



IN SIGHT

- 1 USB-A port (for drive or stick)
- 2 USB-A port (for external DAC)
- 3 Ethernet input
- 4 Ethernet output (to player)

Melco

N100 EX £2,000

This entry-level offering delivers the bonus of a very clever Intelligent Music Library system

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Melco N100 EX
- ORIGIN**
Japan
- TYPE**
Digital music server
- WEIGHT**
3kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
215 x 61 x 269mm
- FEATURES**
 - Input: USB-A; Ethernet
 - Outputs: Ethernet; USB-A
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Audiophile Digital Music Masters Ltd.
- TELEPHONE**
01252 784525
- WEBSITE**
melco-audio.com

Melco has rapidly built a reputation as one of the go-to brands for audiophile music servers, but the name – and the company heritage – is deep rooted. Melco Syncretis – the company behind the ‘Music Library’ series – was founded as part of Melco Holdings, the parent of storage manufacturer, Buffalo. That heritage means the Melco brand started off with a distinct advantage: it could make – and optimise for audio use – its own hard drives, rather than having to work with third-party components originally built for general data use.

Audio storage tends to be a case of write once, read many times, and Melco majors on isolating its drives, both electrically and physically, using its HS-S² (Highly Stable Storage System). And yes, it still uses hard drives. Not the solid-state drives some other brands champion, because it believes its 2.5in HDDs sound best.

The N100 EX, the most affordable Melco ‘Digital Music Library’, shares the styling of one half of the company’s two-box flagship N10, and comes with 2TB of storage, but – unlike the Bluesound, Naim and Novafidelity – has no internal optical drive for disc ripping. Instead you can transfer music to it over a network, using USB storage or simply plug in a USB disc drive to do the job. It also has a dedicated isolated USB socket to connect it to a DAC.

Also isolated, for less interference, is one of the two Ethernet sockets here, the idea being you connect it directly to your network player (if you’re using one), and use the other for network connection control, internet radio and so on.

Melco has its own Music HD app (only available for iPad) to control the N100 EX and this can also make use of the new models’ incorporation of Song Kong and MinimServer to provide intelligent music browsing,

with advanced tagging relevant to various genres of music. It also allows the N100 EX to access internet radio, Qobuz and Tidal.

Performance

Like the other digital-only offerings here – in other words, everything except the Bluesound – the Melco is tested with a variety of offboard DACs and digital-input amps: everything from AudioQuest’s DragonFly Cobalt (see p54), through Chord’s Mojo up to a very high-end Balanced Audio Technology unit we just happen to have hanging around (as you do...). And though any suggestion of anything other than ‘digits is digits’ is likely to set off an unending conflict, it’s hard not to conclude that the Melco sounds very good indeed as a digital source, even if the ultimate sound is going to be characterised by the DAC you use with it.

Even with the modest DragonFly, the sound delivered has appreciable scale, power and depth, along with excellent space and air at the top end – as is clear with the recent remaster of The Tallis Scholars’ *Allegri Miserere*. Meanwhile, with more exotic DACs the sense of control, detail and presence is thrilling – particularly Rory Gallagher’s live *Check Shirt Wizard* compilation. Throw in the ease of use of the N100 XD under the control of the Music HD app and its clever tagging, and we’re sold ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Clean lines; solid build; Intelligent Music Library software
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No disc ripping as standard; fixed storage capacity
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Heavy optimisation of both drives and connections pays off in the crisp, clean sound
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL

