


Qsonix Q100 Digital Music System Review

By: [Tom Andry](#)

Date: August 2, 2006

Qsonix Q100 Digital Music System Review

	<p>Q100 Digital Music System Manufacturer: Qsonix Overall Rating: 3.75/5 stars Value Rating: 2/5 stars Review Date: August 2, 2006 MSRP: \$5495</p>
<p>Pros</p>	<p>Cons</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touchscreen interface is just cool • GUI is intuitive with virtually no learning curve • Interfaces with Crestron products via RS-232 • Two zone ability (Zone 2 only analogue) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealer-targeted pricing • No wireless networking ability • Can't burn CDs • No ability to access music off other computers on the network • No screensaver on touchscreen without password protection • Loud fan makes placing the <u>server</u> a good distance from you (or in another room) a necessity

Introduction

Music managers seem to be the wave of the future. Every product seems to claim some sort of music management system no matter how rudimentary. It also seems that the more of these reviews I do, the more often I get comments like, "Yeah but you can do all that with your computer." My answer has always been – but how well? I don't care if you can store 5 billion albums on your modded PC. If it crashes all the time, takes forever to access your library, and you can only listen to it from your office it is useless. In my opinion, the most important part of a server of any kind is that it *works* – every time.



Build Quality and Fit and Finish

The Qsonix Q100 system came in two boxes – one for the server and one for the touchscreen panel. Frankly, I was a bit surprised at the choice of interface. A 15" touchscreen? I kept looking for a remote – nope. The Q100 server is substantial in weight and Spartan in appearance. There are three lines to the left of the power button which is centered on the face of the unit. When powered up, there is an illuminated blue ring around the power button. On the right side of the front of the unit is the CD drive that would be invisible except for the white label on the door and open button. The unit is constructed out of brushed aluminum – the face plate being of noticeably higher quality



that the rest of the unit. The unit is held up by 4 round black plastic feet. The touchscreen is seemingly rugged and wear resistant. Using the touchscreen felt natural and I never feared that I might damage the screen. The bottom of the frame is constructed of a dark grey plastic that doesn't exactly match the color of the rest of the frame and the server unit (not a problem as you'll soon read). There are buttons on the unit to modify the output of the display (similar to just about every computer monitor I've ever used) and to power on and off the display. There is also an "auto-calibrate" button which my 3 year-old son liked to press. This didn't seem to hurt anything and only took a second to run.

Setup – General

The unit comes with a short manual including setup instructions. Really, it isn't that hard. Connect the power, connect the touchscreen with two different cables, and connect the unit to your receiver. I chose the coaxial out rather than analogue for zone one and analogue (no digital option) for zone two. You then connect the server to the network via an Ethernet cable. Easy.



Upon powering up for the first time, you are led through five setup screens. You are asked to set date, time zone, that sort of thing. As long as you have the unit connected to a router, it should link up via the automatic connection easily and quickly (it did for me). The unit does not recognize other computers on the network nor can it access any other stored music. If you plan on using the coaxial output, you'll need to enable this after the initial setup. It is easy to do from the Advanced Settings under the Playback menu.

The only real problem I noticed at this time was the volume of the fan. The unit has an integrated fan to cool the unit. From a bit of a distance with music playing it wasn't very noticeable but the fan never shut off (from what I could tell). Once I switched sources, I immediately noticed the fan and had to power down the unit to disengage the fan. If you are planning to place the server in the room with you plan on placing it in some sort of cabinet – preferably far from you. Fortunately, if you plan on relocating the unit Qsonix offers optional equipment that will allow the screen to be placed up to 600 feet away from the server. The only other option is to shut the unit down completely which will require an approximate 60 second startup time when restarting the server.

