

# Home Depots

Music and movies?  
You can store 'em  
— these can help

Let's face it: we've been spoiled. Now that the iPod has transformed the way we listen to music, more and more of us are looking to hard-drive-based entertainment for our homes. Who among us wants to fish through a stack of DVDs or CDs to find what we want, or even mess with jewel boxes and disc cases anymore? What we really need is the equivalent of a giant Click Wheel in our living rooms that lets us instantly access all our entertainment media — and makes getting at it just as much fun as the iPod does.

In their own way, these two media servers each move us a little closer to that ideal. The Qsonix Q100 Digital Music System (\$5,495) brings a powerfully addictive touchscreen interface to the management of your music collection. And Inteset's Denzel Media Server (\$5,995) brings, well, power — a massive 1 terabyte of storage, and the ability to rip all your music and DVD movies to a central location where they can be tapped from anywhere in the house. If you're after the ultimate entertainment experience, it's time to let your fingers do the walking.

Is this the correct CD?

YES  
Begin Loading

EJECT  
Cancel Loading

qsonix

inteset

DVD [Play]  
00:28 01:49:39

## WHAT WE THINK



**Q100**  
*This multiroom music server offers excellent sonics and an interface as gorgeous as it is easy to use.*



**DENZEL TP420-SD**  
*It's not cheap, but Inteset's luxury-class Windows Media Center server does it all, and does it well.*



## Qsonix That Magic Touch

**A** board game called *Othello* came up with the ingenious tagline, “A minute to learn, a lifetime to master.” It’s simple enough that anyone can immediately start playing but it has enough strategy to hold your interest for, well, years. Now, that might be okay for a game (though after a couple of losing turns, I want to scatter those impertinent black-and-white discs all over the floor). Unfortunately, it’s also an apt and regrettable description for many audio/video systems. In my custom-install work, we allot time for “client education,” when we go over how everything works. Then the customer’s eyes start glazing over in that 1,000-yard stare, and I start thinking, “They’re just not gonna get it.” Sure, a lot of today’s technology is jaw-droppingly cool, but if no one can figure it out, what good is it?

That appears to be the driving force behind the Qsonix Q100 digital music system. With a 160-gigabyte (GB) hard drive and two independent audio outputs, the Q100 stores, manages, and serves up your music library to a pair of rooms in two separate but equally sweet helpings. Of course, media servers with giga-size hard drives that store thousands of songs aren’t new. But finding a particular song can mean navigating through line upon line of text, and creating playlists to simplify things can be tedious.

The real treat in the Qsonix is its 15-inch touchpanel controller. It has a drag-and-drop interface for song selection that’s powerful and effortless to use. Its operation will be totally

familiar to anyone who’s used a Windows or Macintosh computer, yet the application feels completely new and different.

People love their iPods because, while shuttling through their collections, they develop an emotional, tactile connection to their music through the Click Wheel. Multiply that effect by a factor of 10, and you’ll have an idea of what the Qsonix interface is like.

**SETUP** Right out of the box, the system looked and felt well built. From the milled faceplate to the quality of the gold-plated audio outputs, it was clear that the Q100 was meant for classy digs.

Installation couldn’t have been easier. In fact, if every component installed as easily as the Qsonix system, a lot of installers would be out of work. I simply connected the Zone 1 stereo analog output to my main listening rig and the matching Zone 2 output to my house-wide music system. A coaxial digital output is also available for Zone 1, but using it on my sample defeated the Zone 2 output. Qsonix’s Version 2 software upgrade, which should be available by the time you read this, corrects this deficiency and some others I’ll point out.

I connected my network router to the Qsonix’s Ethernet port to give it Internet access for finding album and track information. Two connections marry the server to the touchpanel — a VGA and an RS-232 serial cable. Power the two pieces up, and you’re done.

Firing up the touchpanel produced a First Time Startup Wizard on its screen. It asked me to establish a network connection, which was as easy as pressing “Auto Configure” — happily, the Q100 adheres to the DHCP (Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol) networking standard, which automatically assigns IP addresses. Then the Wizard walked me through setting the date and time, the default record-

ing quality, and names for the audio zones. The entire set-up process, including unboxing everything, took less than 15 minutes.

