

Audiophile Style



Aurender AP20 Integrated Review



By The Computer Audiophile

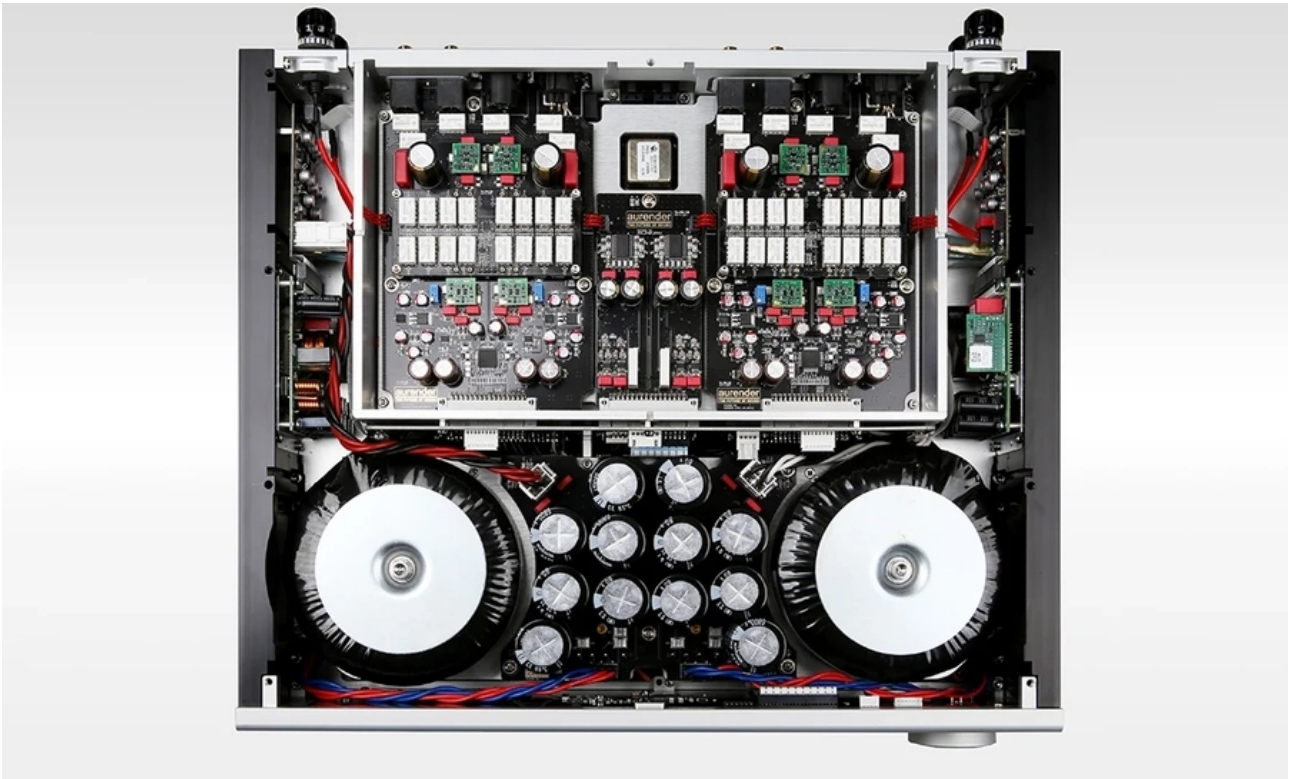
Let's cut to the chase, I absolutely love the Aurender AP20. When I'm not in my listening room, I think about which albums I still need to hear played through it and I daydream about listening to my favorite music. When I walk up the stairs and enter the room, I have zero doubts that I'll hear this music, with fantastic sound quality, as soon as I tap play on the physical remote or Conductor application. There's nothing to go haywire because it's a complete system. When music starts playing, I set my phone down, as the AP20 commands my full attention by doing what it was designed to do, reproduce music incredibly well. Aurender's AP20 all-in-one, single chassis solution, is damn near a perfect product.

Aurender AP20 Details

To be honest, I was unsure if Aurender could pull this off. I've followed the company since its inception as a high end music server pioneer, and I know the team has vision and talent. However, building a component that combines so many features, at such a high level, is a completely different challenge. I had high hopes, but prepared myself for an ordinary, not extraordinary experience. Perhaps I fell victim to the old audiophile axiom that suggests a company can only excel at making one type of product. Old habits die hard, but setting them aside can be immensely rewarding.

