

iTas

England's Other Bard

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ONE OF THE GREAT CHALLENGES IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS WILL BE THE STREAMING OF HIGH-RESOLUTION AUDIO AND VIDEO SIGNALS OVER A HOME WIRELESS NETWORK.

Even now, in wi-fi's nascent stage, the landscape is clouding over with competing standards. Many industry insiders forecast that resolution of these issues is further away than anyone is willing to admit. But there is a simpler approach, at least for those interested in exporting music to multiple rooms. Bardaudio, a division of Sonneteer of England, offers a line of wireless digital audio distribution systems in the here and now, for existing homes and for homeowners seeking to avoid the pitfalls of building permits, contractors, and "early adopter" technology.

Bardaudio makes three distinct systems that operate digitally in the 2.4 gigahertz range (like many wireless phone systems). Each comprises transmitter and receiver elements. Since there are up to eight selectable channels per Bardaudio system, you can also add receivers and create distributed music in up to eight rooms from a single Bardaudio source, or have multiple sources transmitting to assigned receivers.

The \$825 Bardone system includes the Tx and Rx (short for transmitter and receiver), small tea-saucer-like pods with an embedded omnidirectional antenna and a pair of RCA input jacks. Each is powered by a multi-head universal power supply. Adding modules and synching up modules is made easy thanks to internally selectable DIP switches.

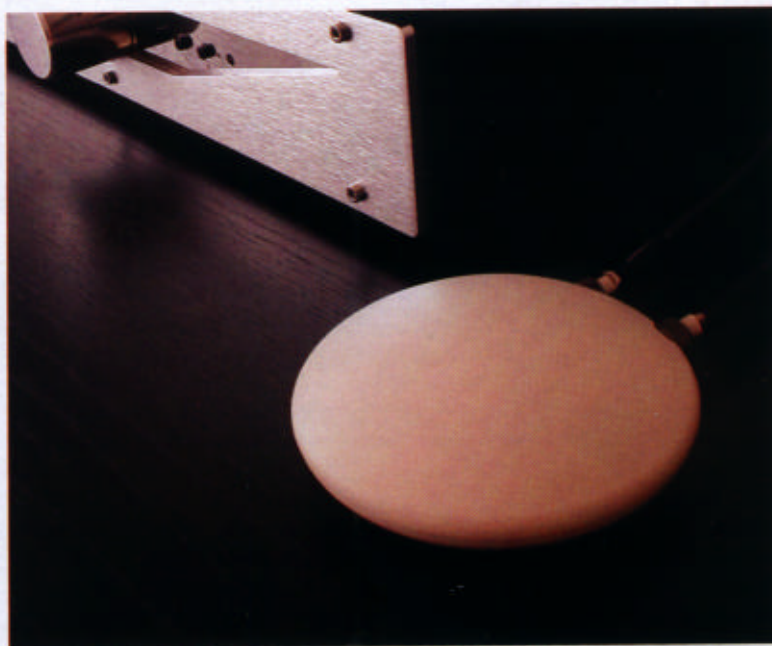
The \$599 BardUSB is designed for those who enjoy their computer as a media hub to playback CDs, iTunes, podcasts, or even Web-based XM satellite. It's a plug-and-play transmitter no bigger than a typical microdrive or memory stick. It, too, is selectable for up to eight channels.

Finally, there's the \$1295 Bardthree, a slick bundle that marries Rx technology to a two-channel digital amplifier with volume control that plugs into a wall socket. That's right, *into*—at 4.5" x 2.5" x 2.5", it's smaller than a box of animal crackers. It outputs 25Wpc into 4 ohms, uses triple protection circuitry, and launches into a power-saving sleep mode when no signal is present. It has speaker terminals suitable for banana plugs and, like the Bardone/BardUSB, is selectable for up to eight channels. For extra zones operating from the same Tx source, just add another Bardthree and a set of speakers and you're good to go. A bi-amp "monoblock" version is also available.

Installation is straightforward enough; the Bardone Tx runs off of any analog source with a pair of RCA outputs (in the instance of an iPod, via a T-adapter). The Bardone Rx connects to the inputs of an amplifier or active loudspeaker. Bon voyage, interconnect.

LOOK MA, NO WIRES!

