

ReQuest Audio The Raptor music server

by Alan Sircom



Although for much of the audio world, streaming has all but replaced the physical digital disc, for the highest of high-end, those 1% or the 1% that both take music really seriously and have the financial clout to afford the very best, CD and SACD are still uppermost. There are those who argue – granted some of these arguments are as much faith-based as evidence-led – that CD still holds dominance in terms of digital sound quality. But the problem then emerges... what if you want that high-quality CD-like sound, from a file-based system? For that, many turn to ReQuest Audio. The company is best known for the striking Beast music server, but now it has taken the best elements of that powerful

performer and made the Raptor. ReQuest's Raptor is the company's new entry level high-end music server; the result of combining knowledge and experience in High-End manufacturing and passion for music.

This elegant piece of high-end technology has a stable and zero-resonance chassis fully made out of high-grade aluminium. Each of the main components of the server has its own dedicated sealed enclosure to prevent any interference and guarantees a perfect protection from distortions. The signal and wiring-loom paths are fully-optimised and the main subsystems are located inside sealed enclosures.

Like the Beast, Raptor's operating system, control software, and library software are all Linux-based and written by ReQuest's engineers over the last 16 years. For the metadata, the server is connected to the Gracenote's licensed database library, populating every recording with the maximum information, cover art, and more. This, and many other parameters of operation and control, is handled on the dedicated web-page based app originally developed for the Beast.

ReQuest's Raptor comes with its dedicated integrated ripping station and special ripping software, and is available with internal storage of 1TB, 2TB, or ▶

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▶ 4TB using either SSD or HDD drives. When adding a NAS drive to the system it is possible to add as much external storage as needed. ReQuest’s own software allows you to decide whether new media files are stored internally or externally. For example, you could store high-end recordings (up to DSD512 or 32bit, 384kHz FLAC) on the internal SSD and standard quality files on a separate external NAS drive elsewhere on the network.

Set-up and installation is easy, especially as ReQuest also developed its own ARQ Link, which provides daily reporting from each ReQuest Audio product for support, and also allows a user travelling anywhere in the world to access the Raptor from their computer and add music or edit metadata on your server from the comfort of your hotel room. It can also create MP3 files to be played anywhere in the world.

We’ve hardly scratched the surface of this full media server, available either as digital only or with a built-in DAC. Suffice it to say, the Raptor is more than just the ‘lite’ version of the Beast! That being said, the most obvious difference between the Beast and the Raptor is the removal of the huge touch screen in the front of the Beast. That, in and of itself, added quite a burden to the project, as trying to shield the electronics from the display without sacrificing performance proved an almighty feat. By removing the activities of the Beast’s front panel to a tablet effectively means more than just a thinner case. Despite this, ReQuest has still gone to enormous lengths to sort out the Raptor’s power supplies. Power is re-generated and is completely reconstructed. For the digital board, there are also temperature-stabilised supplies. In other words, even though the power supplies don’t need to be quite as over-the-top as the Beast, the company has applied the skill-set developed in making that cost no object music server and applied those technologies and techniques here.

In case of difficulties, ReQuest offers an online support system called ARQ Link, whereby a technician can sort out a problem remotely. This level of service is incredibly useful, particularly at the early stages of Raptorhood, and is what I’d expect from a product at this price range.

We looked at The Beast back in 2015 (in Issue 122 to be exact) and a lot has changed in the past five years. Music servers have improved considerably, and the understanding in network infrastructure and use of apps has suffused through the audio world to a far greater extent than it had five years ago. So, you’d think the ReQuest products might face a tougher challenge.

