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MAGICAL MAGICO

Martin Colloms' enjoys a close encounter with Magico's S5 floorstander

AXJET BY AXHORN

Paul Messenger discovers a unique horn speaker system in the heart of Wales

ANALOG DIGITAL?

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THE SPECIAL ONE

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LONG LIVE SUPERNAIT 2

The new Naim SUPERNAIT 2 has fewer features than its predecessor – and with good reason

HEADPHONE EXPLOSION

Comparing newcomers from AKG, Yamaha, Jays, B&W, Sennheiser and Focal, against established references

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I saw something interesting on the TV the other day, in a programme called *If Memory Serves Me Right*, made by actress Maureen Lipman. While the main thrust of the programme examined the difficulty of learning lines as one became older, a specific interview with a researcher did give me significant pause for thought.

Sadly I don't have a recording and the programme is not available on *iPlayer*, so I can't provide more than a brief recollection of the study in question, but the gist seemed to be that an individual's most powerful memories are those that are built up during the transition from childhood to adulthood – say between the ages of 12 and 25.

I'm increasingly convinced that this probably applies even more to musical memories than those of a more general nature, and as a result often goes some way towards explaining an individual's particular taste in music – at least in terms of popular music forms.

It's certainly true that much (though by no means all) of my favourite music tends to date from my adolescent years (say, from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s), and I'm also conscious that jazz fans are often a little older than I, and that punk enthusiasts tend to be rather younger.

Indeed, listening to the beginnings of punk rock at my local record shop, I recall thinking that it wasn't particularly original and strongly reminded me of early Who material. I therefore never really 'got' punk rock – but it's no surprise that my kid brother (12 years my junior) became a big fan of The Clash.

Over the years my record collection has accumulated loads of music from outside that 1962-1974 'window', much of which has no less merit than the music I enjoyed back in those early years. But there's no denying that many of my favourite discs date from that era. And on the odd occasion that I get talked into participating in pub quizzes (I've discovered that my knowledge of history and geography can be quite useful), I find myself well able to answer questions from 'my' era, but quite unable to cope with those from more recent years.

I should stress that this observation only applies to popular music. Enthusiasm for classical music seems to belong to a different part of the brain and memory entirely. I was certainly exposed to plenty of classical music through my formative years, but the composers I heard in my youth seem to have little if any relationship to my current personal preferences (for the works of Sibelius, Elgar and Wagner, for examples).

However, while I don't believe that one's preference for a particular type or era of music entirely determines one's choice of hi-fi system, it probably does have some influence. It also maybe helps explain why timing and dynamic expression seem to be much more important than imaging or tonality, for me at least, though I'm fully aware that others have quite different priorities.

Paul Messenger

Editor

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Aurender W20

MARTIN COLLOMS TRIES OUT THE AURENDER W20 HARD DRIVE MUSIC PLAYER AND STREAMER

South Korean brand Aurender is beginning to make an impression on the UK market, particularly since it is now distributed by British digital audio specialist dCS. The W20's versatile hard drive music store has useful basic features, but I also discovered that this top quality unit has hidden depths of connectivity and versatility. I have seen numerous Aurender models used as the playback source at many recent audio shows, avoiding the complication of external computer style NAS drives on a local network.

Highlights of this new model include the inbuilt 6TB hard drive (2x3TB units), the ultra low jitter solid state memory for selected file playback, and the low noise lithium battery power for the S/PDIF digital output.

Circuitry

Costly temperature-controlled 'oven' high stability crystal oscillators supply the internal clock signals. It will handle numerous formats at up to 24-bit 192kHz, and the computer section is silent (no fans are required for the supply or the CPU). The large AMOLED display may be switched between track

information and replay signal level; the simulated peak meters make a pretty distraction. The unit is substantially built from heavy aluminium sections, weighing a total of 19kg and incorporating noise and vibration countermeasures. The main supply for the unit is a 100W rated switch-mode design. A flash recovery mode helps it survive supply interruption and provide a clean restart.

Although I'm used to computer sources and remote network streamers for audio data, I still needed some familiarisation to understand the W20 and its purpose.

