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## Sonos Digital Music System: Multi-Zone Audio Done Right

Did you know that Sonos is the Greek word for sound? Or that Sonos spelled backward is Sonos? Forgive me if I seem to be grasping for straws, but this multi-zone music system has already achieved a level of fame usually reserved for supermodels, presidents and mass murderers. What can I tell you about it that you haven't already heard?

You probably know it uses a sleek handheld wireless controller, called, logically enough, the Controller, to operate one or more ZonePlayers. If you're multi-zone savvy, you'll also be aware that the zones can operate in tandem or independently. And no doubt you've heard a lot about the system's visual resemblance to the Apple iPod.

But here are some things you may not have heard yet. The Controller is splash-resistant and therefore can function (within limits) in the kitchen and bathroom. Class D amps enable the ZonePlayer to deliver its 50 watts per channel, a technology story in itself. And while digital rights management does impose some restrictions, a recent deal with RealNetworks will allow the Sonos system to play songs downloaded from the Rhapsody online music service.

My review sample was the "introductory bundle," which includes a single CR100 Controller and two ZP100 ZonePlayers for \$1,199. Extra Controllers go for \$399 and additional ZonePlayers—the system can handle up to 32 zones—cost \$499, each. The two ZonePlayers found homes in my office and bedroom.

On my desk, an Ethernet cable connected the primary ZonePlayer to a Belkin router. The player mated with a pair of Paradigm Studio/20 monitors, moonlighting from their back-channel positions in my reference system. Unusual spring-loaded binding posts accepted cables via holes on the sides. The holes would have accepted either banana plugs or bare wire tips, but when I tried bananas, the plugs blocked the power-cord jack. So I stripped some generic 12-gauge cable that I keep around for emergencies.

In my bedroom, the second ZonePlayer was a perfect fit for a bookshelf that's seven inches deep and stands 1.5 inches from the wall, perfectly accommodating both player and binding posts. Here the speakers were a new pair of JBL Control1Xtreme indoor/outdoor speakers with a Pinnacle SubSonic subwoofer beefing up the low end. The second ZonePlayer connected to the system wirelessly, presumably with the first one serving as transmitter, so there was no need to connect another Ethernet cable.

Each ZonePlayer has a set of auto-detect stereo analog inputs to connect an external source (so you can still play unripped CDs, cassettes, or even vinyl). And, of course, each requires a separate power connection. The Controller has to be charged with a power adapter, a process that takes about two hours. A charge lasts for a week with "typical usage."

The next step was to install the Desktop Controller software in my IBM ThinkCentre, running Windows XP SP2. The program duplicates all functions of the handheld controller and adds a few more. I used it to re-index my music library whenever I ripped anything new to the IBM hard drive—something I did, inspired by Sonos, frequently while I had the system. It can also add Internet radio stations to the operative list and access software updates.



The installation wizard asked if it was OK to add the software to the Windows Firewall's list of allowed exceptions. I said it was. Then I was prompted to simultaneously press the mute and volume-plus keys on the first ZonePlayer. Having done so, I received a prompt asking me to name the zone, and accepted "Living Room," the default setting.

Would I like to add another ZonePlayer? Certainly. I wasn't sure whether to call it "Master Bedroom", or just "Bedroom," but I am the master of my bedroom, so that's what it became. Back at the office PC, the registration process moved swiftly, and a password was e-mailed to me. It's associated with an account profile that accesses tech/web support, forums and software upgrades.

The last step was to tell the controller (and Desktop Controller) where to look for music folders on the PC's hard drive. This required another firewall adjustment—to allow file sharing—and then I was ready to listen to music.

My music library was navigable by artist, album, composer, genre, track, playlist or folder. I played with genre for awhile—Bebel Gilberto showed up under bossa nova, as expected—and sometimes resorted to direct PC folder access to find the contents of various LPs burned to CD-R, ripped to MP3, and never properly embedded with metadata. But most of my browsing was by artist.

Evaluating sound was the first order of business. I wanted to hear what the ZonePlayer's Class D amps could do. This relatively new and highly efficient type runs the output stages with only two values—on and off—before routing the signal through an analog output filter, turning it back into a wavelength that's intelligible to the speakers. A thick aluminum enclosure provides passive cooling—no fan needed.

