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The Qsonix Music Server

By Jeff Dorgay

In the past couple of years, the music server has gone from a curiosity to a nearly ubiquitous component in many serious HiFi systems. The technical aspects of the music server world abound, but it all boils down to one thing: interface.

At the risk of making some readers grumpy, if you don't have a great interface, a music server is just another computing device that you need to manage. By the time you rip your music properly, find the right album art and ID tags, everyone has fallen asleep. And no one will ever play with a Squeezebox when you have a party at your house.

Sooloos has been the leader in the high-end music server race, with a flawless interface that begs you to explore the music contained within. The big roadblock to the Sooloos has been (and continues to be) the price. At more than \$10,000, this just isn't a sandbox in which a lot of music lovers can afford to play. And with used CD prices at an all-time low, you can buy a substantial amount of music for 10 large. Think of the Sooloos as a BMW M3 and the QSonix as a VW GTI R32. A less-prestigious badge on the bonnet, but very close in performance where it counts.



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Enter Q Sonix

At a base price of \$4,450, the entry-level Qsonix comes in at less than half the price of a comparable Sooloos with a 15-inch touch-panel screen and a 500GB hard drive that will allow storage of about 1,500 CD's in WMA lossless format. It can be configured in 750GB (\$150 additional) 1TB (\$300 additional) and 1.5TB (\$600 additional) editions along with a larger, 17-inch touch screen and other interesting options. The full 1.5TB edition will store close to 4,500 CD's in WMA lossless format, which should be enough for most listeners. While the ability to access a larger collection is on the drawing board, for now this is the only limitation of the Qsonix.

Currently, the Qsonix is compatible with WMA Lossless, WAV, MP3 and FLAC files. Hi res files will be addressed soon, so you can mix them into you collection with the next software release.

While there are a number of Qsonix dealers across the country, you can also buy the Qsonix direct from the factory if you do not have a dealer nearby. Using the factory website is as easy as buying a computer from the online Apple store. Choose the configuration you want, pick your accessories and press "buy." It's a snap.

There are two basic models of the Qsonix: the Q105 reviewed here, which will support two separate zones of playback, and the Q110, which supports four zones. Each zone can have its own dedicated touch screen, or it can be controlled via an iPhone/iPod touch device. Both versions have only one digital output for the more demanding audiophile and 1-3 analog outputs that can go to different zones in your home or office. Both machines can also be controlled via a Mac or PC that is on the same network for additional flexibility. *(continued)*



Ease of Setup

The Qsonix is very easy to setup. There is one main box containing all of the electronics and a cable that goes to the touch screen. You should be able to set it up and start ripping discs in less than 15 minutes. The instructions are easy to read and follow, and most of the functionality is self explanatory. Connect the analog or digital output to your preamp or DAC, hook up an internet connection and start it up. It's that easy.

One important thing worth mentioning about the Qsonix is that once you have loaded all of your music to the server, you no longer need an internet connection to access the metadata from your collection. This is a huge plus for someone who has to locate the server where there is no internet connection available.

When you insert a CD into the drawer, the Qsonix directs you through the rip process and gives you options for the quality level in which you would like your music to be stored. You can save

your music as MP3, WMA lossless or uncompressed wav files. You are not locked into one compression scheme as the Qsonix will let you store in all formats, but keep in mind that the less compression you use, the fewer discs you can store. All of the files on the Qsonix for this review were in lossless format, though a few files were imported as .wav to see how much, if any, difference existed in playback quality.

Though debate continues about the validity of lossless compression versus uncompressed files – I can hear just a slight degradation on my reference system – in the interest of convenience, I've had no issues with lossless files. I suspect for all but the .01 percent of the world's pickiest audiophiles with canine hearing, the WMA lossless option will be just fine.

The Qsonix is robustly built and uses a standard CD drive mechanism so it should last through importing thousands of CD's, and should it ever fail, replacement would be easy and inexpensive.

(continued)



