

DECEMBER 2005

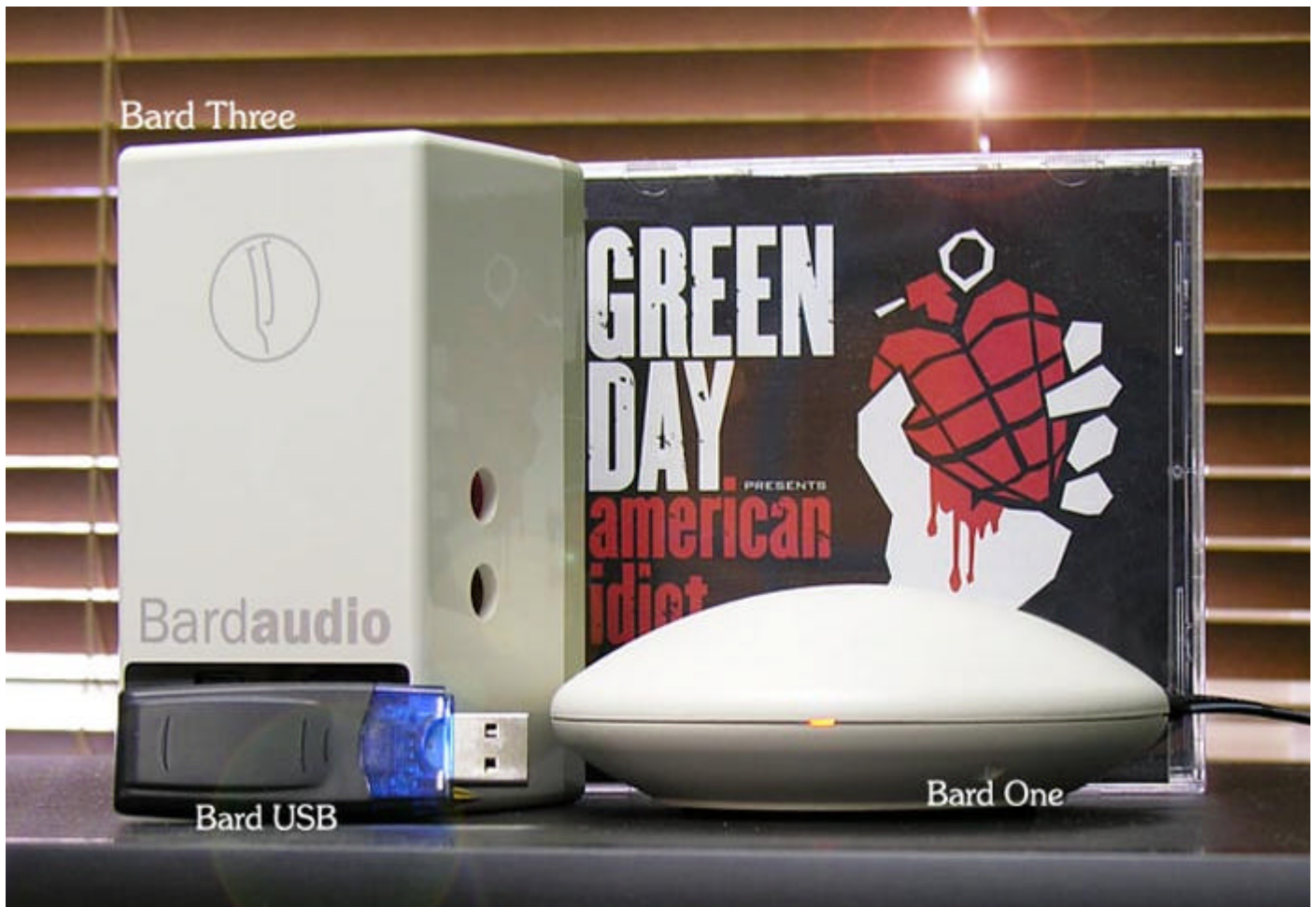


WIRELESS SOUND:

