

Tiny tunes

A complete guide to buying and using MP3 and MP4 players, plus a chance to win an iPod Touch

You may have heard digital media players being called both MP3 and MP4 players. What's the difference? Strictly speaking, MP3 players play music only, while the latest versions – MP4 players – also play video. However, the term MP3 player is often used to describe both types.

We have listened to, scrolled through and dropped 19 MP3 and MP4 players to bring you five Best Buys, including the Philips SA2820 (1), which we think is exceptionally good value at £20.

If you're not interested in video on the move, don't discount an MP4 player. They usually have a large screen,

making menu navigation easier.

However, if this isn't important to you either, a basic MP3 player will do the job. They tend to be lighter – perfect if you want to listen to your favourite songs while exercising, for example.

Some £227m worth of MP3 players flew off the shelves in 2007, and sales of digital music are skyrocketing. The number-one single is now more likely to be downloaded from an online music store than bought in the shops. We take a look at music download websites below.

Video downloads are taking off, too, with online music stores such as Apple iTunes now stocking films and TV



The Philips SA2820 is exceptional value at £20

programmes. Feature films cost from £2.49 to rent or £6.99 to buy. TV shows, usually available a day after broadcast, cost from £1.89. A typical half-hour show will take about 13 minutes to download to your computer on a 3Mbps internet connection.

How to buy music – and more – online

It's not hard to see why buying music online has become so popular. It's convenient, a little cheaper than buying music in the shops, and eliminates packaging. And, with a reasonably fast broadband connection, it's quick – you can download an album in minutes.

Music download sites

You'll find many music stores online, including websites from big high-street names such as

HMV, Woolworths and Tesco. They don't just offer the latest pop songs – you can find music from many genres and eras. If you're a classical fan, you may want to try www.classical.com and www.passionato.com.

Best Buys

Which? Computing tested music download sites in January 2008, rating them on ease of use, sound quality, flexibility and range of music. The Best Buys were iTunes (www.apple.com/uk/itunes) and Napster (www.napster.co.uk). If you have an iPod, iTunes should be the most convenient for you. If you have a different player, iTunes won't be so good due to the special file format that it uses.

Payment methods

You pay per purchase (a typical price is 79p a track, or £7.95 for

an album) but a few sites offer a subscription service where you pay a certain amount each month, giving you the right to download many tracks.

Napster.co.uk has two levels of subscription. With its standard service, you pay from £8.95 a month and can download as many tracks as you like for use on your computer. With the 'Napster To Go' service, you pay from £12.95 and are allowed to copy downloaded tracks to your MP3 player.

However, there is a drawback to this subscription-based service – once you stop your subscription, you'll no longer be able to listen to the music you've downloaded.

Digital rights management (DRM)

This is a copyright restriction built in to many music files. Essentially, it prevents you from



copying music completely freely. You may only be able to copy a track to a certain number of MP3 players, computers or discs.

Audiobooks

Literature fans are well catered for. You can download audiobooks from iTunes or dedicated sites such as www.audible.co.uk. Most MP3 players have a handy resume function – the equivalent of a bookmark. This memorises your place when you shut the player down so, later, you can pick up where you left off.





which? **EXCEPTIONAL VALUE**

1 MP3

73% Philips SA2820 £20

The 2GB SA2820 is a terrific MP3 player and, at 27 grams, it's incredibly light. Basic operations are simple and track information is easy to read, despite the small, monochrome screen. Audio quality from the supplied earphones is fine. It has an integrated voice recorder and a volume limiter. Its start-up time is a little sluggish, but it's very robust, so should withstand the occasional knock. It's cheapest at Amazon.

WE LIKED The battery lasts for 44.5 hours on a single charge.

Available Amazon.co.uk, Laskys.com Memory sizes available 2GB Uploading 100MB 49 sec Mac compatible No Radio No Resume Yes



ONLINE

Want to learn more about using iTunes? Watch our video guide at www.which.co.uk/advice/itunesvideo



8 MP4

75% Sony NWZ-A828 £160

The sound quality of this 8GB Sony MP4 player is very good. And, as well as listening to music, you can view photos and watch videos on the small screen – performance here is better than average. It's simple to operate – adjusting volume and changing tracks was easy. It's quick to start up, and the battery is excellent (lasting 11 hours for video). It's cheapest at Comet and Argos.

