

the absolute sound



Aurender A1000 Network Player

Versatile

Muse Kastanovich

Aurender, meaning “Audio Renderer,” was founded by Harry Lee in 2010. Its products are designed and manufactured in South Korea, with some product design and marketing handled by its California office. Aurender’s products range from a high of \$30k down to three newer affordable components at \$3850 each—the A1000 network player reviewed here, the N150 server/streamer, and the ACS100 server/streamer/CD ripper. Some models only function as servers and streamers, some incorporate DACs, some include a CD ripper, and some are streamers and DACs. There are also two master clock models. As a server/streamer/DAC, the A1000 is quite versatile—just add an Ethernet connection and connect the A1000’s analog outputs to your preamplifier or power amplifier. The A1000 offers both fixed and variable outputs, so you have the option of driving a power amplifier directly.

With only a single model that adds analog integrated amp capability, it can be fairly said that Aurender specializes in digital audio streaming and hi-res file storage and delivery. In the company’s words, “by applying a traditional audiophile component-based design concept to a modern digital solution, Aurender delivers an utterly transparent audio presentation.” It also states that its products can function as a closed ecosystem, meaning they are optimized for use with their own hardware and software. However, I found the A1000 functions just fine in the open ecosystem of the internet, streaming 16/44 and hi-res from Qobuz and Tidal using Aurender’s Conductor music-management app. If you prefer, you can operate the A1000 with Roon rather than the Conductor app.

The DAC chip in the A1000 is the AKM 4490REQ Dual-Mono, and there is a quad-core 2.0GHz CPU (ARM Cortex-A55) for DSP. Each is fed by a separate low-noise linear power supply. There is a standard 2.5" SSD-drive bay for storage, though you will have to add your own drive as the A1000 does not come with one. There is a 120GB NVMe SSD built-in for cache, though this drive does not function as server storage in the same way an add-on drive would. The A1000’s chassis is narrower than some, basically a 14" square (~15" deep including connectors and knob). It is very attractive in silvery matte milled aluminum with black sides. The display is large (6.9"), and mostly legible from the listening seat. A remote control is supplied.

For a streaming app, you can choose Roon, Tidal Connect, Qobuz Connect, Spoti-

This Aurender A1000 is quite sensible, at a price lower than many of the company’s other units.

fy Connect, Airplay, Google Cast, Bluetooth aptX HD, or Aurender’s own Conductor app. I was unable to get the Aurender Conductor to load on my Fire OS tablet—Conductor software is compatible with Apple and Android devices. (I do not purchase pricey mobile devices anymore—long story.) So, I used it on my Samsung Android phone instead. It worked fine, though the phone’s small screen size was not as pleasant to use as a 10" tablet. Both Tidal and Qobuz functioned well with the Conductor app.

I’ll start by listing the inputs and outputs which have be-

Equipment Report Aurender A1000 Network Player

come somewhat standardized on similar home network players (the Cambridge EXN100 also has them). Inputs include Ethernet, USB media, USB audio, coax, TosLink digital, HDMI ARC, Bluetooth. Outputs consist of a 12V trigger, digital coax, and single-ended analog on RCA jacks. The HDMI ARC (Audio Return Channel) allows you to feed the audio from your television to the A1000 for playback through your audio system. Compared to the Cambridge EXN100, the Aurender has an extra USB audio out and, of course, the 2.5" drive bay for storage. The Cambridge also has a TosLink optical out, a pair of balanced XLR analog outs, and a Wi-Fi connection with antennae (though I have found Wi-Fi to sound inferior to wired Ethernet).

Usage and Listening

Getting the Aurender up and running took a bit more research and effort than the similar Cambridge EXN100. I would not hold this against Aurender, as the A1000 is also designed to be a music server or to interface with one in a larger digital ecosystem. Certainly, you can also use it just as a network player, as I did. The Conductor app likewise is geared to be full-featured for those who like to create and curate multiple playlists. I tend to just pick tracks according to my mood and keep all my favorite artist, album, and song names in my head. Or I'll just let all or part of an album play before moving on to the next album. Conductor is quite powerful and configurable, though there is a learning curve.

