

Hi-Fi Choice



Triple threat

This three-box flagship streamer/network bridge from Aurender includes a separate server, digital interface and PSU. Does this approach pay off in superior performance?

Three boxes and not a DAC in sight... Aurender's flagship music server, the N50, is a £38,900 combination of Server box with display – able to play from online services, local storage on USB or NAS devices, or optional onboard storage – alongside a separate 'Audio' unit that's home to numerous digital outputs. The third box is a screened power supply unit, offering separately regulated supplies to power both the Server and Audio enclosures. Its most extravagant network bridge yet, Aurender's N50 is clearly a further evolution of the earlier two-box N30SA (*HFC 505*) and forthrightly described by the Korean company as: "the most luxurious, elegant and

high-performance approach to streaming and file-based playback available". These three units, connected by multicore cables, are intrinsic to the operation of the N50 as a whole. You can't pick and choose – it comes as a stack, or not at all.

Well connected

Custom umbilicals connect the power supply to the Server and Audio boxes, while a data cable also links those two. As standard, 60cm cables are provided, with 1.5m options available should you wish to position the units on separate shelves – or indeed the Server box, which houses the N50's colour LCD display and controls, out on display and the other two hidden away out of sight.

The Server unit, based around an Intel Quad Core CPU and 480GB NVMe storage for both system and digital audio caching, has basic controls plus inputs. The fascia is dominated by that large (1,920 x 480) display, just over 200mm wide, with a cluster of controls (mode, play/pause, next/previous) set to one side. To the rear is the power input, two USB-A 3.0 ports for offboard storage, an Ethernet port (with multiple transformer isolation) for the inhouse streaming implementation and the data feed to the Audio box. Most important, is the filtered and galvanically isolated USB 2.0 audio output to feed an asynchronous DAC.

In addition, two drive trays are provided, secured with thumb-screws.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Aurender N50

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Network-enabled
media storage
device/streamer

WEIGHT
Audio unit: 14.9kg
Server unit: 14.2kg
PSU unit: 18.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 96 x 353mm

FEATURES
• Compatible
formats: DSD (DSF,
DFF); WAV; FLAC;
AIFF; ALAC; APE
• Digital outputs:
dual AES/EBU;
BNC coaxial; RCA
coaxial; optical;
USB Audio; I2S
module slot
• Supports up to
32-bit/768kHz PCM;
DSD1024 (native);
DSD256 (DoP)

DISTRIBUTOR
Cambridge
Acoustic Sciences

WEBSITE
aurender.com
cas.audio

These will accept 2.5in drives, Aurender recommending Samsung QVO or EVO series, Western Digital, or Seagate internal SSD drives. The Audio enclosure, meanwhile, has matching power and data connections, plus two AES/EBU digital outs – which can run together in dual-wire mode into suitable DACs up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD128 – and optical, coaxial and BNC outputs (up to 32-bit/192kHz and DSD64). There’s also a word clock input, for use with Aurender’s MC10 or MC20 and an I2S output, with the option of fitting an MSB Pro ISL module instead.

The partnering Power unit – all three boxes share the same slick Black or Silver alloy chassis design – houses what Aurender describes as: “two laboratory-selected, high-inductance toroidal transformers, each vacuum-encapsulated and