There are some additional connections worth mentioning. A second RS-232 jack can send data and control commands to advanced touchscreen controllers by the likes of Crestron or AMX, which will be important to anyone looking to integrate Qsonix with a full-blown multiroom audio system. Two USB jacks are also provided for “Future Upgrades,” such as the ability to add external hard drives to back up your ripped media.

The 6-foot cabling that connects the touchpanel to the server is way too short to be of any practical benefit; I was forced to sit on the floor while operating the touchpanel. Unless you plan on setting the touchpanel very near the server, insist on longer cables. An optional Cat-5 extension kit (\$499) allows the touchpanel to be installed up to 600 feet away.

**LOADING MUSIC** Like any media server, the Q100 lets you trade off quality for storage (playback time) — the better the quality, the fewer CDs it can hold. There are three quality levels: CD Quality uses Windows Lossless, High Quality rips in WMA format at 320 kbps, and Normal rips in WMA at 192 kbps. The 160-GB model can store roughly 500 CDs in CD Quality mode, 1,500 in High Quality, and up to 3,000 in Normal.

The Q100 was Speedy Gonzalez when it came to ripping discs, gobbling most in around 5 minutes. Furthermore, I could continue to listen to anything already in the library while ripping, with nary a hiccup in the output to either zone.

Whenever a CD is inserted, the system springs into action, going out to the Net to grab appropriate metadata (track and artist information) and cover art. Qsonix uses the All Music Guide (AMG) Web site for retrieving CD information instead of the more popular Gracenote CDDB. Given my musical tastes, which run toward the mainstream, it was successful at looking up nearly every-

thing that I threw at it. It did stumble on some classical discs, though, such as a LaserLight collection of Baroque music. Those with more obscure collections might find that AMG doesn’t have the depth of CDDB.

Fortunately, filling in the blanks was quick and painless for unknown discs or homebrew mix CDs. When a disc wasn’t recognized, an onscreen prompt walked me through manually entering album, track, and artist information along with the appropriate genre. You can type on the touchpanel’s virtual keyboard or use a standard USB-connected keyboard (not included). A small selection of generic covers are available for unknown discs; unfortunately, importing cover art from another source isn’t an option. It was also mildly irritating that CDs must be ripped in their entirety — you can’t cherry-pick a disc for the best tracks. Nor can you go back afterward and delete specific tracks you don’t want — only the whole album.

Besides fixing the problem mentioned earlier with the coaxial digital output, the Version 2 software will also address the current inability to import or drag over previously ripped media files from a computer on your home network. That’s a serious drawback in an age when many people have a huge music collection already stored on their PC before adding a networked music server.

**OPERATION** The 15-inch screen is large by touchpanel standards, and the graphics and text were clear and easy to read. I could surf my collection by album, artist, genre, or year, but browsing by cover art was by far the coolest way to go since the Q100 displays 15 albums at a time. Touching a cover produces a larger view with all of the tracks listed.

See a song you want to hear? Touch it and drag it to the zone where you want to listen. This automatically creates a playlist that can then be easily saved and recalled later. But don’t just drag individual songs: Drag entire albums if you like. Drag entire collections by an artist. Drag a genre. Drag a year.

The interface is so cool and so, well, touchable that you’ll want to give your entire music collection the finger — but not in that



The Q100's browsing screen displays 15 albums at once.

New York cabbie way! Since every song must be touched — lovingly hand-selected by you — you’ll reconnect with your music, literally. It’s this physical interaction that bonds you to your music — and to the Qsonix gear — on a visceral level.

It would be nice, though, if there was a way to “sync” the outputs of the two zones at will. You can’t command the system to start playing the same music in both zones simultaneously — to hear the same songs all over the house, you have to load your playlist or album into both zones and start

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### THE SHORT FORM

#### PLUS

Very simple to set up and use. Wonderful drag-and-drop touchscreen interface. High-end build and performance.

