

AUGUST 2004

AUDIENCE

AURIC ILLUMINATOR

[NEW & IMPROVED]



Reviewer: Paul Candy

Source: Sony SCD-XE670 modified with IEC jack instead of captive AC cord, *Hit Audio/Cayin CD-22 CD player* [in for review]

Preamp/Integrated: Manley Labs Stingray, Audio Zone AMP-1

Amp: n/a

Speakers: Meadowlark Kestrel 2, *Reference 3A Dulcet* [in for review]

Cables: DH Labs Revelation interconnects, Q-10 speaker cables, Power Plus AC cables, *Audience Maestro interconnects, speaker cables and powerChord AC cables* [in for review]

Stands: Premier three-tier, filled with sand

Powerline conditioning: Blue Circle BC86 MkII Power Line Pillow.

Sundry accessories: *Grand Prix Audio Apex footers* [in for review], Ginko Audio Cloud 11 vibration control platform, Walker Audio SST contact enhancer, GutWire Notepads, dedicated AC line with Hubbell hospital grade outlets, homebrew acoustic treatments, one three-foot blond-haired monster and one future NHL Hall of Famer.

Room size: 13' x 17' x 8'

Review Component Retail: US\$39.95

I read somewhere that tweaks make the audiophile. If that's true, I must either be an audiophile of the highest order or an obsessive-compulsive loon in need of serious counseling. I have experimented with various CD mats, de-magnetizers, painting CDs green, freezing CDs and placing loose change on my speakers (try doing that on Maggies). Even Peter Belt's barmy foils have made their way into chez bon-bon. While all have made *some* difference, most I would not necessarily classify as improvements. In fact, some were outright bovine scatology. For me, only three have reaped consistent rewards. One is keeping cables off synthetic carpets (laugh all you want until you try it). Another is treating all connections with contact enhancers such as Caig Pro-Gold or Walker Audio's fantastic SST. And lastly, CD treatments such as Audience's Auric Illuminator. I have used AI on all my optical discs (CD, CD-R, SACD and DVD) for several years and regard it as one of my all-time favorite tweaks.

In a nutshell, this gel and black pen transforms digital-based music playback into a more pleasurable listening experience. After treatment, my discs have exhibited greater ease, enhanced transparency, quieter backgrounds and less of digital's chalky grit and hash. More significantly, these effects stretched right across the entire frequency spectrum. No one area was highlighted at the expense of others. How many tweaks have initially impressed with subjectively enhanced clarity but we later discovered this improvement was simply highlighting one specific region to the detriment of overall coherence and musicality? That is simply not so with AI. Furthermore, its benefits are audible or visible on all manner of optical discs; CD, CD-R, DVD, SACD etc. On treated DVD, colors were richer and more defined while the picture became clearer and freer of line hash.



While I have stayed loyal to the Auric Illuminator, I *did* stray from the fold to try Walker Audio's Vivid this past year. I do not recall favoring one over the other but many users have claimed greater results with Vivid. Taking these comments to heart, Audience went back to the drawing board to tweak their - er, tweak. Audience now believes the new Illuminator is superior to any other disc treatment currently available. I cannot tell you if this is indeed the case as I do not have any more Vivid on hand nor do I remember what discs were 'vivified' since I use Audience's black pen on all my shiny discs. However, I *can* tell you that the new AI audibly handsomely beats the older formula.

Since I was both a satisfied AI customer *and* in the process of reviewing Audience's Maestro and powerChord cables, a formal review of the Illuminator seemed appropriate. When Audience's John McDonald discovered I was an avid AI user, he informed me that an improved version was in the works and enquired if I'd be interested in reviewing it. "You bet," I replied and in a few weeks received the subject of today's review.

