

Review of Encore Digital Media Server from Cirgon.

Since Hometoys.com began this eMagazine in 1996 one of our main initiatives has been to track and report on the evolution of a state of the art concept, and that concepts development into a user-friendly and affordable everyday use product. In those 12 + years we have witnessed this successful process with home automation, digital music and flat screen televisions to name a few. Currently one product in the midst of this evolution is the Digital Media Server or Media Center.

Digital Media Servers are destined to become a key component in all home theater systems sometime in the near future. As we as consumers spend more and more of our money on home theaters and home audio it becomes necessary for us to have one system that allows us easy access to our music, digital photos and movies.

Most households now own a digital camera and purchase most of their music using websites such as iTunes; these files when stored on your home computer take up huge amounts of important disk space. However in most cases your home computer does not have the capability to showcase these pictures using that 50" HDTV you paid so much for, or allow you to listen to your music utilizing that whole house audio sound system. So while you may be up on digital technology for portable use, you still have to utilize CDs and DVDs for in home use. This is where a Digital Media Server becomes so valuable.

There are many different Media Servers available on the market today, and the prices of these tend to be anywhere from a couple of thousand dollars to upwards of twenty thousand dollars. As well as cost, three other things to consider while researching Media Servers would be ease-of-use, storage capacity and energy use. After researching several different Media Servers I decided to contact Cirgon (<http://www.cirgon.com/>); they are a small company whose founders had a passion for photography which led them to design ways in which these digital photos can be viewed with quality and convenience on a home theater system.

ENCORE by Cirgon is marketed as "The complete, easy-to-use and affordable Digital Media Server", with an MSRP of \$1,995. It's about the size of a DVD player, weighing only 10 pounds and consuming only 35 watts of power, less than a small light bulb. And, it meets Energy Star requirements, consuming less than 0.5 watt when turned off. The Linux operating system provides fast performance without the need for high power computing hardware.

First lets start with a little background on myself and why I like most households am a perfect candidate for a Digital Media Server. Firstly, I have a collection of hundreds of CD's that have basically become obsolete; they are currently stored in a box in my closet. I also have countless songs stored on my computer for my Ipod. I am recently married, and my wife is inclined to take photographs everywhere we go, so I also stored thousands of digital photos on my computer. My home theater includes a 47" HDTV and surround

sound system. So here I am with a great home entertainment system and ton of digital music and photos, but no way to integrate the two.

That is why when receiving the ENCORE Media Server I was anxious to get started with my review and testing. Installing and setting up ENCORE in a home theater is easier than configuring most modern stereo receivers. ENCORE requires an HDTV and supports component video and DVI/HDMI inputs to assure the highest quality image. Audio connections can be Coaxial SPDIF, Optical SPDIF or analog audio connections. You will also want to connect ENCORE to the Internet and your network, ENCORE will automatically get the required IP information to connect to the net. Upon turning the system on a tutorial automatically begins taking you through the features and use of ENCORE.

The standard ENCORE system stores up to 500 CDs or 30,000 jpeg photos, or combinations of both. Add optional higher capacity disk drive to increase the storage up to a maximum of 2,000 CDs or 150,000 photos. It is also setup with two-zone audio to allow you to play different music on two different zones.

The ENCORE 33 key remote control is used to operate all the system functions. There are special keys for photo management such as EDIT, ROTATE, MOVE, PAGE UP and PAGE DN for easy viewing and sorting of photos. Press the PLAY key to bring up any selected media on your system including music, movies, and photo slideshows. A delete key and associated trash file makes it easy to delete unwanted photos with no concern about accidental deletion.

The system comes with easy to follow step-by-step instructions, which brings me to the next step, loading photos & CDs. Here are the ways in which you can upload files to the ENCORE:

- ? Direct from CD or DVD
- ? Flash USB Drive
- ? Directly from your camera – ENCORE will recognize most cameras
- ? Utilizing a network connection

Copying music from CDs does take time, as the ENCORE has to compress to MP3 format for maximum storage. While copying CDs the system should be connected to the internet so it can retrieve album art and song titles, this will save you a ton of time in setting up your play lists. If album information is not available online you can use a keyboard to type in the song or album titles.

