

REVIEW

HI-FI WORLD

Disk delights

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It was three years ago that I reviewed the Aurender S10 Music Player. I was highly impressed by it and thought it was, at that point, one of the best non-optical digital solutions that I had hitherto encountered.

I was interested to see the latest offering from Aurender recently at the Whittlebury Show, surprisingly in the Audio Note room. It is half the width of the S10, and has a similar look and feel to it. There are in fact two incarnations of the X100, the small one; X100S with 1TB of storage, and the X100L (L for large), which boasts 6/8TB of storage.

Both models have a 120GB solid state drive, from which music is played. Just before a track is queued, it is transferred from the hard drive to the solid state drive, so there are no moving discs whilst music is being replayed – obviously a useful prerequisite for silent operation.

The other major difference to the S10 is that output to a DAC is solely via USB. This may not seem an obvious one: most high-quality DACs have a USB input but, as I found a couple of years ago when I listened to a range of different USB-S/PDIF convertors in a group test, these varied widely in quality and the best ones gave out a solid, expansive soundstage.

The worst examples compromised the holography substantially and introduced a fine layer of electronic mush to the sound, which is commonly known as "jitter". So having been through these experiments, I would prefer an output of a music player to be S/PDIF and not USB.

When doing the listening tests, I had at my disposal an Esoteric K-05 CD player, which is currently my reference, as well as a DCS Debussy DAC, a superior performing digital-to-analogue convertor to the one in the K-05 but somehow less enjoyable to hear. The Esoteric DAC section is a bit more relaxed and involving – the DCS can sound a little academic by comparison.

However when teamed up with the Aurender X-100, the Esoteric gave some disappointing results and it was only when I swapped it for the DCS that the Aurender started to shine sonically. Suddenly control and finesse appeared and the differences seemed to be larger than the differences in the DACs.

When I substituted the Halide Bridge USB-S/PDIF convertor for the internal USB-S/PDIF of the Esoteric I noticed a substantial improvement in the presentation of the sound. Thus the offending party was the USB input of the Esoteric K-05 and not the Aurender!

In terms of compatibility, the Aurender can handle WAV, FLAC, ALAC APE, AIFF as well as M4a files – and also playback of DSD (DFF/DSF) tracks. Connected to your network it will recognise any attached NAS drives as well, so the internal hard disk doesn't have to be the limit for storage.

An internal switch mode supply is used to supply power to non-audio components and this is contained in a shielded compartment to minimise the risk of interference.

In addition to all this, the Aurender comes with a reliable and solidly-written iPad /iPhone app which at the touch of a finger plays a selected CD.

The app lets you chose category, resolution, as well as searching alphabetically, and is a joy to use. To add a CD to the hard disk, i.e. to rip the CD, you plug in a USB CD reader, and the Aurender picks up the artwork and track details from an online database. It takes a few minutes to rip each disc and the online database seemed to be able to cope with most of the CDs I threw at it.

A few of the more exotic CDs drew a blank and the tracks have to be entered manually. This was a bit fiddly, as the only way to alter the contents of the Aurender in this way requires the use of a PC on the network.

Transferring my digital collection took a day, as network transfer is much slower than via USB hard disk. There are a few buttons on the front of the Aurender to replay a track, fast forward and pause, but basically the unit cannot be operated without an iPad.

So, listening through the USB input of the DCS Debussy DAC (DCS have now taken over the UK distribution of Aurender for synergistic reasons) I had a match made in heaven.

SOUND QUALITY

Starting with a high-resolution LSO 'Live' recording of Brahms' Second Serenade, with Bernard Haitink conducting, the sound is sumptuous, rich, detailed and thoroughly engaging. There is a quietness, a blackness to the silence. The naturally organic recording technique really works here, simple but correct miking in combination with 24/48 resolution gives the impression of actually being at a live concert. I have rarely heard this recording sound better and can understand the *raison-d'être* of this series more clearly now. Really fast transients, impressive dynamics.

Over to a hi-res recording I made of the Allegri Quartet, on 24/96 live from the Holywell in Oxford. Again, this produces one of the best versions I have heard of this recording. The instrumental tone is smooth and rich, very believable and organic. The DCS is never as comfortable as when playing wellrecorded live concerts, because it captures space so well. There is real solidity to the midrange and a lack of any distortion or jitter that I have heard through lesser equipment. This player is clearly a refined solution for playing back hi-res material.

Now to some ripped CDs and for me The Beaux-Arts Piano Trio encapsulate everything that a great ensemble needs: inspiration, personality, and oodles of musical insight. In their Philips recordings of the charming Mozart Piano Trios, they capture the idiomatic rustic character of the set beautifully. The final movement of the last Trio, the G major, is a Rondo with episodes taking you to different corners of Austria.

On the Aurender, there is beauty, charm, and I am transported on my Austrian journey, but am left with a niggling doubt. The presentation doesn't quite have the same crystalline reality to it as played on the Esoteric K-05.

I feel I'm a few yards removed from the accuracy of the optical disc, the solidity and tangibility of the sound stage, the smell of the performance...

The Aurender X-100 represents a fine solution to the problems of a digital music player. It has been thoughtfully planned and brilliantly executed. It is up

there with the best music players that I have auditioned. For hi-res material, it excels, and feels to be in its element. The quality of a CD ripped to its internal drive does not quite match the quality of the same disc played directly from the Esoteric K05. It is close, around 90% of the quality, which for most people will be a small price to pay for the massive increase in convenience created.

However for those who have transparent enough systems to hear the small differences between hard disc and direct play from a high quality CD player, and are in pursuit of the last nano-detail, the Aurender may not be all-things to all-people.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

VAC Phi 200 monoblocs
VAC Signature Mk2a Preamplifier
Esoteric K-05 CD player
B&W 802d speakers
PS Audio PS10 mains regenerator
Halide Bridge USB/SPDIF convertor.