

Sooloos

Music storage and server system

SOUNDVISION
2008
Editors'
Choice
Award

Once thought to be niche products, digital music players have become nearly ubiquitous. Between iPods, computers, and smart phones — not to mention A/V receivers, gaming systems, and even TVs — you've probably got a number of devices at home that can stream and play digital music. And while these devices can do a serviceable job of sorting and playing music files, chances are you're looking for a richer, more elegant solution. For the well heeled, there are a few servers that fit the bill, like those from Kaleidescape, ReQuest, and Qsonix.

But a new contender has entered the high-end server arena. Two years ago, I discovered Sooloos tucked away in a small downstairs area at the CEDIA Expo in Denver and was instantly enamored. The company's founders have music-industry backgrounds, and Sooloos was borne from the need to manage their massive music collections. They also wanted the experience to be fun, social, and lightning-fast. After 2 years of waiting, a system finally arrived.

SETUP

Unpacking the 70-pound box containing Sooloos's Source:One, Store:One, and Control:One components, I was struck by the system's build quality and appearance. With their machined-aluminum chassis and elegantly understated front panels, these components exude high-end panache.

The second thing I noticed was the lack of a user's manual. Upon requesting one, I learned there *isn't* a manual. While you could argue that the system is so easy to use that a manual is superfluous, I'd counter that the Sooloos is also a luxury product not unlike a 7-Series BMW or a hyper-expensive timepiece, and that it should include documentation that befits such a purchase.

Installation was simplicity itself. The Store:One and Control:One have only power and Ethernet connections, while the Source:One features a four-port Network switch, along with analog and coaxial digital-audio outputs, both simultaneously active. For house-wide systems where multiple streams are needed,

Sooloos offers the Source: Five (\$5,000), which is identical to the One but has five analog outputs. Ethernet connections can either be made directly to the Source or to a standard network switch or router.

While my review system featured the Store:One, Sooloos has since phased out that component in favor of the Twin-store, which has an identical form factor but contains a mirrored 1-terabyte hard drive to automatically back up your music library in case of drive failure.

After the components power up and discover one another, the Home menu appears on the Control:One's screen with selections for Music, Settings, Information, and Shutdown. Selecting Music takes you to your stored music library. Going to Settings reveals options like adjusting cross-fade time between tracks (from Off to 10 seconds), browsing preferences, and volume leveling. And Information displays the number of albums and tracks currently in the library, as well as the available drive space.

A slot-loaded CD drive for importing music is tucked discreetly into the Control:One touchpanel's base. Putting it there was a *great* idea. Since you'll be constantly accessing the touchpanel, it's the perfect place for importing music, especially if the system's other components are hidden in an equipment room. Brilliant, Sooloos!

CDs took 8 to 11 minutes to import with the tracks ripped simultaneously in FLAC format and in 192-kbps MP3 for transfer to portable players. While FLAC's lossless compression saves drive space, a system this expensive really should also offer an "audiophile option" to import in WAV format as well as in higher-rez MP3. (You can also import previously ripped songs from computers on the network as long as they're in the FLAC or MP3 format.)

There's also no remote control, because the system has no IR capability, *period*. Sooloos does provide a Crestron interface, plus the Control:One panel can run Crestron X-Panel projects — a huge added benefit for Crestron owners, because using the Sooloos basically gives you a free 17-inch house-wide touchscreen controller. For the rest of us, Sooloos has an application called Control:PC so that you can control the system using a computer hooked into the



The Short Form

Snapshot

Audiophile-level build quality and a terrific user interface let this server do much more than just manage a music collection

Plus

- :: High-end look and build quality
- :: Simple yet powerful touchpanel interface
- :: Easily handles even the largest music collections
- :: Stellar sound

Minus

- :: No IR control
- :: Pricey

Price \$11,600

same network as the system's components. While this is nowhere near as elegant as the panel interface, it *will* let you queue up and change music. Also, iPhone and iPod users can control the system, thanks to Wi-Fi.

PERFORMANCE

Ultimately, a server's job is to make it as easy as possible for you to find and play your stored music, and that's where Sooloos truly excels. With no manual, I just jumped right in and started exploring the system. Thankfully, the smartly designed interface greatly simplified this. And if you get stuck, several screens have "?" icons offering page-specific help.