Qsonix Q100 Touchscreen Control & Setup

Setup – Configuration Options

There are three different ripping options for getting music onto the Qsonix. All of them rely on the Windows Media 9 codec and internally store the files in the .wma format. The quality level is determined in the user settings and includes a) CD Quality which is called "Lossless", b) 320Kbps called "High Quality", and c) 192Kbps for "Normal Quality." The lossless setting is still reduced in size so it does save about 50% of the space on the hard drive (as opposed to a straight WAV rip). With the 160 GB version of the Q100 I had for review, I could get approximately 400-500 albums in "lossless" on the unit.



Under the playback menu, you can configure a number of options:

Basic Settings:

- Crossfade Duration – Number of seconds to fade from one track to another
- Muted Volume Level – Between 0 and 100% of the play volume when the mute button is pressed
- Track Preview Duration – The number of seconds a track is previewed when selected
- Track Preview Volume – The percent of change of the current track when a preview track is selected (between 0 and 100%). So if you chose 80%, the current track would reduce to 80% of its current volume while you previewed the desired track.



Advanced Settings:

- Pause Fade Duration – The number of seconds it takes for the volume to reduce to 0 when pause is pressed
- Stop Fade Duration – The number of seconds it takes for a track to stop when stop is pressed
- Mute Fade Duration – The number of seconds it takes for the volume to fade to “muted volume level” (as set above).

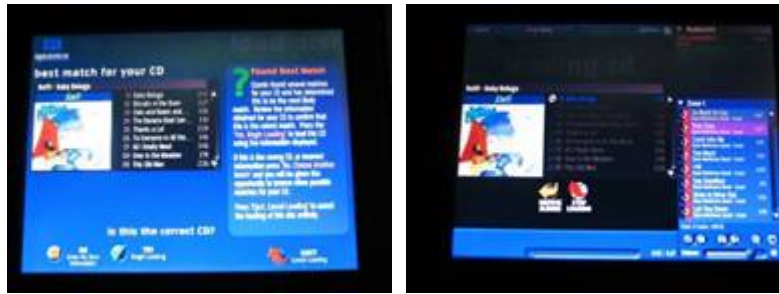


So, what does all this do for you? Well, it takes your music listening experience to a whole new level. These little touches – the way the music fades up and down, how tracks seem to overlap, the whole preview thing (I'm getting to that) is just cool. It just screams “professional” to me.

Setup and Performance – Music

Getting music into the Qsonix Q100 Digital Music System is child's play. At the initial startup, you've configured how you want the Qsonix to store music. If you want a particular album stored differently, you'll need to reconfigure it from the Quality menu before you load the CD. Otherwise just insert it into the drive. The unit will access the AMG database and try to find a match to your CD. It will display that match (if any) and ask for confirmation. At this point, you can enter the information manually if you like or accept the match. At all three of the different quality levels I found it took about 1 minute to burn 10 minutes of music. It will automatically spit out any CD that has already been loaded into the system. What is nice is that you can do all this while listening to music. It doesn't cause any stutters, jitters, or hiccups in playback.

My review unit came shipped with a bunch of albums preloaded for my convenience. After playing with the Q100 for a while, I discovered that the unit didn't burn music. Odd. One of the advantages I've found with music servers is the ability to make a copy of an album whenever you want to. For example, when we purchased a little CD player for my son's third birthday, I noticed my wife giving him some of our original CDs. I quickly showed her the steps of how to quickly burn a copy from our HTPC. That way he can use the thing for a Frisbee for all I care.



The recognition interface of CDs is very detailed. It recognized a few of the classical albums and one from the White Stripes (an import) that none of the other servers/HTPC's I've reviewed could identify. Unfortunately, it also missed a few albums from Portishead and a couple of other bands. When it does recognize an album, it doesn't just make assumptions. It gives you what it believes is the closest match then allows you to decline. It will then allow you to scroll through all the other matches to find the right one. If it doesn't find a match it asks to enter a bunch of information such as style, year published, band name, and track names. The downside is that you can't skip any of this information. It also doesn't seem to help the unit identify the album. So with my Portishead albums, when I entered the artist name, it didn't display every Portishead album in the database and let me choose. Perhaps that's because there were no Portishead albums in the database, but that seems unlikely. It isn't like they are an unknown band.

