

by Scot Hull

Aurender A30 Music Server | Review



Adventures in ... Consolidation?

Simplicity. If I have to summarize what I believe we ought to be talking about with “lifestyle audio products”, that’s what I have in mind. Not all-in-one compromises, not tiny speakers on stalks, not active-speakers, not any of that. Or, better, not necessarily that. All I mean is ‘simplicity’. I like simplicity. Not that my office space resembles anything close to that, but I can surely admire it anyway. So long as ‘simplicity’ isn’t just a synonym for “wildly compromised”, I’m good. All of this is to say that the Aurender A30 is right up my alley. As a reviewer, it helps if I have “separates”. Speakers, preamp, phono preamp, amplifiers, DAC, power cords – basically, the works – and more than one of each kind of thing, so I can compare and see if a different this impacts the that that I’m looking at. This also means that my listening room is not one room, but a warren of boxes, wire, and gear that only the truly intrepid, or someone visiting from the show Hoarders, would really want to visit. Making that trek to work, I will confess, tends to have me fantasizing about radically downsizing.

Anyway, the Aurender A30 does a couple of interesting things. First, like most Aurender products, it's first-and-foremost an audiophile-grade music server – with 8TB (!) of internal storage. Also, you can rip your CDs right on the box, or load your files via a portable hard drive into the USB port, or connect to a network storage array, or stream via Qobuz or Tidal, or all of the above. Aurender has a custom “app” available via iTunes, and with a not-included-but-necessary iPad, you can with relative ease, organize your music into playlists and have a ball.

Unlike my “old” reference W20, the Aurender A30 is also a high-res DAC (768KHz/32bit dual-mono DAC designed around the AKM AK4497 chipset, with support for “native” DSD at up to 8x), and for those curious, it does also support MQA.

The A30 is also a fully functioning preamplifier, with a digital attenuator and is controllable in-app, right from the iPad. XLR and RCA analog outputs can drive your amps – and the A30 drove the snot out of my Bricasti M28 monoblock amplifiers with no problems at all. And yes, that is a headphone jack complex right on the front.

Other points of interest? The power supply is linear and data delivery is managed with an “OCXO Based Precision Jitter Reducing Clock Generator”. There is a host of digital inputs, and in a novel twist, super-caps used to create an “uninterruptible power supply” (for graceful power-up/down, mainly). And there's a great big color LCD on the front to show off your music's cover art – and provides clearly-visible feedback of data (like volume) from most listening distances.

And it's built like a tank.



Using and listening with the Aurender A30

In use, the Aurender A30 is straightforward – just load your music and go. The look is clean, the buttons robust, and the knob is very knob-u-licious. Start-ups are a bit protracted, but once “alive”, responsiveness is good. You’re going to be spending most of your time in the app, sorting and selecting tunes, but you can manage to get going right from the faceplate.

I queued up tunes on Qobuz from The Wailing Jennys, Béla Fleck, and Uncle Lucius, and sat back and just reveled as my Harbeth M40.2 Anniversary Edition loudspeakers, cranked up to speed by a pair of Bricasti Design M28 monoblock amps. Triode Wire Labs is my preferred cable loom, with Pi Audio Group doing the duties of power distribution.

I am pretty sure that I spent the entire day glued to my chair. Just ... wow.

The Aurender A30 sets a brilliant pace. Seriously. This is a solution worthy of your attention. With the A30, treble extension was un-impeachable. Bass control was superb. If you’re a detail-freak, the A30 is not going to be the limiting factor.

The detail, the ease, and the extension of the music I was hearing out of my system shouldn’t be reduced to the 8-second bytes of sound that I was using for fine-grained testing, but let me assure you that I did brutalize the music I use as tools just as I usually do (much to the vast and ongoing annoyance of everyone else I share a home with), and what I heard was fully competitive to what I wanted to hear on all my “tests” (including the “Cricket Test” – I got flocks of birds, here, flocks). I will also offer that when I was not endlessly repeating musical micro samples, I was sitting with my eyes wide open, delighted by the drama that the music unfolded in front of me. This was some top-shelf stuff, folks. More on that shortly.



