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WHY THE NEW
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ReQuest Audio

The Beast Music Server

by Rafael Todes

*“Music has charms to soothe
a savage breast”* WILLIAM CONGREVE

The Beast. An extraordinary name! It rolls off the tongue with a plosiveness: it summons images of Beowulf and other epic poems, and conjures up an image of substantial might. Shakespeare refers to a beast with two backs. But does the bite live up to the bark?

The Beast was conceived when Gerhardt Schneider, the Swiss manufacturer of Acoustic Lab speakers, approached US company ReQuest (which builds Linux-based music servers) with the idea to build the ultimate high-end server. Following the financial input of a private investor, ReQuest Switzerland AG was founded, which then bought its US partner. MSB joined the party and the Beast was born. It was designed in Bellach, near Bern, with the express purpose of producing a best-of-breed animal, where money is no object.

The Beast is beautifully constructed. The case is hewn from solid aluminium billet. There is a high-quality seven-inch touch-screen window that displays images of the ripped CD covers in miniature, and allows a useful amount of the server's functionality to be accessed without using an iPad or PC as an interface. It is really convenient to have a touchscreen as a usable option even in our iPadded world, but this is not always the case with servers I have known. There is a slot at the front for easy CD ripping. Ripping takes around four minutes, and utilises the Gracenote database via a wired network connection at the back. While Gracenote is not entirely comprehensive for album artwork, its other metadata parameters seem to be nearly always correct. To activate the player from an iPad requires the server to be connected to a network. The iPad uses a web browser to access the player and not, as with most servers, an App. So after typing in an IP address, which can be found through the touchscreen settings, you simply make an icon on the iPad of the web address to access the Beast remotely. The iPad interface gives the user most of the important functionality required to use the player for everyday use.

You can search by using the usual suspects, including 'recently added' and in fact the data has been organised to

meet the hardest of asks, that is classical: search by artist, conductor, or orchestra. A greater slice of functionality comes by using a PC to log on to the same IP address, whereupon you have the ability to do things like change artwork, and load files stored on a non-NAS drive. This is in effect transferring files over your network, and is a great deal slower than uploading via USB. It took a couple of overnight sessions to upload some of my own high-resolution material to the player.

The Beast uses solid-state hard drives; it comes with 1TB or 2TB of on-board storage and can cope with additional NAS drives. However, there is a claimed sonic advantage to using the internal drives, and ReQuest recommends these drives be used for high quality files, with the NAS additions for the lower quality material. The machine is virtually silent in operation as there are no moving parts contained within, save a small but silent fan. The Linux operating system has been written in-house; it works with a rapid boot-up, and never once crashed on my watch.

The rear panel, as expected, has digital outputs in the form of RCA, AES/EBU, BNC, Pro I²S, (a standard used by MSB), balanced and single-ended analogue outputs, and – perhaps surprisingly – analogue inputs, which may be useful to connect a turntable and a CD player. Equally surprisingly, the server doesn't have any digital inputs, on the grounds of sound degradation rather than oversight. This makes life a bit more complicated if you don't possess a high quality DAC, but you wish to play a digital source.

There is scope for the addition of a high-quality clock, although as there are different versions of the Beast, the need for aftermarket reclocking becomes a touch academic. The 'entry-level' Beast eschews even a DAC, while the full package includes an MSB DAC and Galaxy Clock, which has noise performance with a guaranteed jitter measurement (at the worse case) of less than 77 femtoseconds (0.077 picoseconds). Anyone who has played around with clocks and CD players will know about the dramatic difference a good clock can make to the bass performance, soundstage, and overall timing of the sound, and this is no exception.

ReQuest has gone to enormous lengths to sort out the Beast's power supplies. Power is re-generated and is completely reconstructed. For the digital board, there are also temperature-stabilised supplies. ▶



▶ The Beast will play WAV or FLAC files up to 384kHz, and up to 32 bit, and all the current four formats of DSD. It will even stream video with the addition of an optional module, having the ability to rip and store DVD and Blu-ray formats. It can be integrated into a home automation system, such as Crestron, AMX, Control4 etc, and has the ability to synchronise multiple iTunes accounts, as well as the ability to exchange information with other like-minded Beasts around the world over the Internet. Put simply, if it's digital entertainment, The Beast takes it in its stride.

In case of difficulties, ReQuest offers an online support system called Arq-Link, whereby a technician can sort out a problem remotely. This level of service is incredibly useful, particularly at the early stages of Beasthood, and is what I'd expect from a product at this price range.

To begin listening, I started with the *Dies Irae* from the Verdi Requiem, as conducted by the late Sir Colin Davis, [Hyperion, 24bit/48kHz]. The first thing that hit was the ability of the Beast to recreate that massive sea of voices of the choir, without any harshness, and with a weightiness worthy of the biggest of big beasts. The timpani – which battle with the orchestral shrieks – had immense authority, the sound for that brief second is taut, precise, and vicious: no overhang. The soundstage is huge and the ire of the music is gripping. Tonally the sound is quite mellow, closer to the palette from great analogue and not typical for digital fare. There is deathly-black silence as a backdrop, and although the sound is incredibly vivid, it is not in the slightest fatiguing. This seems a far cry from the 'Mac 'n' DAC' systems I have heard. The Beast is altogether much

more sophisticated, and maximises the potential of any higher resolution format. It doesn't sound like other computer audio systems I have heard recently, and really shows what solving the various audio conundra can achieve. There is no doubt for me what the stability of a clock source is doing in combination with a first-rate DAC. What is impressive though is that the server's streaming engine sounds so good. On cheaper, less skilfully designed streamers, there is often a lack of definition to the soundstage. It presents like blancmange; smudged and uninteresting. The Beast is the polar opposite. The soundstage is finely etched, and there is texture to the sound. I find that a mediocre streamer makes me lose the will to listen. It does so little to convey nuances in the music, and I find it hard to stay with the narrative of the music. A great live concert has that ability to draw you into the sound and emotional world of a composer, enabling you appreciate the palette of colours and textures of the instruments and voices. This server has many characteristics of live music experiences to my mind and ears.