Incredibly, what held then still holds today. The Raptor captures that same ‘musical gravitas’ the Beast provided (and still provides). There is a sense of scale and majesty to the sound that is best – but not uniquely – highlighted in the classical domain. On large, sweeping orchestral pieces or powerful operatic arias, the Raptor holds a sense of scale and drama that is a mark of the very best. It’s not one of my ‘go to’ albums today, but Panufnik’s Sinfonia Votiva [Seiji Ozawa, Boston SO, Hyperion] is a perfect example of just how good the Raptor is at parsing orchestral gravitas. Part of the reason this isn’t a ‘go to’ album is it sounds like a bit of a car-crash when streamed. The second movement in particular (written in 1981 to celebrate the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s 100th year) is a dense, angular, and spiky piece of modern classical, that is conveyed here as it should be conveyed. ▶

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► That’s no easy task; streaming systems tend to either make this sound like demolition set to music, or smooth over the dynamic passages. Instead, the Raptor takes the road less travelled of actually portraying the music as it is supposed to sound, without burnishing or sharpening the edges. It’s still a challenging listen, but this time because the music rather than the noise it makes.

This might make people think the benefits of the Raptor only really apply to the more gnarled and harder end of the musical spectrum, whereas this is simply the most obvious example. Moving to more audiophile fare – the title track from *Blue Maqams* by Anouar Brahem [ECM] – once again the quality of the performance shines through. You get more of a sense of musical performance, of musicians riffing off one another, and that lithe and natural sound that is usually identified with the best in digital and good analogue audio. This music is all about the nuances, the interplay between musicians, and the result is an almost raga-like hypnotic glide through an East-meets-West jazz riff. Get it wrong – and many servers can get it very wrong – and it’s bland aural wallpaper (when we could go to restaurants, it sounds like the sort of music a Lebanese restaurant might play when trying to relax people because they just ran out of falafel). Here, however, the interplay between Brahem’s oud and Django Bates piano is perfectly rendered.

Some of this perfect rendering is down to its soundstaging abilities. The quartet is well-spaced within a stable and expansive soundstage that gives one the feeling of being in the midst of the music. But more importantly, it’s the timing and phrasing that captivates you. This too is not unique to well-recorded audiophile fare; ‘Pentacostal’ from Mark Lanegan and Duke Garwood’s 2013 CD *Black Pudding* [Heavenly] has a very lo-fi vibe (the guitar part is very close mic’d while the vocal sounds as if it’s recorded in a bathroom), but even here the Raptor gets past the recording and under the skin of the music. It’s fine blues in its own right, but played well, the diction breaks free of the recording and that lets the darkness of the track out perfectly.

Maybe the best praise I can put the Raptor’s way is its chameleon-like abilities when handling music of all kinds. It rocks out when you play powerful 4/4 time ‘rawck’, yet can be a gentle, delicate performer when playing folk tunes. It breaks apart the synths from the natural instruments in ‘nu-jazz’ yet doesn’t leave the music dissected in the process. And if you move from Mozart to Mahler, the Raptor tracks your changes in taste with changes in dynamics.

I’m holding off calling ReQuest Audio The Raptor ‘Beast-lite’ because there is nothing ‘lite’ about its performance. In essence it’s The Beast but without a screen, for a fraction of the cost. In a way, the only thing you can say against it if you were considering buying The Beast, The Raptor does all its bigger brother can do, but without a screen and for much less money. Unless you are ReQuest itself, is that really a downside? +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state music server with built-in storage optional DAC and Clock

Storage: 0.96 TB or 1.92TB SSD

Analogue Inputs: Balanced XLR Input (pass through or controllable) over the optional analogue Diamond Volume control

Digital Inputs: None

DAC Resolution/Supported Digital

Formats: DSD all 4 different formats, WAVE/FLAC

44.1/88.2/96/174.4/192/384 and 16bit/24bit/32 bit

Analogue Outputs: One stereo balanced (via XLR connectors), one stereo unbalanced (via RCA jacks)

Digital Outputs: coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jack), TOSLink, PRO i2S, BNC

User Interface: Apple iPad, iPhone, Android, PC or Mac

Other Features: UPnP server

Dimensions (HxWxD):

10cm x 44cm x 46cm

Weight: weight depends upon configuration

Price: from £10,998 (£14,998 with internal DAC option)

Manufacturer: ReQuest Audio Switzerland AG

URL: requestaudio.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

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URL: absolutesounds.com