Ease of Importing and Exporting Music

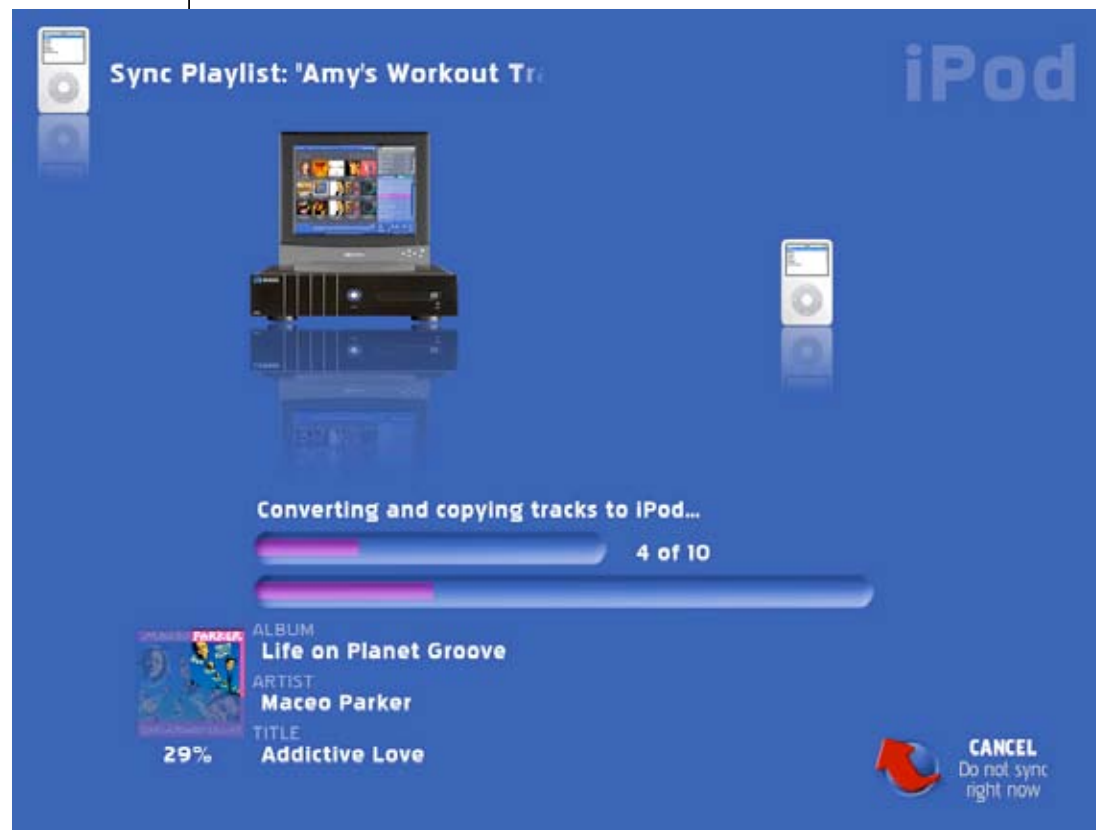
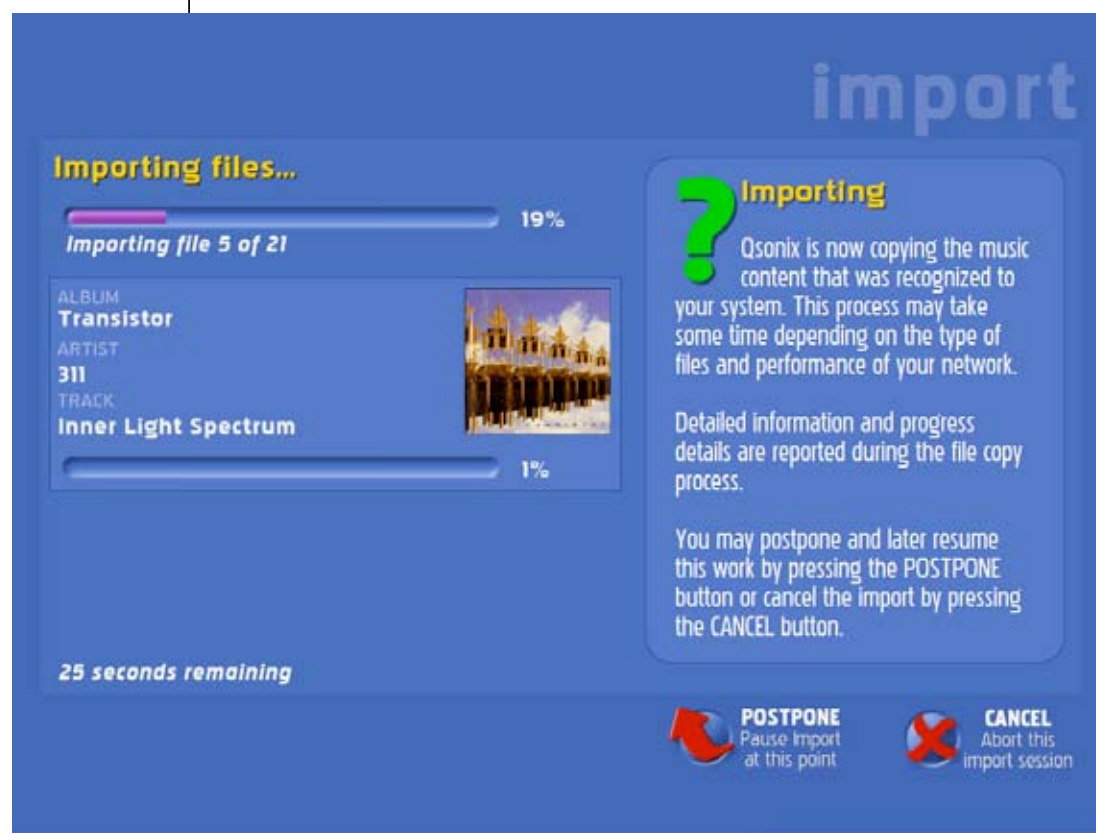
First, I'd like to compliment the Qsonix staff for producing a fantastic owner's manual. While some of you don't like to read manuals, it helps with a product like this because while deceptively simple to use at first, there are a number of additional features that will enhance the user experience. But you have to dig into the manual. The manual stays informative without requiring that you be an IT professional to use the Qsonix.