Turning to a CD ripped to the player, on hearing Bryn Terfel in the *Tutto Mozart* album [DG] singing 'Bei Männern', a charming duet from *the Magic Flute*, I was astonished by the sheer naturalness of Terfel's voice. It had a reality to it that is revelatory. Every tiny nuance in his expression came across. The accompanying Scottish Chamber orchestra breathed colour into every phrase. I had a sense of the space of a large hall, with a vast quantity of air between the players and singers. It isn't music whose demands are going to push a system to its limits, but it is just effortlessly beautiful. The server is just doing things right. The timing between the ▶



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HIGH END HI-FI

REQUEST AUDIO THE BEAST MUSIC SERVER



▶ orchestra and singers is impeccable, and there is a spring to every phrase. The player helps with its ability to do micro phrasing, to suck the listener into the heart of the aria.

A favourite recording of mine is Mozart's 18th Piano Concerto, as played live by Daniel Barenboim and the Berlin Philharmonic [Teldec, CD]. Mozart Piano Concerti are very difficult to record, as you have a soloist in front, who often spars with woodwind players sitting a fair distance behind.

The Beast turned into something of a pussycat for this, of the best audio kind. Mozart's long and beautiful phrases are constructed so that they need the tiniest of inflections to make the narrative work. The human ear can pick up the smallest of volume changes, which then creates the emphasis and hence the meaning of a phrase. I have heard numerous pieces of digital equipment that can do the broad brushstrokes well, but miss out on the subtleties of the musical line, and fail to engage me. The Beast has superb micro control of the phrasing and dynamics, while presenting the orchestra in a gently persuasive way, which in this concerto is highly seductive. The presentation is lithe and witty, just as I think Mozart intended it. Due to the tightness of the Beast's bass control, there was good attack at the beginning of bass notes. Chords started as convincingly at the top as the bottom, and as a result, the harmony spoke with one impulse, not a smudged version of many impulses. This is what people call 'timing well', and the Beast really does this superbly. When it's not quite right, the music sounds as if it lacks conviction, and coherence. The Beast's presentation is highly coherent, and for these reasons I would call it 'musical'.

Ravel's 'Tombeau de Couperin' is a re-scoring of some piano pieces dedicated to a couple of the composer's friends that died during the First World War. On the Decca/Solti recording, the Rigaudon is beautifully crisp, and the orchestral space massive with plenty of air between instruments. The double basses grunt with complete control, the woodwind colours are crystalline, and there is tremendous dynamic energy to the playing. I had the feeling that the Beast was 'allowing' this sophisticated ensemble playing to happen effortlessly. There seemed to be no obstacles in the way, and this was among the best renditions I have heard of this work, CD or not.

I have waited a long time to find a way of removing the huge quantities of smashed CD jewel cases from my shelves, with a server that could punch like a good CD player, but to date my search has been fruitless. ReQuest's The Beast changes that: it challenges and can even better my Esoteric K-05 CD player, and that comes from a self-confessed CD stick-in-the-mud. The Beast certainly justifies its sobriquet for its gravitas and the sheer awe it inspires. It has an alter

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state music server with built-in storage optional DAC and Clock

Storage: 0.96 TB or 1.92TB SSD

Analogue Inputs: Balanced XLR Input (pass through or controllable) over the optional analogue Diamond Volume control.

Digital Inputs: None

DAC Resolution/Supported Digital Formats:

DSD all 4 different formats, WAVE/FLAC

44.1/88.2/96/174.4/192/384 and 16bit/24bit/32 bit

Analogue Outputs: One stereo balanced (via XLR connectors), one stereo unbalanced (via RCA jacks)

Digital Outputs: coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jack), TosLink, PRO i2S, BNC

Frequency Response: Not specified.

Distortion (THD + Noise): Not specified.

User Interface: 7-inch display (on main unit).

Apple iPad, iPhone, Android, PC or Mac

Other Features: UPnP server

Dimensions (HxWxD): 19cmx44cmx46cm

Weight: Not specified (weight depends upon configuration)

Price: from £29,900

Manufacturer: ReQuest Audio Switzerland AG

URL: www.requestaudio.com

Distributor: Absolute Sounds

Tel: +44 (0) 20 8971 3909

URL: www.absolutesounds.com

ego: lithe, quick footed, and an intelligence, which is always present. It is eye-wateringly, but reassuringly, expensive, but The Beast is the first vision of a post-CD world that offers hope to even the most demanding of music lovers! +

"No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity. But I know none, and therefore am no beast."

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,
RICHARD III, ACT I, SCENE 2