

MT REVIEW

Tivoli Audio's NetWorks Global Radio

By John Figlio

While terrestrial and satellite digital radio have been struggling to either gain traction with consumers or establish a sustainable business plan, wifi internet radio is becoming an accepted digital transmission platform for radio in North America.

The emergence of a range of appliances with wifi radio capability at wider price points signals that a viable market for wifi internet radio is developing. During recent strolls through mass market stores like Best Buy and J&R, I have even started to see a few such radios displayed on their shelves.

One prominent and promising example of this trend is the new NetWorks Global Radio from Tivoli Audio. Having built its reputation as a purveyor of high quality, simple, but elegantly designed AM/FM table radios with a somewhat retro touch, Tivoli has decided to make a strong initial move into the internet radio sector.

Initial experience with NetWorks shows that it hits most of the high notes claimed. Furthermore, NetWorks' ability to activate feature and functionality improvements by regular firmware updates gives promise of the designer's clear intent to provide long term value.

❖ The Package

Included with the radio itself is a 9 foot (2.74 meter) power cord (the transformer itself is contained within the radio, a good feature), a remote control with battery installed, a 22 inch (55.2 cm) long USB accessory cable, operations manual and warranty card.

NetWorks is housed in a natural hardwood enclosure – available in cherry, walnut, or



wenge (a dark brown wood) veneers – measuring in inches 8.74Hx5.51Wx5.12D (in cm. 22.2x14x13) and weighing a solid 4 lbs. (1.8 kg). In keeping with the character of the Tivoli line, the face of the NetWorks has simply a display screen and a speaker.

The display is somewhat larger than most in this genre, which allows for a welcome four lines of information in white print on a blue background. This is an attractive pairing, offering good readability with brightness and contrast levels that automatically adjust to ambient light. When the radio is off, there are options to display time in a digital or analog format. If the display is deemed too bright for the bedside, it can be turned off entirely, with an ability to activate briefly by pressing the one inch round button on the center top of the box (or any button on the remote or at the back of the unit, for that matter).

When the radio is on, the first line of the display shows alternatively the name of the radio (which seems redundant given that it is permanently affixed to its face) and the web address of the NetWorks portal. (More on that later.) The second line shows the name of the station or stream being played.

The third line initially reads out the word "Playing," but through progressive clicks of the select button on the remote or back of the box it will show additional information, such as the type and speed of the stream and a more detailed description of the station or program. The fourth line is reserved for corner symbols indicating "S" (stereo) or "M" (monaural) and the strength of the wifi signal being received, with the time in digital format in-between.

The speaker cover is attractively prominent in gold, behind which is a robust 3.5 inch driver which delivers far more audio punch and clarity – with loftier highs and deeper lows – than any other wifi radio currently on the market.

❖ The Controls

NetWorks seems designed to be controlled primarily and optimally through its remote. Doing so manually is made cumbersome by placement of nearly all of the controls at the rear of the box. It would take almost incredible powers of memorization and tactile acuity to hit the correct buttons on the back while watching the screen in the front for response. Clearly, the designers intend the manual controls to be used sparingly, if at all. Therefore, one needs to take particular care not to misplace the credit card sized remote.

The round button on top of the radio controls on/off by pressing it on its center and volume by rotating it clockwise and counterclockwise. A quick tap on center will mute the audio and then reactivate it. When the radio is in alarm mode, pressing the button will grant seven minutes to snooze.

Apart from mirroring the controls on the remote, other features on the back of the unit include a mono/stereo switch (for when a second speaker or headphone is used for stereo reproduction), a balance control, a 3.5 mm headphone port, a USB port.

However, the remote gives the user the most efficient means of navigating to and through the various menus, station, stream and musical selection lists, raising or lowering the volume, programming and selecting the five preset buttons, and turning NetWorks on and off. In that sense, NetWorks is easy and intuitive to operate, despite the rather quirky design of the controls on the unit itself.

❖ The Connections

The NetWorks Global Radio, like all other radios in this genre, requires access to



Connections are found on the bottom of this unit instead of on the back for a neater look.

broadband internet. While many similar products only work with a wireless connection, NetWorks offers a choice between wireless and wired.

This Ethernet port is located on the recessed bottom face of the unit, along with a number of useful connection options. As with the controls placed on the rear of the unit, this is a unique arrangement that can create some problems, regardless of cosmetic considerations, if the space reserved in the design is not deep enough to clear the various plugs that could be connected to the unit. However, in most cases it appears that cords are malleable enough to allow bending so that the unit will still rest flat.

In addition to the power cord input, a 12V DC input is provided for an optional power supply when the unit is used on a boat or camper. There are also auxiliary in, mix in, and record out ports, as well as subwoofer and right speaker out ports (for connection of a Tivoli second speaker and subwoofer available at additional cost).

❖ Performance Overall

NetWorks operates in three modes: internet radio, music player, and auxiliary. In internet radio mode, the unit plays the streams of online radio stations and podcasts, notably including *BBC Listen Again* content which makes many BBC radio programs available on demand for seven days after first airing.

