



iFi Audio Aurora

WITH A DESIGN DRAWING ON TRENDS IN ARCHITECTURE, UNIQUE TECHNOLOGY AND A SURPRISINGLY INVOLVING SOUND, THE AURORA IS RATHER MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER ALL-IN-ONE IN A SNAZZY SUIT

'Looks amazing – what actually is it?' That was a common reaction I heard when iFi Audio rolled out its latest system, the £1399 Aurora. The company had already teased the design and its technology around a year ahead of its debut, at a dinner held during the Munich High End Show, and the brief details given then had more than a few heads being scratched: after all, how was it planning to offer room optimisation without resorting to digital signal processing? One wag even suggested it was all going to be done with metal tape measures extending out from the casework to probe for the surrounding walls. Well, it sounded as plausible as any other explanation...

While we were given a taster of the styling of the product with a few sketches, I'm not sure anything prepared us for the way the finished object would look. And 'object' just about covers it: more than any other offering from a hi-fi company – only the likes of Bang & Olufsen even get close – the Aurora is audio turned into a style icon, its bamboo-finished main body suspended at a gentle upward tilt from slender aluminium legs coming to a triangular point up above the unit.

It's all very different from past system offerings from iFi Audio, which were so tinged with nostalgia they were even called Retro: wrapped in bamboo, yes, but very much with the looks of the past, whether in the Retro 50 'mini-system' or LS3.5 speakers, themselves 'inspired' by the classic BBC LS3/5a monitors.

iFi Audio – and this is a company based not in one of the style capitals of the world, but up on the Merseyside coast in Southport, remember – has taken inspiration for the Aurora from Japanese design and architecture. French designer Julien Starck, who learned his trade working for Philippe Starck, quotes as his influences for this design the work of architects Shigeru Ban and Tadao Ando, and the style of Tokyo's fashionable Harajuku and Omotesando districts.

The bamboo slats are sourced sustainably, and give the Aurora a distinctive finish – as if a product looking like this needs to be any more distinctive – the like of which I've only ever seen before on the slender B&O Beolab 18 speakers. Dispensing with conventional grilles, the Danish active speakers instead use slender wooden 'lamellas' running top to bottom, suggesting

their function of channelling the sound out around the listening space as does the company's acoustic lens tweeter atop the column.

In the Aurora, the bamboo slats form the entire outer structure of the system, interrupted only by the control panel to the front and the connections to the rear. And though it's a fraction of the price of the speakers from Struer, which sell for the better part of £4500 a pair, the Aurora is no less complex within. And it has a reassuring heft and solidity about it, weighing in at around 15kg.

ART, TrueBass and Pure Emotion

Which brings us back to that original question: what is the Aurora? Well, essentially it's an all-in-one stereo music system, able to play music from network storage and online streaming services, wirelessly via Bluetooth or Apple AirPlay, from USB storage and SD memory cards, and via digital and analogue inputs.

It does so using no fewer than six drive units and two passive radiators, all driven by a total of 320W of amplification, their output optionally modified by the company's Automatic Room Tailoring (ART, conveniently), room optimisation system. That's 'optionally' because the ART system can be turned off, with listening then being in 'Audiophile' mode.

The speaker complement here runs to two 12cm coated paper cone wideband drivers per channel – one firing forward and one to the side – each covering a range from 60Hz to 8kHz. Above this there's a 28mm silk dome tweeter for each side, angled outwards on the front corners of the Aurora to both extend the frequency response and open out the soundstage. The drivers are linked together with a simple first-order crossover.

Boosting the low-frequency response is a pair of downward firing passive radiators – ah, that's why the main body of the unit is suspended in space – measuring 12x20cm, with a diaphragm made from carbon, iron and ethylene-vinyl acetate for stiffness, lightness and self-damping. This part of the company's TrueBass system, which comes complete with a pushbutton selector enabling the user to choose between ultimate extension and a faster, tighter low end.

These drivers allow iFi to claim a frequency response of 27Hz-40kHz, and a maximum SPL of 115dB at one metre, and the slatted bamboo covering is more than cosmetic: it forms a matrix the company calls SoundSpace, affecting the output of the drivers at certain frequencies.

Amplification is from what the company calls its PureEmotion circuitry, using a Russian 6N3P valve (on display in a front-panel window) to 'process' the signal on its way from input selector and volume control, and producing the first Watt of amplification. From there the signal passes into the

'current multiplier circuit', a high-efficiency switching power amp. But unlike conventional Class D amps, which have variable switching frequency according to output, the iFi design fixes the switching at 1.5MHz – well out of the audio band – and then passes the signal through a low-pass circuit, with a feedback loop keeping everything on an even keel. It's all locked to a master clock developed by iFi parent AMR, and called Global Master Timing, or GMT – the company really likes its snappy acronyms.

Digital to analogue conversion here is in the hands of the now-familiar ESS Sabre Hyperstream DAC, fed from coaxial, optical and USB-A sockets, a microSD card slot for music playback, plus Bluetooth 5.0 running on the latest Qualcomm 5100 chip, able to handle all the proprietary HD wireless protocols and with jitter eliminated by that GMT clock system.

