FIRST LOOK

Logitech Squeezebox Radio

By Loyd Van Horn, W4LVH

Ahhh, the WiFi radio. Truly a marvel of modern technology and design, this simple device allows users to tune in radio stations from around the world – regardless of propagation conditions.

In recent months, with the explosion of Internet Radio – led mainly by the efforts of services such as Pandora and Slacker – we have seen an equally impressive explosion in the WiFi radio market. With so many choices, one can become blinded to the standout trees in the forest of offerings.

But, mark my words: the Logitech Squeezebox Radio is one of those standouts.

This device combines beauty and functionality in a way that few WiFi radios can claim. Simple, intuitive and effective, the Squeezebox Radio has certainly raised the bar for all other WiFi radio developers to strive for in their own efforts.

Most striking upon first glance is the full color LCD display. This enables stations that are packing graphics with their stream to display station logo, photos of DJs, etc.

But the beauty isn't only skin deep: the Squeezebox Radio packs plenty of features to give it functionality and an impressive sound from its single speaker. Digging into this radio was a definite delight.

❖ Out of the Box

The second you take the Squeezebox Radio out of its packaging, you know you are dealing with something a bit different. Its sleek, black styling and intuitive button layout makes it an attractive unit, whether bedside, in the office, or even in your living room. The Squeezebox also comes in red, for those who want something a little bolder.

The Squeezebox comes from the factory well packaged. The box includes the radio, AC adapter, a cable for connecting devices to the auxiliary input and a brief bit of documentation to help with set-up, although those with any experience with WiFi radios likely won't need it. If you are new to WiFi, it could be worth a glance.

A quick run-through of the buttons will give you an idea of what can be done with the Squeezebox. The main control you will be working with is the large push-button knob that allows for scrolling when entering WiFi encryption keys, browsing through menus and

more. It does require a little bit of a push when using the knob to make selections, so you may want to use your other hand to stabilize the radio.

Secondly, you will notice six silver buttons, three on each side of the LCD screen. These are for storing presets, which are really the easiest way to navigate through your favorite stations. I was surprised to find only six stations could be saved as presets, but there is a way to store your favorite stations through the Squeezebox web site, which I will cover later.

A note about using the preset buttons for Internet radio: In order for the radio to tune in those stations, you must be in the Internet Radio mode. Otherwise, it won't attempt to tune in those streams.

You will also find several other buttons that are helpful when navigating. The 'home' button (conveniently decorated with a graphic of a house) will take you back to the main menu screen. This can be helpful upon start-up to quickly change modes from Internet Radio, to auxiliary, to any applications you have installed on your radio. You will also find two buttons (one on each side of the main scrolling knob) which will allow you to either backtrack one screen (the button on the left) or to resume paused streams (the play button, to the right of the knob).

The included AC adapter is not a large wall-wart, but as with most WiFi radios, it is a transformer nonetheless. I did like how the plug for the outlet was on a separate, removable adapter, which means that when traveling overseas, you can easily match the outlets with other adapters from Logitech.

The included documentation is a simple fold-out that shows button layout, how to con-

nect the radio to a WiFi network, and a trouble-shooter (which I found handy later).

❖ Performance Test

Looks are nice, but how does the Squeezebox perform? After turning the radio on the first time, it required me to install a few updates. It took about 5-10 minutes, so I grabbed a cup of coffee and returned to find it was ready to go.

The Squeezebox had no trouble finding my Linksys Wireless-G router. When reviewing WiFi radios I will go to the opposite end of my apartment (through several concrete walls) to see if there is any signal loss. Amazingly, the Squeezebox seems to have the strongest reception of any radio I have tried to date. The documentation included with the radio says it is also compatible with 802.11n and 802.11b networks.

No wireless router? No problem. The Squeezebox includes a 10/100 mbps Ethernet interface as well with Auto MDX.

I found that entering data on this unit was a bit easier than on other WiFi radios I have tried. The knob seems to be easier to control when scrolling quickly and if you make a mistake, the back button just to the left of the knob makes it easy to correct it. I have seen other WiFi radios where the backspace is actually another selection that you have to scroll to, which can be time consuming if you are as clumsy as I am entering WEP keys.

The first station I tuned in was WWL-870 AM in New Orleans, LA. After a short buffering period (maybe 5 seconds, tops) I was listening to rich, full audio from the Big Easy. Adjusting the volume on the Squeezebox is handled by a separate knob just to the left and below the main knob.

One feature of the volume control I absolutely loved was the push-button mute. Rather than a separate button or a key found only on a remote control, pushing the volume button mutes the audio on the Squeezebox. This is particularly handy when you get a phone call or an irritating commercial comes up.

Searching for stations is relatively painless. The menus on the Squeezebox are unlike most of those found on WiFi radios; those who use Reciva-based systems will find it familiar, but with a different interface from what you are used to.

