As seen in:
ELECTRONICHOUSE

Whole-House Music

Pipe music from a single stereo to every room in the house

PHOTO COURTESY OF LITETOUCH

Of all the electronic amenities you can choose for your home, one of the most enjoyable is a whole-house music system. Able to distribute tunes from one stereo system or server to multiple speakers located in every area, this system eliminates the need for many separate stereos and offers a convenient way to manage a growing library of music. At the press of a button, you can hear your favorite CDs, radio programs, satellite music stations and hard-drive stored tunes just as if you were standing in front of the family room stereo. ■ In addition to being convenient to use, a whole-house music system can help make any occasion seem much more special. For example, during a casual get-together with friends, the system could play a compilation of '80s tunes. When your guests leave, it could switch over to classical music. Even cleaning and cooking seem more enjoyable when accompanied by music.

One of the most important rooms to remember when designing a whole-house music system is the great room. Whether you're using the space to cook dinner or entertain friends, having a little background music is always nice.

Also appealing is the fact that you can access and control several music sources and play them simultaneously in different rooms—without sacrificing audio quality. For example, while you relax to a few jazz CDs in the master bedroom, your kids can still get the system to play their favorite rock station in the rec room.

The Rooms

It's hard to say where you might want to listen to music, especially if your home has yet to be built. But this is a decision that must be made early on. For one thing, many whole-house music systems distribute audio signals over low-voltage cabling, which is easier and more economical to install before a home is finished.

Professional audio/video installers usually recommend the family room, dining room, kitchen and living room be included in a whole-house music system. These are the areas where you are most likely to entertain and relax, so having music there will be important. It might also make sense to have music in the master bedroom, the master bathroom and the den. These areas are more private and isolated, but if you enjoy music, you're certainly going to want to hear it in these places as well. (What could be better than listening to your favorite tune while taking a long, hot shower?)

You might feel less certain about whether to include music in your guest bedrooms, unfinished basement and powder rooms, but at the very least, you should have your installer pull wire to those areas. That way, even if you don't install speakers there for several years, the wire will be there when you're ready. Should you convert a bonus room into a den, for example, you could easily add a pair of speakers and a volume control if the wire is already behind the walls.

The inside of your house isn't the only place you should prepare for music. If you plan on spending a lot of time outdoors, be sure the whole-house music system can reach the decks, gardens, patios and swimming pool. Consider places where you might eventually want to install a hot tub, a gazebo or some other outdoor element. Dig a trench for the wire before the lawn goes in, and run the wire to all possible places. The trench doesn't have to be very deep to keep the wire out of the way.

Each room or set of rooms can make up a listening "zone," similar to heating and cooling zones of a house. For instance, one zone could be made up of the master bedroom, master bathroom and hallway, while you might dedicate a room such as the kitchen to its own zone. Usually, an audio/video specialist will recommend that adjacent rooms be

By including your master bathroom in a whole-house music system, you can hear the news, a favorite CD or a satellite music station simply by pressing a button at the vanity.

grouped together into one zone. There's a simple reason for this: When rooms are close together, it becomes audibly difficult to separate one area from the other. So while it might seem like a good idea to be able to play different songs simultaneously in the kitchen and the adjacent breakfast nook, for example, what you'll likely hear is the equivalent of musical mush. Instead, think of listening zones as areas rather than as rooms. For example, many people choose to have a living area zone (which includes the kitchen and family room), a master suite zone, an upstairs zone (which includes the remaining bedrooms) and an outdoor zone. Or, if your family members all have the same taste in music and your house is small, you can simply have one zone. But remember: Having one zone means that only one song can play at a time. How you decide to divide your home will determine what type of system you need (*See the "Designing a Whole-House Music System" sidebar on this page*).

One method of preparing a house for music is outfitting it with Category 5 (Cat 5) Ethernet cabling. A number of whole-house music systems now utilize this type of cabling to transmit music from a main stereo system to a keypad. The music goes from the keypad to the speaker over traditional speaker wire. Another option is a system that delivers the music entirely from the stereo to the speaker via Cat 5, without any speaker wire necessary. No matter what kind of system you choose, using Cat 5 as the backbone of a whole-house music system offers many benefits. The cabling is inexpensive, and it can be used to network computers, telephones and other devices. Plus, an increasing number of builders are putting Cat 5 cabling in as a standard part of their homes.