WORTH KNOWING This model is Bluetooth enabled, for wireless connection to Bluetooth headphones.

Available Argos, Comet, John Lewis Memory sizes available 2GB, 4GB, 8GB, 16GB Uploading 100MB 50 sec Mac compatible No Radio No Resume Yes



9 MP4

70% Apple iPod Touch 32GB £309

The 32GB iPod Touch is an excellent media player that's both attractive and functional. The 3.5-inch touchscreen is scratch resistant and clear – even on a sunny day. Sound quality is very good, and in our tests the battery played 27 hours of music on a single charge. It's a little heavy, but it's wireless enabled and comes with Apple's Safari. It's cheapest at Argos, Comet and John Lewis.

WORTH KNOWING We tested the older version of the Touch – see p46 for details of the latest model.

Available Argos, Comet, John Lewis Memory sizes available 8GB, 16GB, 32GB Uploading 100MB 24 sec Mac compatible Yes Radio No Resume No

which? **BEST BUY**

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Useful accessories Improve your player's sound quality – or turn it into a home music system

Headphones

If you feel the sound quality from your MP3 player could be better, a separately bought pair of headphones may do the trick. Back in August (*Which?*, August 2008, p48) we tested 26 pairs, including three sets of traditional over-ear style headphones, which outperformed everything else. If you're after the ultimate in sound quality, over-ear headphones are the ones to go for.

However, we did find some good plug-style earphones that were cheaper. Interestingly, the iPod in-ear standard

headphones fared quite well in this test, so it's not always worth upgrading.

We have more than 80 reviews of headphones online at www.which.co.uk/headphones, with more information on the four different types: over-ear, on-ear, in-ear and plug.

Our top-scoring headphones are the over-ear Bose QuietComfort 2 – at £225.

If you're after great overall performance from an over-ear set, but don't want to spend too much, we recommend the Best Buy Beyerdynamic DTX900. They scored 85% when we tested them in August 2006 – they're £49 and still available from Amazon.co.uk.

If you prefer more compact plug types, have a look at the Best Buy Sennheiser CX 400, which cost £38 from Amazon.

The JVC HA-FX66 are even cheaper – £16 from Amazon. They're not quite a Best Buy, but they still perform well.

Speaker docks

A speaker dock allows you to play your music out loud. Most speaker docks are primarily designed to work with iPods, although if you have a different MP3 player fear not, as most docks also come with a 3.5mm socket that will allow you to connect your player.

If you're after a bit more oomph and have a good home hi-fi system, you can buy a cable (under £10) that will connect your MP3 player to your system's aux input.

See www.which.co.uk/speakers for more information.





10 MP4

69% Creative Zen £150

The lightweight Creative Zen is a great device. It's easy to use and its battery lasted for 29.5 hours of audio and 5.5 hours of video in our test. Sound quality is OK, and picture quality is good. The Zen is well equipped, with a clock, calendar, FM radio, resume feature and a useful SD card slot. This MP4 player is cheapest at Comet.

WORTH KNOWING The main controls are on the right of the screen, so it may not suit left-handers as well.

Available Comet Memory sizes available
4GB, 8GB, 16GB, 32GB Uploading 100MB 32 sec
Mac compatible No Radio Yes Resume Yes



11 MP4

68% Sony NWZ-S616F £90

This well-designed gadget is a joy to use. Screen quality is good, and the controls are well arranged. The FM radio is a welcome feature, as is the volume limiter. Sound quality is acceptable, but battery life is impressive: it falls into the select band of players with an audio running time of more than 40 hours; and video running time of 8.5 hours is enough for three films. It's cheapest at Argos.

WORTH KNOWING Although the screen is good quality, it's a little small for watching feature films.

Available Argos Memory sizes available
2GB, 4GB, 8GB Uploading 100MB 52 sec
Mac compatible No Radio Yes Resume Yes



How we test



Music to our ears

We expect high standards of sound quality from MP3 and MP4 players.

Our experts listen to several pieces of music from a range of genres on the players, checking for flaws like distortion, poor stereo or interfering noises. They describe how the music sounds

(balanced, shrill, dull, muffled) to give their overall impression.

Tests are carried out using both the supplied headphones and a pair of high-quality headphones.

We also check for sound leakage from the supplied headphones to see how much, if any, noise escapes.

