

Naim CD5 XS: our verdict

Mid-range player with high-end sparkle



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Cyrus
system

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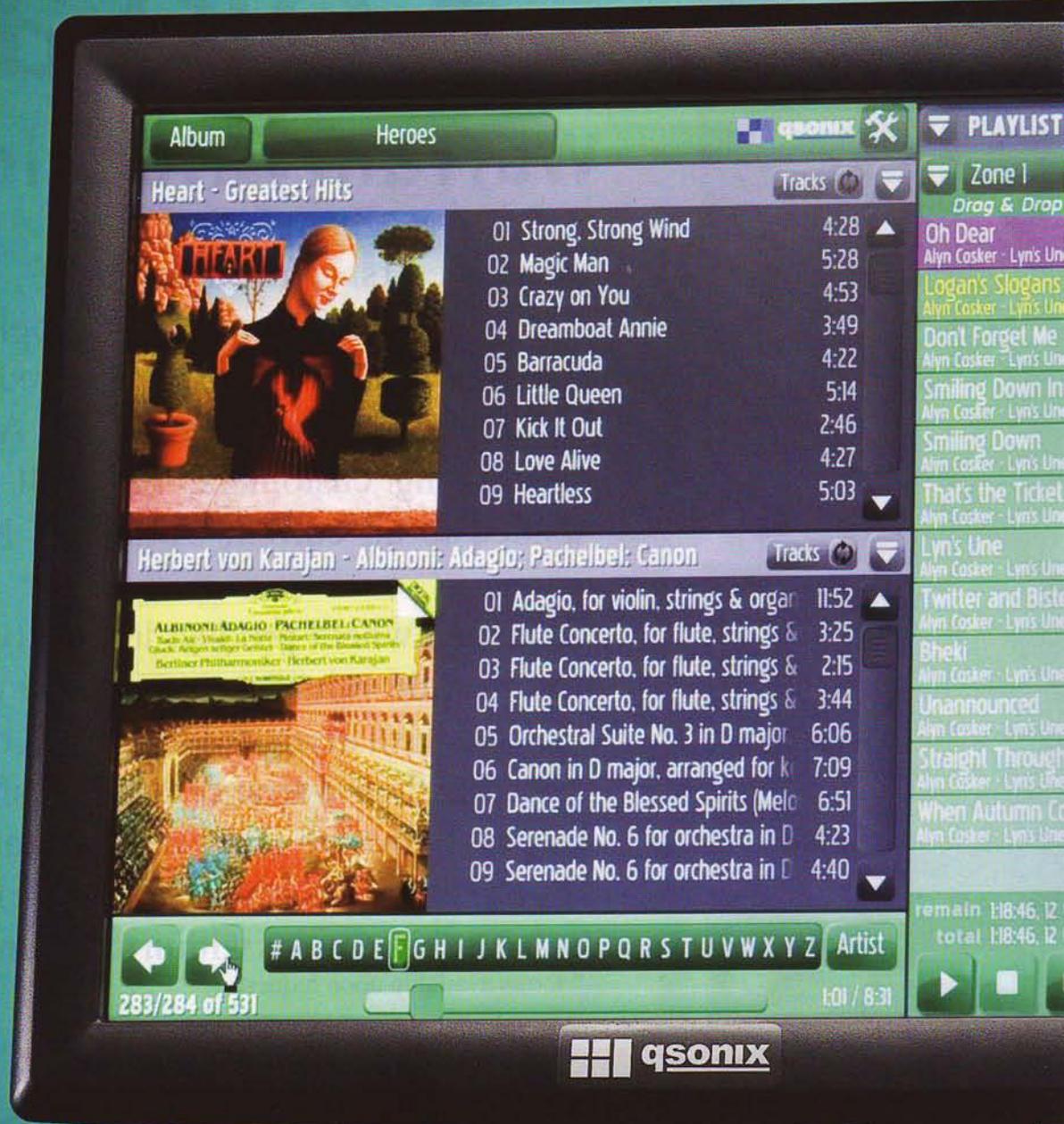


Audiophile adventures

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Rip, touch and play

Malcolm Steward test runs the Qsonix Q105, a 21st Century music library system for people who have no interest in computers

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 is rather more rudimentary, i.e. what sort of person is going to buy it?

