

Qsonix Q100 Music Server

That Magic Touch

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A board game called *Othello* came up with the ingenious tagline, "A minute to learn, a lifetime to master." It's simple enough that anyone can immediately start playing but it has enough strategy to hold your interest for, well, years. Now, that might be okay for a game (though after a couple of losing turns, I want to scatter those impertinent black-and-white discs all over the floor).

Unfortunately, it's also an apt and regrettable description for many audio/video systems. In my custom-install work, we allot time for "client education," when we go over how everything works. Then the customer's eyes start glazing over in that 1,000-yard stare, and I start thinking, "They're just not gonna get it." Sure, a lot of today's technology is jaw-droppingly cool, but if no one can figure it out, what good is it?

What We Think

This multiroom music server offers excellent sound and an interface as gorgeous as it is easy to use.

That appears to be the driving force behind the Qsonix Q100 music server. With a 160-gigabyte (GB) hard drive and two independent audio outputs, the Q100 stores, manages, and serves up your music library to a pair of rooms in two separate but equally sweet helpings. Of course, media servers with gigabyte hard drives that store thousands of songs aren't new. But finding a particular song can mean navigating through line upon line of text, and creating playlists to simplify things can be tedious.

The real treat in the Qsonix Q100 is its 15-inch touchpanel controller. It has a drag-and-drop interface for song selection that's powerful and effortless to use. Its operation will be totally



familiar to anyone who's used a Windows or Macintosh computer, yet the application feels completely new and different.

People love their iPods because, while shuttling through their collections, they develop an emotional, tactile connection to their music through the Click Wheel. Multiply that effect by a

factor of 10, and you'll have an idea of what the Qsonix interface is like.

SETUP Right out of the box, the system looked and felt well built. From the milled faceplate to the quality of the gold-plated audio outputs, it was clear that the Q100 was meant for classy digs.

Installation couldn't have been easier. In fact, if every component installed as easily as the Qsonix system, a lot of installers would be out of work. I simply connected the Zone 1 stereo analog output to my main listening rig and the matching Zone 2 output to my house-wide music system. A coaxial digital output is also available for Zone 1, but using it on my sample defeated the Zone 2 output. Qsonix's Version 2 software upgrade, which should be available by the time you read this, corrects this deficiency and some others I'll point out.

I connected my network router to the Qsonix's Ethernet port to give it Internet access for finding album and track information. Two connections marry the server to the touchpanel — a VGA and an RS-232 serial cable. Power the two pieces up, and you're done.

Firing up the touchpanel produced a First Time Startup Wizard on its screen. It asked me to establish a network connection, which was as easy as pressing "Auto Configure" — happily, the Q100 adheres to the DHCP (Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol) networking standard, which automatically assigns IP addresses. Then the Wizard walked me through setting the date and time, the default recording quality, and names for the audio zones. The entire set-up process, including unboxing everything, took less than 15 minutes.

There are some additional connections worth mentioning. A second RS-232 jack can send data and control commands to advanced touchscreen controllers by the likes of Crestron or AMX, which will be important to anyone looking to integrate Qsonix with a full-blown multiroom audio system. Two USB jacks are also provided for "Future Upgrades," such as the ability to add external hard drives to back up your ripped media.

The 6-foot cabling that connects the touchpanel to the server is way too short to be of any practical benefit; I was forced to sit on the floor while operating the touchpanel. Unless you plan on

The Short Form

\$5,495 / SERVER,
17 x 4 x 14 IN, 21
LBS /
TOUCHSCREEN, 17
x 16 x 6.75 IN, 12
LBS / qsonix.com /
818-332-9504

Plus

- Very simple to set up and use
- Wonderful drag-and-drop touchscreen interface
- High-end build and performance

Minus

- Supplied touchpanel cables too short
- Can't drag music from zone to zone or start a playlist simultaneously in both zones

Key Features

- 160-GB hard drive stores up to 3,000 CDs
- Sort, browse, and play music by artist, album, genre, year, or playlist
- Outputs to 2 independent zones
- 15-inch (diagonal), 1,024 x 768-pixel touchpanel
- connections: VGA video, coaxial digital audio, and 2 analog stereo audio outputs; Ethernet port; 2 USB ports; 2 RS-232 serial connectors
- Price: \$5,495

setting the touchpanel very near the server, insist on longer cables. An optional Cat-5 extension kit (\$499) allows the touchpanel to be installed up to 600 feet away.



