



Aurender A10 network music player/server

Jason Victor Serinus | Dec 21, 2017



A huge fuss was made over Aurender's first music server, the S10, when it premiered in 2011 at the California Audio Show. While I didn't feel that the room acoustics and setup were good enough at CAS to permit an honest appraisal, the looks and features of the S10 (now discontinued) thrust Aurender into the spotlight. So when John Atkinson, who had very favorably reviewed Aurender's N10 server in April 2016, asked if I would evaluate Aurender's new A10, the opportunity to serve so many audiophiles with a single review elicited from me an unequivocal "Yes!"

What have we here?

As part of a product line that includes multiple streamer/servers and a "lifestyle" DAC-integrated amp, the A10 is Aurender's first all-in-one model. Its single full-size case contains a network music player-server similar to the company's entry-level N100H caching music server, with the addition of what Aurender calls a "high-performance," MQA-certified DAC. The A10's all-in-one design and \$5500 price should make it especially appealing to budget-conscious audiophiles. Those able to pay more will appreciate the superior power supplies, clocking systems, and noise isolation of Aurender's higher-end models, as well as their greater storage capacity, higher numbers of inputs, and other features.

Aurender is a South Korean company. John-Paul Lizars, the California-based industry veteran who heads the sales and marketing division of Aurender America, calls the A10 "the CD player of the 21st century . . . that distills a complex process to the essence of simplicity." That's a claim worth examining.



The A10's DAC, designed by John Kim and Justin Jang, uses the Asahi Kasei Microdevices Corporation's AKM 4490 32-bit, 2-channel chip, employed in a fully discrete and balanced dual-mono configuration. (The

DAC's linear power supplies are also configured as dual-mono.) The chip has five 32-bit digital filters, and accepts data up to 768kHz PCM and 11.2MHz DSD. Due to the A10's implementation of the DoP protocol, however, at present it can process only DSD64 and DSD128 (5.6448MHz). It also decodes MQA files.

Storage is limited to a 4TB hard disk drive (a 5TB Seagate drive option is in the testing phase), while cached playback is via a 120GB solid-state drive. This two-drive system—in which music stored on the HDD is cached for playback on the SSD—is claimed to completely eliminate electrical and acoustic noise produced by spinning disks, moving heads, and motors.

An HDD icon appears on the Aurender's large, adjustable display as a new track is being cached to SSD. During this period, which doesn't last very long, ultimate sound quality is sacrificed. When the track has been transferred, the HD then goes to sleep to minimize wear, and the sound level returns to optimal.

One of the A10's many features is its ability to use its S/PDIF (TosLink) input to interface with a CD or DVD player, as well as a TV or multi-zone system such as Sonos. In such situations, the A10's variable output enables it to function as a preamplifier in an all-digital system. In addition, the A10's USB 2.0 output lets you send signals to an outboard DAC. The A10 can also play music stored on NAS drives via its Aurender Media Manager (AMM) software and the all-important Aurender Conductor app.