#### MINUS

Supplied touchpanel cables too short. Can’t drag music from zone to zone or start a playlist simultaneously in both zones.

#### key features

- 160-GB hard drive stores up to 3,000 CDs
- Sort, browse, and play music by artist, album, genre, year, or playlist
- Outputs to 2 independent zones
- 15-inch (diagonal), 1,024 x 768-pixel touchpanel
- **connections:** VGA video, coaxial digital audio, and 2 analog stereo audio outputs; Ethernet port; 2 USB ports; 2 RS-232 serial connectors
- **PRICE:** \$5,495



## Inteset

### The power of convergence

After years of false starts, the age of convergence appears to be upon us. And the future has finally arrived at my doorstep — one possible future, anyway — in the form of the Denzel TP420-SD media server from Boston-based Inteset. The Denzel could replace no fewer than four devices in my rack — music server, TiVo DVR, CD/DVD recorder, and high-def digital TV-tuner— and also function as a basic A/V preamp/processor and system remote control. But it also brings along a hard-drive movie server, multizone audio playback, still-picture and camcorder-video storage, and Internet access. What's more, with Inteset's Vana VA6420-SD media expander (\$2,395, which I also tried out), all this goodness can be spread around via an Ethernet home network — just add additional Vanas as needed.

At heart, the Denzel is a fully tricked-out PC running the Windows XP Media Center Edition 2005 (MCE) operating system, with a full terabyte of storage on board and a built-in DVD-R drive for ripping movies and music from your discs. What's different is that Inteset has seamlessly piggybacked proprietary software modules onto the MCE software to allow multiroom audio and DVD/movie-server functions.

The audio module lets you configure the Denzel to serve two additional zones with independent music via line-level stereo outputs (you'll still need powered speakers or an amp/speaker combo for each room). The system can be controlled from the remote zones by a third-party RF (radio-frequency) remote or wired IR-repeater, or any Web browser running on a laptop PC or wireless handheld PDA. The browser option adds onscreen display of track/album data and cover art.

Inteset's movie-server module lets you store DVD movies on the Denzel's drive, then search or browse through them onscreen via cover art, actor, director, or genre. The company's database of DVD cover art and title info on its own servers is automatically tapped when you enter the UPC (bar-code) number from the back of your DVD's keepcase — very slick.

Public-domain DVD-ripping software, working in the background, does the heavy lifting when you add movies to your library, but Inteset delicately leaves it to the system installer to add this.

**SETUP** There's no mistaking that this is a computer, and a complex one. Like sausage-making, its configuration is best left to back-room experts — in this case a qualified Inteset dealer/custom installer. However, with some help from the company, I installed the Denzel in my main home theater, connecting it at various times to a 42-inch plasma TV via component video and to a 50-inch DLP rear projector via the DVI output.

I initially made 7.1-channel analog audio connections to my power amp via supplied miniplug-to-RCA cables, but later tried connecting the Denzel's coax digital audio output to my preamp/processor. In that case, it delivered PCM stereo and Dolby Digital or DTS multichannel bitstreams like any DVD player.

The Vana Media Extender was set up in my family room, where it drove a 5.1-channel audio system and a plasma screen via a component video connection. The Vana lacks the Denzel's huge storage but differs from a traditional MCE extender in being a full-fledged computer with its own analog TV tuner, DVD/CD drive, and ability to record shows or other content locally. Plus, it'll rip CDs or DVDs like the Denzel, though Inteset recommends setting it to store music and movies in the Denzel's huge centralized library.

I connected the Denzel and Vana to each other and the Internet through my wired Ethernet home network. Inteset supplies a generic wireless keyboard/mouse combo with each component for setup and operation in Windows XP mode, though the company discourages

using the Denzel for browsing the Internet because it's too easy to pick up viruses — they suggest you use another desktop on your network for downloading content and then drag it over to the Denzel. The standard Microsoft MCE remote, also supplied with both units, handles all everyday functions unless you've got a fancy Crestron-style touchscreen or other controller.

