Aurender A30 caching music server/CD ripper/ streamer *by Eric Neff*

Benchmarks. *Noun:* a standard or point of reference against which things may be compared or assessed.

Ask your audio friends what products or brands represent benchmarks in different categories of gear and you are likely to receive a lot of answers. To discover what the audio industry considers a benchmark, go to a few audio shows and see whose gear is in lots of other manufacturers rooms and that will tell you what the industry truly feels. In the Streaming/Server realm Aurender is the clear chosen benchmark as some recent shows have seen upwards of thirty rooms featuring Aurender gear. Aurender offers two lines defined by output type; the W and N lines with all digital outputs and the A line with analogue outputs. The N10 offers high-end quality digital out alongside the W20SE as the digital flagship have been available for a few years and continue to be seen in high end rooms throughout any audio show. The A10 as the analogue out high-end device has been another mainstay of the audio show sources.

The A30 took its place as the flagship analogue out member of the Aurender line in 2019 and joins its W20SE digital out sibling in many high-end rooms including this February's 2020 Florida Audio Expo's Von Schweikert/VAC room featuring a system priced at over $1,000,000 USD and that for many (myself included) represented Best Sound in Show. Poor performers and industry non-benchmarks need not apply when paired with the mighty Von Schweikert Model 11's and VAC top of the line electronics.

So, what is the story of the A30? First it could rightly be referred to as the James Bond Aston Martin of audio products. Its full moniker would be the A30 Caching Music Server/Streamer/CD Ripper/HDD Storage/Full MQA Decoder DAC/Headphone Amplifier. I did check twice to see about martini server, but no luck shaken or stirred.

In essence in one box the A30 offers four distinct pieces of high-quality gear.

First a server; A default 10TB 3.5" drive plus a 480GB SDD for caching to store your CD library. The CD ripper ▶

offloads a CD to the on-board storage in WAV, FLAC or AIFF formats via its TEAC manufactured CD-ROM. The A30 can be paired with an Acronova Nimbie CD Autoloader that can load and rip 100 CD's consecutively for curating large CD libraries. (Autoloader not included).

Next a DAC; The A30 has a Dual Mono DAC featuring the flagship AK4497 DAC chip operating with dual mono power supplies to manage non MQA files. PCM is supported to 768kHz/32Bit, DSD to 256 DoP and 512 for Native DSD. Jitter is managed via FPGA based clocks to under 100fs. Regarding MQA the A30 is a full decoder and can stream MQA and MQA Studio Master recordings via Tidal at the quality of the original master tape. If you prefer to specify a particular upsampling you can set the non DSD files to 705.6/768 directly to the analogue outputs or allow the DAC to handle the process!

Also, a streamer; Tidal and Qobuz are among default options during setup. The A30 is able to add other services via the Aurender Conductor app to allow seamless streaming between your physical HDD storage and online services.

Finally, a Pre-Amplifier/Headphone Amplifier; The A30 can output directly to your amp via Balanced XLR or Unbalanced RCA connections removing the need for a dedicated pre-amplifier should the A30 be your single system source. The A30 offers volume control via the volume knob of the front panel, its remote control or from the Conductor application on your tablet or phone. There is also a high-quality headphone amplifier that has a ¼" unbalanced, XLR Balanced and 4.4mm jacks on the front. I tested this with my Sennheiser HD800's, Audeze LCD-X's, Mr. Speakers Ethers and HiFiMAN Edition X v2's and found it to be a solid entry into the headphone world. Planar and Dynamic headphones were all driven easily and with wonderful fidelity.

The A30 offers a lot of high-quality tech in one box and I was anxious to dig into its capabilities plus I knew my audio rack would certainly appreciate the versatility as it generally has a lot more heavy gear on it. I connected the A30 to my PS Audio BHK Mono 300 amplifiers with a pair of AudioQuest MacKenzie XLR cables and ripped a few CD's to the 10TB hard drive using WAV as my default format. As usual the system was playing through my Vandersteen Quatro CT speakers via the AudioQuest William Tell bi-wired cables.

I installed the Aurender Conductor app on my iPad Pro and followed the steps in the A30 Software Quick Start Guide included with the unit. I would recommend following the start-up guide as you need to respect the sophistication of the A30 and make sure you are starting off with all aspects set properly.

Once setup, system installation and the first ripping were completed I selected Paul Simon's *Graceland* album [1986 Warner Bros] for a first listen. At this point I could really appreciate the large 8.8" colour LCD screen displaying album and track information along with the album cover big enough to see clearly from my listening position. I used that screen for some setup as well as stepping through the menu system via the buttons.