One of the neatest features is previewing music. I know that I'll often wish to find a particular song. Just as often (it seems) I'll not remember what the title is. While *Album* is displayed, you can double click on a track and a short snippet of the track will play so that you can determine if you want to move it into the play area. You can adjust the amount of the track will play (up to 10 seconds) from the menu. If you have music already playing, you can still preview a track. Depending on your settings, your currently playing music will reduce in volume during the preview. That, my friends, is pretty cool and it really works during implementation. It has this sort of professional "high end" feel that can't really be adequately described in words. The only hiccup I found (really in the whole interface) was that if you moved an entire album over to the play area while previewing a track on that album, you were stuck listening to the remainder of the track from the point that the preview started. You couldn't skip to the end of the track or fast forward. You *could* shut down the restart the unit but by the time you did that, you could have just listened to the track. Not a huge deal.



One thing that I noticed that was sort of a big deal was that occasionally, playback would stutter. It would pause for a millisecond or two and then continue on. I tried to find a reason why that was happening but I couldn't. It happened very inconsistently – sometimes it would happen every half hour or so and others it wouldn't happen for hours at a time. What I ended up doing was just listening to a bunch of music and waiting for it to happen. When it did, I quickly rewound the music to see if it was an error in the original disc (since a lot of this music wasn't mine) or if it had something to do with the machine. I couldn't make the error happen at the same point in any disc which makes me think that it has something to do with a background process that is interrupting playback.

Touchscreen Control

OK, I've talked a lot about what you can do but not how you do it. The touchscreen control is your interface into the unit. There are no front buttons or manual controls. It is the screen. The unit is compatible with existing home automation controls such as Crestron so the touchscreen doesn't *have* to be used but why not? If you can get set it up within reach of a listening seat I'd say do it. The interface is awesome.

Basically, it works exactly like you think it would. The left of the screen devoted to browsing. The top right lists saved playlists, and below that is whatever is currently playing. To find music, you can browse by Album, Artist, Genre, Cover, or Year. You can also set up a search. Type in the keyword and it searches through the artists name and song titles. There is an "All" browsing option which shows the artist's name, album title, cover art, and song list. Of course this takes up a bunch of space so it can only list two albums at a time.



Once you want to play something, you simply need to locate the album. Then, using your finger, drag the album or the specific track to the blue play area in the bottom right of the screen. You can even just locate an artist in the browse section and drag their name over to the play area. All their albums will show up. You can either double tap on the first track or you can hit the play button at the bottom. If you decide you want modify the playlist, you can tap on the down arrow and a menu will pop up. From this menu you can delete a specific track, save the whole list to a playlist, clear the played tracks, or clear the entire playlist. Once you settle on a playlist you like, you can save it and name it. It then will appear in the box above the play area. If you want to modify it further, you can do so from that box by selecting the playlist and hitting the down arrow. You will then get a list of actions including Renaming, Editing, Deleting, and Creating a New List. You can also sort by name or by date created. Or you can just double tap on the playlist and the Edit screen pops up.

Does any of this sound hard? It shouldn't. It is completely intuitive with virtually no learning curve. And it gets even easier. You don't like the order of your currently chosen songs? Just touch the song you want to move and drag it to the desired location. It is that easy. Once you learn the location of the browse, the playlist, and the currently playing areas, I can't imagine anyone spending more than five minutes figuring this interface out.



The touchscreen is nearly flawless in its execution. My only issue was that there was no screensaver mode. As far as the screen was concerned, it wasn't a problem – LCD has no real burn-in issues to speak of - but I would have liked it to dim or something after a few minutes of dormancy. Your only option was to activate the Access Protection. Then the unit would time out after a while and would display what was playing in both zones bouncing around the screen. While not a *bad* option, it does require you to specify a 4 digit password. It would be preferable to have the screensaver separate from the Access Protection function. It would have also been nice if you could remove a track from the currently playing list by dragging it to the left and dropping it into a blank area. That seems to be the more intuitive use rather than having to select the song then deleting it from the dropdown menu.



