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Platforms: Serving Up Digital Audio

Market expands as high-end solutions become more affordable

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High-end digital audio solutions are no longer exclusively for high-end customers. As more home distributed audio solutions come down in price to reach the upper end of the mass market, digital integrators are finding a broader range of products to expand their businesses into new areas. This translates to more choices for end users looking for better ways to store and manage their music collections.

While legacy infrastructure systems by companies like AMX and Crestron are aimed strictly at the luxury home market and require costly programming skills, many other vendors sell home control devices that expose their products through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), which allows for the creation of less expensive platform solutions. Over the past year, integrators have turned to such vendors as Netstreams, Colorado vNet, Control4 and Russound for cost-effective music distribution systems that use these new methods--including TCP/IP, XML and APIs--to bridge digital audio systems with home controls. Today, there are more audio servers that fit the price points of those systems.

*Digital Connect* Lab engineers recently looked at new digital audio systems by Qsonix, Agoura Hills, Calif., and Request, Ballston Spa, N.Y., because they fit the price point of an affordable custom solution and offer unique features that essentially eliminate all the hassles of accessing, storing and ripping music. Both systems were priced at more than \$1,000 per zone; however, they provide a stable platform for integration and produce high-quality audio signals. We also invited a handful of other vendors to participate in the review but they failed to deliver the units.

## **REQUEST**

Over the past five years, ReQuest has sold more than 13,000 units and continually updates its systems with a wide variety of configurations and integration options. We tested its N.Series digital audio system priced at \$2,500.

The unit arrives with DHCP turned on so integrators can connect it into a network right away. But, if the unit is connected to a PC, integrators still must check the network to see if the end user has any firewall or routers with active port blocking.

ReQuest provides a JavaRemote client that automatically finds any ReQuest unit on a network through UDP. However, UDP did not work on our lab setup so engineers manually specified a static IP that matched our laptop. We used ReQuest's sophisticated remote control to program the IP.

ReQuest's remote control includes a complete keyboard and dedicated buttons to quickly navigate the menu. The remote was not intuitive, but we found it useful for quick installation. Avoid showing this remote to customers because it does little to complement the unit.

ReQuest's N.Series UI shown through a 15-inch Elo touch panel is also accessible through a JavaRemote. The Java program duplicates the behavior of the UI through auto synchronization. This unique feature allows integrators to see what's happening on a unit as they guide customers through technical support calls.

This level of attention is important in maintaining customer loyalty. If ReQuest receives a customer support call, it informs the related integrator so it can close the loop or at least be aware of the support problem. In the future, the company plans to roll out specific system monitoring solutions to enhance digital integration support.

ReQuest has made all its hard drives, which it ships separately, swappable so that different product series will work with any hard drive. The company's startup software automatically recognizes all hardware components, making installation easy and network integration seamless.

A growing but steady number of ReQuest end users with multiple homes are buying N.Series units and connecting them through the Web to Z.Series units. The Z.Series units are typically used in second homes where homeowners want to duplicate their music collection. ReQuest provides a remote access and synchronization program called Arqlink, which maintains the same music collection between multiple units automatically. Today, more than 1,000 customers are using synchronization, according to the company.

The N.Series software arrives with a Web server allowing digital integrators to monitor log files through the Web via an administration interface. This is another service that integrators can provide to ReQuest customers.

Once on a network, a ReQuest unit can be accessed as a shared folder allowing programs such as iTunes to transfer MP3s into an upload folder. A program in the ReQuest unit scans this folder for music files, stores it based on compression type and indexes files into the unit's music database.

Engineers were not disappointed with the quality of the music or the setup process; however, we believe that ReQuest should improve its user interface, especially in making it more intuitive.

## **QSONIX**

While not as versatile as ReQuest's offering, Qsonix's Q100 digital music management system provides a more intuitive interface that allows homeowners to quickly navigate through a large CD collection. Entry-level pricing, including a 15-inch touch-screen flat-panel controller, is \$5,495.

The Q100 panel interface groups most of its functionality into one main view so homeowners can quickly jump between menu selections. For example, within a single pane homeowners can view a menu bar, browse albums, view playlists, see what's playing, control volume and play modes, and track the position of a song that's playing. On the same view, homeowners can also jump between albums by alphabetical order.

Q100's search view provides a keyboard on its touch panel, allowing users to find albums based on matching keywords. Search capabilities are general and can identify songs as well as albums and track titles with the same artist names. Its interface separates results appropriately so homeowners can quickly look at a result without being confused.

Qsonix partners with AMG to provide music metadata, including all the album art for its units. During ripping, Q100 finds all the metadata and album art over the Net and presents it to the user while loading. Q100's ripping capabilities are extremely fast. It takes about three and a half minutes to load an 80-minute disc directly to lossless.

Q100's music metadata also provides artist biographies, reviews, influences and similar artists in the same genre. After extensive testing, *Digital Connect* engineers give high praises to the overall user experience.

Qsonix sells two models that are differentiated by storage capacity. Both units provide two zone systems using two discrete analog outputs. During installation, Q100 provides a wizard that helps integrators with network connectivity. Q100 uses DHCP by default. Each analog output is associated with a zone, so digital integrators can name each zone separately.

During setup, Q100 provides an option to select the level of music quality that will be loaded into the system. Q100 defaults to Windows media lossless files. Homeowners can mix and match the quality of music that is loaded. For instance, a homeowner might want to load his collection in lossless format and his kids' music in a compressed format.

Connecting the analog jacks is straightforward. Digital integrators can either hook the jacks

into power speakers or an audio system. Remote access is not possible except through a network shared folder. This folder provides the link necessary to connect iTunes with a unit's music storage folder.

Display options are currently limited. The company provides an integrated touch-screen controller and will soon provide integration with various home control systems.