Are you being served?

QSONIX Q110 MUSIC MANAGEMENT SYSTEM
(£5390+)

An audio jukebox for the enthusiast running out of room for CDs. Just don't let on that there's a PC under the bonnet...

Review & Lab Report: Paul Miller

There's an inexorable shift in the way audiophiles are choosing to consume their music, a shift away from the physical to the virtual, encouraged by the growing number of websites offering legal, high resolution downloads. Hey, even true CD-quality WAV/WMA/FLAC files are (or should be) a perfect replica of the silver disc that's served the enthusiast royally for the past 25 years.

Nevertheless, if you really cannot stomach the thought of dragging the household PC into the living room and getting to grips with Windows media tools, then the Qsonix Q110 music management system offers a one-stop solution. This Network-ready CD ripper not only has internet access to automatically recover album art and disc information but also allows downloaded media to be imported from a Networked PC or via a portable drive connected to one of its front USB ports. However, only files with the capacity to support metadata tags, like WMAs or FLAC files, are recognised – linear WAVs are not. Quite by accident, I discovered the Q110 has the capacity to handle high resolution media files files up to 24-bit/192kHz, rather more than the default 16-bit/44.1kHz of CD. The facility is currently undocumented so expect an announcement from Qsonix very soon...

ABOVE: The rear of the Q110 offers four independent analogue outputs (serving four separate zones), a single analogue input and one digital output. Two USB ports (disabled here) are joined by a working pair on the front panel enabling media to be imported. The ethernet connection uplinks to the Qsonix database during ripping and allows file sharing across a local network

Its single black box contains an embedded PC and operating system accessed by a colourful 'All Media Guide' GUI. Our £5390 Q110 was supplied with a 500Gb drive (+£500) and 17in touchscreen (+£2200), but there's no reason why you shouldn't use a third-party solution. Drives up to 1.5Tb (+£1500) are offered.

BACK-UP YOUR CDS

The Q110 has a CD/DVD ROM drive, but this is no player. Instead, the moment you load a CD it'll attempt to contact the online database and recover album art and disc data (including reviews) while ripping its contents to the integral hard drive. A 500Gb drive is sufficient to store about 514 albums natively, 886 as losslessly-packed WMA files or up to 3690 discs if its 'normal quality' compression option (320/128kbps) is engaged.

Once identified, the contents are filed under one of 27 primary genres stretching from 'Ballet' and 'Blues' through to 'Vocal' and 'World', each with as many as 90 sub-genres. Our demo sample was supplied with over 350 albums, a selection of 230 artists and 4600 tracks representing some 34 genres. Quite who makes this stuff up is beyond me – I mean, what is 'Brill Building Pop'? Fortunately, you may edit the genre hierachy, along with other data, via its on-screen virtual keyboard.

In the end, I simply selected 'Rock' and skipped manually through the 200 choices before compiling one of many playlists. Qsonix lets you burn any of these playlists to a blank disc, customising extensive selections to squeeze them onto the standard 60- or 74-minute media. Among the Q110's many other natty features is its ability to compile playlists from albums or tracks with similar styles, themes or tones using descriptive data retrieved from the on-line Tapestry service.

> 'Before you make any assessment of the Qsonix Q110 it's crucial to disable the 'Volume Leveling' option'

SURFING THE JUKEBOX

Before you make any assessment of the Q110 it's crucial to disable the 'Volume Leveling' option from the Playback menu ('eliminate the pesky volume differences between old and new CDs,' says Qsonix!) and ensure the default volume is set to maximum. If in the unlikely event you choose to deploy the Q110 in a single master location then select the S/PDIF digital output. This mutes the four analogue zone outputs but does allow an external DAC to lift the ultimate sound quality attainable from the system as a whole. That said, the sound of the M-Audio soundcard is rather better than might ⟶

QUEUING-UP THE QSONIX

The Qsonix user interface is divided into two broad sections. On a day-to-day basis you'll be using the top-level interface, browsing your archive by album, artist, genre, cover art or year (see main picture); dragging selections into playlists and playing them out to one of four independent zones. Hit the 'tools' icon and you'll see the management interface (shown above). Here you'll configure the Network (the auto configure DHCP option is typically fool-proof), enable media sharing to PCs or streaming clients, set the CD ripping audio quality and define track preview volume and preview/crossfade duration. The choice of analogue *or* digital S/PDIF outputs is also selected here. The output zone name, the local volume control mode and colour setting for the interface are all managed under the System > Outputs menu. **PM**

AUDIO FILE

Music management system with CD ripper, four-zone server and network capability

Made by: Qsonix Inc

Supplied by: Absolute Sounds

Telephone: 020 8971 3909

Web: www.qsonix.com

ABOVE: Search your archive by artist, album, genre, year or even perform a custom search using the virtual keyboard. Add to a playlist and serve out to 1-4 separate zones

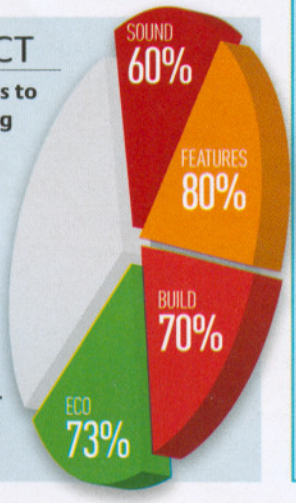
have been anticipated as anyone who heard the Q110 through MartinLogan Spires at the 2009 Bristol show will attest. The system has a tidy and compact sound with a punchy but not especially extended bass and a smooth but, equally, not especially dazzling treble.