The AP20 does everything and does it extremely well. Like all Aurender products, the AP20 features the company's core technology, a fantastic music server. This part is identical to other Aurender servers, with a combination of local storage, streaming from Tidal or Qobuz, and the ability to connect to an Aurender Content Server (ACS). I used all three during my time with this unit. I'd forgotten how nice local SSD storage is, until I popped a 2.5 inch Samsung drive into the back of the AP20, copied files to it from my NAS (using the Conductor app), then played some music. Instant playback is really nice.

From the digital section of the AP20 files are sent to the dual-mono AK4497 DAC for conversion to analog. Aurender is no stranger to servers with built-in DACs, and the performance of the AP20 shows this in spades.



Now the AP20 story gets interesting. It's analog all the way from here on out (with one convenient exception). Aurender implemented an analog R2R stepped-attenuator volume control in the AP20. It would've been so simple for the company to just use the digital volume control built into the AKM chips, but I'm very happy an R2R analog control was selected because I often prefer the sound of a nice analog volume control.

The convenient exception to an all analog volume control comes into play when reducing the volume below -64 dB while using a digital source. The AP20 switches to a digital volume control at levels lower than -64 dB. When using the AP20 in my main system with Wilson Audio Alexia V loudspeakers positioned roughly ten feet from my chair, I never needed to dip into the digital attenuation. On the other hand, when I used the AP20 with Wilson Audio TuneTots at my desktop, I needed to reduce the volume quite a bit below -64. The ability to do this in the digital domain, versus not at all, was very nice because the speakers were literally a couple feet from my ears. Very little volume is required in this situation.

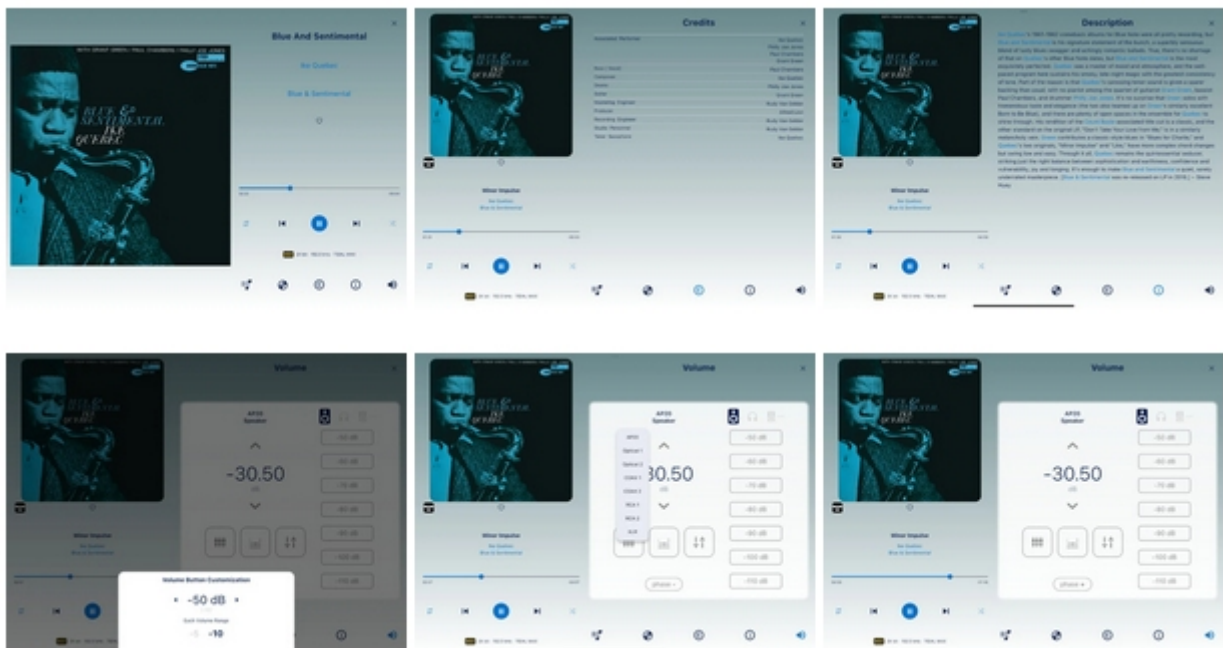
Note: If using the analog inputs of the AP20, the lowest volume setting remains -64.

