Aurender A10
Network Music Server

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"Hey, we have the Aurender A10 in; interested in writing a post script to my review?" spoke our fearless leader, Dave Clark. "Sure, why not", I simply replied. Having spent time with various digital bits and players over the past year or so, including dCS Rossini, Meridian's stupid great Explorer2 (with full Roon and MQA compatibility), the AURALiC Polaris, and of course my trusted Playback Designs MPS-5, I figured that digital streaming and playback technology has matured to a point where it would genuinely pique my interests.

The first thing you notice with the Aurender is the premium and rather nicely finished case; the all-aluminum chassis looks as though it was designed with purpose and style in mind; no rough edges mar the well-sculpted front; each of the buttons are shaped with pleasant touch points. The main OLED display features a large enough font that it can easily be read across the room, and a selector knob with a solid feel sits to the right of the display. Aurender's logo has been cut, nay, machined into the top panel and gives the A10 a elegant high-end feel. The back is rather minimalist, featuring both RCA and XLR outputs, S/PDIF Optical, Gigabit Ethernet, and two USB output ports (the Aurender can send digital bits to an external DAC via these ports; they do not function as USB input). The latest and greatest PCM/DSD playback options are guaranteed by dual mono AK4490 DAC chips, which also handle native (full) unfolding of MQA data. A built in 4TB storage drive rounds out the impressive feature set—mind you, purchasing the A10 won't set you back tens of thousands of dollars either as the A10 retails for a fairly affordable (in high-end terms, anyway) $5499.

For the past decade or so, I have felt that the digital equipment and playback market is ripe for disruption. Over the past years, and seemingly from nowhere, many new companies have entered what was a fairly stale market just a few years ago. Mytek, AURALiC, Aurender, exaSound, KEF LS50 Wireless (!) et al., have sprung onto the scene at prices that generally undercut the big boys whilst offering more features and, in some cases, if not equal to, then pretty darn close to the big boy's sound quality. The A10 is no different here, with a healthy feature set that will no doubt find use in many a high-end digital playback system.

Setup is pretty simple actually, though not entirely without its own quirks. Download Aurender's iOS Conductor app, connect your A10 via Ethernet to your network, and, generally speaking, off you are to enjoying digital bliss. More or less, that is. Your mileage may vary; personally, while I had no specific issues connecting the A10 to my network, there are times—randomly—when the A10 seems to connect and then immediately disconnect from the network. Given that you are at the mercy of the Conductor app's built in setup functionality, there doesn't seem to be too much in the way of troubleshooting if you do run into issues. In that case, powering the unit off, then back on, seems to do the trick ninety percent of the time, though on occasion it didn't. For the record, my home's WiFi is in the hands of eero's professional grade "mesh" network. If you haven't already done so, I strongly urge you to consider dropping coin and getting behind the eero Whole-Home Wifi System for all your network needs. I have dropped my trusted old Apple Airport Extreme setups (3 of them) in favor of eero and haven't looked back since. Three beautifully made eero WiFi hotspots cover my house and all of my network issues... and variable download speeds are now a thing of the past (this is not a paid endorsement or "review" of eero; simply stating what works really well in chez K).

Sonically and musically, the A10 is a hit. Tight, firm, low-end bass grabs both the Wilson's Alexx as well as YGs Sonja 1.2 (review forthcoming); dynamic swings are properly scaled and rendered. On any of my favorite electronica cuts, I keep reminding myself that hey, digital does, in fact, at times sound rather great. Fundamentally, the A10 plays bass lines and dynamics as well as anything I heard. Listening to Tidal's ever growing lineup of MQA files, now numbering several hundred albums in total, I am impressed with the perceived increase in resolution, overall sonic impact, and ability to retrieve detail more so than I remember some other digital front ends I've heard. To be fair, the A10 is the first main, full-sized, digital product I have had in my home that does, in fact, natively unfold MQA to its true resolution, thus, comparisons to other digital gear has to be taken with a grain of salt when discussing MQA files. Since neither of my other resident digital players support full MQA unfolding, at most I am hearing 24/96, since that is what Tidal's desktop app is capable of without the necessary hardware decoder. My only other resident MQA capable device is the little Meridian Explorer2, which has served me well for its portability and fully featured spec sheet. Thus, comparing apples to apples, both Aurender and Meridian offer up the increased—perceived—resolution of MQA'd files. Whereas the Meridian spotlights, to a degree or two, midrange and treble regions, it is the absolutely potent bass and dynamic transparency that gives the nod to the Aurender. Given the rather dramatic price difference, this isn't surprising, though I have to highlight that the Meridian kicks quite into higher price regions all other things being equal. It's quite the little "super" DAC.