SONNETEER
A U B I D I F H I L L S

Bard audio

BARD AUDIO
BY SONNETEER**Reviewer:** John Potis**Stereo System****Analog Source:** Rega P9 turntable, RB1000 & Hadcock GH Export arms, Benz Micro MC Silver, Rega Super Elys & Garrott Bros Optim FGS Cartridges.**Digital Source:** Accoustic Arts Drive 1/Audio Aero Prima SE DAC**Preamp:** Bel Canto Pre2P**Power Amp:** Art Audio Carissa, Bryston 7B ST**Speakers:** Hørning Perikles, Anthony Gallo Acoustics Reference 3, Ohm Acoustics Walsh 4 with 4.5 mk.2 upgrade**Cables:** JPS Labs Superconductor and Superconductor FX interconnects and speaker wire, Furutech Digi Reference digital**Power Cords:** ZCable Heavies & Black Lightnings, PS Power AC, Analog AC, Digital AC and Kaptovator power cords**Powerline conditioning:** Balanced Power Technology 3.5 Signature Plus with ZCable Heavy Power Cord, r**Sundry accessories:** Vibrapod Isolators and Cones, Ultra & Heavy ZSleeves, Auric Illuminator**Room size:** 12' x 16' with 9' ceiling**Multichannel System****Multichannel Source:** Pioneer DV-525**Stereo Source:** Yamaha CDC-735/Bel Canto DAC2**Multichannel Preamp:** McCormack MAP-1**Bass Management:** Outlaw ICBM**Power Amp:** Rotel RMB-1095**Speakers:** Gallo A'Diva Ti**Subwoofer:** Gallo TR-1**Cables:** JPS Labs Superconductor interconnects and speaker wire**Room size:** 15' x 23' with 9' ceiling**Review component retail:** Bard One \$825.00 (includes one transmitter and one receiver, also available separately for \$425 each); Bard Three \$1299; Bard USB \$599



Bard wireless high-quality digital audio

I imagine that every 6moons reader has at least one room *stuffed with sound*. That is swell if we spend all our waking homebound hours in that room. But what to listen to when you *leave* that room? And how often do you find yourself puttering around the house, moving from room to room wishing that the music would follow you around? Unless you were listening to the radio, distributing the same program material to all the systems is virtually impossible even if you had systems all over the house - unless your home was wired to connect up all those systems. Or you had Bard Audio's wireless music distribution. Such systems have come and gone over the years. I know. I've watched for one that would actually work. Most were cheap and did *not* work as advertised. They either had horrible sound quality, were noisy or both. When I saw the Bard Audio system on importer May Audio's website, I wanted to hear it immediately. As the importer of the statement-level Japanese Reimyo gear -- among others -- May Audio clearly cares about superior sound.

Bard One

The Bard One system from UK brand Sonneteer -- best known for its 'digital' Tripath amplifiers -- is dubbed a high-quality digital wireless sound distribution system. It sells in the form of a pair of pods, one a transmitter, one receiver. Connect the Bard One transmitter via an ordinary RCA interconnect to the music source: a CD player; radio; PC; TV; a preamp or tape loop output (an adapter will be required for PC connection). Then connect the Bard One receiver to an amplifier or active speaker system within the 40-meter range of the transmitter. Set transmitter and receiver modules to the same transmission frequency (there are up to 8 stereo channels to choose from) and press play on the music source. The Bard system now digitally transmits its uncompressed output at 2.4 GHz. You may add as many receiver modules as you wish and put one in every room in the house. With the router-like feature of 8 channels, you can build out to as many as eight sources transmitting to as many receivers as you have rooms or sound locations. Simply set your Bard One receiver module to the channel you want and listen. You will have to open a pod to change channels. You can't do it on the fly or a whim.



Bard USB

The Bard USB works on the same principle as the Bard One transmitter but plugs into a computer's USB port. Both PC and Mac are supported. The Bard USB can transform your computer into the center of an entire audio system. Sound files stored on hard drive or CDR now extend beyond the confines of the room they're in and are distributed throughout the home on your choice of the same 8 channels as are used by the Bard One receiver - or the Bard Three which is up next. As a USB device, the Bard draws its power from the computer and requires no power supply of its own.



Bard Three

Of the three Bard components under review, the Bard Three is arguably the coolest. Picture a wall-wart power supply. Make it two or two-and-a-half times larger but designed to take up only one outlet in your typical AC wall duplex. Stuffed within this tiny box are not only another wireless receiver but also a 15/25wpc (into 8/4 ohms) digital stereo amplifier. [Quote: "The reason we say digital is because the Three has a digital power supply which does not 'sag' under load like an analogue one, hence more power is actually delivered across the spectrum which is not true of a normal Class A or Class B amplifier".] The Bard Three adds a volume control and a channel selector with an LED display to indicate to which of the 8 channels it is tuned.

Here's what it means. Bard 3 plus speakers (connected via regular speaker wire and banana plugs) equals music in any room or each and every room in the house, all tuned to any number of Bard One transmitters. Or you can do what I did. You can use it as a portable system that even works in the yard! *Any AC outlet becomes a portable music system. Of*

course you can make a Bard Three-based system permanent in any room, basement, attic or garage. Call me childish but I delighted in thinking of the Bard Three plus two speakers as a high-end AC-powered portable stereo. A high-end boom box if you will. It's so flexible that its use is limited only by your imagination. The only limitation I found is that the Bards don't duplicate any of the connections they use up. If you use preamp outputs, you'll need two or use Y connectors. Ditto for any other output. That wasn't a downside, however, as my systems had plenty of options.