Another feature to look for in a whole-house music system is its ability to handle video signals. This capability allows a whole-house music system to distribute video signals from a single DVD player, digital satellite receiver, media server and other components to every TV in the house. The video signals travel over cabling, so be sure to identify the locations of your TVs while your house is under construction.

The Keypads

In addition to deciding where you want to be able to hear music, you also need to consider how you want to control it. Naturally, each zone will need at least one wall-mounted keypad to allow you to call up your choices, enter a selection and adjust the volume. This keypad should be placed in a location that's convenient, such as near the entrance of the listening area. For example, in a zone that includes the master bedroom and master bathroom, it makes sense to install a keypad near the doorway to the suite. You could also put a keypad near the bed and another one by the vanity. The number of keypads you use all depends on how much control you desire—and of course what your budget is. If you're the type of person who can't settle on one radio station for more than a minute, then you might want to have the option of cueing a new source while you're in the bathroom or relaxing in bed. On the other hand, if you prefer to listen to a CD from start to finish, having the one keypad is probably fine.

Another thing to consider is the level of control you expect from each keypad. If you plan to use the system mainly for background music, a simple keypad with buttons should provide just the right amount of control. However, if you're serious about music, you might want to be able to see the titles of each disc and each song that is

DESIGNING A WHOLE-HOUSE MUSIC SYSTEM

Important questions to ask yourself before you select a system

- How many locations (both indoors and outdoors) do you want music to be piped to?
- How many people are likely to listen to different music at the same time?
- Is it possible that your family will be happy listening to the same music at the same time?
- Will you listen to music in the background while you are working around the house, or will you sit down specifically to listen to music?
- What kind of controls do you want in each room?

■ If your stereo system is too big to fit inside a traditional entertainment cabinet, consider having your builder construct a special music closet for the gear.

loaded in your CD player, iPod or audio hard drive. In this case, a more sophisticated keypad with a built-in screen would be a better choice.

The Systems

Based on your listening habits and expectations, your audio/video installer should be able to recommend a system that will work well for you. There are three levels of whole-house music systems to choose from.

1. The simplest type of system pipes music from one audio source to one zone that consists of two or three rooms. Usually the most inexpensive type of whole-house music system, it includes a basic audio/video receiver, volume controls for the rooms and a standard remote to select and control the music.

2. The next step up is a system that delivers a variety of music simultaneously to a fixed number of zones—six or eight are common amounts. Keypads and handheld remote controls are commonly used to cue and control the music with this type of setup.

3. The most sophisticated type of whole-house music system is one that can pipe music from an unlimited number of sources to an unlimited number of zones. Sophisticated touchscreens are typically used to control the music.

WIRELESS OPTION

It's often very difficult to route the wire of a whole-house music system inside the walls of an existing home. Fortunately, there's another option: a wireless music system. It's often difficult to route a distributed music system's wires inside walls of an existing home. Fortunately, you can go wireless. By utilizing the same technology prevalent in home computer networking systems, a wireless system can send music—like hard-drive stored or Internet radio tunes—to small receiver "clients" located in each room. Sonos, Linksys and Apple are good examples for this.

The Components

Given the huge variety of audio and video choices available these days, it's conceivable that a whole-house music system could have more sources than a typical entertainment cabinet can hold. For example, a system might include a CD player, a music server (a unit that can store music on a hard drive), two digital satellite receivers, a TiVo or other brand of digital video recorder, an iPod, a DVD player, and an AM/FM tuner. When you're juggling this many components, audio/video installers usually recommend building a special closet to house the gear. If you decide to create this type of storage area, you will probably want to locate it in a central part of the house for the sake of convenience. You can close off the opening with a door or keep it open if you prefer the high-tech look of a stack of black boxes. Be sure to identify where the closet will go when the blueprints of your home are being drawn up. That way, your builder can size the closet appropriately and add the necessary ventilation, while your audio/video installer can make the necessary wiring provisions.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY SCARPETTA, INSTALLATION BY AUDIO VIDEO DESIGNS, NEWTON, MA