The onscreen user interface on both the Denzel and Vana is essentially that of the Windows Media Center Edition operating system, which is really pretty good. Menu structures are simple and intuitive, and response is fast enough, though the Vana was noticeably slower, especially when I was selecting a movie or CD to be streamed from the Denzel.

**MUSIC PERFORMANCE** As with most music servers, the Denzel/Vana system's audio quality is dependent on the data rate of the audio files you rip (or download). You can select rates and formats from the usual palette provided by Windows Media Player 10 — including MP3, WMA, uncompressed WAV, and WM Lossless — but you have to exit MCE and get your hands dirty in XP to select among these. Once your defaults are set, ripping and storing is simple from within the MCE environment, and CDs ripped in the high-performance WMA-VBR format sounded very good indeed. For example, the recent album *Chris Colbourn and Hilken Mancini*, an eponymous duo effort from the Buffalo Tom bassist (Colbourn) and ex-Fuzzy guitarist/vocalist (Mancini) retained all the intimate, slightly homespun charm and fully transparent sound of the original.

The Denzel's audio output comes from a 24-bit Creative SoundBlaster soundcard that delivers Dolby Digital and DTS decoding for up to 7.1 channels on its analog outputs. Unfortunately, there's no Dolby Pro Logic II or DTS Neo:6 processing to convert stereo to multichannel. Better to connect the soundcard's digital audio output to an A/V receiver to gain access to its full palette of surround processing.

**VIDEO PERFORMANCE** Digital video from the DVI output on the

Inteset's high-end ATI video card generally looked superb on my 50-inch Samsung DLP. Configuring the card for high-def 720p output yielded the best all-around images, with excellent playback from both DVDs and HDTV. DVDs like the Bruce Willis actioner *Hostage* looked outstanding — in direct comparisons with the 480p output from my everyday DVD player, the Denzel's upconverted 720p signal rendered the movie's detailed interior scenes with a visibly more film-like texture, and better showed subtle gradations from light to dark. I judged the Denzel's component-video output to be marginally less sharp, but otherwise very similar in image quality.

Off-air HDTV via the Denzel's ATI HDTV tuner card was fine on the two digital stations I could capture in my rural area. I use HD cable in everyday life, and the off-air programs looked virtually identical to the same shows via my Comcast cable box. Note that, like all Media Center PCs, the Denzel won't accept the HDTV output from a digital cable box. Microsoft's new Vista operating system, set for release later this year, will correct this deficiency by allowing the Denzel to accommodate a CableCARD-ready digital tuner card. Inteset has an upgrade in the works for this, as well as for handling the new high-def disc formats when available.

Movie serving is among the Inteset's most alluring features, and the Denzel ripped DVD movies to its hard drive extremely quickly: just over 5 minutes for *The Fifth Element*, for example. (That's more than 100 megabits per second!) With its installed terabyte of disk storage, our review unit could easily hold 150 average films, with plenty of space left over for recorded TV shows, music, videos, and photos. Movies ripped to the hard drive looked indistinguishable from straight DVD playback.

The Denzel's My Movies interface was easy and completely intuitive to use: you see thumbnails of your titles' cover art, which when clicked gives you a larger view with scrollable credits, director, synopsis, running time, and more. Having all this plus a graphic and text database of films, browsable and searchable, was very cool — and would no doubt be cooler still with 150 films at your fingertips.

Music or videos streamed from Denzel to the Vana extender over my home network



The Denzel's music module offers multizone playback.

— even recorded HD content — were picture- and note-perfect, looking and sounding just as they did when auditioned directly from the Denzel. However, you can't stream live TV programming from the Denzel to the Vana — a Denzel-sourced recording must be completed first. This isn't an issue with standard-definition programs since the Vana has its own

#### THE SHORT FORM

#### PLUS

Instant access to movies and music.  
Integrated multiroom audio.  
Excellent video and audio performance.  
Massive 1-terabyte storage capacity.

#### MINUS

Excessive fan noise.  
No access for HD-cable TV.  
Much more expensive than typical Media Center PCs.