The A30 presented the title track with clarity and definition. The familiar jump in the rhythm was perfect and Paul's voice was nicely detailed. *Graceland* offers up a wonderfully unique combination of instruments and this presentation was delightful. Making a 40 year jump I moved to Paul's *Stranger to Stranger* album [2016 Concord Records] and 'Wristband'. Clearly a song with a story behind it, 'Wristband' features a wonderful stand-up bass and drums with a well-used high hat. The bass set the tempo as well as define a large portion ▶

"Lorde's distinct and clear voice came through with emotion through the mid-range."

▶ of the room space. The high hat kept a tight 'snick, snick' as the drumstick snapped at the point of closure with just the right amount of leading sizzle. Clearly, the A30 was at home with Paul Simon CD rips.

Changing gears to Lorde's first album, *Pure Heroine* [2013 UMG] streamed via Qobuz in 96/24 high res, track 1, 'Tennis Court', has the ultra-low EDM bass with triangles and other percussion devices placed specifically at different locations throughout the song. The sense of space and depth set a tangible soundstage throughout the song. The A30 delivered the EDM to the Quatro's subwoofers with room shaking power. The triangles appearing with their light, but crystal-clear tone floated clearly through the carbon tweeters. Meanwhile Lorde's distinct and clear voice came through with emotion through the mid-range. The A30's ability to manage all of the aspects necessary to deliver a terrific presentation of high res streaming files as if they were a local source were in full force. It was a first-rate performance.

Moving over to Tidal and their MQA Master files I selected Jan Lisiecki and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra performing Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No.1 in G Minor, Op. 25, MWV O7 – 1. Molto allegro con fuoco. [2019 Best of Tidal Masters].Growing up in a home where my father is a professional piano player it was exciting to hear a piano recording sound so authentic. Fronting the orchestra, the piano had the right attack and decay. The tone was near live and the space between notes in the allegro was just that small space to show off the recording's quality (and the pianists' considerable skill!). The strings, horns and woodwinds played their support role with live energy and tonal accuracy. Over the years I would have needed an SACD or vinyl album in the house to enjoy this level of connection with a recording. To experience this connection via streaming was truly magical and illustrates how far audio has come over my lifetime.

The A30 is not inexpensive. Yet, the fact that the A30 offers this level of performance in four key device areas makes this a solid bargain. Once you invest an afternoon in taking your time to configure it properly it will reward you with simple operation using it together with the very well thought out Conductor app. After ripping all of your CD's, configuring and logging into your streaming accounts and boxing up your many old devices you can settle back and decide which of the forty million songs you should enjoy. That may be your most difficult audio decision left to you. Bravo Aurender, the simplicity benchmark. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Compatible Formats: DSD (DSF, DFF), WAV, FLAC, AIFF, ALAC, M4A, APE and others

Bit and Sample Rates: PCM up to 768kHz/32bit. DSD up to 256 DoP. Native DSD up to 512(Internal play only)

HDD for Music Library Storage: 10TB 3.5" X 1 HDD

SSD for System and Cache: 480GB M.2 NVMe

DAC Chipset: AKM AK4497 Dual-Mono Design with Dual-Mono Linear Power Supplies

Power Supply: Full-Linear

Display: 8.8" 1920 × 480 WIDE IPS COLOR LCD

Digital Audio Inputs: 1 × RCA SPDIF / 1 × BNC SPDIF / 2 × TOSLINK up to 24-bit / 192 kHz / DOP up to DSD64

Data USB: 2 × USB 3.0 (Rear)

Dedicated Audio USB Port: 1 × USB AUDIO Class 2.0

Ethernet: 1 × Double-Isolated Gigabit Ethernet

Volume Control: -90 dB–0dB, 0.5 dB step, Velocity Sensitive Operation Variable output control

Clock Structure: Revised Full Differential System

Headphone Outputs: 1 × 4pin XLR Balanced / 1 × 4.4mm Balanced / 1 × 6.5mm Unbalanced

CD Ripping: TEAC Slot-Load CD-ROM Drive Automated ripping support for Acronova Nimbie Autoloader via USB 3.0 port (optional)

CPU: Intel N4200 Quad Core

Internal UPS: Super Capacitor Based UPS (uninterrupted power supply)

USB Audio Output: PCM: Up to 32bit / 768kHz – DSD: DoP Up to 128- Native DSD Up to 256

Analogue Audio Outputs: Unbalanced (RCA): 2.0 or 2.7 Vrms / Balanced (XLR): 4.0 or 5.4 Vrms selectable

Dimensions (WHD): 430 × 141 × 355 mm

Weight: 17 Kg

Price: £19,000

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