Beyond the R2R analog volume control are two Purifi 1ET400A Class D amplifier modules in a Dual-Mono configuration. These are the amp modules that "everybody" is talking about, and for good reason. The team at Purifi is brilliant and it has proven through countless objective tests that these Eigentakt 1ET400A modules are the new king of the Class D hill.

Feeding these modules and the entire complement of internal components, are six discrete toroidal transformers. Even the CPU is fed with a linear power supply.



One feature I didn't plan on using, but thought, why not, is the balanced analog input of the AP20. Sitting next to the unit near my desktop was a dCS Lina DAC. I sent audio to the Lina via JPLAY for iOS, then output from the Lina to the AP20. Once the digital was converted to analog by the Lina, the signal remained analog from input to output of the AP20. I'm very happy I tried this because it enabled me to isolate the analog section of the AP20 from the digital and DAC sections. The unit's performance was fantastic, even though using an all-in-one integrated with external DAC and UPnP server was a bit outside any normal use case for the AP20.



All of the aforementioned features are the big ones. I left out many of the small details that in and of themselves equate to large performance enhancements. I should also discuss the “issue” that an all-in-one traditionally suffers from the fact that it’s an all-in-one. It isn’t possible to change a single part of the product or upgrade it down the road. The AP20 is a different animal in this regard. The music server piece is like all Aurender servers in that it gets updated frequently. The AP20’s analog inputs enable one to use a different DAC if the time comes for such an upgrade, while the analog outputs enable one to use a different amp if desired. The Eigentakt 1ET400A amp modules are fantastic, but perhaps down the road one may want to dip his/her toe into a lush tube amp with a pair of horn speakers. Fear not, just connect the analog outputs of the AP20 to said tube amps, and off you go. In essence, this is an all-in-one with great flexibility and obsolescence resistance.

The Proof Is In the Listening

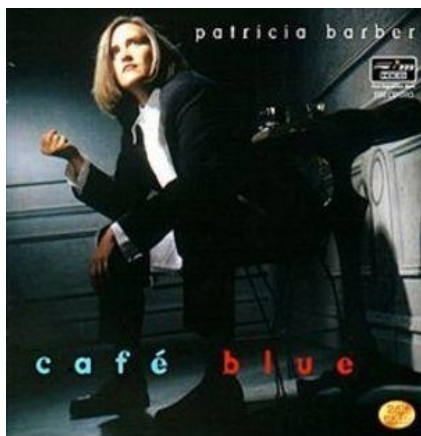


We’ve all likely seen many products in many industries that were designed using the best components, without regard for anything other than the components being considered the best. After all, it’s the easy way to avoid complaints from those who look at specifications and armchair engineers. In my world, components such as the AP20 are built for reproducing music and eliciting an emotional response when I play my favorites or something new that blows me away. Yes, the internal components are wonderful and measure great, but I don’t really care if the product doesn’t deliver on its promise of great sonic performance.

I started with the AP20 on my desktop system. I loved setting it under my desk, connecting speakers cables, and pressing play. The simplicity can't be overstated or ignored. Listening through the Wilson Audio TuneTots, music sounded stellar. I texted a few friends after spending a couple days with the AP20 in this configuration. I had to spread the news that this integrated was special.

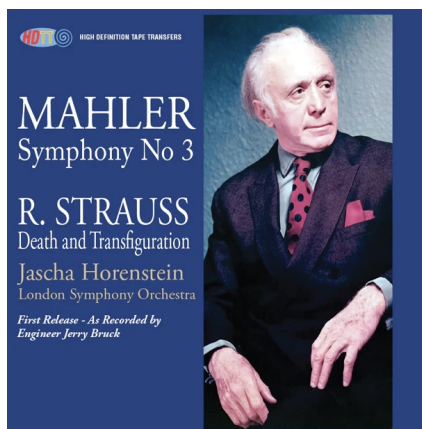
Sitting in front of this system for many hours per day, I'm always aware of any flaws. Once I hear them, it's all over because I can't stop hearing them. I heard no such flaws with the Aurender AP20 and Wilson Audio TuneTot combo.