If the answer is the hard-core audiophile, then the manufacturing task is immediately 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.

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.

Computer-based

Qsonix feels that it has the answer with its powerful and high-performance music management system, the Q105. This turnkey device, so claims the company, caters for all manner of people, from casual music lovers to devoted audiophiles with their extensive music libraries.

Although the Q105 can be purchased with one of two touch screens, we opted for the substantial 431.8 millimetres (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.

Switching the unit on, we were first aware of the sound made by the fan. Although this measured below 60dB and was not horribly intrusive, it did warrant further investigation.

Inside the enclosure there is a small ATX motherboard, with a generously sized Zalman heat-sink/fan cooling the CPU (Central Processing Unit) barely 50mm away from a smaller Arctic case fan. This sits next to a 300-watt Sparkle switched-mode power supply, which has its own fan.

“Although this is a computer-based device, it certainly doesn't feel like one... The whole shebang comes to life without any arcane boot-up screens”

If you are thinking that that is a whole lotta coolin' goin' on and wonder what else inside the box is generating Therms, the answer is not a great deal. There's a Sony NEC optical drive and, alongside it, a Western Digital 500GB hard disk, designed specifically for use in streaming environments. For some reason, both drives use old-fashioned PATA rather than SATA connections. At least, however, they use modern rounded cables rather than the older, airflow restricting ribbons.

Other than that, there's the separately encased audio DAC/amplifier circuitry housed above the main motherboard, but that was still cool after several hours of playing.

Touchscreen

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 ▶

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Qsonix Q105

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Music management system

WEIGHT: 12.25kg (not including touch screen)

DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 430x100x406mm (not including touchscreen)

FEATURES:

- Outstandingly straightforward graphical user interface

- Q105 can be linked to a TV display and then driven with a mouse or by remote control

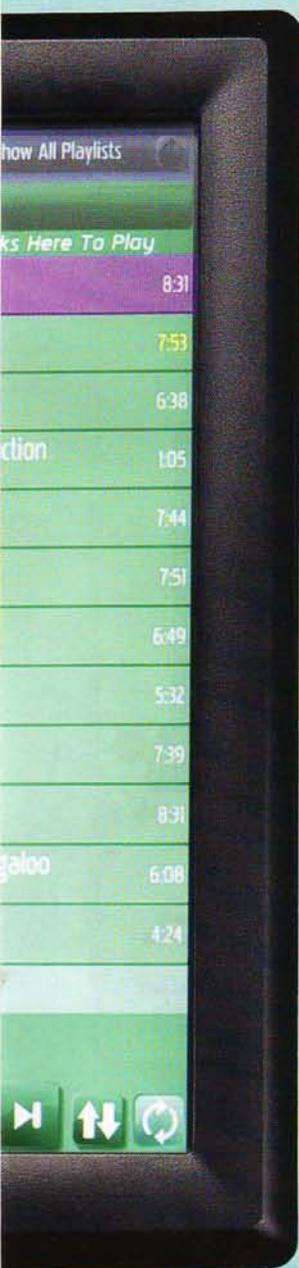
- Highly robust, fuss-free operating system for user/family friendliness

- Easy back-up to external USB drive

DISTRIBUTOR: Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE: 020 8971 3909

WEBSITE: Qsonix.com



Q&A...

HI-FI CHOICE SPOKE WITH MIKE WEAVER, QSONIX'S PRESIDENT.



HFC: How did you make a Windows-based operating system so resilient? For example, one seems able to ignore the usual shutdown procedure and simply kill the power. Next time it stills starts up perfectly.

