NETWORKED TABLETOP STEREO

RUARK AUDIO R2

There are all kinds of ways of getting your musical fix. An increasingly popular one is from the category known at table-top audio. These compact boxes are designed to provide good sound from a range of digital sources, and that's exactly what the Ruark Audio R2 promises.

EQUIPMENT

The R2, now in its third generation, appears at first glance to be a seemingly simple stereo. But it turns out to be a very well-equipped network media player, with additional support for USB, analogue sources, FM radio and DAB+ digital radio.

It is very pleasing on the eye, with a wrap-around wooden enclosure, a metal front panel with two round black speaker grilles and a pale blue-on-black OLED display. This is a decent size, measuring 57mm wide by 28mm tall, and that's good since you will use this for all your interaction with the unit as you set controls and navigate through music and station lists.

The enclosure itself is 36cm wide, 12cm tall and 20cm deep, and a nicely solid 3.4 kg in weight. Actually, it's a touch taller because there's

Ruark's 'trademark' circular control cluster on the top centre, with a central knob surrounded by eight control keys. The knob itself can be pushed to select things, and does double duty as the volume and menu navigation control.

One key stands alone, for play/pause. The others are forwards and reverse skip, menu and back, input source and preset, and alarm. You can set the unit to waken you... twice if you like.

In addition to the FM/DAB+ tuner there's network audio by means of DLNA, USB audio by means of a rear USB socket, internet radio, Bluetooth, Spotify and analogue audio — two kinds of input for this last, with RCA inputs on the back and a 3.5mm socket on the front. The USB socket can power a portable hard-disk drive. Spotify requires a premium subscription (around $12 a month — a free one-month trial comes with the unit) and Spotify Connect is supported.

For the network features the device needs to connect via Wi-Fi, since there's no Ethernet socket. Standards up to 802.11n are supported.

There's also a 3.5mm headphone output on the front. There is no fixed level analogue line out, nor a digital audio output.

PERFORMANCE

We didn't attach the extendable antenna supplied for DAB+ and FM; instead we screwed on the coax cable that goes to our external aerial. (Our review space has foil wall insulation, and it's a dog for FM reception, while our local DAB+ is fairly weak as well, so we need to gather our radio waves outside for decent performance!)

A nifty little wizard guided us smoothly through setting up the unit when we switched it on for the first time. That involved choosing time zones, selecting daylight savings, and connecting to our Wi-Fi network. (The item only detected our 2.4GHz access points, so it would appear not to support 5GHz.) We chose the WPS push button method of connecting, but there are a couple of manual set-up options available if your network doesn't support WPS.

That done, the system came up with a clear display inviting us to select a source. Before we really had a chance to get going, the unit noticed that there was a firmware update available over the network and sought permission to update itself. We said 'Yes' and within a couple of minutes it had downloaded the new version, then sought

permission to install it. Another 'Yes', and in not much more than a minute it was done.

It's hard to think how this system could be easier to use, other than a large touch screen for swiping through things. You do spend much of your time just spinning the control knob and pressing it to select things. The little remote works well enough at a distance, but how far will mostly depend on how well you can see the screen. Up close that knob works a lot better than pressing buttons on a remote.

Actually, you can in fact control the unit from your tablet or phone. We could find no Ruark app in either the Android or Apple stores, but you can effectively manage network audio using a DLNA-compatible app. The R2 popped up as a DLNA 'renderer' (i.e. client) in Bubble UPnP on our Android tablet, so we were able to push music from our server to the Ruark device, which switched to the appropriate 'source' and started playing.

And there's Bluetooth, so of course you can use your player of choice on your tablet or phone, or indeed on your iPod nano or touch. For Android users who have it, the unit supports the aptX codec on Bluetooth.

But let's return to the unit's own control systems. We found it took us about, oh, two minutes to master that! That's due to no genius on our part — the system is highly intuitive. Whirling the main control knob around didn't get us through lists as fast as swiping, as it has a very gentle indent and no ability to build up momentum, but even with our many-hundreds-long lists of artists and such we were able to get through without losing patience.

The internet radio allows you to set up favourites via the web on a computer, which is a sensible activity since it means you can access your preferred stations even more easily. When you're playing local music, you can hold down the select key for a couple of seconds to add the track to a master playlist which you can access later. This can hold up to 500 tracks.

Spotify worked smoothly. Spotify Connect hands over streaming from your portable device to the Connect device. On first use, it also authorises the Ruark to directly access Spotify from its own interface.

Not all was perfect, though. It didn't like some of the menu structures served up by our Synology NAS. The main structure we use runs Music, Artist initial letter, Artist, Album. It couldn't go deeper than the initial letter. Other menus which skipped the initial letter layer worked fine. With connected USB devices it showed not just the playable material but a clutter of incompatible files, including hidden files placed there by OS X.

For streaming and USB audio the unit supports MP3, WMA, AAC, FLAC and WAV. The specifications say up to 24-bit/96kHz, but with those tracks supplied via DLNA all the unit would produce was a kind of barely audible static. But it worked perfectly with CD-quality FLAC.

When it comes to sound quality the unit was quite pleasant-sounding. There was a reasonable amount of upper bass to lend a sense of balance to the audio. On radio, male announcers' voices had a slightly forward chest, but not excessively so, along with a clear bite in their upper harmonics, aiding coherence.

It was clear that there wasn't much in the way of deep bass with music, but the stereo spread was quite wide and the result was generally boppy and tuneful.

Our initial listen with headphones wasn't very successful, thanks to an overblown bass (and way too high volume!). It turned out the bass was ten decibels higher than the midrange, and the treble was also high, although only by about 5dB. We explored the settings and found that the unit had a 'Loudness' control grouped with its bass and treble ones, plus something called 3D sound. Switching both of those out largely tamed it, with the bass around 130Hz about four decibels up relative to the midrange and the treble up by only a decibel or two. The deep bass rolled off gently to be about 9dB below the midrange level at 20Hz. Even with these changes and some tweaks of the bass and treble to get the output as smooth as possible, the headphone sound was still somewhat muddy, lacking precision, and seeming even grainy. There was also the occasional impression of a kind of underlying grit, a background processing noise that just occasionally revealed itself in the spaces between the actual signal.

CONCLUSION

While we would like to see Ruark set up the headphone output to deliver better quality, as a tabletop audio system the Ruark Audio R2 provides truly excellent access to a wide range of modern music. It also delivers pleasing sound from the built-in speakers, making it a wonderful device for many different applications. ∎

Ruark Audio R2 MkIII networked tabletop stereo

- Excellent range of digital media sources
- Excellent control system
- Attractive design

- Headphone output quality

Price: $799

Tested with firmware: ir-mmi-FS2026-0500-0094_V2.6.17.EX52729-1A17
Drivers: 2 x 90mm
Cabinet: Bass reflex
Power: 18 watts nominal
Inputs: 1 x analogue stereo (RCA), 1 x analogue stereo (3.5mm, front panel), 1 x USB, WiFi, Bluetooth,F-Type connector for FM/DAB+ antenna (telescopic antenna supplied)
Outputs: 1 x 3.5mm headphones
Display: OLED, 128 x 64 pixel
Dimensions (whd): 360 x 115 x 199mm
Weight: 3.4kg
Warranty: Two years

Contact: Synergy Audio Visual
Telephone: 03 9459 7474
Web: www.synergyaudio.com