Like a good doctor, the Qsonix asks you a lot of questions along the way. When you import a CD, a series of menus pop up on the screen that direct you through the process. Should the proper album art and data not be available online, you can add your own. There is a handy USB port on the front panel of the Qsonix so you can load music that way or plug in a keyboard for data entry. This is a useful option if you have a pile of discs that require metadata.

My favorite feature is the Qsonix's ability to burn custom CD's from your music collection. If you're headed out for a road trip and want to burn a few custom CD's or make a quick mix CD for a friend, you can copy a custom playlist to a blank CD at the push of a button. I found this to be a fun feature after a listening session; you can send your friends home with a mix CD of the evening's favorites. Again, the Qsonix walks you through the needed steps quickly. This is impossible to accomplish with the Sooloos, which only allows low-res MP3 files to be exported to iTunes.

Syncing music to your iPod is also a snap, and the Qsonix lets you choose three different quality settings (low, medium and high) right from the touch screen. You can export up to 3,000 songs per playlist.

(continued)





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The only feature the Qsonix lacks is a web-based component that will allow you to rip discs from other Macs or PCs on your network. This really comes in handy when you have a large collection to import.

Ease of Backup

The most important aspect of using any music server is also the least fun: backing up your data. If you have a large CD collection, chances are you'll spend a lot of your free time ripping them all to the Qsonix. So this is a task you only want to do once because a data glitch can wipe out all of your hard labor. The Qsonix has the easiest and most cost-effective system available.

Unlike most other music servers that require you to back up over a network, with Qsonix you just plug a hard drive into one of the USB ports and get to it. With 1TB external drives available for about a hundred dollars, this is the other main advantage over the Sooloos, who's TwinStore module is \$2,295 without hard drives installed.

Ease of Use

If you are moving up from all of the other iTunes-based products, the Qsonix will amaze you at the ease of using its touch-screen interface. You can view your music by artist, album title or album cover. My favorite remains the album-cover mode because that is the way most people remember music, by the album art. With everything organized alphabetically, you get two albums on a page with all of the track listings. *(continued)*

There are three distinct zones of activity on the screen: the album browser where you can see the album art and track titles, the playlist control that lists any of the custom playlists you may have created and the now-playing control. Think of the now-playing control as the dynamic playlist to which you are dragging tracks. You can drag the whole album to the now-playing list or individual songs in any order. Once you've programmed a certain list of songs to your mood, you can save it or erase it when you are done the listening session.

Within this playlist, you can bounce around between the songs you've chosen at will, going up and back incrementally or making the whole playlist loop and repeat at the end. One of the handiest features of the Qsonix is that it features an infrared remote. This is great when you want to pause the server from across the room without resorting to using your iPhone. You can also use the remote to control zone volume (analog outputs only) and advance forward and back on your playlist.

Once you get used to using a touch screen with your music library at your fingertips, you won't want to go back to putting discs in a drawer and fumbling through your CD library.

The Sound

Using the Qsonix through the analog inputs is easy and the sound quality is on par with what you might expect from a CD player in the \$1,000 - \$2,000 range. Not terrible, but not fussy audiophile quality either. But hey, neither is the sound from the analog outputs of my McIntosh MS750 or Sooloos. I think this is a perfect combination because chances are that even in a multi-zone installation, you'll have the high-res digital output going to your main system and feed the analog outs to other zones in your house where peripheral music systems might be.

Fortunately, the SPDIF output with the DAC of your choice *will* satisfy the fussiest audiophiles. *(continued)*





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Plugged into my reference Wadia 781 SE, the sound between discs played on the Wadia and those files through the DAC section of the Wadia with the Qsonix as the source were indistinguishable from each other.