There’s growling bass aplenty and stunning focus from the lead vocal

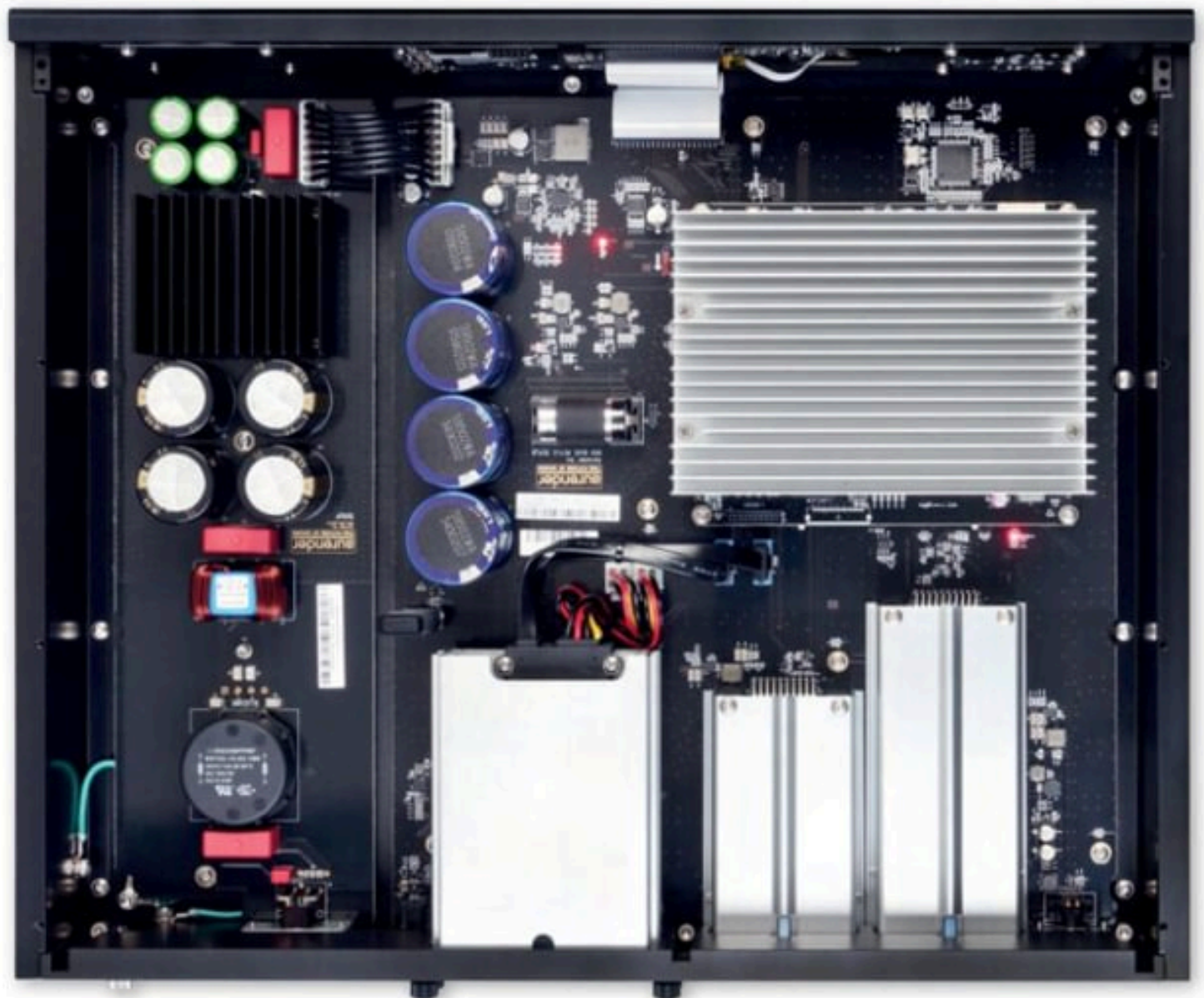
epoxy-filled within a polished stainless-steel enclosure, ensuring maximum isolation and durability”. The power supply also uses multi-layer AC and DC filtering to, as far as possible, suppress power-line noise.

The Server employs an OCXO clock with FPGA control for ultra-low jitter and the three-box construction is intended to minimise interference and noise. The whole setup is both solidly built and superbly finished, as is usual with Aurender’s products.

Playback from streaming services or local storage is simple and logical via the company’s excellent Conductor app, while the convenience of using the N50 as a one-box – actually, three-boxes – storage and playback solution shouldn’t be underestimated. A couple of 4TB 2.5in drives to fit inside aren’t cheap – you’ll need to budget about £1,000 or so for the pair – but once installed it’s simple to copy over an entire music library for fast, convenient access. In addition, the N50 provides the ability to download purchased music directly from Qobuz or Highresaudio to that internal storage.

