

EQUIPMENT REVIEWS **audio**video REVOLUTION

manufacturer:	Qsonix
model:	Q100 Digital Music System
category:	Music Servers / MP3 Players
review date:	May 2006
reviewed by:	Tom Garcia

Introduction

In the two decades since the Compact Disc (CD) was released, few can argue about the significant ways in which it has changed our habits in accessing and listening to music. Its durability, diminutive size and capability to be played universally in our homes, automobiles and portable players gave consumers the opportunity to take their tunes virtually anywhere. This had a phenomenal plus side over the previous dominant format, the vinyl LP, with its limited durability and restricted playback options. Unfortunately, the CD's additional flexibility created the potential problem of having your music scattered throughout a multitude of listening environments and devices. Personally, I've struggled for years to keep all of my CDs organized and easily accessible. My collection has had a large amount of attrition due to lost and loaned discs, not to mention the mysteriously disappearing CDs that I keep buying repeatedly.



As mentioned in a previous review, I have used computers to archive my music in one location in order to have access without rummaging through every drawer, storage box, vehicle, etc. to find a desired disc. This has worked well to a certain degree, but requires a lot of attention and effort to create an effective playback option. Fortunately, in the last several years, many companies have taken on the effort of creating music servers that perform this task with far greater finesse and functionality.

Qsonix, a new AV company based in Agoura, California, has taken the typical music server application to a new level of global function, creating one of the most entertaining, effective, user-friendly music management devices available. Their current offering, the Q100 Digital Music System, incorporates a standard component-sized server with a 15-inch LCD touchscreen controller, capable of supplying two zones of music. It is this touchscreen controller and Graphical User Interface (GUI) that really separates the Q100 from any previous music server that I have experienced. Retail price for the basic Q100-160GB model reviewed here is \$5,495, but it can be upgraded for more storage capacity and accessorized to fit various applications. This reviewed unit allowed approximately 500 CDs to be stored using a proprietary lossless compression scheme, and up to 3000 using the highest level of compression.



Description

The Q100 is cleanly designed, with enough architectural features to make it interesting, yet capable of blending in with a broad array of other manufacturers' components. The front panel is functionally simplistic, with a centered, lighted power button and a single-slot CD drawer positioned above an open/close button. On the rear panel, the Q100 provides a coaxial S/PDIF digital audio output (24 bit, 192 kHz) and two high-quality stereo analog (RCA) output jacks. There is also a VGA video output with a resolution of 1024 by 768 and an RS232 serial connection for integrating the touchscreen panel to the main chassis. Additionally, a second RS232 port is provided for remote control or combination with a home automation system. For future upgrades, Qsonix has also included two USB 2.0 ports. Finally, there is a 10/100Mb Ethernet connection for connecting the server to a high-speed Internet service.

Physically, the main server chassis occupies approximately two bays in a conventional system rack and is quite substantial in both its construction quality and weight (21 pounds) for a relatively compact component. Its overall dimensions are 17 inches wide by 14 inches deep by four inches high (including the feet).

The 12-pound touch-screen controller measures 17 inches wide by 16 inches high and six-and-a-half inches deep. Rear panel connectors are complementary to the connectivity of the Q100 server chassis. The monitor is powered via a 12-volt external supply (similar in size to a laptop power supply). For custom installations, the touch-screen can be remotely located up to 600 feet away by utilizing an optional CAT5 extension kit.

Audio performance and specifications for the server are on par with other state-of-the-art digital components. Qsonix claims a typical signal-to-noise ratio of 107dB, and a frequency response of +/- 0.6dB from 22 Hz to 20 kHz.

Functionality and Use

Philosophically, Qsonix set out to design a product that would be easy to operate by even the least sophisticated user, while providing an unparalleled feature set and level of music management. The design team consisted of individuals who collectively had extensive experience in both the audio and computer industries, amalgamating their expertise into the Q100.

The centerpiece of the Qsonix system is the intuitive, visually attractive and highly informative GUI used to navigate and access your music library. Functionally, I have yet to experience anything even remotely close to the simple drag-and-drop interface used by the Q100, which allows you to manipulate your music by the touch of a fingertip. Because of this simplicity, you spend far more time enjoying your listening experience and less time manipulating and navigating the data.



It's amazing how, through the years, album artwork has become less important than it was during the days of vinyl. I remember listening to music for hours while gazing at the incredible detail that was available on a full-sized album cover. This experience often intensified my appreciation and emotional connection to the music and performer. Navigating this artwork on the Qsonix's touch-screen brought back many of those sensations that were lost when I started storing my CDs in carrying cases, becoming completely detached from the artwork that had previously adorned the disc. Merely browsing through the Qsonix's menus was a pleasure in itself.