#### key features

- Media server with 1-terabyte hard drive for music, videos, HDTV, ripped DVD movies, FM radio, photos
- Distributes standard and HD content to Vana extenders in remote rooms via wired or wireless network
- High-def DVR functions
- CD/DVD burning
- Feeds up to two displays via HDMI, DVI, VGA/RGB, or component video in 720p format, with upconversion for DVD and standard-def TV/video
- 7.1-channel analog and digital audio outputs; THX-certified Dolby Digital EX and DTS-ES decoding
- 3-zone multiroom line-level audio outputs
- **PRICE:** Denzel TP420-SD, \$5,995; Vana VA6420-SD, \$2,395

analog TV-tuner card, but you'd have to configure the Vana with its own HD-tuner card and antenna feed to watch real-time HDTV on it. Both Intesets are equipped for wireless networking as well, though most current-day wireless nets lack the bandwidth required for high-def video. (Check back next year . . .)

I encountered a few operational quirks while using the system, mostly after rebooting it for one reason or another. For example, on a couple occasions the Denzel's component-video image went all watery and blocky shortly after a restart; simply rebooting again always cured this, and I never did figure out the cause. Another time the Denzel "forgot" its component-video configuration, requiring me to restore those settings. And it would occasionally boot up with Windows messages about software or security updates cluttering up its blue startup screen — I'd have to break out the wireless keyboard to trash these. But considering its leading-edge nature, over its several weeks in my system the Inteset Denzel/Vana combo was impressively trouble-free.

One problem both Inteset components do suffer from, however, is noise.



The Denzel's fan kicks up a very noticeable racket, while even the Vana is nearly as whooshy as a typical small DLP or LCD projector. Either one is too noisy to be in the room during serious classical or jazz music listening, even after minimizing the adjustable fan settings—which caused the Denzel to run quite hot. They're best relegated to a custom installation's remotely located, professionally noise-proofed and cooled equipment closet, which is doubtless where they'll most often be found.

**BOTTOM LINE** Inteset's Denzel/Vana duo makes for an impressive state-of-the-technology media-server



system. Of course, that's a fast-moving target right now, but since both components are card-based, they're eminently upgradeable. It's true that a reasonably savvy Windows geek could assemble the same functionality — perhaps not as slickly integrated — for a lot less money than the Denzel's \$6,000 asking price. But the Denzel and Vana are clearly targeted toward well-heeled custom-install customers for whom ease of use and transparency of technology take precedence over price. Media Center PC-based A/V entertainment may not be quite ready for the typical cash-and-carry consumer, but Inteset has measurably narrowed a gap that is sure to continue closing.

S&V

## Qsonix continued

them separately. No matter how hard you try, they never quite sync up. Nor is there any way to drag a playlist from one zone into the another. For example, if I created a song list in one zone that I wanted to continue listening to in the other, I'd first have to save and then reimport the list to the second zone. That's awkward.

On the other hand, Qsonix has added some flourishes that make the system even more lovable. One is called Soft-fade, which gently fades music out when you stop playback or change tracks. Another is Fast Preview, which lets you check out a track before adding it to your current session. But instead of starting at the beginning, the track you're previewing starts playing about a third of the way into the song, making it far easier to identify. Smart! Both of these features are user adjustable — you can alter, for example, the duration of the fade or the length of the preview.



Sound quality was terrific, and the Q100 should be right at home in even top-flight systems. Fan noise, a concern with many hard drive-based systems, never called attention to itself.

**BOTTOM LINE** By the time you read this, Qsonix should have rolled out the Version 2 software upgrade I've mentioned. Along with enabling dual-zone digital audio output and importing of files from networked devices, this will add support for CD burning and



direct CD playback, plus a Web interface that can be used for remote system control from a computer or wireless PDA. These added features, coupled with its gorgeous and fun-to-use interface, will only add to the Q100's standing as a contender for best-in-class music server. It's true that, in the end, the Qsonix doesn't do anything you aren't already familiar with. It just does it very, very well, and helps you reconnect with your music in a way that other servers just can't.

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