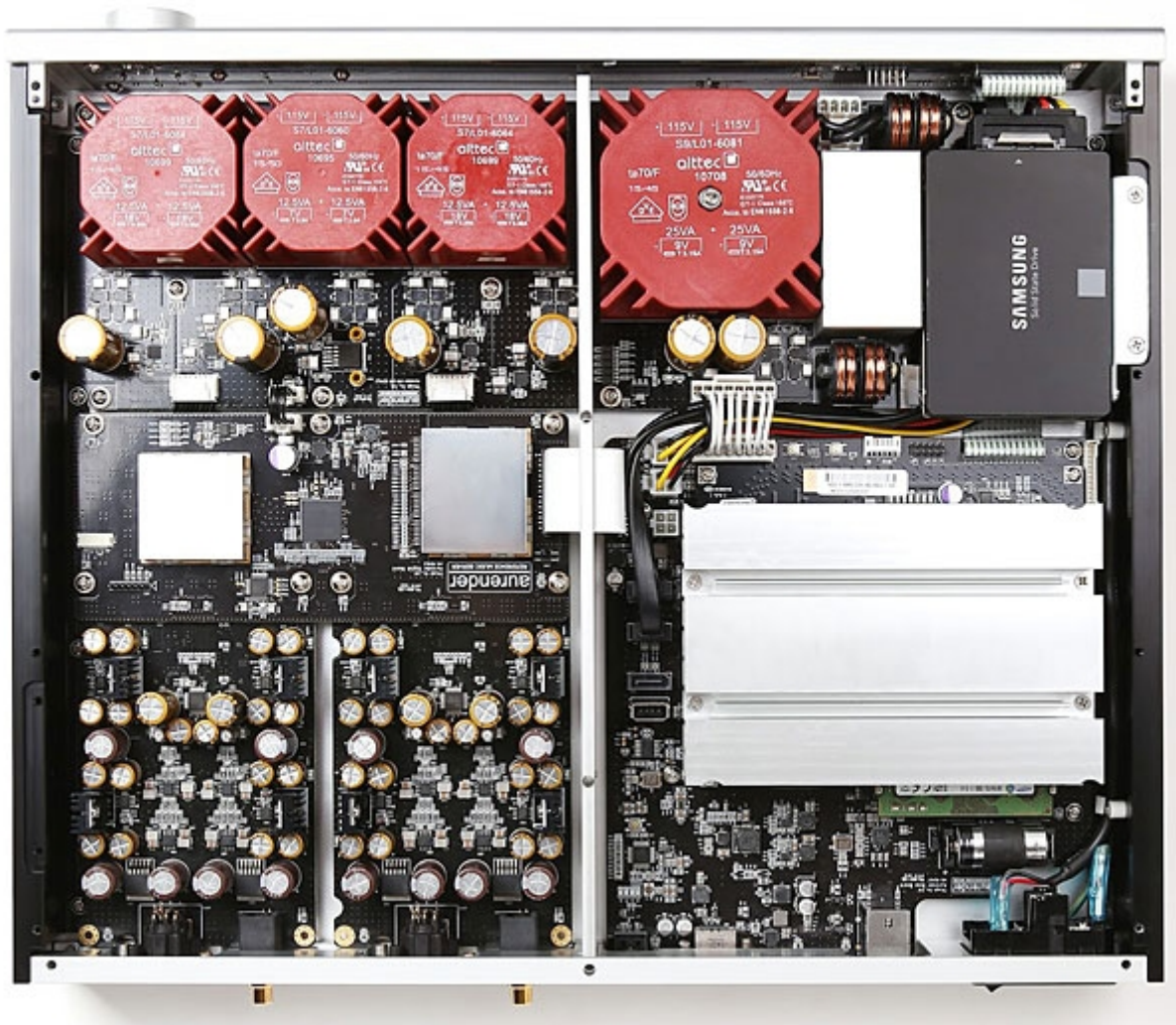
Both an iPad and wireless router are essential to operate the A10. Even before the Aurender is plugged in, users are instructed to download Conductor from Apple's App Store. (The Aurender App for Android is based on the iPad app but apparently has limited functionality.) After the A10 is connected to the Internet via Ethernet and the correct information is entered in the settings, the app should communicate seamlessly with the A10.

While some of the A10's basic functions can be controlled via buttons on its front panel or with its supplied remote control, all settings, playback, and storage functions are managed using Conductor, including music from Tidal and Internet radio.

If memory serves me, the handsome brown-and-yellow color scheme of the Conductor app has remained consistent since the days of the S10. When selections are played, album-cover art, the bit depth and sampling rate, and the file format (eg, FLAC or WAV) are displayed. In addition to Play, Pause, and Stop, you can Repeat a single track or an entire playlist. You can also play single tracks without automatically playing the tracks that follow. However, once you cue up a playlist, convincing the A10 to wait for your command to play music is a tricky business. Every time I chose my playlist or list of cached tracks, the first of those tracks, Yello's "Electrified II," would start booming away without my consent. Gah! This was not the shock my nervous system needed when I was all geared up psychically for hearing something very different.

Rather than tediously list everything the A10 and Conductor can do, I refer you to the A10's far too slim online manual and New Features in Conductor App webpage. While a huge amount of essential support information is available online, that section of Aurender's website was "under construction" during the review

period, and what was available was outdated. Navigation was difficult, nomenclature inconsistent, and the product line included discontinued models.



So when problems or questions arise, Aurender's remarkably responsive US technical-support person, the Seattle-based Jesse Locken, encourages users to contact him and Aurender's staff in Korea via the app's Help feature. Locken usually replied quickly with a link to the appropriate support pages, which otherwise are difficult to find. If something needs fixing, owners are asked to leave their units on so that someone in Korea can check them out remotely, via the Internet, and fix the problem.

The last page of Aurender's 15-page Quick Start Guide warns users to follow a two-step turn-off procedure before they disconnect from AC power, lest they unmount or corrupt the internal SSD drive, thus "crippling or rendering the unit inoperative." Try telling that to the reviewer who inadvertently pulled out the A10's power cord while performing multiple listening tests and cable swaps.