The new and improved Auric Illuminator is visibly distinguished from its predecessor by its slightly thicker consistency and being colorless rather than pale blue. The enclosed black felt tip pen, a Staedtler Lumocolor, is also new. It is easier to apply and blacker than the previous Papermate pen, for enhanced absorption of stray light. The packaging is otherwise identical, containing one bottle with enough Illuminator to treat up to 400 discs; the black pen; a cardboard template; and a dozen very soft lint-free polishing cloths that are completely devoid of any cotton or wood fibers. These are by far the best cloths I have ever seen and easily superior to those provided with Vivid. Even the cloths offered in electronics and computer shops are not anywhere near as good as the AI ones. In fact, I use them for cleaning my eyeglasses.



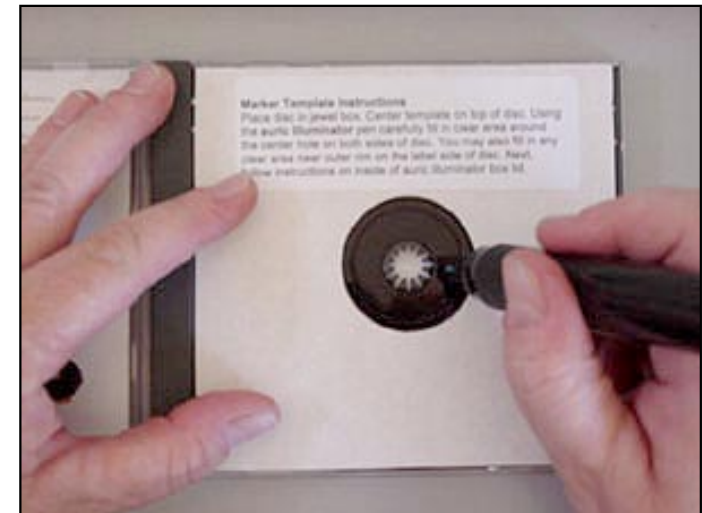
How does it work? Auric Illuminator is an optical resolution enhancement which allows disc players to "...retrieve all the available data on your discs at the right time. Auric Illuminator allows the laser pickup to track the disc more accurately. It also improves discrimination of the exact beginning and end of the reflective and

non-reflective areas on the track". AI works on any optical disc format; CD, CD-R, DVD, SACD etc. Together, the enclosed gel and pen are said to achieve the above by:

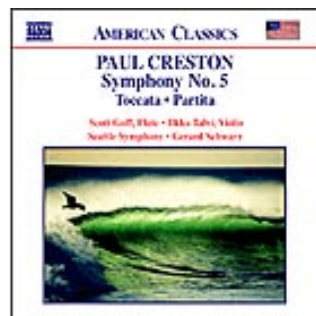
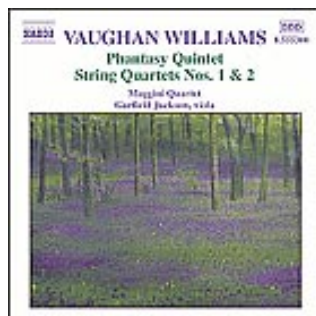
- Improving the optical signal to noise ratio by reducing ambient light in the disc material.
- Enhancing optical transparency by reducing reflection and refraction.
- Removing stored energy from the disc surface and preventing future static build up, thus eliminating the charge- induced wobble to make the disc easier to track.

For the full skinny, refer to the following [web page](#). Use of the new AI is identical to the old. First, the inner and outer disc edges are treated with the black felt tip pen. As an option -- no doubt for the hardcore sufferers of OCD -- a cardboard template is provided to paint the entire clear portion of the disc around the center hole [below]. While I do detect some benefit, it frankly isn't enough of an improvement to justify the additional effort. I am thus quite content with treating just the edges. Next, you apply two drops of gel to the label side of the disc and spread them over the entire surface with one of the enclosed cloths. With another cloth, buff the disc until it is shiny and free of haze. The same is done on the other side. *Viola!* Now play the disc and prepare to be pleasantly surprised.