Qsonix offers a plethora of unique operational and navigational options, such as the ability to aggregate your CD collection into one focal device and manage the data in a multitude of ways. Creating your music library is easily accomplished by loading a selected disc, automatically accessing an Internet CD database, and having it compile a detailed album database. This database includes cover art, artist, track and other useful information. Actual loading process for a 70-minute CD typically takes three to four minutes, though the recognition of all CDs is not flawless. Compilation CDs occasionally were recognized as incorrect albums, requiring manual cataloging. If you have a custom compilation CD that cannot be found on any database, the Q100 has a built in onscreen data entry wizard that will allow you to enter information about your CD quickly by using just the touch-screen.



The Qsonix server also supports a range of recording qualities, which include a custom lossless compression scheme (without compromising original sound quality) and two high bit-rate modes, 320 kilobits/second (kbs) for high-quality compressed music and 192 kbs for what Qsonix designates as a normal-quality compression scheme. By utilizing all three modes, you can customize your music collection to optimize your storage space, deploying the lossless mode for your more critical listening sources, while compressing your general listening music to save space on your storage drive.



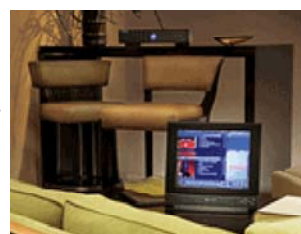
Once the library is compiled, the Q100 offers an almost infinite ability to navigate your music collection. Browsing is quick and easy using the onscreen menus, which allow you to filter your music based on various criteria such as artist, album, genre, music style, year of release or CD cover. As a plus, if you forget some of this information, you can search via an onscreen keyboard.

Playback is achieved by creating playlists that can be configured in a variety of ways. You can drag-and-drop whole albums, individual tracks, complete artist and genre libraries, and even your previously configured playlists. It is also easy to make on-the-fly modifications to your current playlist, even while a track is playing.

Along with the custom ability to manipulate your music, you also have the option of integrating the Q100 to provide music for two different zones. More complex features include fast preview auditioning of different tracks, which allows the first few seconds of any song to be played without stopping the playback of your current playlist. Another feature that I really enjoyed was the SoftFade function, which allows you to smoothly transition from one song to the next by providing a user-defined cross-fade between tracks. This utility provides a time overlap for the volume of one song to fade out and another to fade in, creating a DJ style of track transition and playback.

Set-up

Set up of the Q100 was extremely easy, especially with the help of Mike Weaver, president and co-founder of Qsonix. Qsonix's main headquarters is roughly an hour away from my home and Weaver offered to assist in the set-up. Less than a half-hour after he had arrived, the unit was unboxed, assembled, playing music and acquiring pertinent data from the Internet. Since setting up the Qsonix system requires only basic technical knowledge, there was nothing in the assembly process that should cause any consumer to experience a significantly longer time frame for duplicating the same set-up and integrating it with their existing audio system. The Qsonix can be used as a stand-alone source or be integrated into an automated system with relative ease. If you are still technically challenged, you can acquire the services of an authorized Qsonix dealer to assist you in the installation and guide you through the operational features.

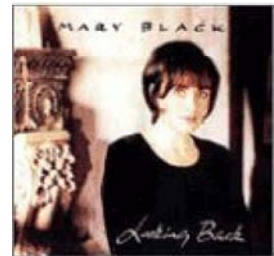


Once physically connected, the Qsonix onscreen set-up wizard will navigate you to configure the server for items such as your Internet connection and various setting preferences. The extremely easy to negotiate GUI allows access to these functions and to a considerable amount of additional features with simple taps and touches.

Qsonix's Q100 connects to your audio system with standard analog and digital audio connections. Throughout the review, the digital coaxial output was the primary source feeding my preamp/processor, though a sufficient amount of time was allocated to assess the analog outputs as well. An insignificant difference may have existed, though during most of our listening experience, a preference for either connection was not established.

Music

During my time with the Qsonix, I had the opportunity to listening to a wide variety of different musical material, as well as comparing the different compression ratios. I've had a complex about using any type of compression schemes for music that I wanted to use as reference material, but this is based mostly on emotional perspective rather than scientific fact. To assess the ultimate sonic quality of the Q100, I used Qsonix's lossless compression mode to load a compilation disc of well-recorded favorites that I commonly use to demo equipment and systems. The lossless compression utilized by Q100 appeared transparent to me, relative to the uncompressed original source; I could discern no relative differences between them. Mary Black's "Columbus" from Looking Back (Curb Records) stresses the entire range of dynamics and micro-dynamics of high-resolution playback systems, as well as the ability to accurately portray the female voice. Black's vocals were extremely smooth yet capable of being quite expansive. Any substantial alteration to the original recording would be easily discernible. In the case of the Q100's lossless mode, it was not. "Into My Arms," from the Best of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds (Reprise), successfully recreated the interesting juxtaposition of Cave's delicate piano and the evocation of his tender yet gravelly vocals. Similarly, the Q100's lossless mode provided no substantial hints of varying sonically from the original track.