Listening Tests

As you'd expect, I did spend quite a bit of time playing with this system.

If there is one big knock against it, it would be that it is *too easy to interface with*. It practically begs to be fiddled with, adjusted, and modified. I could barely spend any time listening before I'd start adjusting my playlist or previewing a track. This thing is just *fun!*

Eventually, I buckled down and did some tests. My first curiosity was how much difference there was between the CD quality and the other two compression formats. I picked an album that I know has covers a lot of the audible frequency range. I ended up choosing Portishead's *Best of '99* (when entering the album information manually, I also discovered the lack of an apostrophe on the onscreen keypad). This album has a respectable amount of bass and good deal of highs and a ton of just about everything else. It may not be the best mastered album I've ever heard but I find it enjoyable at times.



The first thing I did was to burn the album to the Qsonix at the "Normal" quality (which is the lowest quality – don't you just love positively skewed scales?) I already had the album burned at CD Quality into my [2partsfusion DMS-701](#) so I just cued it up and hit play on both at the same time. Both sources have their own volume control so I turned them up as high as possible hoping that this would allow my [Denon 3805](#) receiver to basically set the volume levels the same. They sounded pretty close but I can't really be sure. I broke out the old Radio Shack SPL but without test tones going through each, the results weren't conclusive. They did look similar. Both units were connected to the Denon digitally so the DACs in the receiver handled the digital to analog conversion for both.



I did notice a bit of attenuation of the high's and lows during the first track *Undenied* (a take on the James Bond theme). This track has a lot of trumpets paired with a quick low bassline. Together they make apparent compression on one side or the other. At the Normal encoding rate, the attenuation was noticeable in an A/B comparison. I'd use Normal or High Quality for saving many of the pop albums of today (which are already compressed for you) or children's music.

Next, I deleted the album and re-imported it using the "High Quality" resolution encoding. At this level of encoding with this album, I could hear little difference between the two. I couldn't say definitively that one sounded better than the other. Perhaps with a different album... I quickly loaded up Sarah McLachlan's *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy* to make another comparison. Once again, no obvious differences leapt out at me. I'd use the "High Quality" encoding for most all my music if I had a ton of CDs. Perhaps with headphones or different speakers I'd feel differently but with my current rig, the differences seem to be all but inaudible. As my current collection stands, I could load everything up at CD quality and still have room to spare. What I might do would be to use "High Quality" for all but the most sensitive of recordings where I'd use "CD Quality".

Suggestions and Recommendations

It is hard to fault this unit for what it does. It would be easy to suggest other functionality – the most obvious of which is the ability to burn CDs. Having music on a server with no way to get it off seems... wrong. I'd also like to see some sort of networking ability so that you can interface with other computers on the network. If you have a couple of gigs of albums burned to your hard drive, as it stands the only way to get them onto the Qsonix Q100 is to burn them all to CD and upload them. That just seems silly. Other than that, I'd like to see the unit offered with a quieter or even no fan. Clearly this is made for installation within a dedicated equipment rack (likely in a separate room) but it isn't an unattractive component. It could easily sit under the monitor in certain applications. With the current fan, that is nearly impossible.



Conclusions and Overall Perceptions

The Qsonix Q100 Digital Music System is clearly a product with a purpose. Touchscreens, especially of this size (15 inches), are clearly meant to be a focal point in a room. I could see this panel on a coffee/end table or mounted within reach of the primary listening seat. I have this picture in my mind of it mounted to my recliner, me reaching over to rearrange a playlist, my wife screaming, "Are you even listening to me?!" Of course I'm not. I'm in my happy place. If you're not offering scotch or cognac, you can show yourself out. The Qsonix is not for the light of wallet but for those that can afford it, it presents what I found to be an unrivaled cool factor. **For our custom installer readers, this is a hot product that does what it advertises neatly and easily. Reliability and simplicity may be well worth the money and you have a nice product for your clients. The touchscreen rocks. The interface is simple enough for most anyone with two (or maybe three) brain cells to rub together to use. It sounds good, looks good, and works, um, pretty good. You can even buy a second touchscreen and set up zone 2 with its own interface. Maybe in that room the wife can find her happy place as well!**



