

Enveloped in MUSIC & QUESTIONS

Assessing the Precarious State of Surround-Sound Music

by wayne
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In the electronics world, the accepted assumption is that 5.1, 6.1, and even 7.1 surround systems are just a breath away, in every direction, at every price strata. But do we have material to support this medium and will the music industry continue to support us with surround sound media?

The quick and short answer is yes, but a look at where the DVD is headed and an examination of today's music industry will give a more accurate picture.

It was recently announced that Apple is now in the top-10 list of music retailers thanks to the exploding sales of legally downloaded music via the company's online music store, iTunes. While this is great news for certain record labels, it is of concern for both the high-end market and the consumer who may have invested in a better-quality 5.1 room and wants six or eight channels of enveloped music versus a compressed two-channel recording at a maximum of 320 bits.

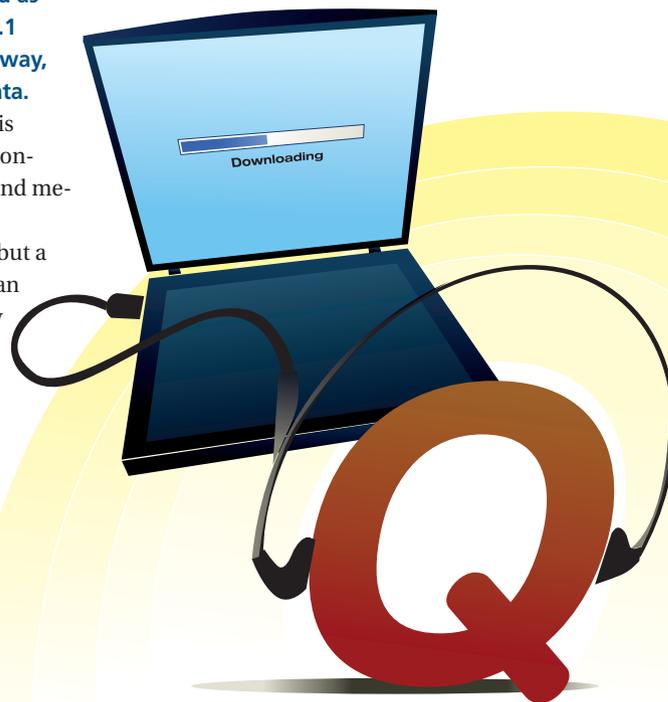
Genelec president, Will Eggleston, isn't in love with the concept of downloading music, but accepts its inevitability and importance. "The growth of downloaded music is a reality," he said. "It represents the return and growth of the music business. The compressed portion of it serves two issues: download bandwidth and available quality. Both are in a transition period. Personally I don't download since I'm just a hi-res traditionalist, and I find

the quality almost barbaric. But looking into the future, distribution will surely occur this way since the pipelines will be wider and faster. This will certainly accommodate multi-channel broadcast and theatrical productions."

What is a consumer to do, and what is a retail-

er to do? The answers give subtle hints as to the future of surround sound. First and most important to producers, recording engineers, and studios is the fact that surround music is here to stay. Absolutely, 100 percent guaranteed in the long run, surround music of one format or another will be included on movie tracks in whatever the format used will be. The key word though is *movie*, and not music. A few statistics underscore the current state of affairs. On the DTS website, a company synonymous with the highest quality audio recordings in rates up to 96K/24-bit DTS ES, only 102 surround music titles were listed. In a study titled, *DVD Release Report*, it is noted that there are 4,750 DVD music titles in total, but not all are in surround.

In a search of the Universal Music website, only 195 SACD discs and just 51 DVD-A titles were found. And just because they are DVD-A or SACD does not guarantee 5.1 or 6.1 recording formats. These are only two companies, but their snapshot is quite accurate of surround music. To put it in perspective, while 4,750 titles of DVD music is nothing to sneeze at, the numbers are not even a blip on the map com-



pared with DVD or CD sales, which accounted for more than 1.1 billion units in the first three quarters of 2005, up from 364 million units in 2001.

Global music sales fell three percent to \$29 billion, but on a brighter note, music video sales were up 17 percent in the first three quarters of 2005, with just five percent of all music sold being pressed on DVD, according to the RIAA. This is not a small number overall in relation to the total dollars sold, but have consumers accepted surround sound?

Manufacturers continue to enhance their respective support of the medium by bringing to market ever cheaper and more user-friendly gear. The U.S. market penetration of DVD players used has been so great that units supporting 5.1 channels of music in Dolby, DTS, and THX can be found for as

little as \$39 retail. Similarly, Home-Theater-In-a-Box (HTiB), now with its own recognized category by the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA), has a mean price of under \$500 retail, with \$399 units that include speakers and a DVD receiver making up 52 percent of all audio systems dollar volume in 2004. The CEA further estimates that 33 percent of all U.S. households have HTiB as of January 2005, up from 23 percent in January 2001.

Herein lies one of the music industry's problems and the shaky future of surround music as stand-alone media. In many of the HTiB packages, only 2-, 2.1-, or 3.1-channel speaker systems are provided, often with optional rear channels. With the more "upscale" systems retailing for as much as \$899, inclusive of rear speakers, are homeowners connecting the rear speakers at all?