Audience claims that once a disc is treated, no further applications will be necessary. The gel can be removed with a combination of water and Joy. The pen can be removed with 99% isopropyl alcohol and cotton swabs. Overall, the Illuminator is a no-brainer to use and offers results far out of proportion to its crazy low price. Even using the pen sans gel will reap audibly lower background noise and hash. But it's the gel that really works the magic so if the idea of using the pen causes you concern, I would say that 80% of the total effect is realized with the gel alone. However, ensure your treated discs are thoroughly buffed as you may be startled by a hazy residue at a later date. There is no need for concern though as it can still be buffed out then. I discovered this myself after rushing carelessly through a couple of my discs at first.



Now for the \$64,000 question: Is the new Illuminator better than the original? You better believe it. Whether classical, pop or jazz, every disc I applied the AI treatment to displayed easily audible improvements. To nail down the differences, I burned three copies each (on standard Maxell CD-R) of three newly acquired CDs: Vaughan Williams' *String Quartets* [Naxos 8.555300]; Creston's *Symphony No. 5* [Naxos 8.559153] and Sonic Youth's *Sonic Nurse* [Geffen 254912]. One copy was left untreated; another was treated with the original AI and the third with the new product. The discs treated with the new AI displayed greater overall resolution, quieter backgrounds, smoother, less brittle highs and most significantly, an overriding sense of relaxed ease with a more natural flow to music playback. Less effort was required to relax into music or to follow individual strands, be it a rock, symphonic or small-scale chamber recording. Even when I applied the AI MkII on discs previously treated with AI MkI, I easily noticed an improvement. It accomplishes exactly what the former Illuminator did but just more so. When I finally treated my store-bought discs, the sonic enhancements were significant and not at all subtle. It was as if a grainy veil was suddenly cast aside and there was simply so much more music to enjoy.



I detected the same effects on SACDs even when played back on my \$200 Sony player. Apparently they are subject to the same physical imperfections as CD. However, beware of older hybrid SACDs manufactured by Sonopress before May 2003 which may react adversely to the Illuminator and similar products. If you check Audience's site, you will find instructions on how to treat those early discs.

I do not consider myself a videophile by any stretch of the imagination and am quite content with watching films over budget video gear. Still, treating DVDs offered surprising results. Colors were richer and more vibrant. I noticed less line hash, sharper images and more subtle details such as facial features standing out to a higher degree than I recall (Helluh Ms. Halle Berry). It was no surprise that soundtracks and dialogue were clearer and more intelligible. I can only imagine what further gains would be realized with a truly high-end HT setup. I wonder if my vision would improve if I smeared AI on my eyeglasses? Before you laugh, John informed me that treating plastic eye wear was indeed beneficial and would help one to appreciate the effectiveness of AI on CDs. Ever the compulsive tweaker; I 'illuminated' my spectacles and noted greater clarity and transparency (I'm not kidding). I was simply less aware of a slice of plastic hovering in front of my eyes. Furthermore, there was the added benefit of reduced dust build up on my lens. Now if I could just polish my contact lenses in this fashion ...



At ten cents per disc, the improved Auric Illuminator is a tremendous bargain that will surely enhance your enjoyment of every disc you own, be it CD, CD-R, DVD or SACD. There's absolutely no downside I can detect. Just think how relieved your spouse will be when you inform her or him that your newest audio-video acquisition cost a mere forty clams?

Before the music industry tries to sell us yet another high-rez format, perhaps they can start doing a better job of manufacturing discs to begin with? Better yet, why not ditch optical discs altogether and download music via high-speed, wide-bandwidth connections to a music server? I suspect *that* is exactly what will occur in the not-to-distant future. Until that day arrives, I have hundreds of 'illuminixed' discs in my collection to enjoy, most treated several years ago with the original AI. I am now faced with the daunting task of re-coating all of them with the new formula. I need some artificial intelligence. Ah, the life of an audiophile is a harsh one indeed ...



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