Having said that, I am still not sure what I'm really hearing with MQA. Meridian isn't doing themselves any favors by keeping a rather convoluted marketing message in play, thus adding to the perception that all isn't what it's supposed to be. Kudos to Arian Jansen, of SonoruS fame, for providing an educational background to MQA long before any other audio publication did. Don't get me wrong, I'm not an anonymous online troll—I think that MQA is an opportunity to rally around (yet) another new format, quirks and bugs and all. It remains to be seen where MQA will get to; discussing this very subject briefly with an industry insider last week brought to light that gent's great analogy of MQA being like video's 3D. Which is to say that in some limited ways it can be a great experience (like watching Gravity on a positively massive IMAX screen in 3D; one of the few films 3D really worked well with), but in most instances, will leave you feeling somewhat underwhelmed.

Aurender has done a great job getting their audio circuitry lined up to offer up a great sonic experience no matter the file format being served. Outside of Tidal, I have about 7TB of various hi res DSD/PCM tracks that I regularly enjoy listening to, and with the Aurender, sonically I found nothing to fault.

But this brings me to Aurender's Conductor app. For some time now I've been saying that software is the new hardware. What I mean by that is that we are living in an increasingly software-centric world that's driven by scalable hardware platforms. Being around the iOS world day in, day out (my day job!), I have grown to appreciate a genuinely great app ecosystem. Given that app developers monetize their app designs skills far more effectively and to a far higher dollar level on iOS than Android, it is a general fundamental truth that on equal terms, the iOS app will tend to be superior to its Android counterpart. This gap becomes ever more evident when using a tablet, read, iPad vs. some other Android tablet.

Given this backdrop, I can't help feeling that Aurender really missed a great opportunity with their Conductor app. Now look, app development isn't cheap or easy. Yes, Apple has made it fairly simple to develop world class apps, but that doesn't imply that every app developed for iOS will be great. But... Aurender's Conductor app—there really is no easy way of saying it—is rather weak in both UI and UX terms. Frankly, it's an app I would have expected five or seven years ago, but not in 2017. First, iOS ditched "skeumorphism" with iOS 7 (!) in 2013, which is to say, from the get-go Conductor app looks visually very dated. Second, the UX part of the app is unnecessarily complicated and confusing to boot. Third, as I noted previously, the app's stability leaves room for improvement. Fourth, while the app allows you to playback files from your attached NAS, it is a manual, repetitive process, because the app doesn't import your files, it rather allows you to select each file from the file viewer screen. And lastly, playback of Tidal files is quirky at best, with the UI again playing against you, rather than for you. My simple advice would be that given the resources required to redo/update the Conductor app, why not simply make the A10 (or other Aurender hardware) Roon compatible? Since Roon already did all the heavy lifting and has established itself as the defacto playback software of choice for many, it would seem easiest to focus efforts on what Aurender is good at, the excellent DAC/analog output section, and leave the rest to other partners and teams.

Let me close out by saying that the A10 proves terrific as a digital streamer/DAC; the sound quality is great, if not even excellent, especially given the price of the unit. What mars the experience for me is the Conductor app. Fortunately, there's a really easy fix for that: Roon—please!

Audio Ramblings - The Aurender A10 and Comments on Cables from WireWorld

So, two things on my mind here… the Aurender A10 and how wonderfully musical it is, and the WireWorld Starlight Cat8 Ethernet cables… and how they work so well together. I mean they work great by themselves with the Aurender A10 going a long way in terms of musicality, delicacies, nuances, bass, slam, and depth… and the WireWorld Starlight Cat8 Ethernet cables making this all happen from a NAS... oh so nicely.

So, let's dig a bit deeper on each.