As we were going to print with this review, Qsonix announced that they would now be supporting high-resolution audio files (up to 24bit/96kHz), so we will have a follow up shortly. The next generation will also have a high-quality USB output to interface with a number of the latest DAC's that are utilizing this technology.

The only objectionable sound the Qsonix makes is the fan. It's quiet by PC standards, but not silent. To keep your listening room whisper quiet you will need to mount the main control box in a closet or somewhere nearby to eliminate the background noise. Again, this is standard operating procedure for any music server that uses a battery of hard drives.

A Flawless Experience

Our experience with the Qsonix was as good as it gets. I'd love to see the graphic design on the interface tightened up a bit, but that's a personal style thing. Built-in wireless ethernet would be handy and, of course, support for a larger music library than 4,500 CD's would be welcomed by the mega collectors. These are all tiny gripes about an excellent product, none of which interfere with day-to-day operation.

The Qsonix is already one step away from the top of the mountain, but considering the price differential, it is the best value today in a high-capacity music server.

Every time I walked by the black box with its blank touch screen sitting on top, I expected it to start snarling at me in some kind of DOS code.

Additional Listening

(or the curmudgeon perspective) By Hood McTiernan

Aside from the iTunes/iPod thing, computer audio has held virtually no interest for me. Having read various articles about what you have to go through to actually hear anything, I had feelings of great trepidation when our publisher suggested that I take a stab at making the Qsonix Q-105 music server work in my system, or work at all for that matter.

After he dropped it off at my house, it sat on the coffee table for a week as I studiously ignored its presence. Every time I walked by the black box with its blank touch screen sitting on top, I expected it to start snarling at me in some kind of DOS code. And I fully expected that I might have to hit it with a hammer if it tried anything that had anything to do with configuring. You see, I've done my share of introducing my forehead to brick walls when it comes to computers in general, so mating a computer with audio felt wrong: I just *knew* that this enterprise would not turn out well.

But once I fired it up, it settled down after a few moments of cogitation and proceeded to display album art that had been previously loaded in alphabetic order. Then the dreaded moment came. I needed to hook it to my network router. Fully expecting it to start sputtering and throwing Windows-related fits, I was utterly taken aback when nothing happened. Nothing that is until I loaded a CD. Then it dutifully went out and retrieved the album art and song listing in a flash. I proceeded to load about 50 more CD's and took it into my sound room.

Connected to my Bryston DAC via a Transparent Audio digital cable, I was soon listening to the music that I had loaded only moments before. I let it play for about three hours before settling down to a listening/interface session.

To say I was pleasantly surprised is an understatement. I was able to navigate around the touch screen quickly, and retrieving songs or albums was lightning fast. Playlists were a snap to create. As a matter of fact, the more I touched the screen, the more I wanted to just keep exploring. You see, I didn't read the manual.

OK, I'm a guy and such things are beneath me. That kind of behavior usually results in some kind of wound, but in the case of the Qsonix, such was not the case. As a matter of fact, mechanically the only quibble I had with it was the placement of the transport open/close button. It's directly under the tray and is a bit awkward to operate.

Sonically, the Qsonix acquitted itself rather nicely. One thing I noticed right off the bat was the width of the soundstage. It extended well beyond the outside edges of my speakers. The depth of the soundstage was a bit shallow, though. The bottom end was tight and well-controlled if not the ultimate in detail.

The high end was not offensive in the least. Not as extended as a reference-quality CD player, but nice nonetheless. I'd call it comparable to a good \$2,500 CD player. Taking into account the amazing storage capacity, ease of operation and great sound, I'd be hard pressed not to call the Q-105 a great value.

After some contemplation, even a curmudgeon like me must admit that this is the next stage of digital audio playback. Thanks to such a good experience with the Qsonix, I can see one in my future. It took a non believer by surprise in a very convincing manner. ●

The Qsonix Q105 Music Server

MSRP: \$4,600 - \$5,200

www.qsonix.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamp Burmester 011

Power Amplifier Burmester 911 mk. 3

DAC's Wadia 781 SE, Neko Audio D100, PS Audio Perfect Wave

Speakers Gamut S-7

Cable Shunyata Aurora Interconnects, Shunyata Stratos SP speaker cables

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim power conditioners, RSA Mongoose power cords, Shunyata Python CX power cords.



Holiday Gift Guide

By the TONEAudio Staff

Here are a few goodies we think you'll enjoy. Some are too big to fit into a stocking, but almost all will fit under the tree and put a smile of the face of your favorite audiophile. Many of these items are available at Music Direct, so if you are in the mood to shop as you read this, just click on the supplied links and they will take you right to the item on the MD website.



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