Roon $119/year or $499

This sophisticated option takes the computer-fronted system to places that makes it the envy of all rivals

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roonlabs Roon v1.6

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Licensed playback and server software

FEATURES
● Platform support: Mac; PC
● Format support: MP3; AAC; FLAC; ALAC; WAV; AIFF; DSD; MQA
● Full integration with Tidal and Qobuz
● Upsampling; EQ and room correction
● Compatible with multiple Roon clients and Roon-ready devices

WEBSITE
roonlabs.com

Relative newcomer Roon first launched in 2015 and has been making strong progress ever since. This is despite having the highest cost of any of the other options in the group – you can have lifetime memberships of Audirvana Plus or jRiver for comfortably less than a one-year subscription to Roon, but the case for its high costs becomes more compelling when you see how it operates.

Like the other software here, it can be installed on PC or Mac and used to control and send music to a USB DAC, but this barely scratches the surface of its capabilities. The computer running the Roon software becomes the 'Core' and can output content to any Roon client or Roon-ready device (see boxout) and is able to upsample the material in question to higher resolution rates including DSD.

Roon's interface is slightly different to the other software here. It is compatible with Tidal and Qobuz but rather than simply rendering them accessible via the Roon interface, any albums added to your favourites becomes part of a homogenous library. Roon also makes great play of featuring unique curation and genre organisation options as well. It's extremely clever, but I'm not a huge fan of the horizontal scrolling left-to-right interface it uses as standard and prefer the vertical approach of most rivals.

One area that I'm fonder of, however, is the relationship that Roon establishes with an external DAC. It has a Chord Electronics Hugo 2 profile stored in its database that automatically applies the correct maximum settings. From here, you can additionally apply any EQ and room correction settings as well as a Crossfeed function for headphone listening. There is also an excellent app on iOS and Android for controlling (and listening to) Roon remotely, which is available at no additional cost.

Sound quality

Having performed the straightforward setup procedure and selected the Hugo 2 profile as the output in the main zone with no upsampling or other processing applied, the differences in performance between it and the other software in the test are not huge, but they do add up. The noise floor feels less perceptible so that *Fake Empire* rises from total silence, which adds emphasis to the piano so it comes across as weighty and natural with vocals also sounding rich and well defined. It does a commendable job of opening out *Burn The Witch* and finds texture in its low end that makes it sound clearer and better defined.

The hi-res material is also handled well. *One Vision* is energetic and all of the considerable detail is worked into the performance without spoiling the overall balance of the piece. It handles *I Believe In You* with an excellent combination of natural tone and unforced spaciousness.

CORE VALUES

As well as supporting just a single computer into a DAC, Roon is compatible with more ambitious systems too. It will detect any device setup as a Roon client or described as Roon ready. These can then receive whatever is being played in the main system or different streams depending on your requirements, and can be controlled either from the 'Core' or from the app. It's extremely impressive, although perhaps a little too easy to accidentally play two things at once. Both iOS and Android versions of the control app work well.

The ultimate extension of this philosophy is the Nucleus+ server (*HFC* 439) priced at £2,500. This is a cut-down computer that runs Roon software, is controlled via the app and sends information out via USB or network connection. It isn't cheap, but ensures you get the best Roon experience possible in a device that is well made and silent in use.

All the upsampling options work well and can be adjusted on the fly, while DSD works seamlessly with the Hugo 2 DAC. A 4x upsampling setting results in a performance that has consistent gains in its immediacy and presence without affecting the commendable balance that is present.

With material from both Tidal and Qobuz streaming services added to the library, performance is absolutely consistent with that of stored material from my NAS drive. Roon has the ability to 'unpack' the MQA-encoded Tidal masters, but if you have a choice between hi-res streaming services it is Qobuz that sounds better here. Having it all available as a seamless library also makes for a much more compelling user experience and the ability of Roon to suggest recommendations for further listening only broadens its appeal ●
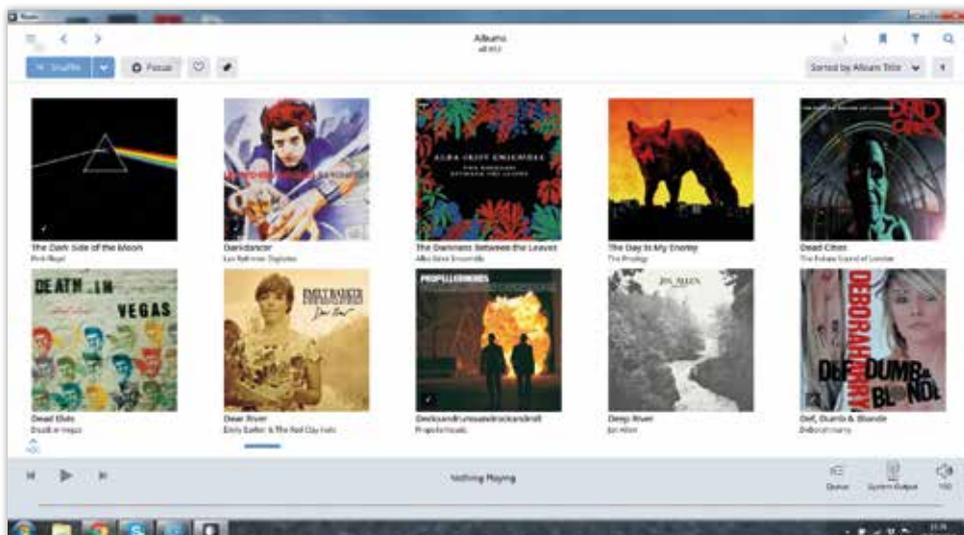
HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★½

INTEGRATION
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Excellent sound quality; superb curation and browsing; flexibility

DISLIKE: Price

WE SAY: Elevates integrated computer audio into a beautifully imagined and seriously capable piece of software that's an absolute joy to use

OVERALL

★★★★★