MW: The Qsonix software platform is based on the Windows XP Embedded operating system. While this is a Windows-based solution, it provides a variant of the operating system that is customised exactly for our needs. Since it is running only the components necessary for our system, the reliability is greatly increased over a general-purpose Windows-based computer. In addition, it allows us to customise the start-up and shutdown procedures and gain ready access to many industry-standard protocols, formats and technologies.

Why was ripping to WAV not included at the outset, considering many regard it as so superior to WMA? We chose early on in our company's development to standardise on Windows Media Audio Lossless, a codec that provides excellent performance for many users and applications. A fully lossless compression routine is used and the resulting uncompressed data is bit-for-bit equivalent to the original source.

However, we received feedback that some users still prefer to use the WAV format and so we added this as part of our Performance Audio Pack upgrade. WAV does present some additional challenges. It does not support tags in any standardized way, so it can be difficult to properly preserve the appropriate full-featured metadata.

Are there plans for UPnP facilities, so one could include music stored on a NAS drive in the Q105 library?

There are plans in the works for using Network Attached Storage with Qsonix products. We don't have a timeline for this, but we have found that computer networking, large capacity storage and data backup can be challenging for many of our customers who are not computer-savvy, but are more focused on music appreciation.



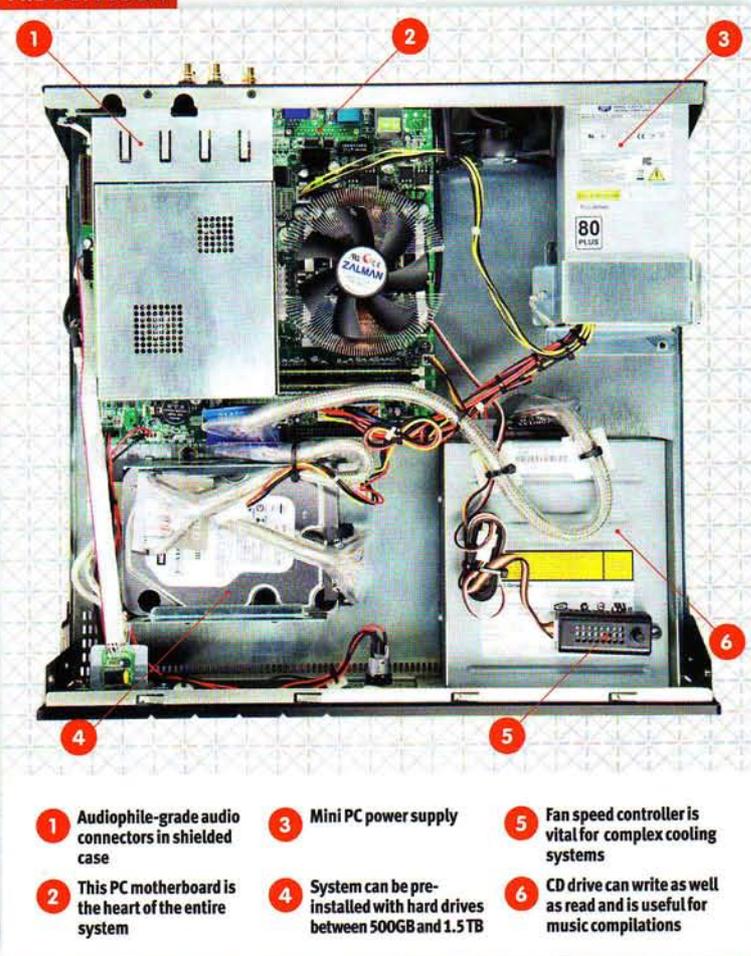
HOW IT COMPARES

FOR THE BEST sound quality from rips, there's always the Naim HDX. But this is a very different machine to the Qsonix and it is undoubtedly fair to say that potential buyers of one are unlikely to be interested in the other.

