Roon comes of age

FROM BEING AN 'INSIDER' IDEA, ESPOUSED BY A FEW EARLY ADOPTERS,
ROON HAS GONE MAINSTREAM, WITH WIDESPREAD HARDWARE SUPPORT.
ANDREW EVERARD EXPLAINS WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

There's no shortage of music playing software out there on the market, much of either open source or free to use – so who in their right mind would spend $119 a year, or $499 for a lifetime subscription, just to organise their music library?

The simple answer to that is 'almost anyone who's tried it', for not only is Roon extremely simple to use, it also offers a near-seamless integration of your own music library and high-resolution online sources (Qobuz and Tidal), and presents them all in a highly addictive interface. It's also pretty much platform-agnostic, with versions of the software available for a variety of computer and handheld device operating systems, and the assurance that, providing a product is Roon-compliant, it will just work when in your system.

The history of Roon may be familiar, but just to help us all catch up it started life as Sooloos, a music library playback and organisation package, back in the 1990s, before breaking cover with a $10,000 music server system – in 2007. Within a year the company had been bought by Meridian Audio, which was then looking for a way into the multiroom audio market, and this technology became incorporated into that company's products.

Spun off by Meridian in 2015, Sooloos became Roon Labs – the name coming from the liking of the team for words with 'double o' spellings, and the Labs bit because of the need for a unique domain name for the company – or so the legend goes.

Having made that eye-wateringly expensive server almost 15 years ago – a consequence, the company has said, of the technology available to it at the time – Roon took the sensible route of becoming a software-based company, licensing its platform to end-users and, more recently, hardware companies. However, as we'll see, that hasn't stopped it dabbling in hardware, too, though at a more sensible level than those five-figure originals.

To tackle the elephant sitting unavoidably in the corner of the room, let's tackle the question of Roon's pricing: it's all to do with maintaining the software behind what the product does. You see, unlike other music-software, Roon doesn't just grab what's on your server and punt it to a playback device: instead it references it to the company's own constantly-updated database, enabling it to add extra metadata and information to create the particular Roon experience, which runs from extra graphics and text content, including background information on artists and even reviews of what you're playing, to that ability to cross-reference albums, tracks and even performers to suggest other linked music, or just items it thinks you may enjoy.

Start at the Core

So how does Roon work? Well, it centralises all the control, metadata and so on to a central computer, which runs what it calls its Core. This can be a conventional home computer, a dedicated Core device, or even run on a NAS device, with the requirement that it runs on an SSD or similar in order to achieve the data speeds required, and of course the enabled device needs to be connected to your network. Having tried it on both home computers and NAS boxes – where I avoided the need for an SSD by running Roon on a 16GB flash drive plugged into the back of the unit – I now run it on a dedicated small-form computer, meaning it's always on, without the need for my main computers to be fired up.

The idea for the small computer came from one of the latest Roon developments, the company's *Nucleus* devices, which as the name suggests are designed to sit at the centre of a Roon system. Effective as these are, they're not cheap: the Nucleus,

"Designed to sit at the centre of a Roon system, the Nucleus devices – starting at £1500 for the basic model able to handle a 120,000-track library – are effective, but not cheap"