Setup & use

Using the Bard system is easy. The Bard One transmitter and receiver pods use a wall-wart power supply and connect line-level via the usual RCA cables. The Bard USB transmitter requires no power source and plugs into any USB port on the PC or laptop. The Three draws its power from the AC receptacle into which it is plugged. In my case, everything was instant plug'n'play including the USB which required no software to install, no wizards to prompt. It even automatically disconnected the computer speakers to allow auto routing of the signal to my he-man rig or the Bard Three plus a speaker pair - or *both*. As the Bard One in the family room was transmitting on channel 1, I set the USB transmitter to transmit on channel 2. I was therefore able to switch between my sources (the computer on 1 or my rig in the family room on 2) when listening over the Bard Three/speaker combo in yet another room.

Sounds a little confusing? In use, it couldn't be simpler or user-friendlier. You can configure these pieces to do just about anything imaginable. Their only limitation is that these pieces are unidirectional. You can use any given system as a source/transmitter or slave/receiver but not both. Well, *actually*, you could. All that's required is doubling up on the Bard components you purchased. I doubt that Sonneteer would complain about that!

Of course, you can use the Bard system to not only send wireless music around your home, you can even do it within just one room - the home theater room for example with its dreaded three rear speakers for Dolby Digital EX or *five* for EX 7.1. That's an awful lot of wires to run and make inconspicuous. Use the Bard system to do away with those unsightly snakes. If you use high-efficiency speakers or don't listen loudly, you can even do away with those bulky rear-channel amplifiers. Transmit the surround-channel signals to a Bard Three, which in turn powers your surround speakers. Just connect a Bard transmitter to your processor's preamp outputs and place the receiver ! pod or the Bard Three wherever it's convenient. Very cool. Very *functional*.



Sound

Of course, all this would be moot if the Bard system didn't sound good. Which it does. First off, it's quiet. Very quiet. No hum, no noise. The only fly in my ointment was the microwave. When used, it caused the music to drop out entirely yet only intermittently. But even the microwave oven didn't induce any kind of noise - it just interrupted the music. Frankly and to my mind, this utter absence of noise made the Bard system a complete success already. One day I took the Bard Three upstairs with a pair of speakers and listened to music as I showered. Even between floors and not just walls, the system was completely silent in operation. At this point in the review, I need to be careful not to damn the Bard products with faint praise but I must say that if casual or background listening was

your goal, the Bard products work *fabulously*. And if this were a *Better Homes And Garden* or *Popular Mechanics* review, that's all I'd have to say on the matter. But this is 6moons. Inevitably, readers will want to know exactly just *how* good the Bard system sounds. Right?

Well and in a word, it sounds bloody good. Okay, that's two words but the word *good* alone simply doesn't suffice. After the absentee noise floor, the first thing noticed was the bass. It was shockingly good. I half expected audible roll-off at the frequency extremes but that was not to be. The bass was solid and nicely defined. I even used the Bard Three to power the Gallo Reference 3s *directly* and was flab! bergasted by what I heard. [That's putting it mildly. I was the recipient of a midday e-mail from John who isn't prone to expletives. Not on this day. To call our man 'excited' would be like calling a tiger a pussy cat - Ed.]

No, the Three won't replace your Krell integrated amplifier or the Canary CA 160 tube monoblocks I've been using. That was never Sonneteer's intent. But when you consider what you're actually doing here -- replicating a source, a preamplifier and a power amplifier with the tiny and relatively inexpensive Bard products -- you'd be amazed at how close it comes. As good as the bass is, the midrange is even better. It's *stunningly* good as a matter of fact. Surprisingly and amazingly good. It's one area where nobody will be disappointed. Through the treble, there is a tiny bit of roll-off but no significant errors are made. In fact and without a doubt, it's better than what can be expected of Japanese receivers in the same price range. Stereo separation was absolute, amply demonstrated by a soundstage as wide and almost as detailed as that provided by a very good amplifier. In terms of soundstage width, the Gallos off the Bard Three went wall-to-wall. No kidding, no foul play, no hyperbole.

If you're thinking that I've made the bards sound *too* good to be true, you're correct. I've left out the one item that will prevent the Bard system from replacing a much more expensive high-end system. It's the one thing that makes a Bard-based system not *entirely* appropriate for the reproduction of the kind of sound that allows the average audiophile to sit in front of such a system for hours on end, eyes closed and deeply lost in the music. Maybe. Because even there, the Bard system misses by surprisingly little. Where it does is with a touch of veiling. Even the ingenious Bard system cannot substitute for or completely preserve the intimacy of your SET-based big rig.

