



Aurender FLOW

Portable USB DAC and headphone amplifier (also storage-capable)



At the 2014 CanJam @ RMAF, an audio industry friend and I were chatting about gear we've been enjoying, and I mentioned the Chord Hugo. "Have you checked out Aurender's Hugo competitor?" he asked? When I answered I hadn't, he insisted I should. As chance would have it, I later ran into ComputerAudiophile.com founder Chris Connaker, and he also asked if I'd heard the new Aurender portable DAC/amp. That was two people I knew and respected asking me about the same product, so

I asked Chris if he could introduce me to Aurender. Ten minutes later, I was meeting with Harry Lee and other Aurender team members, listening to the Aurender Flow for the very first time.

Okay, to be clear, the Aurender Flow was already in development before the Hugo was even announced, so it wasn't created in response to Chord's mega-successful portable DAC/amp combo. Once you put them both on a table, though, there's no avoiding the comparison. The Aurender Flow is a high-end, high-res portable DAC/amp combo; it is clad in a robust silver aluminum chassis, and it's more or less similar in size to the Hugo.

In terms of styling, though, they are certainly very different. The Flow is sharp corners and smooth flowing lines, with a beautiful (and huge) volume knob dominating its topside, and a digital display smack dab in the middle of that volume knob (which I'll get to shortly). The Hugo sounds absolutely amazing, but it is a strange creature to behold, with its domed hey-check-out-my-FPGA viewing window to the PCB, unusual recessed volume control ball thingie (that glows different colors to indicate volume levels), recessed jacks galore, a host of LED's of varying colors that a colorblind guy like me has a hard time making heads or tails of, and strange little chassis design flourishes that seem almost random. The Flow looks decidedly more straightforward and business-like in comparison.

In terms of specs, the comparisons certainly have more in common than their chassis styling. Both are 32/384-capable via USB. Both are 24/192-capable via optical. Both will play DSD files up to DSD128. (The Hugo also has a coaxial digital input, which the Flow does not.) Rated output power comparisons show the Hugo a bit more powerful into 32 ohms (600mW for the Hugo versus 570mW for the Flow); and the Flow is a bit more powerful into 300 ohms (87mW for the Flow versus 70mW for the Hugo). Both have vanishingly low output impedance specs, with the Hugo at 0.075Ω and the Flow at 0.06Ω . Battery life for the Hugo is rated at around 12 hours (which might be a bit optimistic) and the Flow at 7+ hours (which is probably mildly conservative). The Hugo's DAC is based on a custom-coded FPGA DAC, and the Flow's DAC section uses the Sabre ES9018K2M.

Due to the display in the middle of its wide volume knob, and the media control buttons on the side, the Flow is regularly mistaken for a standalone media player, which it is not. The display shows a visual volume indicator, various functional modes, battery status, current sample rate, and other bits and bobs. The buttons are for playback control (of your computer), and can control iTunes and some other media player software (play, pause, track backward, track forward).

Another reason people seem to assume the Aurender Flow is a portable media player is because it has an mSATA slot into which can be installed an SSD drive up to 1TB. Again, to be clear, the Aurender Flow is not a portable media player like an Astell&Kern players. It is a DAC/amp combo, and installing an SSD drive turns it into a USB 3.0 media storage device. I've installed a Samsung 1TB SSD in mine, and the read/write times are fast. If you're still unclear why one would want an SSD drive in his DAC/amp, here's my personal answer: My laptops of choice is a MacBook Air that has only two USB slots. With the Aurender Flow, both my media storage and DAC/amp functionality are served with a single USB slot. It's less to carry, and it keeps my other USB slot free for other things (like my photo storage drive or other peripherals).

As for how its performance compares to the Chord Hugo, I'd say the Aurender Flow is so far the strongest competitor to the Chord Hugo I've listened to. If your primary headphone is a sensitive IEM, you might actually prefer the Aurender Flow, as, in terms of self-noise with an ultra-sensitive in-ear, it is dead quiet, whereas my most sensitive IEMs can touch and reveal the Hugo's noise floor. When it comes to sensitive IEMs, I also like how the Aurender Flow always jumps back to -90dB volume level (-110dB is its lowest setting) when you unplug the headphone from it, which is nice for added hearing safety.

The Aurender Flow is a very resolving DAC, to my ears approaching (but not quite reaching) the Hugo in terms of inner detail and accurately conveying imaging and soundstaging (using albums I was present for the recordings of as my references). With most of my over-ear headphones, and with my loudspeaker setups, I still have to give the edge to the Hugo, though, for its ability to present a sense of solidity--a corporeality--that I typically associate with good tube gear. The Flow is good in this regard, but that edge is the Hugo's. This is not faint praise--the Hugo is far more expensive, and is one of my favorite DACs ever, regardless of form factor. With two portable products like these at the top of their games, there'll be some who prefer one over the other, and I think the Aurender Flow will win the battle with some of you.

This has been a very heavy travel year for me, and the Aurender Flow has edged out the Hugo as my carryon-only travel companion, due to its ability to be both my DAC/amp and my media drive all-in-one. When I travel extra-light, my best in-ears always win the role of primary headphones, and the Flow's advantage with my most sensitive in-ears also contributes to its status as my current #1 travel DAC/amp combo.

If you don't need the SSD drive, the Aurender Flow comes in at just over half the price of the Chord Hugo. Even with a 1TB drive, it's priced at just under \$1800, which is still \$700 less than Chord's portable marvel.

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