

An Audio Hub that Actually Works, Easily

BY BILL HOWARD



The **Sonos ZonePlayer ZP100** is the iPod of digital audio hubs. It's a joy to use: well engineered, driven by a scroll wheel, and finished in milky white. This is the first digital audio hub we can recommend without reservation.

Even the price is reasonable, as long as you understand the audience that Sonos is chasing: Although the ZonePlayer is a *digital audio hub*, meaning that it plays MP3 and WMA files that reside on your PC, the system is really competing with whole-house audio systems based on CD changers and 12-channel audio amplifiers. Those can run to \$1,000 a room for dedicated wiring, an in-wall volume-control and remote-control sensor, and a whole-house amplifier. With the ZonePlayer, you buy one remote (\$399), and for each room where you want music, you buy one chunky, 10-pound hub (\$499 each, or \$1,199 for two hubs plus a remote).

Unlike other digital audio hubs, which typically cost \$100 to \$200 and don't look half as striking, the ZonePlayer integrates a 50-watt-per-channel stereo amplifier. That means you can use traditional audio speakers without the need to hook the system to your existing stereo. While most users will choose to use that built-in amplifier, there is a line-level output to use with powered speakers or an external amp.

And not only does ZonePlayer have an Ethernet jack, it also has a four-port 10/100-Mbps switch, as well as proprietary (not 802.11b) wireless. Only the first ZonePlayer you install has to be wired. A 2.4-GHz peer-to-peer mesh network passes the audio along

wirelessly to the others.

Setup is simple. Plug the first Sonos hub into electrical power and wired Ethernet, connect two speakers, run the setup CD on a PC, then point to the music folders you want indexed. Music can be on a PC or a network hard drive. And like only a few other hubs,

updated weekly. The Rhapsody streaming service should be available to Sonos users by the time you read this, although Rhapsody will limit you to three different simultaneous music streams (the same as if you were using it on three different PCs in your home).



THE ZONEPLAYER ZP100 is as elegant as it is simple to set up. The remote has a large color screen for accessing your music.

the ZonePlayer can see network drives directly, not just as mapped drives of desktop PCs. Song information is stored on each ZonePlayer.

Most users love the idea of multiple independent streams of music: rock in the rec room, classical in the kitchen, and jazz on the patio, all simultaneously. That's something most other hubs can do. But the ZonePlayer does the opposite as well: It can play the same music throughout the house, perfectly synchronized. Even though that may seem drop-dead simple, other hubs don't do it. And you can join multiple rooms to play the same music or put something different on in other rooms on the fly.

You can also play Internet radio: The ZonePlayer supplies a sampling of about 70 stations,

As you might expect from a remote control that costs as much as a PDA, this one is a gem. It integrates a 3.5-inch backlit color display and 13 buttons. You move through lists by sliding your finger along a circular scroll wheel, then pressing a Select button in the center. On the LCD, you see album art, the name of the song playing, the artist, the album, the elapsed/total playing time, the next song up, and the remaining songs in the queue for each room (or zone).

If you want to crank up ZZ Top in your downstairs office, it takes just a couple of seconds to tap the Zones button and drop the music link to the living room. Want less volume for background music in the living room than in the kitchen? Press the volume-down button, then slide the

scroll wheel to select each room and set the volume for it. Once you're back to using the master volume control, the volume rises or falls relative to each room's existing setting. These are the brilliant touches that make you forgive the ZonePlayer for costing twice as much as any other digital audio hub.

You also can control the ZonePlayer from your PC if that's easier for you (for instance, when you're setting up a music queue that's not yet part of a playlist). Everything you can do on the remote, you can do on your PC. And on the front of each hub are a volume control and mute button, for when it's easier to reach the hub than the remote or your PC.

Our wish list for the ZonePlayer is short. The first item is support for rights-managed Windows Media Audio. This is complicated, because music can be distributed to multiple rooms, which might affect rights discussions. The ZonePlayer also lacks support for WMA Lossless, FLAC, and Ogg Vorbis formats but hopes to support them by year-end. Support for AAC tracks purchased from iTunes is lacking, too, but that's Apple's doing.

We'd also like to see a docking cradle for the remote, which would be classier than the supplied transformer. Users with imperfect eyesight might wish for a large-font option on the controller display. And while you can set it up from the Mac, the music player software so far only has a PC version. Most of all, we'd like to see a sibling product that also handles photos and PC-based video.

Sonos ZonePlayer ZP100

\$499 direct; remote control, \$399; two players plus remote, \$1,199. Sonos Inc., www.sonos.com. ●●●●●