I used Flash USB Drive to copy my photos to the ENCORE, it really could not have been easier, simply copy and paste the files. Some nice features for your photos are the ability to crop, rotate and also add your own narration to a photo using a microphone.

ENCORE does not rip DVDs for legal reasons. However you may rip DVDs on a personal computer and copy them to ENCORE through the network. I would also

recommend using the network file system to transfer you MP3's from your personal computer to ENCORE.

Once you have uploaded all of the music, photos and movies you wanted, the next step would be to organize them. This would be with music playlists and slideshows. Probably the most convenient feature of ENCORE is the DEST (destination) key on the remote. This allows you to select a folder destination and then everything you copy and paste will be stored there. So when making a play list I simply select that folder as the "DEST" and scroll through all my albums copying and pasting the songs I want in that list. This same process is used for slideshows. The slideshows you create can be accompanied by music and later burned directly onto a DVD using the ENCORE.

Some other features of ENCORE are that it supports several Internet Radio sites; these include free station Last FM and subscription sites Sirius-XM. This is just more ways in which this system allows to incorporate digital media through your whole house audio. Also use the ENCORE to back up all your digital files onto CDs or DVDs.

We are starting to see a lot of options on the market for Digital Media Servers. I imagine the Media Server to be on the same path we have seen in the past with other home technologies, that is in the next few years the systems will get faster, cheaper and easier to use. With this evolution it will not be long until every home has a Media Server. I feel with the ENCORE; Cirgon is one of the companies that are helping to push and challenge the industry to move quickly in that direction. They have a product that is more affordable than most, yet still accomplishes most if not all of the functions one would want in a Media Server while remaining very user friendly.

<http://www.cirgon.com/>

Specifications

Connections

Audio zone 1

- 2 RCA left, right analog audio out
- 1 S/PDIF coaxial 7.1 digital surround sound
- 1 S/PDIF optical 7.1 digital surround sound

Audio zone 2

- 3.5MM left, right Analog audio output

Video

- Triple RCA jack for 1080i component video
- DVI

Digital

- 1 high speed USB 2.0 on front panel
- 2 high speed USB 2.0 on rear panel
- Ethernet: 1 RJ-45 10/100 Base-T
- Remote control IR input and IR output

DVD/CD

- DVD player
- CD Player
- DVD/CD burner supports all DVD/CD recordable formats

Features

File types supported:

- Audio: mp3, wav, flac, wma, ogg, aac
- Photo: jpeg
- Video: mpeg 1,2,3 wmv 1,2 h.263, h.264, avi, mov

Options

- Disk drive: 320GB, 500GB, 750GB (standard drive is 160GB)

Rack mount kit

Physical Specifications

Rack mountable with two rack mount ears

Operating temperature: 0°C to +40°C

Size: approximately 17.0"w X 3.5"h X 10"

Weight: 9lbs

Power requirements: 100-240 volts, 35watts (standby <1.0 watts)

Media Storage

Encore can store music, photo, and movie files. The following table provides an estimate of the media storage for music and photos for several hard disk size options. The example shows storage of 10,000 and 20,000 digital photos. There is no practical limit on photo storage except for available disk space. Addition of movie files will significantly reduce the space available for photos and music.

Disk Drive (GB)	160	320	500	750
CDs - 600MB				
WAV	165	350	650	1067
MP3*	1650	3500	6500	10667
Photos (5MB)**	10000	20000	20000	20000

* Encore uses optimum MP3 encoding to maximize fidelity.

**Assumes jpeg photos are 5MB size

Movies will reduce the amount of storage available for CDs and photos. CD and Photo storage space is interchangeable.