The big Control:One touchpanel makes music browsing a treat. The main screen displays eighteen 2 x 2-inch covers at a time, and it lets you page through additional screens literally as fast as you can push a button. When you know what you're looking for, the A-Z keys at the top of the screen let you jump to the first letter. Or you can tap multiple letters, like hitting F-R-A, for example, to go right to a screen with Frank Zappa albums. You can also hunt for albums, artists, songs, or any combination of the three using a virtual QWERTY keyboard. Playlists can also

be quickly generated based on your most frequently played songs, or from songs played or added in the last day, week, month, or over longer periods of time. You can even generate them based on a particular decade or record label!

When you select an album, the touchpanel displays a host of information, including the date it was released, the date you added it to the Sooloos library, and other albums by that artist. You also get the option of reading a full album review. (Having immediate access to reviews helps you rediscover gems in your library.)

Tabs on the album-view screen can show the genres and Moods an album falls into, along with a very cool Credits option that lists everyone who worked on a particular album. This offers another great way to explore your music library as well as your own music preferences. For example, I like Cannonball Adderley's sax work on Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*. By selecting Cannonball Adderley in the credits tab, I discovered that he performed on eight other albums in my library. Nice!

Finding what you want gets a lot harder as the size of your stored music collection grows. Randomly playing the entire library produces a hodgepodge of results, and even narrowing your choice to Play Jazz likely won't deliver desired results. Sooloos's solution to this problem is Focus. After I selected a combination of Moods and subgenres, Sooloos dialed in exactly the style of music I wanted to hear. For example, choosing the Soothing and Sensual Moods options produced 473 albums — way too many. By additionally selecting the Vocal/Easy Listening genre, I was able to whittle the list down to a more manageable 30 choices. But selecting the Lounge and Torch subgenres produced 10 relevant albums. *That's* focus!

While there's a "Focus on albums like this" mode, I would have appreciated a Pandora-esque feature like AMG's Tapestry or iTunes's Genius to highlight the style of a single song. Fortunately, Sooloos agrees with me. According to the company, something "much better" is coming by way of a free software update.

Another very cool Sooloos feature is Swimming. This provides a way to keep a constant flow of music coming automatically, either from your entire library or from your current Focus, while still let-

ting you jump in and insert selections. For instance, if you get the urge to hear a different song or album while Swimming in a certain genre, simply browse to the genre and hit Play Next. Once that song or album is finished, Sooloos returns to Swimming mode without missing a beat.

Sonically, the Sooloos system was utterly beyond reproach, producing detailed and engaging audio. Delicate sounds like soft brush strokes on cymbals or the subtle nuances and inflections in voices were clearly audible. I felt that the Sooloos reproduced music as faithfully to the original as my system would allow.

BOTTOM LINE

Sooloos is a phenomenal music server that combines style and performance in equal measure. Music lovers with large collections will be hard-pressed to find something that does a better job at any price. The company also plans to shortly introduce a photo, movie, and online component that will be compatible with all its existing systems. Based on how Sooloos handles music, these additions should catapult the system into rare territory indeed, making it a real contender for the title of ultimate server. **S&V**

Key Features

- :: Advanced interface easily tames even the largest music collections
- :: Remote backup and location synchronization for protecting your music library and for sharing it in multiple locations
- :: Twinstore 1-terabyte drives redundantly store up to 2,400 CDs in both lossless FLAC and 192-kbps MP3
- :: Additional Twinstores can be used to increase storage capacity
- :: Focus and Swimming modes provide sophisticated ways to find and enjoy your music
- :: Source: One single-source output (\$4,000); 17 x 2³/₄ x 14¹/₂ in, 12³/₄ lb
- :: Control: One 17-inch touchpanel controller (\$4,400); 18 x 13¹/₂ x 7¹/₄ in, 23¹/₂ lb
- :: Twinstore mirrored 1-terabyte drives for automatic library backup (\$3,200), 17 x 2³/₄ x 14¹/₂ in, 12³/₄ lb

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