Moving the AP20 to my main system with Alexia V loudspeakers from Wilson, involved disconnecting my immersive system. The difference in size between a system with seven amplifiers, twelve speakers, and hundreds of feet of cabling and a system with a single AP20 chassis, one set of AudioQuest Robin Hood Silver speaker cables and the loudspeakers, is really profound. At first I had to get over the fact that a single unit, sitting in front of my center channel speaker, was running my entire two channel system. After decades of monoblock mind conditioning, and separates for everything, it can be jarring to hear an integrated sound so good.



One album that I'd been thinking about since installing the AP20 was Patricia Barber's *Café Blue*. I have the First Impressions Music version, along with MFSL and others, so I copied it over to the internal SSD. Right from the start of the opening track, *What a Shame*, I was all-in. Mark Walker's percussion sounded so realistic, and with texture that I didn't think was possible from a system like this. Everything is inside one box, it shouldn't sound this good! When John McLean's guitar eerily creeps up from the background to the foreground just before the two-minute mark, his tone is reproduced so well, it just sucks me into the track and into a smokey jazz club, where Patricia Barber likely watched and listened in awe of the sound

just like me from my listening chair. This track and the entire album sound not only super clean through the AP20, but the sound is very engaging. Listening through the AP20 I frequently thought about what I was missing on this album, and I concluded that the missing attributes were likely sonic artifacts not on this recording, but only present on other systems because of a sonic flaw or flavor.



Sure, low-key jazz plays nearly perfect on the AP20, what about Mahler's *Symphony No. 3*? I'm glad you asked. I queued up the newly released, by High definition Tape transfers, version of Mahler's Third, set the volume to -13 and let it rip. WHOA! Talk about clean power that moved air and would've moved my hair if I had any! What an absolute delight it was to listen to this performance and put the AP20 through its paces. This album has incredible dynamic range, requiring instant power to reproduce huge percussion, followed by finesse required for soft passages and reproduction of the tone of the horn section. The Aurender AP20 delivered better than I could've imagined. Seriously, this was one of those moments that I'll be

talking about to friends at the upcoming AXPONA and Munich High End shows. The AP20

has power to kick you in the chest and delicacy to place a triangle in a three dimensional hologram anywhere on the soundstage. After listening to this performance, my heart was literally racing.



Of course I played my fair share of Pearl Jam and Three Blind Mice jazz albums during my time with the AP20, and they all sounded fantastic, but I want to focus on a new album released February 16, 2024 from Gilad Hekselman, titled *Life*, at the Village Vanguard. Track three, *Equinox*, has been released on Tidal at 24/96, and the entire album is available from Bandcamp. This is a live recording that sounds excellent through the AP20. The buzz of a tube amp, not the AP20 buzzing, drew me in right from the opening seconds. There's so much beauty in imperfection and it's these "imperfections" that the Aurender AP20 reproduces with perfection. I want to hear everything

included on the recording, and on this one it's as if I was sitting in the front row at the Village Vanguard.

Through the AP20 this recording has a wonderful sense of space. The texture of the snare drum head, when hit, is inescapable and delectable. With Hekselman's elusive electric guitar slithering throughout the track, and a few jazz club patrons in the background, this is like a modern day *Jazz at the Pawnshop*. Stream it, and download now for posterity, you will love this on a great audio system.

Wrap Up



The design of the AP20 is really something to behold. It's the right horse for not just a single course, but many courses. Its flexibility enables it to be used as an all-in-one or as a single component of a larger system, or as something that falls in between those two. I used it in two different systems, and mainly as the only component connected to my Wilson Audio Alexia V loudspeakers. I still have a smile on my face when thinking about playing Mahler's Third through this system, with little volume attenuation. Enough transients to scare any listener and plenty of delicacy to please even the

most discerning audiophile. The team at Aurender has seriously outdone itself.

Around my house we like to say, use it up, wear it out. I feel like I used this unit in every which way imaginable and forced it to flex its muscles while simultaneously whispering with accuracy, but I couldn't wear it out. I couldn't find the limits of the Aurender AP20. This is so much more than an integrated amplifier. It's a complete system with sky-high capabilities. 100% CASH Listed.