Transferring music from CD to your player

One of the advantages of MP3 and MP4 players is that you can carry many albums worth of music with you without hauling around lots of CDs (or indeed a bulky player). If you have a big CD collection and would like to transfer this music to your MP3 player, you'll need to use a computer.

Copying CD music tracks to your computer's hard drive is called ripping. From your computer's hard drive, you then copy the tracks to your player. However, you should be aware that this remains unlawful at the time of printing, even if the files are for your own use, as it amounts to copyright infringement.



Step 1

Ensure the necessary software is loaded on your computer. Windows Media Player is popular and easy to use. If you have an iPod you have to use iTunes.



Step 2

Place your CD in your computer's CD or DVD drawer and follow the on-screen instructions. At this point, you can choose the bitrate for your music – this is a guide to the sound quality. A bitrate of 192kbps is the ideal setting, although a lower quality 128kbps should be OK – not many people will notice the difference.



Step 3

If you're connected to the internet, your software should recognise the name of the album and its tracks – the newly created music files will be named accordingly. Connect your player with a USB or FireWire cable. You can now transfer the files. Simply drag and drop them from your computer to your player. iPods and some other players can synchronise with the computer automatically.

BEST BUY COMPETITION

**Worth
£618**

Win an Apple iPod Touch 32GB

We are giving two members the chance to win this Best Buy gadget.

TO ENTER, SIMPLY ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION

How wide is the screen on the Apple iPod Touch?

(a) 6 inches (b) 2.5 inches (c) 3.5 inches

To enter our Best Buy competition online, go to www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition or send your entry on a postcard to 'Best Buy November 08', Which?, Gascoyne Way, Hertford SG14 1SH.

Include your name, address and postcode, daytime phone number and Which? membership number (found on your Which? membership card as your user name). Entries received by 13 November 2008 will be entered.

Our competition is open only to current Which? members. Only one entry per household. Usual rules apply. See www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition or Which?, December 2007, p82, for a full set of rules. Prize: Apple iPod Touch 32GB.

Congratulations to the winners of our August competition:

■ Mr PG Williams from Bristol and
■ Mr HJ Robinson from Fleet.



Which? online Speaker docks

We are currently testing 16 of the most popular speaker docks, and you'll be able to see the results online in mid-December, at

www.which.co.uk/speakers.

We're putting a wide range of interesting models through their paces, from the £40 Gear4 Street Party to the £395 B&W Zeppelin.

Our current Best Buys, however, are the high-scoring, ball-shaped Intempo iDS-02 (pictured right), and the cube-like Logic3 JiveBox MIP 100. They cost £97 and £100, respectively, and are available from Amazon.



Curves are back in

Nano and Touch iPods are shapelier than ever

Apple has released new versions of its popular iPod Nano and Touch, just in time for the Christmas rush.

The new iPod Nano has a rounded aluminium case in a rainbow of colour options. It's taller and thinner than the previous model and has a larger screen. Apple also claims it has a longer battery life.

The funkier new feature is the updated shuffle: just shake the Nano and your songs will be rearranged.

You can buy the new Nano in 8GB or 16GB versions.

The new iPod Touch also has some extra

curves. It's a little thinner than the old one (9), and adds a few of the features found on the iPhone, including an external speaker and external volume controls.

Sizes remain the same, at 8GB, 16GB and 32GB.

Our first impressions of both models are online at www.which.co.uk/mp3players, and we'll publish full test results as soon as they're available.



Facts & scores

Other interesting details our testers uncovered

David

Our lightest player on test is the Creative Zen Stone (7) – a baby at 24 grams.



Goliath

The Cowon Q5 (12) weighs in at 389 grams. It also has the slowest start-up time – almost 25 seconds.



Rough 'n' tumble

Some question marks remain on the durability of the Cowon A3 (14). Several of our samples stopped working after our tough tumble test.



MODEL	PRICE (£)
MP3 PLAYERS	
1 PHILIPS SA2820	20
2 WHARFEDALE MP415	50
3 CREATIVE Zen Stone Plus	38
4 ALBA MP31GD12	15
5 CREATIVE MuVo T200	61
6 ACOUSTIC SOLUTIONS FM6611	15
7 CREATIVE Zen Stone ^b	30
MP4 PLAYERS	
8 SONY NWZ-A828	160
9 APPLE iPod Touch 32GB ^c	309
10 CREATIVE Zen	150
11 SONY NWZ-S616F	90
12 COWON Q5	396
13 SANDISK Sansa Fuze	48
14 COWON A3	297
15 MEIZU miniPlayer	108
16 iRIVER E100	72
17 SAMSUNG YP-S5J	130
18 WHARFEDALE FMP-205	60
19 SUMVISION ICE1000	35

^a These models are available with other memory sizes,

Contacts

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iriver.eu.com

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Sumvision
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USING THE TABLES

The more stars the better.