I recently set up and demonstrated a "quasi" surround speaker system that was both wireless, extremely nice looking, and painless to control via a computer. An interesting product, the A-250 2.1 speaker by a firm called Saitek, did what it was expected to do for the most part—provide a right and left

Will the music industry continue to support us with surround sound media?

speaker plus a sub, in a modern form factor and the ability to sync with a computer wirelessly. While this does not necessarily address the needs of an audiophile looking for true surround, the average iPod user or consumer with a media server, will find it a brilliant option. Some companies are going so far as to offer "virtual-surround" in one speaker.

Why aren't more music titles released in surround sound? After all, the hardware sales are supporting DVD video sales and DVD video sales are supporting the hardware industry. But that is where the similarities end. Surround music can be purchased on DVD-A discs and/or SACD, two non-compatible formats that in the overwhelming majority of households don't play on an existing DVD player. Go into a Best-Buy or Circuit City and ask the salesperson where his Universal DVD players are and the most likely answer will be, "We don't carry foreign-voltage units." Or for a real indication of the status of surround music, one has to go no further than the DVD and CD racks and try to find SACD or DVD-A titles. Good luck.

A new entry in the surround

arena is from none other than Noel Lee, head of Monster Cable. Dubbed "Monster Music," the system takes existing masters, and via the codecs of Dolby Digital and DTS, presses a multi-purpose DVD and separate CD into a highly respectable 96K/24Bit release. Called a "High Definition Surround Sound SuperDisc," it has a suggested retail price of \$25. I did listen to a Ray Charles release, which was exceptionally clean. With only five titles currently in its repertoire, this surround format has a few turns to make before it becomes a success. Does this mean the end of surround music as we know it in DVD-A, SACD or the highly touted DSD?

The next step begins with hardware and computer makers, and continues with the media provider. Microsoft is supporting surround music via the Windows Media Center in 5.1 and optional 7.1. Additionally, the billion-dollar gaming industry has its widely touted X-Box. The handwriting is on the wall; the total simplification of appliances via plug-n-play and the growth and acceptance of a media center is not too far in the distant future.

Intel recently announced the Viiv-branded technology platform for the digital home. When incorporated within devices, Intel promises that Viiv will revolutionize the way we all listen to and enjoy music, as it helps us share and manage our digital lifestyles. All products incorporating Viiv, which is scheduled for roll out in this quarter, will include the latest version of Windows Media Center and a purpose-designed remote to control, among other things, your surround music.

This year, DTS will continue its support of the surround platform with the rollout of DTS-HD Master Audio with support for up to 7.1 channels of bit-for-bit discrete audio. DTS-HD Master Audio has been selected as an optional, approved

continued on page 78

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Music and Questions

continued from page 64

standard for Blu-Ray disc and HD-DVD.

At the forefront of media support for surround music, high-quality sound, and education of the consumer is the CEA, which has partnered with Concord Records to educate the consumer as to what music “really” can sound like in full fidelity, without compression. With the help of Martin Porter they have put together and released a “sampler” of high-quality music mixed and engineered by industry luminary, Phil Ramone. The disc, distributed at this year’s CES in Las Vegas, will also be available at all Starbucks coffee houses with under the title, *The Great Audio Experience*. It’s a start! Time will tell if we are listening to surround music as a stand-alone medium in the future or not, but all indications point to the survival and growth of sur-

round music in one shape or sound.

A recent study by the CEA revealed some informative numbers for us to ponder. In the primary listening room, a full 50 percent were happy with their respective audio experience, 37 percent were somewhat satisfied, and 8 percent did not feel either way. Whether this is a good or bad thing depends on how you interpret it. Within the top-five complaints about using a home theater, 40 percent complained about wiring. When the questions moved to audio improvements and what they were unhappy with, a full 56 percent complained about the distribution of audio, and 34 percent had issues with speaker placement. The biggest issue, though, was sound quality, with an astounding 59 percent of respondents complaining. Clearly, education of the consumer and the manufacturer is essential to the continuation of the evolution of sound as we strive for that holy grail we call hi-fidelity audio.

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Delano

continued from page 36

great impression on their friends and neighbors.

Don’t forget about the door experience: the doorbell. Install a beautiful door station with a metallic finish that suits the décor. You can configure these rascals with a telephone module so that the phones ring with a doorbell tone or into your distributed audio system for paging and doorbell function. Heck, a camera there is a great security enhancement, too. And, what if someone told you about their success with integrating an iPod’s playlist with a doorbell?

Now get out there and be creative, because we all know that nothing happens until somebody sells something.

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continued from page 72

eliminates this distance limitation.

Wireless Access Points. In many larger homes a single access point does not provide enough coverage. While wireless range extender products are available we have found that bridging wireless access points across a coaxial backbone is frequently more reliable.

Media PCs, Extenders, or Digital Receivers. All of these devices are typically located next to a television and need a network connection where one usually does not exist. As mentioned previously, wireless bridges often provide less-than-satisfactory results for these audio/video devices whereas a coax backbone provides a much more reliable, robust solution.

We view the Coaxsys TVnet/C Pro line of products as an extension of our “IP infrastructure toolkit” of products that we carry in our company vans. We always have routers, switches, and wireless access points to leverage a home’s broadband connection. Now it makes sense to carry the Coaxsys products as one more way to distribute broadband Internet throughout the home and interconnect Ethernet devices with minimal wire pulling and tone testing. Minimizing labor and maximizing reliability—those are elements that can enhance the profits of all of our custom home networked installations.