When I did that, my heart skipped more than one beat as the disconnected A10 powered down, went very, very quiet, and finally, after what seemed an eternity, announced that it was rebuilding its HDD. But it had completed only a small percentage of that rebuild when it seemed to freeze up again.

Oh, no, thought I. Please may I not become the reviewer who broke the A10's back. Thank goodness, after another be-still-my-beating-heart wait, the A10's display proclaimed that all was okay. HDD rebuilt. Eternal damnation averted.

Setup and Listening, Round One

Aurender's Jesse Locken doesn't live far away, and he dropped by to help me set up the A10. My four-shelf rack was already filled with multiple dCS components and power products—the only space for the A10 was atop the dCS Scarlatti clock. After connecting the router and Pass monoblocks to the A10, we powered up the latter and inserted, one by one, three USB 3.0 sticks filled with high-resolution tracks into the A10's USB

port, and used the Conductor app to transfer their contents to the A10's HDD. Tracks whose sound I knew well we arranged in a playlist I named "JVS Test."

After letting the A10 warm up a bit—it was already broken in—Locken checked that everything was functioning as it should, and quickly noticed that the A10's HDD icon was not turning on during file transfer from HDD to SSD. Without it, we couldn't tell when the unit was delivering optimal sound. Before leaving, he promised to check with Aurender HQ in Korea and get back to me.

When I gave the A10 my first solo listen days later, after the cables had settled in, the A10 didn't sound very good. Speculating that its performance was compromised because I'd placed it atop the dCS Scarlatti, I turned the Scarlatti off. That made a major difference.

It also made me realize that an honest assessment of the A10 required removing multiple shelves of dCS gear. Once the A10 had a shelf of its own, I further isolated it from noise by placing it on a Grand Prix carbon-fiber Formula platform. These relatively lightweight platforms contribute greatly to the "black"-background transparency of my reference system. On the empty shelf below the Aurender went a Mytek HiFi Brooklyn DAC (\$1995), set atop a second Formula platform.

My plan was to first listen to the A10 by itself for an extended period of time. Once I was clear on how it sounded as an all-in-one unit, I would compare its DAC section's sound to the Brooklyn's. Both can play PCM up to 24/384, DSD64 and 128 (the Mytek goes higher), and MQA. Connecting the units was Nordost's excellent, ultra-transparent Valhalla II USB cable, which in my experience transfers data with virtually no loss of sound quality. When the Brooklyn wasn't in use, I left it in standby mode so that it would be performance-ready. Given that the Brooklyn had a shelf of its own, away from both the A10 and the silent dCS Vivaldi that sat on the top shelf of my rack, I had no concerns about unwanted interactions.

*There may be trouble ahead
But while there's music and moonlight and love and romance
Let's face the music and dance*

Before tackling these setup issues, I'd opened Advanced Settings on the Conductor app and tried to compare the sound of the A10's various digital and analog filters. (There's a separate, nonadjustable filter for MQA.) However, I could hear absolutely no differences among them. Meanwhile, across the country, in Brooklyn, John Atkinson was trying to complete measurements on a different sample of the A10 before renovation of his listening room and test lab began. This was a highly unusual situation: JA usually measures products only after a reviewer has finished his listening and sent the sample to him.



When John, too, could find no differences among the filters, he wrote to ask if I was having the same experience. Given that I'd already spent days assembling four pages of listening notes, I did the ostrich dance. When I could stall no longer, I faced the music and confirmed that switching filters made no audible difference.

At that point, JA felt it best to abort the review until the folks at Aurender HQ could fix what seemed to be a firmware problem. Out went the A10 and Brooklyn, and back in went the dCS components and enough cables to suspend the Brooklyn Bridge. Easier said than done. Only when I'd finished reviewing the dCS Network Bridge did I once again switch all those boxes and cables and reinstall the Aurender A10 and Brooklyn. For the first time in my life, I fantasized about the joys of Assisted Living.

Eventually, Locken e-mailed to tell me that, due to how the A10 processes MQA, filter choices were no longer an appropriate option for this product. Therefore Aurender had "removed the option to select the optional digital and analog filters from the Aurender Conductor app." He also assured me that, under cover of darkness, Eric in Korea had remotely entered my unit, removed all filter options, and fixed the HDD icon.