Manufacturer's Note: Software Version 2.0 Release for Q100 Platform

According to Mike Weaver, President of Qsonix, the company will be introducing version 2.0 of its firmware for the Q100 at CEDIA in September. Existing customers will receive this upgrade at no cost, and new units will begin shipping with version 2.0 included (no price changes). Version 2 features include; System Backup/Restore to USB drives, CD Burning, iPod Integration, RS232 serial protocol (Crestron/AMX, etc), Volume leveling, Wireless Pointer Device Support and Enhanced meta-data (artist reviews, biographies, etc). Stay tuned to www.qsonix.com for more details.

Stated Specifications: Q100 Digital Music System

Music Storage Q100

Q100–160GB Model
Lossless* approx 500 CDs
High Quality approx 1500 CDs
Normal Quality approx 3000 CDs
Q100–400GB Model
Lossless* approx 1200 CDs
High Quality approx 3500 CDs
Normal Quality approx 7500 CDs
*Qsonix use lossless compression technology which increases storage capacity without compromising sound quality.

Interfaces

1 x S/PDIF Coax [digital audio](#) output (24 bit, 192Khz, 107dba)
2 x Analog stereo (RCA) output
1 x VGA Video Output (1024x768)
2x Accessory Ports (future upgrades)
1 x 10/100MBit Ethernet
Cat5 Monitor Extension (optional)**
Crestron controller support (available Q2 2005)
** Allows extension of touchscreen up to 600' from main system

Touchscreen Technology

15" TFT Active Matrix Screen
1024 x 768 Resolution
Anti-glare screen
Includes tabletop stabilization bracket
VESA 75 compliant for wall or arm mount (optional)
Elegant and rugged design

Audio output:

Dynamic Range 106dB (A-weighted)
Signal-to-Noise Ratio 107dB (typical, A-weighted)
THD 0.00235% (-92.6dB)
Maximum Line Output Level +2.1dBV (1.276 Vrms)
Frequency Response +/-0.6dB; 22Hz-20kHz
@48kHz Samplefrequenz
+/-3.0dB; 22Hz-80kHz

Dimensions / Weight:

Chassis: 17"(w) x (14"(d) x 4"(h) with feet (2U rack) 21 lbs
TouchScreen Controller: 17"(w) x 16.0"(h) x 6.7"(d) 12lbs
Crosstalk: -118.9dB






The Score Card

The scoring below is based on each piece of equipment doing the duty it is designed for. The numbers are weighed heavily with respect to the individual cost of each unit, thus giving a rating roughly equal to:









$$\text{Performance} \times \text{Price Factor/Value} = \text{Rating}$$

Authors Rant: The minute you hear yourself saying, "Well, by my math it should have been..." fill in the blank, stop yourself. *Performance* and *Value* are both subjective scores. You can't validly average scores based on subjective opinion. The *Overall* and *Value* scores are just as subjective as the rest and therefore stand alone.

Audioholics Ratings Scale:

-  - Outstanding (reserved for features or areas that exceed market norms)
-  - Above Average
-  - Average
-  - Below Average
-  - Very Poor

Qsonix Q100 Digital Music System

Metric	Rating
Build Quality	 1/2
Music Management	
Music Playback	 1/2
Ease of Use	
Features	
Touchscreen Interface	 1/2
Overall	 3/4
Value	 *

**Consumers will likely find this unit expensive, but custom installers may value a product that can be sold to higher-end clients with plenty of margin.*

Qsonix Q100 Digital Music System

MSRP: \$5495

Qsonix, Inc.

5737 Kanan Road # 241
 Agoura Hills, CA 91301-1601
 818-332-9504
www.qsonix.com