Specification

Price For Best Buys we give the cheapest widely available high street or online price as we went to press. Prices for other models are a guide. Go to www.whichcompare.co.uk for the latest prices. **Memory** A typical pop track recorded at a decent quality uses about 4.5MB of memory – 1GB of memory can store about 240 songs. **Mac** Models with a ✓ work with Apple

computers (all work with PCs). **Compatible music formats** The main digital music formats that the player accepts.

Compatible video formats 'Plays own format' requires you to convert the file first, using supplied software. 'Plays most common formats': these formats include AVI, WMV, MP4, Mpeg and ASF.

Battery

Type R = rechargeable; S = standard (non-rechargeable). **Running time** With supplied batteries.

Test performance

Sound with supplied headphones The best sound quality possible using the headphones supplied with the player. **Ease of use** Takes into account compatible formats, how easy it is to set up and operate the player, the quality of the instructions and the clarity of the menu system. **Watching video** Takes into account compatible formats, quality of the display, viewing the screen indoors and outdoors, ease of use and battery life.

Viewing photos

Takes into account viewing the photos on the screen indoors and outdoors, and the ease and speed of uploading and downloading photos.

Test performance

Score

Ignores price and is based on:

Ease of use	32%
Sound quality	16%
Battery life	12%
Viewing photos	10%
Viewing videos	10%
Features	8%
Portability	8%
Durability	4%

SPECIFICATION						BATTERY				WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE				SCORE %
MEMORY (GB)	MAC	FM RADIO	RESUME	COMPATIBLE MUSIC FORMATS	COMPATIBLE VIDEO FORMATS	TYPE	CHARGING TIME (hr)	RUNNING TIME MUSIC (hr)	RUNNING TIME VIDEO (hr)	SOUND WITH SUPPLIED HEADPHONES	EASE OF USE	WATCHING VIDEO	VIEWING PHOTOS	
2 ^a			✓	MP3, WMA, WAV		R	2	44.5		★★★★	★★★★★			73
8				MP3, WAV		S		42		★★	★★			57
2 ^a		✓	✓	MP3, WMA		R	1.5	22		★★	★★			54
1 ^a				MP3, WMA		S		13		★★★★	★★			51
4 ^a			✓	MP3, WMA		R	1.5	12		★★	★★			51
1				MP3, WMA, WAV		S		36		★★★★	★★			49
2 ^a			✓	MP3, WMA		R	1.5	27		★★	★★			47
8 ^a			✓	MP3, WMA, WAV	H.264	R	2	41.5	11	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	75
32 ^a	✓			MP3, AAC, WAV	H.264	R	2.5	27	5.5	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	70
32 ^a		✓	✓	MP3, WMA	Plays own format	R	2.5	29.5	5.5	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	69
4 ^a		✓	✓	MP3, WMA, WAV	H.264	R	2	40.5	8.5	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	68
40 ^a	✓	✓	✓	MP3, WMA, WAV	Plays most common formats	R	6	11	6	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	66
2 ^a	✓	✓	✓	MP3, WMA, WAV	Plays own format	R	2.5	28.5	6	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	64
30 ^a	✓	✓	✓	MP3, WMA, WAV	Plays most common formats	R	7	8.5	6.5	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	63
4 ^a			✓	MP3, WMA, WAV	Plays own format	R	3.5	17	4	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	60
4 ^a		✓	✓	MP3, WMA	Plays own format	R	3.5	19.5	5.5	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	58
8 ^a		✓		MP3, WMA	Plays own format	R	3.5	23.5	5.5	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	58
4 ^a			✓	MP3, WMA	Plays own format	R	2.5	10.5	4.5	★★	★★★★	★★	★★	47
2 ^a	✓	✓		MP3, WMA	Plays own format	R	2	11.5	3	★★	★★	★★	★★	45

sometimes with slightly different names. They perform almost identically, although occasionally there are minor differences – to battery life, for example ^a This model has no screen ^c This is the older model