete).



At the end of the day...



The Astell&Kern SP1000M is smaller than the SP1000, and almost half the weight, and it also costs only half of what the SP1000 will set you back, but because it has almost identical technology on board, it has nearly the same performance. Those who want to keep the option of the separate Amp dock, in order to achieve those last few percents of improvement, should save up for the dearer SP1000. But if you can do without the dock or the optical digital output, the somewhat smaller battery and less internal memory, the SP1000M may be the smarter choice after all. Because the M, like I concluded before, does definitely not stand for 'Mini'. The Open APP Service is a welcome addition, and with its blue aluminium body and luxurious leather case it is already a pleasure to hold it in your hand and just look at it with a loving smile. But after all the t's are crossed it is its sovereign and very pleasant reproduction of music that lets the Astell&Kern SP1000M win you over.

Music and Information

For more information about the Astell&Kern A&ultima SP1000M, please visit our webstore:

Astell&Kern A&ultima SP1000M (not available anymore)

Spotify

Ólafur Arnalds - re:member

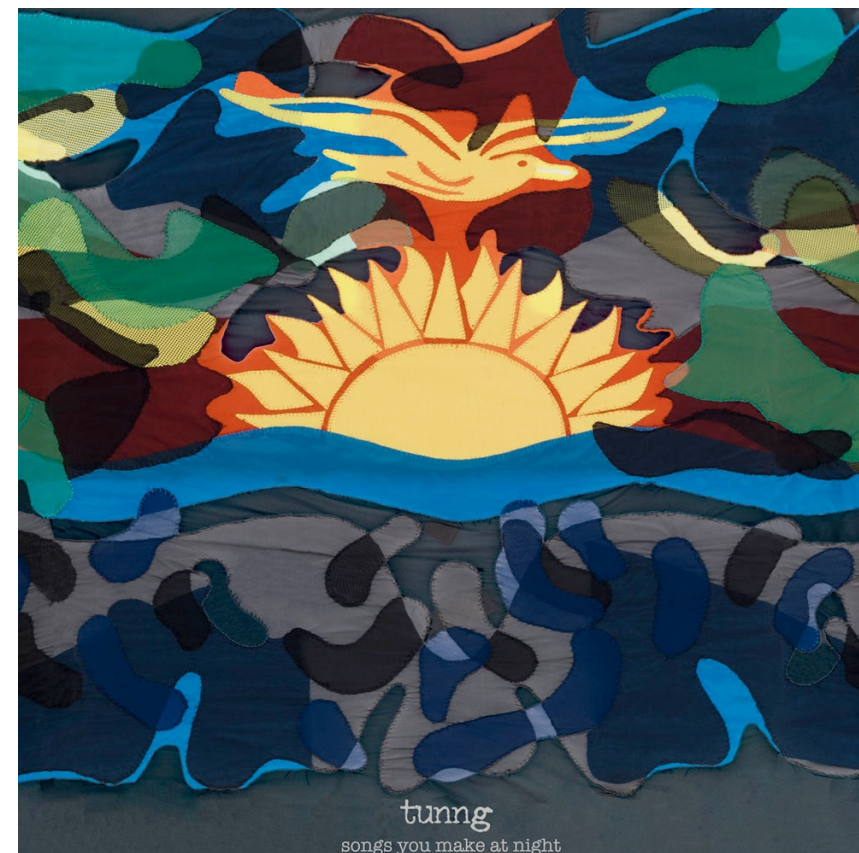
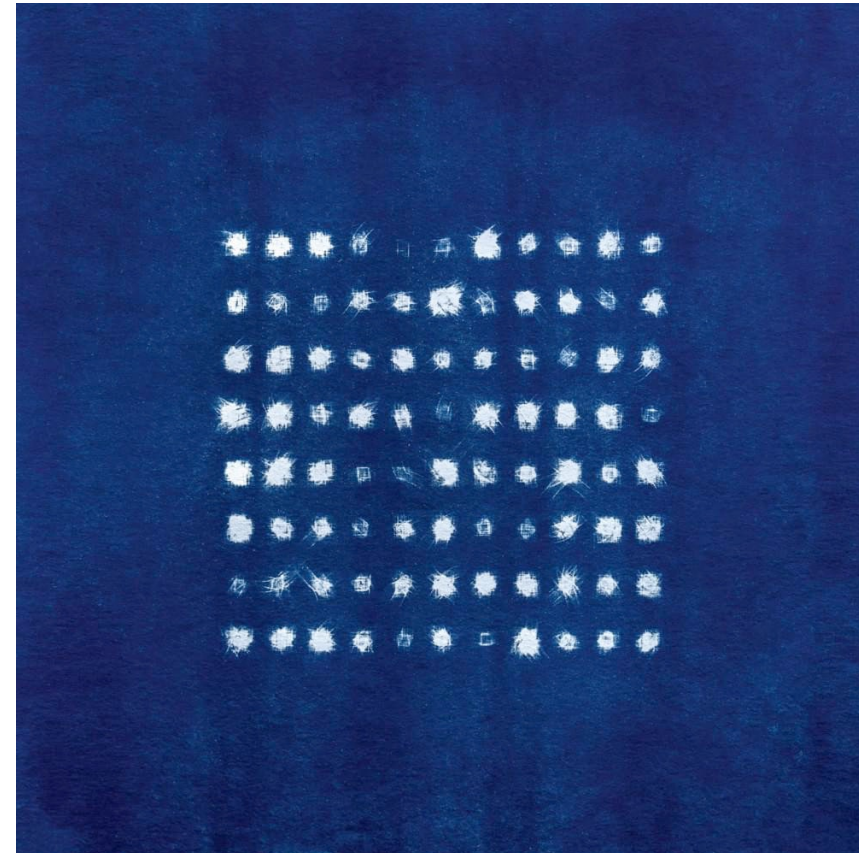
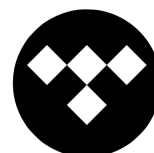
Tunng - Songs You Make At Night



Tidal

Ólafur Arnalds - re:member (MQA)

Tunng - Songs You Make At Night





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