



## Barry Willis

Journalist for top American audio-video publications

While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

# 21st Century sounds

Marketed as the last box you'll ever need, all-in-one music servers are beginning to appear thick and fast. **Barry Willis** spends time with an upmarket offering from the US, and likes what he hears

The Olive Musica debuted a few years ago, represented a new genre of audio product – the music server, a hybrid of computer, CD player and CD burner. A versatile, good-sounding pioneering device, the Musica was hampered by a smallish hard drive, low-contrast black-and-white screen, and sometimes counter-intuitive operating system. Shortly after its release, San Francisco-based Olive promised to deliver a series of music servers with sleeker operation, larger storage capacity, and truly audiophile performance.

The Opus series fulfills that promise, and more. The Opus 4 HD is as delightful and stylish a piece of gear as I've brought home in a long time. With a raking front (easier to use on desktop or coffee table), a high-resolution colour touch-screen with just the right degree of sensitivity, enormous hard drive space, and stunning audio performance, the Opus makes standalone CD players suddenly seem quaint.

### HIGH DEFINITION

While much of its functionality can be duplicated with a notebook computer and outboard hard drive – such as archiving CDs, organising and/or manipulating your music library, burning a playlist to CD-R – the Opus 4HD makes home-brew music servers look clunky and inelegant, like something slapped together by an engineering student.

Its capacity is dazzling: the 1TB version of the Opus 4 can handle 1638 CDs as uncompressed WAV files (1411.2kbits/sec) or 2889 CDs as FLAC files (lossless compression, 800kbits/sec), or 18,059 CDs as ACC or MP3 files. The

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ABOVE: The Opus comes pre-loaded with a dozen Chesky Records HD tracks which, along with music ripped from your own discs, are processed by 192kHz/24-bit Burr-Brown PCM1792A DACs

trayless slot grabs a disc only after you've pushed it almost all the way in.

The 'HD' designation stands for 'High Definition', referencing some pre-loaded Chesky high-resolution recordings. Internet connectivity (wireless or Ethernet) lets the Opus download high-res recordings from the Chesky site, search for information regarding CDs loaded to the hard drive, and stream web radio via the Shoutcast portal. Rear-panel connectivity includes

USB, HDMI (for an external monitor), digital coaxial and optical, and unbalanced analogue outputs.

I used coax out, to an April Music DA100 Signature DAC (which couldn't recognise the bit rate of the high-res tracks) and analogue out, using

long runs of Mogami microphone cable to my Halo C2 preamp/processor.

Sound quality of the high-res tracks is astoundingly good – easily better than either my Oppo BDP-83 universal player in SACD mode or my Integra R1/Stello DA100 Signature/Magules Magenta ADE-24 compact disc playback chain. The Opus's playback of ordinary CDs, and of archived

tracks (WAV files) is superb: deep, seductive soundstage with tremendous dynamic shadings, excellent extension at the frequency extremes, and especially well-defined details.

### SIMPLY A BARGAIN

A favourite use is random mode. I like surprises of a sort, knowing that every track is one I like but having no idea about the order of playback. Oddly, 'Hungarian Rhapsody' is always the first track, but there a repeatable pattern stops. With the hard drive only slightly full, there's enough music to last an entire day without a repeat.

Its musicality, ergonomics, and build quality make the Opus 4 the equal or better of most dedicated CD players in its price range (\$2000 for the 1TB model; the standard CD-only version is cheaper).

And in the US at least, the company is offering to load 100 of your chosen CDs onto your Olive 4 for free, ripping them losslessly so that when your unit arrives your music is ready to play. Add in everything else it does so exceedingly well and it's simply a bargain.

Olive VP Robert Altmann says the company's primary markets are the US, Germany, and the UK. See [www.olive.us](http://www.olive.us).