In music player mode, once properly set up and configured by the user, NetWorks plays music stored on your Mac or PC, except DRM-protected music. Music player mode also allows for playback of any content stored on a USB connected device.

In auxiliary mode, NetWorks can be used to play content from any other external audio source.

Without going into a great detail, connecting the NetWorks unit with a wireless (or wired) broadband network is direct, smooth and relatively quick. The process is not remarkably different from what has become characteristic of the genre. However, once initially configured, it is considerably faster from “switch on” to “play,” and this is a welcome improvement over much of the competition, some of which can take upwards of a full minute or more to complete the start-up process. When this happens every time the radio is turned on, it quickly becomes tedious. Notably, NetWorks gets this right – the listener is greeted with his selection quickly and efficiently with only a few seconds’ delay while content necessarily buffers.

As soon as it starts playing, NetWorks’ superior audio performance is immediately apparent. Its room filling sound possesses the clarity and depth that make it almost a musical instrument in itself. And even if you are particularly finicky about sound quality and don’t initially find the audio performance fully appealing, there are controls you can activate through the menus to set and store your own equalization preferences and get it right for you.

NetWorks Global Radio
Tivoli Audio, LLC.
Seaport Center
70 Fargo Street
Suite 901
Boston, MA 02210
USA
\$599.99
\$649.99 (with FM)
\$749.99 (with FM and matching additional speaker)
www.tivoliaudio.com

❖ As an Internet Radio Receiver

How well this genre of receiver functions is dependent, not only on the design of each radio itself and the strength of its connection to your home broadband network, but also on the radio’s link to a web portal that provides both content and a degree of user control over that content. The quality of both the NetWorks’ design and manufacture is nothing less than stellar and clearly apparent whether observing, handling, or listening to it.

In operation, the NetWorks maintains a solid connection to the home wireless network but the distance over which it can maintain that connection is partly determined by the user’s wireless modem. My experience in a medium-sized home indicated that its ability is at least better than average.

The NetWorks also exhibits a superior ability to handle streams that might otherwise prove problematical. This is in part due to a unique, proprietary feature that allows the user to selectively engage a “Superbuffer” that stores a larger swath of content to guard even further against loss of program continuity.

Tivoli’s proprietary web portal, found at www.tivoli-portal.com, seems a bit more of a work in progress. In a realm where there are upwards of 20,000 stations and podcasts, it may seem overly critical to point out that the NetWorks portal has on hand several fewer thousand sources (at this writing) than, for example, the reciva.com portal that services radios using its chipset. After all, as with other such portals, Tivoli does have a facility that allows users to request that sources not already listed be added to the overall list or to only that user’s radio. Also, a tour through what’s already on the list shows that most established and recognized streams are indeed there, as are popular features like *BBC Listen Again* and podcasts from dozens of major providers.

Nonetheless, some consumers may want the largest ready list possible, making this feature a factor in their purchase of a radio. Having a team monitor all such streams and maintain it on a daily basis is admittedly costly, but of considerable value to the user. With a radio at this price point, it is not unreasonable to expect more.

Furthermore, unlike some other portals, the Tivoli system is not automatic or instantaneous. From reading through the support messages on the site, it can sometimes take several days for Tivoli personnel to manually implement a user request. This may make some sense as a means of ensuring quality control, but it is not user

friendly and needs to be improved. For example, the Com One Phoenix (which I reviewed previously) has an automated system that immediately tests the requested stream for compatibility with the Phoenix firmware and adds it to the user’s source list instantaneously if it’s compatible. If the bargain-priced Phoenix can offer this convenience, Tivoli should be able to do the same.

However, maybe a more important factor for the user is the commitment level of the radio’s maker to supporting both the product and the web portal. In these respects, Tivoli gets full marks, where many others – including the aforementioned Com One – fall short. It has identifiable, live personnel assigned to address in a timely manner users’ questions or any issues that arise in their use of the NetWorks. Given the newness of this product and the genre generally, having such demonstrably active and attentive support is both comforting and encouraging.

A welcome, additional indication of the depth and degree of Tivoli’s support for its NetWorks Global Radio is the fact that there have been significant updates made to its firmware already, adding features and improving its operation. These updates are incorporated into the user’s radio effortlessly and seamlessly through the internet. All indications are that this will be a regular occurrence.

Thus, the currency of this radio will be retained for years to come, with the potential that any shortcomings identified now or new features developed in the future will be addressed by Tivoli. In this way, a purchaser’s decision to, in effect, invest in this radio will have been vindicated over and over again.

❖ Summary

As product lines mature, grades from basic to luxury develop. The fact that this is happening in this genre bodes well for both its longevity and stature in a very competitive radio/audio marketplace. The NetWorks’ \$599.99 entry price point is higher relative to other wifi internet radios on the market, but this is not at all a negative. Its buyers will value it both as a superior performer and an elegant design piece.

In sum, the NetWorks Global Radio is a premium product that justifies its premium price and – with the stated determination of Tivoli Audio’s founder Tom DeVesto to make and keep it the best wifi radio on the market – it will continue to do so for many years to come.

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