Not quite. While the HDD icon finally did begin flashing on and off when tracks were being cached in the SSD, the filter choices remained. Doubly assured that changing filters was no longer possible, and that the option would disappear with the A10's next official firmware upgrade, I recommenced listening from scratch.

Listening, Round Two

Once I'd acclimated to the sound of the A10, the excellent depth and bass impact of the remarkably spacious, driving "Electrified II," from Yello's Toy (24/48 WAV, Polydor 4782160/HDtracks), as well as the strength of its upper midrange, helped compensate for muted colors and a bit of grayness. For contrast, I cued up the capacious voice of operatic great Jamie Barton singing Sibelius's "Var det en dröm?" to Brian Zeger's liquid pianism (24/96 WAV, Delos 3494/HDtracks). I wanted to sink deeply into Barton's glorious mezzo-soprano, but I kept having to turn up the volume when she sang softer (not that a woman with such a huge instrument can truly sing softly), then turn it down when she opened up fully. Under the sound of her voice, Zeger's piano lacked color.



One of the most revealing of the many recordings I listened to was the second movement of Lou Harrison's remarkable Concerto for Violin with Percussion Orchestra, with soloist Tim Fain, and Angel Gil-Ordóñez

conducting the Post-Classical Ensemble (24/48 WAV, Naxos 8559825/HDtracks). The impressive impact of Harrison's wild collection of percussion instruments helped compensate for, again, a lack of color. Fain's violin sounded fine at full volume, but a bit hoarse and overly resinous when played softly.

I then chose an MQA file that Bob Stuart had provided of a recording John Atkinson had made, Eric Whitacre's *Lux Aurumque*. (The original resolution and sample rate was 24 bits and 88.2kHz.) While the male voices of Cantus certainly sounded more real and present than I recalled hearing from my copy of the group's *While You Are Alive* (CD, Cantus CTS-1208), on which this recording originally appeared, vocal colors were, once more, muted. More engaging were the presence and speed of a stream of the ever-engaging "Babylon Sisters," from Steely Dan's *Gaucho* (MQA, MCA/Tidal).

Connecting Mytek's Brooklyn DAC and using its digital volume control, I experienced more color and transparency than from the A10's built-in DAC. Revisiting "Electrified II," "Babylon Sisters," and Barton's *Sibelius*, I found myself more involved with the music. The essential mystery of Harrison's concerto came through loud and clear, and the Mytek did a better job of handling Tim Fain's soft playing without overemphasizing the rasp of bow and resin on strings.

But after a while I began to feel that the Brooklyn's sonic palette was a mite too warm. Rather than knocking me out with the 12-tone take on the devastation of WWI and the dissolution of Old World order, Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony's download-only release of Berg's *Three Pieces for Orchestra* (24/192 WAV, SFS Media/HDtracks) sounded seductively smooth, midrange-rich, and remarkably beautiful. But since the Brooklyn's source was the A10's server section, its sonic signature was difficult to ascertain without trying alternative sources.

Thus, I tried two non-Aurender source components to play files through the Brooklyn: my MacBook Pro, using the Amarra Luxe music-playback app to feed files via USB; and the dCS Network Bridge (\$4250), using dCS software to feed those files via AES/EBU. The computer source sounded way inferior, lacking the vividness, color, and "blacker" backgrounds transmitted by the A10's server section. The Network Bridge, on the other hand, delivered more midrange and detail than the A10, and sounded more neutral, truthful, and realistic. However, not only was the Network Bridge unable to handle MQA (at the time of the review), it also required extra cables that raised the cost of the Bridge plus Brooklyn far above that of the single-box Aurender A10.

Before wrapping up, I double-checked my observations with a second back-and-forth between the A10 solo and the Brooklyn. Playing the final section of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, with Ludovic Morlot conducting the Seattle Symphony (24/96 WAV, Seattle Symphony Media 1005/HDtracks), again confirmed that while the A10's color saturation and transparency were just okay, its strong suits were bass, speed, ease of operation, convenience, and ability to play multiple formats.

Conclusions

If the Aurender A10 is not the CD player of the 21st century, it's certainly a viable 21st-century successor to that less-than-perfect source. That the A10 provides a single front-end solution for playing digital music in far more formats, sourced from far more platforms, than the designers of the CD ever envisioned makes it a most tempting proposition for those with limited space and budgets, or who consider a pile of boxes and cables the work of the devil. Whether or not the A10 will end up on your shelf will depend, in large part, on your sonic priorities. Those who tend to listen to music while multitasking, or who don't spend hours on end sitting undisturbed in the sweet spot, need not hesitate.