At this point, let me mention my experience with Aurender North America phone support. It was excellent. The operators answered right away and were knowledgeable, patient, and friendly. As you would expect with any premium software (though this one comes with the player), good tech support is important to help people learn and/or troubleshoot issues. Aurender also has online support that can log in remotely to your player to solve issues. I had problems getting the Bluetooth remote to connect to the player, which the online service helped fix.

Changing the digital filter setting (also in Settings—Advanced) from short delay/fast roll-off, to short delay/slow roll-off improved the sound. It was more organic and natural. A good thing, since compared to the Cambridge EXN100 the Aurender tends toward the analytical.

Yes, I like dancing to Goth music. It's not a trendy thing, I've

Specs & Pricing

Type: Network player/streaming DAC

Inputs: Ethernet LAN, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, SPDIF coax, SPDIF TosLink, TV ARC, Google Cast, Tidal Connect, Spotify Connect, USB 3.0 data

Outputs: Unbalanced RCA analog, SPDIF coax digital, USB audio

Onboard library storage: 2.5" SSD drive bay up to 8TB (not included)

Dimensions: 13.8" x 3.8" x 14"

Weight: 18.3 lbs.

Price: \$3850

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Individual instruments were easier to pick out of the mix, including drums.

been doing so since the late 80s (though we called it Industrial Dance back then, and I seldom wear all-black). With "Horses in the Abattoir" by Traits (Qobuz 16/44), one thing the Aurender player does is reveal very fine gradations of recording quality on different albums—an indication of higher resolution than any other digital front end I have

had in my system before. This is a full spectrum of gradations, not just "good" and "bad." For example, compare the subtle differences in sound quality and recording equipment/techniques on that 2021 album to another new discovery "Sympathy Garden" from Forever Grey in 2022 (Qobuz 16/44).

My top sound quality configuration included a fiber-optic link from my router to the network player. It also included Shunyata Alpha and Theta Ethernet cables, a generic FMC on the upstream side, then the fiber, then a Sonore OpticalModule Deluxe FMC on the downstream side near the player. This really improves sound quality, even for a player such as the Aurender, which pre-loads the file into cache before playing it. You can put together your own fiber-media connection for as little as \$200 in parts using instructions from the article "How To Optimize Digital Streaming With Optical Fiber" in the July 2020 issue of TAS (and online).



Aurender A1000 Network Player **Equipment Report**

Comparisons

I directly compared the Aurender's sound to that of the Cambridge Audio EXN100, which is the only DAC I had on hand that is in the same league as the Aurender sonically, though the older Cambridge CXN v2 sounds almost as good and could stand up somewhat to a comparison. (The EXN100 is one-half the price of the A1000, and the CXN v2 is about one-third the price.)

Differences were subtle and hard to pin down. With The Police's "Tea in the Sahara" off *Synchronicity* (Qobuz 16/44), the Aurender had more sibilance on vocals, a bit too much more in one part of the treble range, though the EXN had a touch more top octave. The Aurender's bass, however, was deeper and stronger, and the soundstage was more three-dimensional. The A1000 seemed to have a tiny bit more detail, though that may have been due to somewhat more incisive sound.

Listening to *Passion* by Peter Gabriel (Qobuz 24/96), the tracks "Of These, Hope" and "A Different Drum" had airier reverb with the Cambridge EXN100, but on the Aurender the images were more specific and concrete. The A1000 had more prominent midbass, but the EXN100 seemed to go deeper. On the A1000, instruments floated in the space in front of me more realistically, with a better sense of depth. Individual instruments

You also have the capability of turning the A1000 into a multi-function unit

were easier to pick out of the mix, including drums. Instrumental timbre was very rich, though the mid-treble was, as noted, a touch too hot, which one might remedy through careful cable selection. This Aurender has a very exciting D/A, with lots of layering in the soundstage and agile time-domain performance. Overall, I felt that the Aurender streamer did sound a touch better, but the improvements were so small that EXN100 owners would be getting nearly the same

sound quality at a great value.

In terms of pure sonic considerations, I could see some preferring the Aurender's sound, and some might prefer it due to the Conductor app being more configurable. You also have the capability of turning the A1000 into a multi-function unit with the addition of an SSD, so you can bounce back and forth between streaming files and local saved hi-res files seamlessly from the same app or playlist. Also, there is its attractive chassis and large display, intangibles which do not affect the sound. Certainly, preferring this Aurender A1000 is quite sensible, at a price lower than many of its other units. **tas**

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