The best playback sound quality on the Aurender A30 comes from files I loaded on it. NAS, Roon, streaming services – all (unfortunately) cannot match the richness, dimensionality, and immediacy of playback from local storage. I (really) wish it were otherwise, but as this is also true of my W20 and the ZENith server from Innuos, I wasn’t surprised by this discovery. What seems wildly obvious as of this writing is that high-res downloads are not optional for those on the quest for the ultimate in sound. And given that you’re reading about an \$18,000 device, I’m guessing that means you.

While the Aurender A30 is not “affordable”, it isn’t as over-priced as one might first assume. The Bricasti M1SE, one of our reference DACs – very linear, very neutral, very refined – costs \$10,000. The ZENith from Innuos costs \$5,650 (and has only half the storage). The A30 could stand in for both, and also eliminate a fancy power cord and a fancy USB cable – and still provide

competitive sound quality. I should underline this – Bricasti and Innuos are my current references, and I consider the pairing to be excellent. Yes, the Bricasti can be purchased with a network port (a \$1,000 upgrade, I believe), and with Roon Core running on a computer in your home network (and a NAS for storage), you can do great things. But the ZENith, directly connected to the Bricasti with my reference-quality USB cable from Purist Audio Design (and yes, that USB cable is totally worth it), sounds better.

And yet, for the vast majority of audiophiles, this solution is going to not only be “enough”, but it will also qualify as a solid entry into the world of ultra-fi. And it should cause you to ask the dangerous audiophile question: “Do you really need more?”

Comparisons

Truth is, you can get more, but in the reaching for it, I’d have to seriously suggest you question your life choices.

Questioning my own life choices, I should mention that the Aurender W20 was the most absurdly over-built computer audio solution I’ve ever even heard of, much less owned. And paired with a Bricasti M1 Limited Edition, I will offer that the W20 helps make some of the best sound that I have ever heard at home. Organic, liquid, analog – with the very best recordings, and the very best DACs, the W20 has taken me to other worlds, and the glaring gap between it and my previous solution was so large that I bought the W20 on the spot (my children don’t really need to go to college, do they?).

In recent news, I’ve found that the new Innuos Statement server does a shockingly similar trick, with “transparency” and “clarity” being the coins of the realm in this case. The Innuos Statement has redefined, for me, what “open window” means, and when paired with an exceptional DAC, the musical illusion is hair-raisingly uncanny. More on that shortly.

Interestingly, the Aurender W20SE, a major revamp to my beloved reference, is also new and on my audio horizon. Stay tuned for that, too.

I almost hate to admit that the A30, by contrast, falls just a bit short of my ultra-fi pinnacles, but there we are. Of course, with either the W20 + Bricasti M1LE, or the Innuos Statement + Bricasti M1LE, we’re talking over \$30,000, almost twice what the A30 will set you back. But perfection is a lofty, lofty target.

I will offer, instead, that the lack of “distance” between the A30 and those separates makes that money an odd spend for all but the most dedicated or those with investments in their audio chain that demand the very, very best. For the rest of us, the A30 is an excellent end of the line.





The Bottom Line

I whole-heartedly and full-throatedly recommend the Aurender A30. My experience with this solution shouts out for an “Editor’s Choice” award.

It is hard to not love the A30. The sound is reference-quality. The build is reference-quality. In fact, the A30 invites you to spend more on the rest of your system just to keep up with it. Given that you’ll be able to consolidate a preamp, a DAC, and a computer server all at one fell swoop, you might find that the A30 actually saves you money even as it ups your game. Now there’s a weird thought.

The A30 can centralize and orchestrate your disparate musical world – from local files to NAS files, to streaming services. And this one-box solution from Aurender will not only seriously improve your audio system’s performance, it will also do that one thing that technology is supposed to do – it will simplify your life.

Halleluiah.