The Aurender A10 is a *new-ish* product from Aurender and features (from their site):

- Balanced (XLR) / Unbalanced (RCA) Audio Outputs
- Dual 768KHz/32bit Next Generation Flagship AK4490 DAC Chip
- Volume adjustment from app, IR remote or front panel rotary control
- Full linear power and special shielding prevent noise from being delivered to sensitive DACs for the best sound reproduction.
- Four Individual Toroidal Power Transformers for Server / Digital / Dual DACs
- Fully Isolated Asyncronous USB audio block to protect noise
- Precision clock generation system incorporating Field-Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGA) with sub 100fs world-class jitter-reducing clock generator precisely times digital audio data transmissions and minimizes jitter to below negligible levels
- Internal hard drive provides 4TB of storage and a 120G solid-state drive is used to cache music for playback. If a selected song or album is already cached to the solid-state drive, the hard drive will remain asleep. This minimizes wear and tear on the hard drive. By caching songs to the solid-state drive for playback, electrical and acoustic noise resulting from spinning disks, moving heads and motors are also completely eliminated.

- The dedicated USB Audio Class 2.0 output is designed to deliver an exceptionally transparent audio signal free of noise, and is shielded from outside electronic interference.
- If you already have NAS set-up, the Aurender N10 is able to play music stored on NAS devices, AMM (Aurender Media Manager) software is available for Mac (OS X 10.9 or later) /Windows7 or later.
- You can run AMM software on your platform of choice, please specify the location of your content on NAS then it will automatically find the Aurender in your local network and make a combining music database. It's transparent to the user, so once you run AMM, you can select the music with all the meta-data using the Aurender Conductor App without the knowledge of the location of your music files.

Which all means what? Well it means that the A10 was good to go from the initial set-up… no hiccups, no issues… nothing to worry about. Easy cheesy to get up and running—but if you have any issues, their tech support is a quick phone call away. This is important as I am sure there will be many purchasers who are not familiar with network streaming devices and such. While I am no expert, I do know enough to get such devices up and running—and I am no genius. I was also able to load my music from the NAS as well as play it from the NAS via the Aurender's Conductor App—simple drag and drop. I did not copy all my music into the Aurender, but enough files to get me comfortable with the unit's sonics. A note here, the A10 uses a 4TB HDD drive, as noted above, but with no redundancy of files (such as a Raid backup). This was done to get the best sonics from the unit, and with the idea that anyone who would purchase an A10 probably has their music on a NAS running a Raid (redundant array of independent disks) already. So, copy over all or a few, whatever works for you… as long as it is 4TB or less. I used the A10 in several configurations: as streamer feeding music into my preamplifier via its XLR outputs sourced from its own internal drive (damn good), as streamer feeding music into my preamplifier via its XLR outputs from my own NAS (damn good, but not quite as good), and as streamer feeding music out to my amplifier (direct via its own volume controls) via its XLR outputs sourcing music from either its own drive or my NAS (damn good, pretty damn good, but *differently good*).

Preferences? Well, if you use the A10 as a preamplifier direct to your amplifier, you give up any flexibility in terms of other 'sources' (analog and such), but it is direct and gives you a sound that is reflective of taking your preamplifier out. Meaning what exactly? I like the sound from having tubes, so taking the BHK out removes that sense of what the tubes bring to the table. Not a bad thing, just a different thing. The A10 direct sounds really, really good with a wonderful sense of space and slam… open and clean. Articulate and nuanced. Resolution that is natural and not hyped. Delicate and fast. Nimble and right. I should note here that the bottom-end of the A10 is scary big… not boomy, bloomy big, or whatever, but it does offer more oomph and heft than I hear from the Auralic Aries and PS Audio Directstream combination. Of which I never found to be lacking in this area… or region… or sub-region?

Further investigation leads me to learn that it is not so much the PS Audio DAC, but the that of the Aries which presents the bottom-end as being *lighter* than that heard from the A10. Using the A10's USB out into the Directstream gave the same deep and powerful bass as heard from the singular A10 feeding the PS Audio preamplifier. Perhaps an issue of the power supplies? No idea, though if you look at the power supply in the Aurender and consider that against the one of the Aries as used here (an outboard LPS from SBooster that is no slouch), maybe so my dear Watson. I do know that Auralic is releasing a new and improved Aries this coming fall… should be interesting to see if this slightness is alleviated. I can say that prior to the A10 entering the system, any suggestion of a *lesser* bass was never realized in listening to any of our music.