Sound quality

With the USB DAC section of a dCS Varèse stack between the N50 and amplification from CH Precision and Constellation, driving big Wilson Audio Alexx Vfx floorstanders –



The Server unit includes two bays for 2.5in drives, two USB-A 3.0 ports for external media, an isolated Ethernet port and a USB-A 2.0 ‘audio’ output

Aurender’s flagship swiftly sets out its stall with a sound both weighty and extraordinarily vivid. Playing the 2016 remastered version of ELP’s *Pictures At An Exhibition*, we are immediately taken aback by the stunning levels of detail on offer with a simply massive sound from Carl Palmer’s equally huge drumkit, and Greg Lake’s bass tautly underpinning Keith Emerson’s keyboard gymnastics.

Coming right up to date with the slick K-pop of supergroup BTS’ *Arirang* album, there’s growling bass aplenty and stunning focus from the lead vocal on *NORMAL*, all layered over the swagger of the slick production and the tight, clean harmonies. The soundstage effortlessly fills the space between the loudspeakers to dramatic effect. Yes, it’s all entirely commercial –





supremely so, in fact – but it does sound rather magnificent.

Mind you, that ability is also heard to good effect with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra/Karina Canellakis recording of *Rachmaninoff's The Bells*. Here there's plenty of real drama matched by wonderfully vivid instrumental colour and further aided by orchestral mass and explosive power without trading any insight into the solo voices. The momentum is palpable, while the staging and definition are superb.

Presence really is a major factor with the Aurender N50, the sound being delivered without a hint of blur or confusion. The Isidore String Quartet's recording of *Haydn's String Op.20 No.2* sounds tight and fluid, with a wide-open dynamic and a tangible sense of space around the four performers. It's a fine recording,

and the N50/Varèse does it full justice, just as effortlessly as it does with the altogether different Steven Wilson remix of the title track from Van Morrison's *Moondance*. This sounds incredible and is very much like hearing the song for the first time, completely afresh.

The performance is suitably mystical and atmospheric with *The Prophet's Song* from Bob Ludwig's 40th anniversary remaster of Queen's *A Night At The Opera*. The opening guitar feels close and focused, while Freddie Mercury's voice drifts in from mid-distance to close up, in front of the tight Taylor/Deacon rhythm section. It's all very over-the-top pompous nonsense, of course, but highly effective, with Mercury's voice multitracking and layering in the *Now I Know* section, before the band slams in with its lumbering riffs.

The Server has a bold colour LCD screen with artwork and file information directed via the Conductor app

It's perhaps every bit as operatic as the much better-known histrionics of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, an old warhorse that comes up every bit as fresh through Aurender's N50. The fine detailing takes us deep into the mix and all that studio wizardry – for all its familiarity the track can still chill at half a century's distance, just as Brian May's guitar never loses its ability to snarl and growl from the speakers. And, yes, the *Wayne's World* headbanging moment is suitably heavy and gratifying.

