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Music Around the House

John Sciacca | Jan 11, 2005



For years, "whole-house" music meant either a pair of speakers in the living room blaring loud enough to be heard everywhere or bad-sounding radio playing through intercom panels. Most people confined their listening to a single room and used table radios and portable music systems in other rooms.

Thanks to the steady progress of technology and the diligent efforts of custom installers, you can now choose from a variety of convenient ways to spread *good*-sounding music throughout your home. In its most basic form, a whole-house music system today consists of one or more stereo source components, a preamp and one or more power amps (often miniaturized), plus a volume control and a pair of speakers in each room where you want to listen.

- **Zoning In** Most systems have only one "zone," meaning that the same music plays in every room. So if you're in your den rocking out to Bono on satellite radio and your daughter pops Christina Aguilera into the CD player, you'd better be in the mood to get "Dirrty." With independent volume controls in each room, you could just turn Aguilera off where she isn't wanted, but then you're back to having no music.

Happily, there's an alternative that lets you listen to different music in different rooms. With one of these *multizone/multisource* systems in your home, you can listen to U2, your daughter can have Christina, your wife can enjoy the Dixie Chicks, and your son can crank up the Strokes.

The key point to understand is that a "zone" isn't limited to one room. Depending on the system, a zone could be one room or any number of them. While all rooms within a zone hear the same source, each zone can select a different source for listening. For example, Zone 1 might have a CD playing in the master bed and bathrooms, while the office in Zone 2 is tuned in to the radio.

- Control Issues Besides multiple zones, another difference between an advanced system and a basic one is in how much remote control you have. In basic systems, you have to go to the source components to change the music - whether switching from the CD player to the radio or just from one CD to another.

Multizone systems replace simple remote volume controls with keypads that let you turn the system on, select and change sources, skip tracks or whole CDs (if you're using a changer), change stations or channels, and so on. The keypad functions as an in-room remote that relays commands from wherever you are to the main system. How the keypad looks and how easy it is to use are important since it's your main way of interacting with your music.

- Four Paths to Multizone Listening I set up and lived with four very different multizone/multisource systems, ranging from less than \$400 to almost \$1,200 per zone for the necessary gear: the A-Bus system, Elan's System6, Netstreams' Musica, and the Oxmoor Z?N system ([click to see "fast facts" PDF](#)).

Since all of these were on loan, cutting holes in my walls to install keypads or to string wire for speakers wasn't an option. Instead, I had three zones worth of audio gear strung across the floors. Zone 1 was our bedroom, Zone 2 our bathroom, and Zone 3 the living room. Each system cycled in and out of daily use, allowing me to live and play with each one for several days at a time and give all three listening areas a decent workout. For sources, I used my CD and DVD players and digital cable box. For speakers, I used three pairs of small on-wall and bookshelf speakers from De-finitive Technology, one in each zone. Now, turn the page for details on each system and how it performed.

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NetStreams Musica A flexible, feature-packed DIY system NetStreams is relatively new to housewide audio, but it has quickly emerged with some innovative products. The basic Musica system distributes four sources to



six zones.

The Components The heart of Musica is the MU4602 Audio Distribution Center, or ADC (rear in photo above, back panel below, \$1,600), which has only a single power LED on its front panel. All the action happens around back, where you'll find six RJ-45 sockets *and* six two-pin connections for each keypad, stereo RCA inputs for four sources, and four minijack IR outputs. Three more two-pin connectors are provided for a separate power controller and a door-bell/phone mute, along with a two-way RS-232

communications port.



The ADC comes with a remote control (far left) that mirrors the buttons found on the keypad (center left), which includes a stereo amp for the local speakers. Local sources are easily added with AP300 audio ports (middle, \$130 each) - they appear on the keypad's screen as Ext. Audio and are available to that zone. The AP300 includes a stereo RCA input and RCA line outputs so you can connect a powered subwoofer or outboard power amp. A minijack serves as either a local IR output or an input for the local source.

The Keypads NetStreams offers three different but identical-looking keypads for the ADC, and I set up one of each kind. The basic keypad (\$400) has a 25-watt-per-channel amplifier. For \$500, you can step up to 50 watts per channel, and for \$600, you get FM, too, with plentiful tuning options. Each of the ten buttons on the righthand side is dual-purpose - if you push and hold one, it sends a secondary command, providing 20 commands in all, including transport controls and adjustments for volume, balance, bass, and treble. Pressing and holding the off button powers the entire system down. The remaining buttons are a source toggle and a menu selector surrounded by cursors. The LCD screen indicates the source selection, activity in other zones, and the current volume setting, with a choice of amber or green backlighting. There are 40 choices available for source names.

Wiring Musica requires running Cat-5 cable and speaker wire from the ADC to each keypad, then speaker wire from the keypad to each speaker and Cat-5 cable from the keypad to the local-audio port, if any. Each keypad has two RJ-45 jacks for the Cat-5 input and output. There are also screw-down connections for power input and speaker output, but I found that the ones for the speakers were reversed - following the labels connected my speakers out of phase.

Programming is done directly into a keypad, and the manual walks you through the procedure. Once you complete the programming, powering the keypad down "teaches" all of the commands to the other pads. Anyone who's ever worked with a learning remote control should breeze through the process. I had my three sources (CD, DVD, cable box) set up in less than 10 minutes.

System Options Home computer networks are becoming increasingly common, and NetStreams' MUR2E Network Interface (\$450) lets you take advantage of one. Once you connect the MUR2E to your home network and the Musica ADC's RS-232 port, and install the supplied Windows software on a networked PC, you'll be able to control all of Musica's functions from any computer on the network. Each zone is independently accessible, and your entire home can be synced to the same volume setting and source selection for, say, a housewide party. Computer navigation and control are simple and worked without a hitch.

Performance Given the power ratings, I was expecting decent volume from the Musica system. However, the 25-watt-per-channel keypad just didn't have enough oomph to fill a large room, and the dynamic range seemed limited. I usually found myself pushing the volume setting up to 30 or higher (out of 35, tops). The sound using the 50-watt pad was noticeably fuller, but it still couldn't match the volume or richness I heard from the Elan or Z?N systems, which have lower rated power (40 and 30 watts per channel, respectively).

Music sounded trebly, without much bass, making it seem almost harsh at higher volumes. FM reception when using the high-end keypad was on par with my A/V receiver. Operating the system using the keypad was a treat, sort of like having a universal remote in each room. **PDF: Fast Facts**