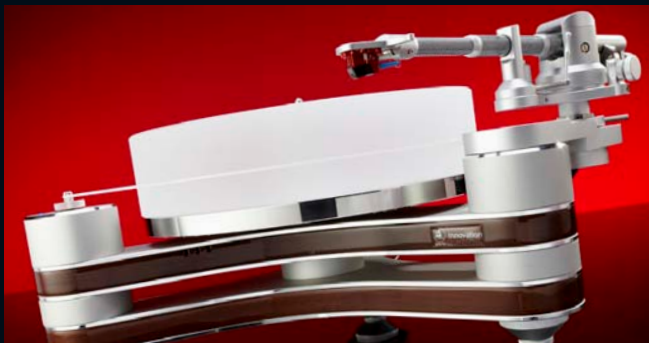


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Qsonix

Q105

Behold a music library system for people with no interest in computers

Price £5,610 **Contact** Absolute Sounds ☉ 020 8971 3909 ☉ www.qsonix.com

There is a vital question facing any manufacturer of a hard-disk music player. It has nothing to do with what size disks to use or what sort of case to put it in. It's more rudimentary – what sort of person is going to buy it? If the answer is the hard-core audiophile, then the manufacturing task is simplified. Audiophiles will generally be content with a rough edge or two, so long as the musical output is exemplary. They will put up with an interface that is a tad clunky, provided that the music sounds first rate.

But, the so-called 'average' music lover is a much trickier customer because he/she will want good, if not great, sound as well as smooth operation with a user interface that is near-telepathic in its straightforwardness. In other words, a machine that will satisfy every type of potential buyer: one that mixes superb sound with super-slick operation.

Although the Q105 can be purchased with one of two touch-screens, we opted for the substantial 17-inch version. This connects to the main unit, which takes care of all the necessary CD ripping and storage through an adaptable, RapidRun single-cable system.

Although this is a computer-based device, it certainly doesn't feel like one. Turn on the main unit by pushing a button on its fascia and the whole shebang comes to life without any arcane boot-up screens, user-intervention or unfathomable fanfares. In fact, it simply switches on reasonably quickly, putting one in mind of other conventional electronic appliances.

Connections on the unit are simple and straightforward. There are two USB ports on the fascia; one could be used to plug in a mouse as an alternative to touching the screen. To the rear you will find an ethernet port, two more USBs, connections for the touch-screen, as well as an S/PDIF digital output and two analogue audio outputs.

As one might expect, the ripping procedure is equally simple: insert the disc and the display asks if you want to rip the disc. Touch the 'Yes' button and ripping begins. It completes the task very swiftly, the unit accessing cover art and metadata from the internet for its library.

You can, of course, alter the format in which you rip: there's a choice of WAV (Waveform Audio File Format), Lossless and compressed WMA (Windows Media Audio) and MP3. These offer capacities on the 500GB drive of around 800 uncompressed CDs, or more if you choose to use compression. There is no requirement to stick with one format all of the time, of course, and you can import other file types, such as FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) through the USB port or network connection.

SOUND QUALITY

Initially, the Qsonix does not seem to be an especially transparent device and its presentation leans towards being rather cloying and euphonic: a touch too close to an old-school valve amplifier. We left it to warm up over a weekend, during which time it updated its software to add a couple of worthwhile facilities, one of them the ability to rip to WAV. This made the previous 'best' rip to WMA Lossless an option that we could then ignore if we so chose. We did and things

immediately improved. A few days to come up to operating temperature never does solid-state equipment any harm and working with WAV files is immeasurably better than the unrefined-sounding WMA files.

The dynamics of the 16-bit, 44.1kHz recording are also significantly better on the WAV, with fine gradations in level that have not been apparent before. The dynamic shading of the WMA could be likened more to that of an on/off switch: loud or soft with little differentiation in between.

Rendering the 16/44 WAV rip of the Tori Amos *American Girl Posse* album after its warm-through, the Qsonix sounds faster and its note shape is much better defined. That said, the

"Music grabs and holds your attention, allowing you to relish the performance"

presentation retains a degree of warmth that ensures that it never becomes clinical. Regardless, we still feel there is potentially more in the way of openness and transparency to come. That had to wait until we imported some higher-resolution recordings, including the Dawn Langstroth 24-bit/96kHz album *Highwire*. Now the music is more open and communicative. Langstroth's voice escapes more easily from the speakers and her band occupies the acoustic space behind her with a greater sense of authority and substance. Distinct and not-in-the-least subtle musical benefits also emerge on the 24-bit/96kHz recording of the Jerry Garcia, Dave Grisman and Tony Rice acoustic jam session *The Pizza Tapes*. Through the Q105, music grabs and holds your attention making it difficult to do anything other than relish the performance.

Overall, the Q105 appears to be most content when handling acoustic music and rendering better-quality recordings. Crisply defined leading edges (of the sort that an acoustic guitar produces when played with a plectrum) are impressive, while the clarity that comes with good 24-bit recordings seems to enliven the smooth, slightly relaxed performance of the device. Equally, though, it savours the beautifully recorded 16-bit/44.1kHz rip of Lambchop's *Is A Woman*, producing rewarding results with regular CD albums.

The Q105 thrives when the recording has space around the performers. It's far from disapproving too, especially when a recording fails to reach the highest standards of audio quality. ■

Malcolm Steward