From one viewpoint it is a network-linked *iPad* controlled music store with output to S/PDIF with its own App; from another perspective it is a dedicated and virtually hidden, Linux programmed, low noise microcomputer optimised to replay internal audio files from massive load-and-forget stores.

Constructed in a magnificent alloy case worthy of high end audio and matching its lofty aspirations, this contains the computer, the audio replay software, and a massive 6TB of HDD audio storage, enough for very large CD collections plus a stack of hi res downloads. Many will never need more than this, even after years of collecting and downloading. Note that there is no RAID or similar fail safe provision; Aurender instead recommends using a network connected computer and backup drives to move and copy music files manually to maintain a working copy of the internal content on an external backup. So a little user input is important at times to facilitate additional backup storage.

With the network connection, the Aurender can access NAS (network attached storage) drives that don't have UPnP, controlling file handling *via* the App. However, the W20 is not UPnP ready and therefore cannot access and play files from a Naim *UnitiServe*, for example. The home network facility is therefore purely for maintenance, file handling and control.

The second computer drive is a rather smaller solid state device, though at 250MB it is still a good size component. It has the sole duty of 'statically' storing a selected audio file for cleaner replay to the digital output (once selected, this music is transferred from the main store, which is then temporarily shut down to reduce noise and electrical interference).

The *raison d'être* of the project is to reduce electrical noise and jitter to an absolute minimum. In order



MARTIN COLLOMS

to finesse this, the final drive has an external clock input so that it may be accurately synchronised to the external matching DAC, further reducing jitter. For this review a dCS *Scarlatti* DAC/Master Clock combo was lent to help prove the value of this interface.

Connecting everything up required some patience, since the master clock has feeds to and from the DAC and that clock output. Meanwhile the DAC needs the specially clocked S/PDIF signal, in this connection split into left and right channels and fed over separate, balanced AES digital interfaces. Finally, a control cable to the master clock advises 44.1kHz or 48kHz base sampling rates; it will still operate if that reference connection is absent, but at a reduced quality by the expedient of oversampling. Nordost *Odin* was used for all this interface cabling.

A computer at heart, it is programmed to work automatically, for example with a USB connected accessory drive, which provides a convenient entry for loading CDs. Just load the disc and it is uploaded to the file store. Downloads to a computer (Apple or PC) may also be added to the *W20* via simple file transfer instruction *via* a computer on the connected network. Likewise music on USB hard drives and memory sticks is automatically uploaded and may be played once in the file store. A small delay takes place while the output memory loads, and this may be set in the App so that the DAC is properly synchronised and the start of the track is not truncated.

By painstaking trial and error, every one of the special synchronisation and connection options was assessed. Without this work you would have to take the overall performance of the connected system (which was actually quite impressive) for granted. However, we are happy to say that each link in the chain did in fact play its part. Each 'technology improvement' in connection and synchronisation delivered a progressive sound quality gain, giving considerable confidence in the upgrade path established by dCS for the matching connected systems. Fortunately the *Scarlatti* DAC/Clock system does sound very good, and the high resolution so clearly shown made it very easy to audition the *W20*'s various modes and connection options. The outputs include optical S/PDIF and a USB audio function; L+R and separate L, R digital outputs are available in BNC and AES formats.

While the *W20* can be connected to a network, this function is primarily intended for the Wi-Fi file control application working on a *iPad* or similar. This App is visually attractive with clean images, though the classification can be a little wayward. Music catalogue arrangement Apps appear to have their own idiosyncrasies which one is obliged to learn (hear, hear – *Ed*).



We got very good results with the dCS *Scarlatti* on full song, scoring the combination at upwards of 200 marks for overall sound quality. It sounded beautifully clear, tightly focused and well balanced, and no one could argue with that. However, a small reservation was also expressed in the listening notes. This arose when the Aurender had been disconnected from the dCS set, and the latter was under comparison tests using an alternative S/PDIF source. This session was going fine when, almost by chance, the *W20* was also powered down, and we heard an audible sound quality improvement, with deeper silences, more transparency, and a general increase in communication. We would not overemphasise this observation but merely note that all operative power supplies have some effect on system quality, and that switch-mode types *tend* to be more damaging than most others. Given the objectives for ultra low jitter and very lower noise for the digital audio outputs, it would be nice to see further attention paid to the power supply side for the computer section of the design.