There are also analogue inputs on a pair of RCA phonos and a 3.5mm socket, and network connection via Wi-Fi, with pushbutton WPS pairing, and wired Ethernet. Several Auroras can be connected on a home network, giving multiroom capability, and the system can also link to Alexa Echo devices. And for those looking beyond domestic use, the mains IEC input is supplemented with a 12V DC power option, allowing the system to be run from car and marine batteries,

Analogue room-tuning

Finally there's that ART room-tuning system, developed in-house and using six microphones to the rear of the Aurora – two facing backwards and two to each side – to measure the distance to the room boundaries using ultrasound. This information is then processed by a 32-bit ARM Cortex microprocessor, which adjusts the output from the speaker array in the analogue domain to tailor it to the space in which the system is being used.

So, anyone suggesting this is just a basic all-in-one system spiffed up in designer clothes is somewhat wide of the mark, and that impression carries through when you start to listen. This won't



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Specification

iFi Audio Aurora

Type	Network audio system
Price	£1,399
Sources	Bluetooth 5.0 with aptX HD/aptX/LDAC/HWA/AAC; UPnP/DLNA playback from network sources and streaming services including Amazon Music, Apple Music, Spotify and Tidal; Airplay; playback from USB and microSD card storage at up to 192kHz/32bit
Inputs	Optical/coaxial digital at up to 192kHz/24bit; RCA and 3.5mm analogue
Networking	Ethernet, Wi-Fi
Drivers	4 x 12cm wideband paper cone drivers, 2 x 28mm silk dome tweeters, 2 x 12x20cm passive bass radiators
Amplification	320W total
Claimed frequency response	27Hz-40kHz
Claimed max SPL	115dB @ 1m
Power input	IEC mains or 12V DC
Control	Front-panel touch-buttons or supplied remote control; app control via third party solutions
Dimensions (WxHxD)	59x27x28cm

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please too much those occasional correspondents complaining about the magazine reviewing 'kitchen radios' – yes, there are some –, but will delight those looking for a rather good music system to use in an additional room in the house, or who are asked to suggest a fine-sounding set-up for use in compact accommodation.

Style and substance

You see, while it would be tempting to assume that the Aurora might be 'all show and no go', the combination of internal and external engineering is such that it not only manages to deliver a sound of very respectable balance and detail, but also cast a wide, and credible, soundstage picture from its 59cm-wide enclosure. Incidentally, that's just a little narrower than the Naim Mu-so 2, which targets the same kind of market, albeit with a rather different form-factor and range of technologies.

Operation of the Aurora is via touch-buttons on the front panel (with information from a crisp OLED panel), the remote handset supplied or – especially for streaming – using the Muzo player app (which is nothing to do with the Naim products of very similar title), or the other DLNA/UPnP apps iFi suggests. These are AudioNet's Remote Control Point, Linn's open source apps such as Kinsky, and dB Poweramp Asset UPnP, but there also others more than capable of doing the job, depending on the phone/tablet platform you favour and other personal preferences.

Of the 'extra features' here, I found the ART 'room-tuning' worked well when I chose to position the system in less than optimal positions, such as with equidistant spacing from side and rear walls or jammed into a corner, either of which could give somewhat 'bloomy' bass and a lack of soundstage

definition. However, with the system on an open table close to a rear wall and well away from side walls, the effect of the ART system was relatively subtle, and I preferred the sound with it off.

The same goes for the TrueBass system, which puts a bit more thump in the low-end in locations where one might expect the system to sound a bit on the light side; however, that 'thump' comes at some expense to bass speed and slam, and I have say I never thought the Aurora sounded lightweight enough to merit the use of TrueBass, even when right out in free space. Yes, the TrueBass is subtler in its operation than many of similar intent I have encountered, but maybe it should be 'Party Mode'?

Fast and precise

It's easy to excuse the odd over-exuberance on the features front, as the basic sound of the Aurora is so good – no, not quite 'sell your £X000 set-up and just buy this' good, but by the standards of its class it's excellent, and more than a match for many a sensibly-priced amplifier and a pair of bookshelf speakers. It's fast and precise with small-ensemble jazz or chamber recordings, has the deftness and punch to deliver rock in a persuasive manner – and the volume to match, without any sign of strain setting in, and even does a plausible job with 'big band' classical works.

Even more impressive is the way the combination of driver placement and that enclosure design creates a wide, yet focused, soundstage, and does so without recourse to digital signal processing. OK, so the mere fact of iFi having done things the difficult way when a DSP chip could have had the same effect isn't meritorious in itself, as after all the company has a lot of digital knowhow at its disposal. However, here's no wilful awkwardness going on here, but rather belief that doing it in analogue would deliver a better sound – and that faith in engineering is borne out in the way the Aurora plays music.

Put simply, this is a (relatively) compact system with a sound so much bigger than one might expect from a product of this kind. And while the styling may not be to every taste, there's no denying that it's striking in both form and function: I happen to like it, in that it's radical enough to stand out in a crowded market while at the same time not being so odd that it will date rapidly, and for buyers who share my view there will no doubt be plenty of pride in ownership, not to mention the sculptural design proving to be something of a talking point.

And then, when you start playing music, it will demonstrate that this isn't just design for the sake of it: surprising as it may seem for an object so striking, there's a lot of form following function going on here, and it all pays off.