Perfect for the likes of Peter Gabriel's *Up* and 'Growing Up' whose drum machine bass rhythm and regular cymbal strikes are well integrated into an enjoyable and uncluttered performance. In a fit of youthful reminiscence I even tracked down 'Eruption' and 'Spanish Fly' to recall the deft finger-tapping of Eddie Van Halen – the Q110 did not disappoint, although the attack and articulation of these, and other, singing strings were typically more muted if they were accompanied by other busy-sounding instruments.

As I made my way through the extensive playlist, adhering strictly to losslessly-packed WMAs, the Q110's sins were consistently those of omission rather than additive distortion. Sarah McLachlan's vocals were a little smeared through *Solace*, but the rendering of her voice still reflected the emotion of the original CD, a portrait significantly improved by adding a Cambridge Audio DacMagic to the party and using the Q110 as a jukebox transport.

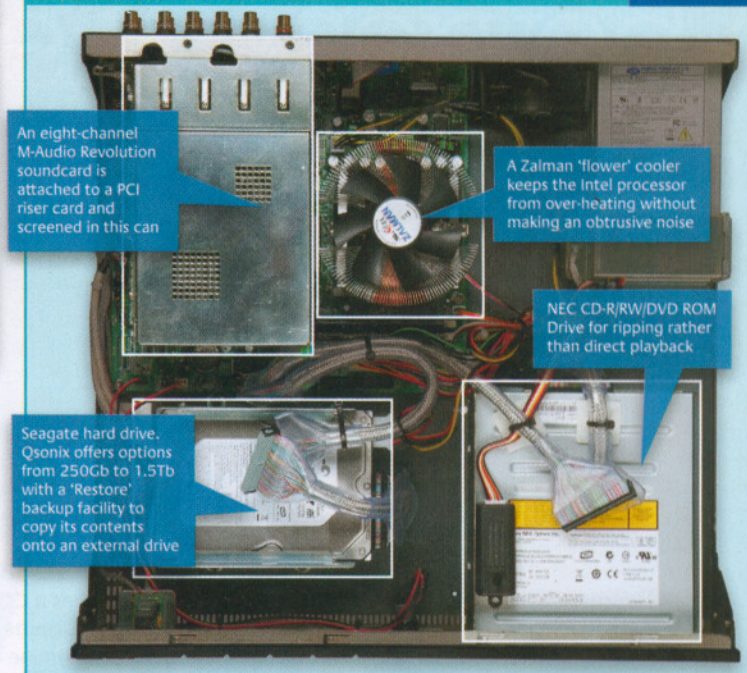
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

For the music lover who wants to avoid the hassle of configuring his own PC with one of the many media archiving/server solutions available, the Qsonix Q110 offers a painless alternative, albeit at a price. It's a pleasure to use and sounds rather better than it has any right to in lossless ripping modes. Keep an eye on this technology, for Qsonix is in the vanguard of a new and emerging market.



QSONIX
Q110 CD RIPPER/SERVER/ £5390+

hi-finews LAB RESULTS



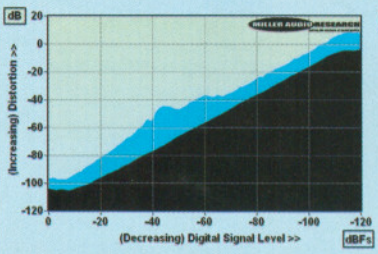
HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

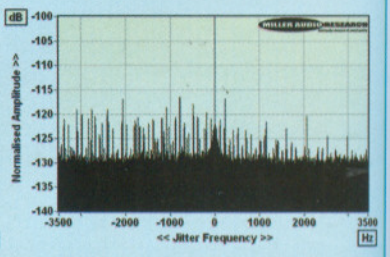
Ideally, a media solution of this type should perform similarly to a good quality CD player, albeit with the advantage of four simultaneous and separate audio outputs. The Qsonix's M-Audio soundcard has a stab but cannot avoid at least some unfavourable interaction with its noisy PC environment.

All spectral analysis shows a fine spray of low-level spuriae, visible as an uncorrelated 'grass' on the jitter plot [below right] while lower frequencies are compromised by the intrusion of 50/150/250Hz harmonics from the power supply. The noise floor is most affected up to ~3kHz and is the cause of the reduced ~90dB A-wtd S/N ratio, some 6dB short of the ideal standard for 16-bit audio.

On the other hand, digital jitter is impressively low at just 265/135psec (L/R) while pure harmonic distortion (not THD+N) is just <0.001% over the top 15dB of its dynamic range. The maximum output is a little below the 2V standard at 1.3V, I might add, but resolution is good to ±0.1dB over the available 90dB range.

The frequency response shows a mild +0.22dB treble boost, peaking around 17kHz, but this will not be directly audible. The 0.02dB channel balance is very impressive as is the >100dB stereo separation while other figures, including the 56dB rejection of digital images and slightly irregular distortion profile at 20kHz [blue trace, below left] are linked directly to the soundcard's AK4355 DAC. Readers are invited to view an extensive QC Suite report for the Qsonix Q110 by logging onto *www.hifinews.co.uk* and clicking on the red 'Download' button. **PM**





ABOVE LEFT: Distortion versus digital signal level at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue); ABOVE RIGHT: High resolution jitter analysis showing low-level spuriae in addition to discrete jitter sidebands from the soundcard

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level (Zone 1)	1.28Vrms
A-wtd S/N Ratio	90.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.0007% / 0.0072%
Distortion (20kHz, 0dBFs)	0.0016%
Frequency response (20Hz–20kHz)	–0.04dB to +0.22dB
Digital jitter (L/R)	265psec / 135psec
Resolution (1kHz re. –90dBFs / –100dBFs)	±0.1dB / ±5.0dB
Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz)	>77dB