But hey man… the A10 is really right on. The music flows with a wonderful sense of rightness… nothing is spot lit or forced. No grain or grit… quiet and revealing as all get put. At lower volumes it is all there... delicate and perfectly nuanced. Turn it up and damn... things just get crazy good.

So, preferences? Okay, okay… for ease of use and overall joy, I preferred the A10 feeding my preamplifier (an audible gain in that tube stage and a perhaps synergy of the two PS Audio products)… though going direct saw no major drop-offs, more *different* than *better*, than not as good. Plus, I have a turntable and other digital sources so I need more inputs.

And I preferred the music coming off the A10's own drive as opposed to sourcing it from the NAS, though again it was really more of it being *different* than a *better* or *not as good a thing*—and for sure that is more of a preference on anyone's part. Perhaps a bit more resolving via its own drive as opposed to a NAS as there is now less stuff between the A10 and the files to get in the way. Not anything that I would find less engaging though, but clearly how best to optimize the A10's performance. While this is an option—getting files from an outboard NAS—The A10's design and purpose is to use its own internal drive.

So, I am really comparing the A10 as a 'standalone' streaming (without a NAS) digital source (DAC) feeding an analog output to the PS Audio preamplifier to that of the Aries feeding a digital output (with a NAS) to the PS Audio Directstream DAC feeding an analog out to the PS Audio preamplifier. And as I noted above, the A10 trumped the Aries/PS Audio/PS Audio in terms of bass and slam... punch and crunch... but, I could live with either. Though, my reference system tended to be ever so more liquid and analog-like in the sense of ease and flow. Not mind-*blowingly* different, but all the same *differently* better. And the PS Audio preamplifier had more drive and control than the Aurender A10 direct... synergy with the PS Audio amplifier? Power and control are good things to have with dynamic music. So, I am quite happy with what I have... if only we could get the bass of the A10! Slam! Punch, wham… the A10's bass is a real tribute to Adam West.
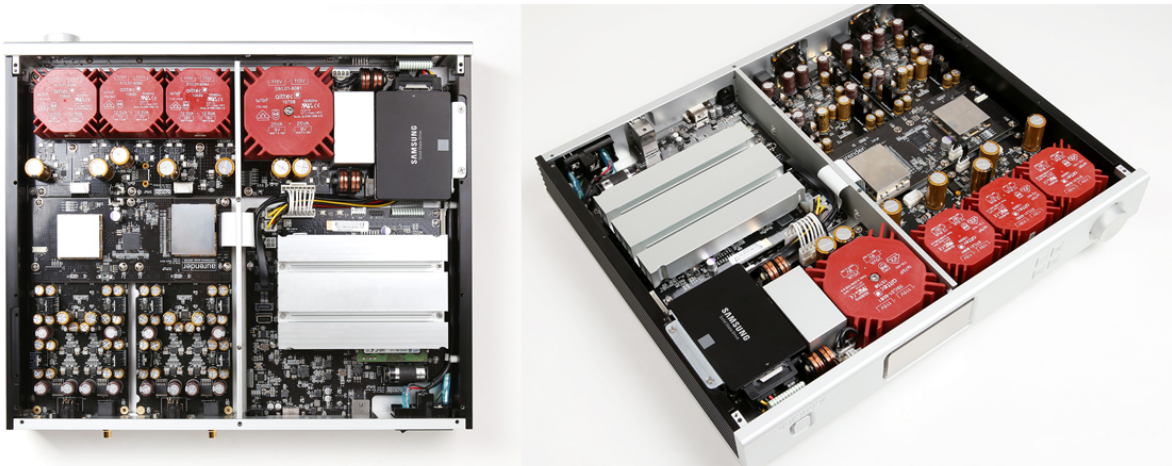
On its own, the A10 is quite stellar giving you a very, very musical presentation. Extended and airy, big and robust… it does the music justice. I see it aimed at those who are obviously all digital and in need of a simpler system. Straight and no chaser—direct to amplifier -and you got magic. I can find no faults sonically though I still have a slight issue—of design—with the app one uses to access your music. The color scheme and layout do not work for me… but this is simply a visual and ergonomic thing on my part. It is not an app that I find fun or visually appealing, but then I am no doubt not all that visually appealing to others, so there you go. On the other hand, it works brilliantly well and does things I wish other apps could do… so for sure it is a stellar app to access and control your music with features one has only dreamed of having... and it never crashed or required a re-boot... way nice!