How veiled? Well, re! place your expensive interconnects with something generic. Dump your ultra-litz speaker cables and replace them with the zip cord that *Consumer Reports* tells you is as good as it gets. If you use tuning devices, take them out of the system, too. Assuming that your system was excellent to begin with, you've probably downscaled it now to about on par with the Bard. Did that just make your system unlistenable? Certainly not. You've simply added a veil or two to lose a degree of transparency. But you're also left with the kind of reproduction that you were perfectly happy with *before* you got curious about wires and cones. And in the context of all that the Bard system does and its meager price, that's plenty good.

In fact, when I originally installed the Bard One system, I placed the transmitter in my main system and the receiver in the multi-channel system. As the listing at the beginning of the review shows, that's a nice rig. But speaking comparatively, it doesn't have nearly the resolving power of the 2-channel system. Piping the sound from my superior source into the family room, I had a hard time with critically evaluating the Bard One system. That's how bloody good it was. The Gallo TR-1 subwoofer handled the bass and the Gallo A'Diva Tis did the rest. The musical outcome was amazing. What I



did eventually was swap out receiver and transmitter locations. In so doing, I significantly reduced the fidelity of the source (CD player and preamplifier) while increasing the resolution of the playback system (my main system with its larger speakers and superior amps). When you remember that fact, it wouldn't be out of the question to ascribe some of the minor veiling I blamed on the Bard on the far more modest source components now.

Before you thus write off the Bards as cute convenience critters unfit for serious audiophiles, keep in mind that I'm speaking in the most absolute of terms here. I'm comparing the Bards to products with a cumulative cost far in excess of their own. I've been as critical as I can be. The surprising fact is simply this - the Bard products work *exactly* as claimed and thereby greatly surpassed my expectations. Nobody in their right mind would ever expect them to replace a \$20K stack of electronics under the most critical conditions. However, if you are looking to add a system to another room, saying that a Bard One transmitter used in conjunction with a Bard Three receiver/amp will outperform a system of electronics at the same price is a grave understatement.

Think about it. If you listen to CD and vinyl, your \$1,725 Bard budget would have to be divided up like an already small booty between greedy bank robbers - between a CD player, a turntable/arm/cartridge/ phono preamplifier plus an integrated amplifier. I couldn't *begin* to accomplish that at any competitive sonic level within this budget. Even if I somehow could, I would lose the ability to play my music on two systems in two rooms at the same time.

In terms of power delivery, the Bard Three with its 25 watts of digital power may also surprise with what it can do. Depending on speaker load and sensitivity, the Three should produce anything from background to roof-raising levels. In my modestly sized room, the Three drove the 88dB Gallo Reference 3 to spirited levels on Rock. Use the Bard system in conjunction with a pair of satellite speakers and a powered subwoofer that filters the power-robbing bass signal from the satellites (such as the Gallo TR1/A'Diva system I purchased in the wake of reviewing it) and the Bard Three will perform as though it had two or three times its actual power rating. With some craftiness, one could assemble a pretty amazing little system around the Bard Three for sure.



Conclusion

As we approach the Christmas season, it would be easy to dismiss these Bard Audio products as cute stocking stuffers for kids - albeit of real utilitarian value. And they certainly *are* of great utilitarian value. I can't imagine an audiophile that wouldn't enjoy finding any of these under the tree - myself included. But other than in the same sense that all audiophile products are toys, the Bard One, USB and Three are most certainly *not* toys. They evidence some seriously lofty design goals and some excellent execution. Would you expect anything less from the Brits? Well, no matter your personal expectations, these products from Sonneteer are both way cool and way recommended.

Now if we could only get these clever chaps to turn their attention to our video signal. Just imagine - your state-of-the-art universal player or HiDef television receiver transmitting pristine high-resolution video images to your daughter's 27" Toshiba. Or a Sunday afternoon cricket match out in the yard by the swimming pool while friends are on barbecue duty.

Dream on. Right now, Sonneteer has mastered the audio aspect. Even someone like myself -- tube amp, high-efficiency horn speakers, separate transport and tubed DAC, vinyl plus a reviewer's jaded perspective of been-there, done-that -- cannot fail to disregard size and price and be mightily impressed. Convenience and quality can go hand in hand for once and the wireless Bard System demonstrates how that's done. Bravo!



John Potis

Manufacturer's [website](#)
US/Canadian importer's [website](#)