To get a handle on sound quality, I turned to an album that's as familiar to me as the layout of my apartment, Richard Thompson's *The Old Kit Bag*. Bass was plentiful on the JBL/Pinnacle combo—as you'd expect in a subwoofer-assisted system—and even became fairly proportional after I hiked the sub crossover to over 100Hz. The Paradigms, sans sub, pushed Danny Thompson's string bass toward the back of the soundstage, producing a smaller but better focused image.

Midrange was crisp and slightly forward, with more sting on the Paradigms in the office, and more warmth (though no less detail) on the JBLs in the bedroom. While the intrinsic qualities of speakers and rooms undoubtedly played a role, the Paradigms have cumulatively demonstrated their neutrality with lots of amps over the past three years, so the ZonePlayer amp must have been sharpening the mids.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, especially for background listening. Strong low-level resolution enabled me to keep the ZonePlayers running deep into the night. I got to like this constant intravenous music drip and decided to leave the menu's treble, bass, loudness, and balance controls alone.

The JBLs played louder than the Paradigms, undoubtedly because their sensitivity rating was three decibels higher, at 89 vs. 86 decibels. But even with the more demanding Paradigms, the ZonePlayer clocked a moderate volume level of 75dB (coincidentally the Dolby/THX reference level) with the volume halfway up, and hit 100dB when cranked to the max.

I loved the controller. Every time I picked it up, the 2.25 by 3 inch color liquid crystal display came to life, prompted by a motion sensor. It showed me everything I needed—sometimes including album covers—and did everything I told it to do. When unused for a few hours, the controller would take a few extra seconds to awaken, but after that it would blink on almost instantly. It worked even in rooms without a ZonePlayer.

A circular touchpad surrounding the enter button navigated up and down menus. Hard keys

included volume, mute, back, a dedicated button that switched between zones, and another that brought up the music menu. Soft keys managed different functions in different modes. In music mode, they managed the song queues, whereas in zone mode, they included a pause function.

Nowhere to be found were stop and off functions. The controller times out when it's left alone for a short time and ZonePlayers are always on. Of course, the PC has to stay on when Sonos accesses its hard drive. The exception is internet radio. In that case the internet connection sends a signal to the router, which passes it to the wired ZonePlayer, which broadcasts it to the wireless, second ZonePlayer.

I quickly got used to living with the Sonos system. And the longer I had it, the more hours per day it ran. The system demonstrated its willingness to play different music in different zones. However, after a brief experiment, I kept it going in the "all-zones party mode" so that music could follow me from room to room. And yes, that included carrying the splashproof controller into the bathroom and using it to manipulate the nearby bedroom—oops, "Master Bedroom"—system. When a ZonePlayer played too loud in close proximity, I used the front-panel volume keys.

Limitations? The Sonos system has a few. One is the Ethernet tether to the primary ZonePlayer. If you don't mind the complication, you could get around this by using a wireless Ethernet bridge like the Linksys WET11 or WET54.

Digital rights management places limits on program material. Sonos is compatible with WMA and AAC, as well as MP3 and WAV, but can't play copyright-protected versions of those first two file formats. So customers of the iTunes and Napster online music services will run into problems. Sonos system owners will be better off paying \$9.95/month to forage for musical truffles on rhapsody.com.

Free internet radio is limited to MP3 streaming. The other option is to pay \$4.95/month for Rhapsody's Radio Plus service. Stations using only WMA won't work. Nor will RealAudio streaming, which is distinct from Rhapsody Radio Plus, though both are controlled by RealNetworks.

Finally, the Desktop Controller software was Windows-only at presstime. However, Sonos plans a Mac OS X version later this year.

Mitigating these problems, there are some unusual strengths. One is the user interface. The PC software is intuitive and the controller gets the most out of its dozen buttons and touchpad—at no time did I dive into the user manual looking for a command.

The Sonos system is simple to set up, pleasurable to use, easy on the eyes, and a musically proficient listening companion. Affordable multi-zone music systems don't get any better than this. -Mark Fleischmann, author of *Practical Home Theater* (www.quietriverpress.com), now in its fourth edition

#### **Quick Facts**

Sonos Media Player

\$1,199

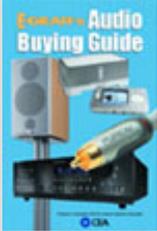
-Multizone, wireless audio

-Wireless remote

-50 watt amplifiers in each zone

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