Conclusions

There are some network access limitations, and a customer will need to plan for some housekeeping to make safety backup files of audio ripped to the Aurender *W20*, but I found the sound quality very good when fully connected to the dCS *Scarlatti* digital replay system, confirming the value of the separated data channels and this fully synchronised clocking 'transport'. Build and finish is very good and the included *iPad* App is attractive and essentially easy to use. Also as connected to the internet *via* the network, software upgrades are regular and automatic, not requiring any user attention. Incidentally a free DSD replay upgrade will arrive very soon, perhaps by the time this review is published, for which the dCS combination is also compatible, further increasing its audiophile appeal.

SPECIFICATIONS

Aurender W20	Hard drive music player
Drives	2x3.0TB main store plus 0.24TB solid state replay store
Synchronisation	Self clocked and external clock
Outputs	USB, AES EBU, mono, optical, BNC and coaxial
Control	iPad App via Wi-Fi on home network
Finishes	black or silver
Weight	19kg
Size (WxHxD)	430x106x370mm
Price	£14,000

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PAUL MESSENGER

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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We call it 'globalisation', but that's just a blanket term for a huge number of factors that have led to much of our hi-fi equipment being manufactured outside the UK. Take your pick from the relative importance of the invention of containerisation, the massive political changes that have taken place across Eastern Europe and the Far East, and the business consequences of those changes, but put them all together and you're in the modern world where hi-fi equipment may well be designed in Britain, but is probably destined to be manufactured somewhere else in the world, where material and production costs are lower.

However, the situation is in constant flux. China has been the manufacturing source of choice for many companies in recent years, but its increasing prosperity is starting to erode its competitiveness, transport costs are rising, and Western companies often seem to have struggled with communication issues relating to quality and tolerances.

It's for those reasons that a number of brands are currently exploring alternatives. When I visited Sofia in Bulgaria a year ago, I was startled to hear that a Hewlett Packard factory in the city employed thousands of people, so Eastern Europe is clearly one obvious zone to consider. To generalise, standards of education tend to be good and cultural similarities ensure decent communication, along with modest labour costs and flexible transportation.

That's the reason why my fellow listening panellist Russell Kauffman has teamed up with Polish associates to create his Russell K brand of speakers. I'm not sure that the choice of brand name is all that promising, but its debut loudspeaker, codenamed *RED 100*, is itself very interesting. I can't say whether it will be commercially successful – it might prove to be a little too unfashionable for its own good – though it does unquestionably tick all the audiophile boxes.

So who is Russell K? He has vast hi-fi industry experience, working for a number of established hi-fi companies. He also spent a number of years travelling with well known loudspeaker designer Robin Marshall to my regular 'blind' listening panel tests.

Chatting with Marshall on those journeys probably provided some of the inspiration behind the *RED 100*, which might look like a regular port-loaded compact stand-mount, but is actually rather unconventional in various important respects.

First impression is that this speaker feels exceptionally solidly built, which is confirmed by the substantial weight of around 11kg. This is partly because two hefty horizontal partition braces above and below the 160mm main driver are drilled with small holes to add some acoustic resistance. The port here is tuned to a low 32Hz and the internals are quite deliberately left entirely undamped. High quality crossover ingredients are used, and the cosmetics are certainly unusual too, our samples featuring a heavily textured finish on five faces and a red painted front panel.

There wasn't time to carry out a full review of this speaker, but initial results were distinctly promising, with the sound showing fine timing and coherence. The in-room measurements gave best results when the speakers were well clear of walls, whereupon they demonstrated good sensitivity with fine bass extension, albeit with some emphasis around 800Hz. And the load looks easy enough to drive, even though it does fall somewhat at high frequencies.

By combining a fairly complex UK designed enclosure with low cost Polish manufacturing, the *RED 100* can be sold for a relatively modest base price of £900/pair. And those who want fancy wood veneers, grilles and so on can specify them as extras.