Listening to Santana's Abraxas (Columbia) using the 320 kbs compression mode proved to be more than satisfying. Songs such as "Black Magic Woman" and "Oye Como Va" reproduced Carlos Santana's atmospheric guitar licks with great ease and sounded comparatively unaltered from the original CD. Though this disc is relatively dynamic and multidimensional, it would seem reasonable that this higher-bit compression scheme should work quite well.



Creating more of a torture test, I created a 192 kbs recording of Metallica's diabolical "Enter Sandman." Having previously experienced limitations of lower-bit recordings, I wanted to see what would happen to the bombastic bass introduction of this track. There was definitely a loss of bass extension, impact and definition from the original recording, as well as increased high-frequency hardness over the somewhat strident original CD. More complimentary to this compression scheme was Anthony Kiedis' poem turned ballad "Under the Bridge," performed by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. This cut does not have the same dynamic extension as the previous track, yet at the 192 kbs setting was capable of capturing the heartfelt vocals and accompanying instrumentals with very little loss of musical and emotional connection. There is definitely a discernable difference between the 192 kbs and higher bit-rate schemes, so users will have to assess for themselves whether this is appropriate or not for specific source material.



The Downside

Although the Q100 proved to be an extremely flexible and intuitive device, there was one major component missing: a hand-held remote control. Even though everyone marveled at the touch-panel and its user interface, there were times when it would have been convenient to modify the playlist from our seating location. Qsonix's Mike Weaver discussed the progress that the company has been making in addressing this issue and, by the time this review goes to print, there may be a solution available.

Mechanically, the Q100 functioned flawlessly, yet its fan was quite audible during quiet passages, as well as during times when no music was playing. Again, I was informed that modifications to the unit are in the works to reduce the noise level significantly.

One inconvenience was the inability to load one or multiple tracks from an album without ripping the complete disc. Quite often, there are only a few tracks on a given disc that are desirable for storing on the Q100, so you must manually remove the unwanted tracks.

Conclusion

Universally, the Qsonix Q100 Digital Music System received more enthusiastic interest from my guests and associates than any other piece of audio equipment I've owned or auditioned. The "wow" factor was immeasurable, especially while I demonstrated the Qsonix's drag-and-drop functions on the bright, colorful display panel. The user interface is undeniably fun to play with and a breeze to use, avoiding certain limitations found on other more conventional servers' displays. Add this to the plethora of useful data that becomes available to the user, and you end up with one of the most recreational pieces of equipment ever to have graced my music system.

Fortunately, Qsonix is capable of backing up all the glitz and glamour with outstanding performance and functionality. Its lossless processing mode worked extremely well. With the material that I auditioned, I was unable to detect any discernable difference between the original CD and the lossless encoded copy.

Excellent performance was achieved recording files at the 320 kbs setting, and for the most part, this proved emotionally and intellectually satisfying during a majority of listening situations. While using the 192 kbs mode, the Q100 was more than adequate for recreational and non-critical listening, though it did seem to reduce overall resolution, bass content and extension by a slight but noticeable margin.

Admittedly, I did not spend equal time critically auditioning the lower-resolution compression schemes, preferring the higher-resolution options. Though I chose minimal compression for my music selections, many users will be adequately served by storing their complete collection at 192 kbs, and therefore maximizing the storage capacity of the Q100.

Qsonix has redefined what a music server should be and how it should function. Though not flawless, the device offers more functionality, ease-of-use, performance and sheer unadulterated pleasure than any other music server I've experienced to date. Qsonix is dedicated to addressing certain outstanding issues and committed to improving the Q100 as the product matures and technology progresses. For the serious and even moderate music enthusiast or collector, the Q100 will provide access and enjoyment to your entire music collection at the touch of your finger. The Q100 Digital Music System is unequivocally in a league of its own.



reference software: [Mary Black - Looking Back \(CD\)](#) • [Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds - Best Of \(CD\)](#) • [Santana - Abraxas \(CD\)](#) • [Metallica - Metallica \(CD\)](#) • [Red Hot Chili Peppers - Blood Sugar Sex Magik \(CD\)](#)

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