Prior to determining its long-range performance, I first wanted to establish the Bardone baseline at an interconnect-length distance from each other. Sonically I found the Bardone and BardUSB have similar signatures. There is some reduction of gain in comparison to conventional interconnect cabling, but the signal remained robust and free of noise and



Info

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breakup. The character of the sound is smooth, though mildly subtractive at the frequency extremes, with a shaded treble that reduces the snap of drummer Stewart Copeland's high-pitched drum kit in the Police's *Synchronicity* [A&M] or the transient tickle of upper-octave piano trills during Mary Stallings' *Live at the Village Vanguard* [Maxx]jazz]. In almost exact proportion is a reduction in bass extension and definition, although midbass remains pretty sturdy. An overall roundness and plummyness prevails. The result is a sound that's neither overly warm nor digitally icy. In a way it reminds me a bit of the vintage British BBC sound, which concentrated on getting the midrange right and maintaining voice intelligibility, and avoided fatigue-inducing treble edginess at all costs. The upshot is a highly musical experience that rivals another antenna-driven source device, the venerable FM tuner. And like a tuner, there is a reduction of channel separation, a bit of soundstage "squeeze" that confines images and acoustics within a narrower ambient window between the speakers.

The Bardthree introduces the variable of digital amplification into the wireless equation. With a modest 25Wpc on tap, amp/speaker matchups are important. Although

Bardthree will drive less sensitive speakers to moderate levels, clearly it performed its best with easier loads like the 91.5dB-sensitive Triangle Altea Esw. Naturally, the Bardthree doesn't have the hulking low-frequency presence and dynamics of an MBL or Plinius amp (bass remains a little soft and rolled in comparison with these high-output mega-integrated-amps), but the Bardthree has a lively and highly resolved midrange, with dynamics and resolution to match. Generally speaking, its sound fell into line with that of the standalone Rx module, but there is a coloration in the treble unique to the Bardthree. High frequencies are clear and detailed but also suggest a thinner, papery quality. Not grainy *per se*, but a sense that the harmonic bloom of high strings and brass has been condensed and desaturated of color. Not a deal-breaker by any stretch—in fact, it comfortably compares with a variety of integrated amps and receivers in its price range.

Arguably, it's the BardUSB where the wireless system really shines. In my system the BardUSB/computer connection made good on its promise to "plug-and-play" as soon as I booted up iTunes aboard my PC. On one occasion when I inserted the

A Bard By Any Other Name

What separates the Bardaudio system from gizmos found at Hammacher Schlemmer is that it makes good on its promises. Sonically these wireless systems performed admirably and musically. Signal strength over longer runs remains an issue—one highly dependant on listening environment and Tx/Rx placement. So, as they say, "your results may vary." That said, this is a company on a mission and clearly prepared to meet the challenges of an increasingly unwired world. And, in the here and now, if you can demonstrate an easier way to pipe music to multiple rooms with zero electrical fuss and construction hassles, I'm all ears. **NG**

The Fine Print

Bardaudio advertises wireless performance between roughly 60 and 120 feet. In practice these are idealized figures. The reality is that wireless systems are prisoners of the infinite number of interior obstacles they must face. A transmitter that "sees" fifty unobstructed feet in front of it performs very differently than one confronted with a couple of lath-and-plaster walls. So the real test of the Bardaudio's prowess was transmitting to another room. In my home, the system began breaking up slightly beyond forty-to-fifty feet with a one-wall obstruction—basically at the low side of the stated spec. Without obstructions, throw distance increases markedly.

Also be prepared to don your tweaker's hat in order to optimize the signal—small shifts of the Tx/Rx modules (which are also antennae, after all) are needed to lock in the signal, much like the time we all spend positioning speakers to accord with the listening-position "sweet spot." Placement on higher shelves is a distinct advantage. Even so, at or near the limits of reception, there will be the occasional dropout, heard as a vinyl-record-like low-level tick or snap. **NG**

BardUSB with the PC already powered up, I got a conflict message from my LinkSys router, but I simply mouse-clicked "Repair" in the Windows XP Wireless Network Connection Status menu, and the software automatically sought a different channel for my DSL. It took hardly a minute, the blue-light connection indicator on the BardUSB shone brightly, and I was back up and running. Note: CD playback was consistent with my results for the Tx, but performance was about what I've come to expect from a highly compressed formats like iTunes—sonics are lightweight with a whitish cast, dynamically squeezed, and generally bereft of low-level detail. But none of this was the fault of the BardUSB, which went about its appointed rounds admirably, transmitting without drama or dropouts.

I need to add that, on a broader philosophical basis, what makes the BardUSB a home run is its potential to bridge the technological and generational divide between computer users (read: younger) and high-end audio hobbyists (older). It has the power to open up a dialogue between what makes these two worlds tick. And any device that underscores compatibility rather than divisiveness is a worthy addition to the wider audio conversation. **TAS**