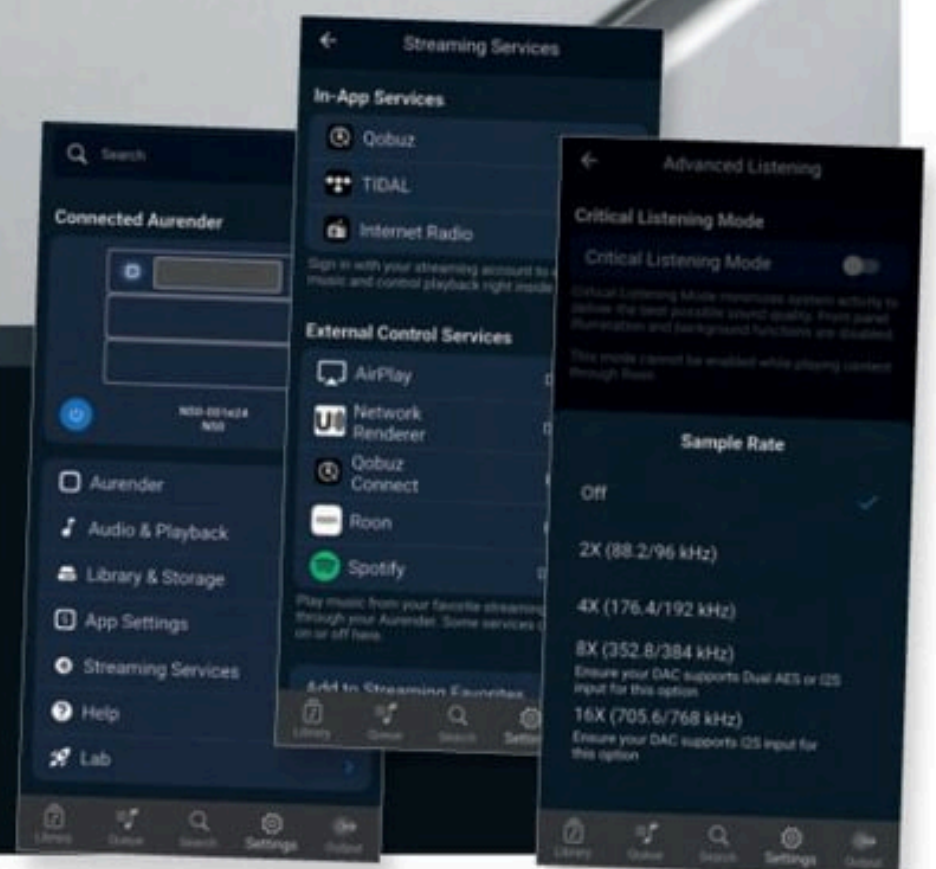
Similarly, the big, bold piano that opens Supertramp's *From Now On*, from *Even In The Quietest Moments...*, now in a brand-new remaster and 24-bit/192kHz release, comes across both vibrant and spacious, while the album-closing *Fool's Overture* rivals the Queen tracks when it comes to epic scale and ambition. There's



APPY DAYS

Aurender's Conductor app is the key to the N50, governing both its configuration and access to stored and streamed music. It connects to native versions of Tidal, Qobuz and Spotify, plus you can control the N50 via Roon, though its Roon Ready status is, at the time of writing, awaiting final certification. The app also supports Internet radio services, and is by far the smoothest way to

operate any Aurender streamer, thanks to clear graphics, logical steps and an absence of clutter. Depending on the output used, the N50 will handle PCM music files at up to 768kHz and DSD 512, while the app allows the selection of upsampling to 705.6/768kHz. Do note, however, that Aurender's 'filtered and isolated' USB output transmits LPCM and DSD data in native 'bit-perfect' guise only.



another wistful piano intro here, building to a massive, thundering charge aided by the crisp, tight, rhythmic ability of the N50. All those sound effects and snippets of dialogue are woven through the music with excellent clarity and the pulsing bassline sounds huge.

At which point we vanish down a rabbit-hole, listening over and again to Tori Amos' cover of The Boomtown Rats' *I Don't Like Mondays* from the recent remaster of her *Strange Little Girls* album. We compare Tidal and Qobuz streams of the new version and the 2001 original with the download played on the N50 and then via the dCS Varèse's own streaming front-end. The N50 playing the download through the dCS DAC

via USB just about edging it over the Varèse's own streaming provision.

These experiments go some way towards nailing the capabilities of the N50 as a top-class music source. If you want to hear streams, downloads and even your CD rips at their best, and really can't stretch to a quarter of a million (!) for the dCS Varèse, the N50 feeding a decent DAC will do very nicely indeed

Conclusion

Combining Aurender's super-slick operating system and app, the N50 has the capacity to compel a vivid, dynamic and thrilling sound from your choice of outboard converter. Just make sure to budget the extra necessary reddsies for internal storage

and you won't go wrong with what is an excellent keystone for a state-of-the-art digital music system ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Slick operating system and app; great sounding performance

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** You'll need extra budget for internal storage

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** The heart of a state-of-the-art digital music system

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★