LOADING MUSIC Like any media server, the Qsonix Q100 lets you trade off quality for storage (playback time) — the better the quality, the fewer CDs it can hold. There are three quality levels: CD Quality uses Windows Lossless, High Quality rips in WMA format at 320 kbps, and Normal rips in WMA at 192 kbps. The 160-GB model can store roughly 500 CDs in CD Quality mode, 1,500 in High Quality, and up to 3,000 in Normal.

The Q100 was Speedy Gonzalez when it came to ripping discs, gobbling most in around 5 minutes. Furthermore, I could continue to listen to anything already in the library while ripping, with nary a hiccup in the output to either zone.

Whenever a CD is inserted, the system springs into action, going out to the Net to grab appropriate metadata (track and artist information) and cover art. Qsonix uses the All Music Guide (AMG) Web site for retrieving CD information instead of the more popular Gracenote CDDB. Given my musical tastes, which run toward the mainstream, it was successful at looking up nearly everything that I threw at it. It did stumble on some classical discs, though, such as a LaserLight collection of Baroque music. Those with more obscure collections might find that AMG doesn't have the depth of CDDB.

Fortunately, filling in the blanks was quick and painless for unknown discs or homebrew mix CDs. When a disc wasn't recognized, an onscreen prompt walked me through manually entering album, track, and artist information along with the appropriate genre. You can type on the touchpanel's virtual keyboard or use a standard USB-connected keyboard (not included). A small selection of generic covers are available for unknown discs; unfortunately, importing cover art from another source isn't an option. It was also mildly irritating that CDs must be ripped in their entirety — you can't cherry-pick a disc for the best tracks. Nor can you go back afterward and delete specific tracks you don't want — only the whole album.

Besides fixing the problem mentioned earlier with the coaxial digital output, the Version 2 software will also address the

current inability to import or drag over previously ripped media files from a computer on your home network. That's a serious drawback in an age when many people have a huge music collection already stored on their PC before adding a networked music server.

OPERATION The 15-inch screen is large by touchpanel standards, and the graphics and text were clear and easy to read. I could surf my collection by album, artist, genre, or year, but browsing by cover art was by far the coolest way to go since the Qsonix Q100 displays 15 albums at a time. Touching a cover produces a larger view with all of the tracks listed.

See a song you want to hear? Touch it and drag it to the zone where you want to listen. This automatically creates a playlist that can then be easily saved and recalled later. But don't just drag individual songs: Drag entire albums if you like. Drag entire collections by an artist. Drag a genre. Drag a year.

The interface is so cool and so, well, *touchable* that you'll want to give your entire music collection the finger — but not in that New York cabbie way! Since every song must be touched — lovingly hand-selected by you — you'll reconnect with your music, literally. It's this physical interaction that bonds you to your music — and to the Qsonix gear — on a visceral level.

It would be nice, though, if there were a way to "sync" the outputs of the two zones at will. You can't command the system to start playing the same music in both zones simultaneously — to hear the same songs all over the house, you have to load your playlist or album into both zones and start them separately. No matter how hard you try, they never quite sync up. Nor is there any way to drag a playlist from one zone into the another. For example, if I created a song list in one zone that I wanted to continue listening to in the other, I'd first have to save and then reimport the list to the second zone. That's awkward.

On the other hand, Qsonix *has* added some flourishes that make the system even more lovable. One is called Softfade, which gently fades music out when you stop playback or change tracks. Another is Fast Preview, which lets you check out a track before adding it to your current session. But instead of starting at the beginning, the track you're previewing starts playing about a third of the way into the song, making it far easier to identify. Smart! Both of these features are user adjustable — you can alter, for example, the duration of the fade or the length of the preview.

Sound quality was terrific, and the Qsonix Q100 should be right at home in even topflight systems. Fan noise, a concern with many hard drive-based systems, never called attention to itself.

BOTTOM LINE By the time you read this, Qsonix should have rolled out the Version 2 software upgrade I've mentioned. Along with enabling dual-zone digital audio output and importing of files from networked devices, this will add support for CD burning and

direct CD playback, plus a Web interface that can be used for remote system control from a computer or wireless PDA. These added features, coupled with its gorgeous and fun-to-use interface, will only add to the standing of the Qsonix Q100 music server as a best-in-class contender. It's true that, in the end, the Qsonix doesn't do anything you aren't already familiar with. It just does it *very, very* well, and helps you reconnect with your music in a way that other servers just can't.