Okay, so where does the WireWorld cables fit into all of this? From their site…

• The first of its kind, the Starlight Ethernet utilizes an innovative new conductor geometry that supports higher transmission speeds for the most lifelike reproduction of streamed music and video. Patent pending Tite-Shield™ Technology improves the most critical parameters of digital signal transmission thereby increasing speed and fidelity over standard ethernet cable design.

• Design: Tite-Shield Technology: 100 Ohms
• Signal Conductors: 23AWG | 0.26 sq. mm
• Conductor Material: Silver-clad OFC
• Insulation: Composilex 2
• Plug Contacts: 24K Gold-plated

Well, all the observations above are with the stock AC cord and generic Belden Ethernet cables. Swap those out for say, just the WireWorld Starlight Cat8 ($210 a meter making this a true bargain) and differences between going direct from the internal drive and that of my own NAS are seriously narrowed. The WireWorld Starlight Cat8 brings so much to the table by taking away so much that gets in the way of your music when transferring files across a network. Less noise, more music. Cleaner, more *rightness* to everything. Quiet and articulate with a nice touch of added warmth and richness—not day and night, but for sure *differently better*. I am not saying that the WireWorld Starlight Cat8 sounds this way… but that my music sounds that way with the WireWorld Starlight Cat8 cables in the chain. With these cables, everything just gets that much better… and in the ways noted above. Sweeter, more resolving… the WireWorld Starlight Cat8 cables are anything but wallflowers—either with their red jacket or their impact on the music. That is, their impact is *seen* and *heard*. Well done David Salz!
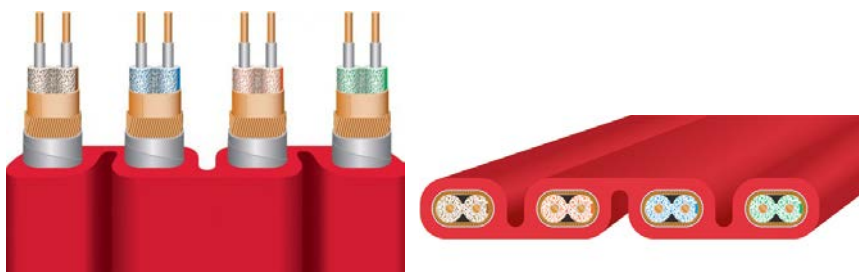
And if you want to get even more from the A10… try the WireWorld Electra Power 7 ($300 for 5 feet making it a steal). Everything I noted above is upped a bit in every way that gets you more of what is there. Now I cannot say what my music should sound like, but I can say what I want it to sound like… well sort of. Sometimes putting such things into words is difficult… but then, one can choose a file and hit play and that is all one needs to do to know… yeah, the combination of the A10 and WireWorld cables does that for me.

Okay so the A10 is like $5499.95 (make that $5500 plus tax) and for that you get a streamer, DAC, preamplifier, and NAS storage… all beautifully housed and weighing a considerable poundage. If you are still using a Mac or a PC… time to ditch that and join us regulars in the pool. The water is way better in here. The A10 is highly recommended and makes our music sing. It does offer MQA and Tidal for those who are interested or in need and can stream MQA via Tidal effortlessly via the Conductor app. I do use Tidal when out in the art studio/workshop, but in the house I pretty much hit random and have at it with my own music—my own music service. As to MQA, the issue is finding anything I like… not there yet for me. But I am sure both work as claimed and should bring you many smiles and hours of happy listening. Perhaps a follow-up with another reviewer who can do justice to the this feature in the A10... ?

So, the A10 worked flawlessly with all my files—of which are 98% 16/44.1. Wait, what? Uh, yeah. Why? Because the music I like is of that sort… not into what is being offered in terms of hi-rez (that being anything higher than 16/44.1). Just not my style. So, all my observations are with 16/44.1 files. Even so, the A10 rocked big time and am sure it will do the same with hi-rez playback and especially DSD. I will dearly miss our music via the A10... but one has to say goodbye. Perhaps we will meet again?

And the WireWorld cables are legit and stupidly affordable (for anyone really) for what they do and how they are made. High quality. If you are ever at an audio show and David is there doing his demo… you have to sit and give it try. I will admit that I have not, as I already know and hear differences in cables, but David's demo will easily change any non-believer into a believer.