One could compare the Naim to a Caterham CSR Superlight, a featherweight, two-seater, sports car built purely for speed and, although road-legal, very much at home on the track. The Qsonix, on the other hand, is more like a Mercedes E-class, a reasonably quick and well-appointed family saloon that is ideal for motorway cruising. The user experience with either car is the antithesis of the other, even though both have four wheels and an engine and have been engineered to transport people from point A to point B.

The HDX, for example, only rips to WAV, while the Qsonix provides access to compressed formats, which can deliver useful space-savings in less than hard-core audiophile circumstances.

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Audiophile-grade audio connectors in shielded case
- 2 This PC motherboard is the heart of the entire system
- 3 Mini PC power supply
- 4 System can be pre-installed with hard drives between 500GB and 1.5TB
- 5 Fan speed controller is vital for complex cooling systems
- 6 CD drive can write as well as read and is useful for music compilations

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 (Universal Serial Bus) 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 touchscreen, 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. Very swiftly it completes the task, 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.

Warm-up

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.

CONNECTIONS



- 1** Data connectivity for back-ups, remote control and upgrades
- 2** Output (1) serves the main zone – typically the main listening room
- 3** Different music can be simultaneously played via output 2
- 4** Touchscreen panel monitor output
- 5** Standard VGA monitor output
- 6** Coaxial digital output for higher quality off-board DACs

Listening to a WMA of Van Morrison (a much-loved favourite performer), we weren't impressed by the timbre of his voice. While he is no honey-toned crooner, he certainly should not sound like a bellicose market trader with acute streptococcal pharyngitis – even on his live albums. Listening subsequently to a WAV rip of his *A Night in San Francisco Live*, he sounds as though he has made a complete recovery.

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. More importantly, though, Morrison's rigorously drilled band sounds slicker and more enthusiastic in its playing.

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 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

“Through the Q105, music grabs and holds your attention, making it difficult to do anything other than relish the performance.”

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

SYSTEM BUILDING

WE ASKED Pedro Jorge-Luis, the sales director of distributor, Absolute Sounds, to describe a system that he believed would realise the potential of the Q105 and that he might use to demonstrate its potential.

“Although the Qsonix can integrate with any audiophile system at any level, the Absolute Sounds system is based on high-end products that we import and distribute within the UK. These include the £12,000, 240watt-per-channel, Deviate D-Premiere combined DAC and integrated amplifier.

“This features not only the most advanced technology available, but also accepts digital and analogue signals simultaneously in a very slick and compact design. It is also happy driving even complex, low-impedance loudspeakers.

“Our choice of speakers would be the £5,400 elegant, floorstanding, Sonus Faber Cremona M. This high-performance design has both the striking sonics and sophisticated appearance to match the rest of the system.”

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.

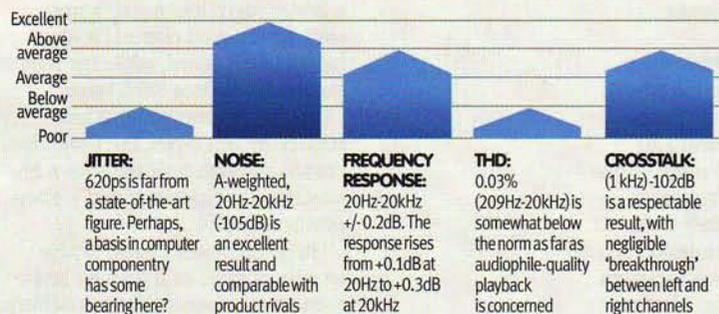
Rewarding performer

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 seems to thrive when the recording has space around the performers. And it's far from disapproving too, especially when a recording fails to reach the highest standards of audio quality. ●

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** The ease of use in every respect is extraordinary
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Tends to encourage you to listen mainly to better recordings
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Very acceptable, the Q105 is a direct descendant of the custom-install-oriented Q110
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★