There is even a selection on the Internet Radio menu that will bring up every local radio station that streams online. Upon finding this, it no longer mattered to me that the Squeezebox didn't include an FM receiver for normal listening purposes – although I would still suggest this should be a required feature on all WiFi radios. This way, even when the power goes out or the net goes down, users can still use their WiFi radios as a means of obtaining local information. (Just a thought.)

In a short time, I had already set up my six preset stations. I switched over to a music station (RTE Chill, which would give me a good idea of this low end the unit can crank out) and was blown away. The unit comes with both a 3/4-inch soft-dome tweeter and a 3-inch woofer, for impressive response to both highs and lows. I was worried the audio would come out a bit boxy, but I was relieved when I heard true-to-sound highs, rumbling lows and even crisp mids. The audio reproduction from the tweeter and woofer were surprisingly authentic.

I found that turning the volume up halfway was more than adequate to fill my entire office-area with sound. I turned the volume to 100% and noticed little, if any, audio quality loss or distortion. The unit only has the one main speaker system, so audio is not in full-stereo, but this is a minor inconvenience, and one that only true audiophiles would notice.

Need to listen a bit more privately or trying not to disturb others? The Squeezebox has a 3.5 mm stereo headphone jack on the side. This also could be a handy way to hook your Squeezebox up to a larger stereo system for more audio punch.

To truly test the functionality of the unit, I decided to try it out over several weeks in various settings. These included in a home office for background music, bedside as an alarm and as a sleep aid, and in a living room as a featured entertainment device.

In the office, I put the radio about two arms-lengths away on a bookshelf and set the volume at about 30 percent. This seemed to be ideal for providing background music or for quietly listening to talk-radio content without disturbing others in the room and still enabling conversations at normal speaking volume.

Bedside, I have grown to love the Squeezebox even more. Not only is it a fantastic sleep aid, but a terrific alarm clock, too. It took me a bit of trial and error to find comfortable volume settings at night that wouldn't keep me awake. Once I did though, I was falling asleep each night to the sounds of George Noory and the nightly Coast-to-Coast AM audience. A built in sleep-timer can be used to turn the unit off after a specific amount of time. (After waking up in the middle of the night the first few nights because of loud commercials, I realized how helpful this feature was.)

My favorite feature of the Squeezebox for bedtime use is the auto-dimming display. Turn the lights on: the screen brightens for easier reading. Turn the lights off: the screen dims so that you don't have a night light keeping you awake. There are also a large assortment of preset alarms, including nature sounds, so you never have to awaken to an intrusive air-raid siren again.

In the living room, I tested the radio out for listening to sports programming in a room full of talkative people. The Squeezebox more than adequately provided clear audio without having to be turned to intrusive volume levels. It also has served as a great interface in the living room for my iPod when cleaning the house or just relaxing on a weekend and listening to some music.

Where other WiFi radios have come up short, the Squeezebox has come through with features that make this an indispensable unit in the home.

❖ Other Considerations

There is a compartment on the underside of the radio that allows for use of an optional rechargeable battery pack. This means the Squeezebox can be taken outdoors, and with weather warming in the Northern Hemisphere, the Squeezebox could be the perfect complement to outdoor barbecues, backyard football games and even near the pool. Mind you, the Squeezebox is NOT weather-proof, so just make sure you bring it indoors and keep it out of the water. A recessed handle in the top of the unit makes carrying the Squeezebox between the backyard and back inside a little more comfortable.

One thing I didn't like about the Squeezebox is that the remote control for the unit is a separate (and therefore additional cost) option. Almost every other WiFi radio on the market has made this a standard feature and would have made this the perfect radio, but for those who wouldn't use the remote control, this is a minor issue. Still, it is one feature I would have like to have seen included with the unit.

The expandability of the Squeezebox is another big plus for this unit. You can go to the Squeezebox web site and set up your favorite radio stations on your account, which is linked to your radio. That means, while you can only have six radio stations preset to the unit's buttons, you can have just about any other station you want just a few clicks away.

Another big feature of the Squeezebox is its applications integration. Yes, everything these days is jumping on the app bandwagon. You can download apps for Facebook, Rhapsody, Amazon and more.

You can also stream music directly from your home computer through your Squeezebox. This has become a standard feature on most WiFi radios these days, but it helps turn your entire home into a wireless jukebox.

❖ The Final Word

I love this radio. The audio is rich, full, and booming and doesn't require turning it to 100 percent to hear; it is perfect to have bedside, but equally holds its own in louder environments as well. It is attractive, has a great set of features, and it is easy to use.

This is a great introductory unit for those looking to get into WiFi radio, but those of us who are already experienced with it, can still find much to like about the Squeezebox.

Short of including the optional remote control with the unit from the factory, I cannot think of much else to improve upon in the design, the interface or in the electronics. If you have been holding out and waiting for the perfect WiFi radio to come along, wait no further: this is it.

The Squeezebox retails for $199.99 and can be ordered directly from Logitech as well as various Internet sources.

RATINGS

Audio Quality – 4.5 out of 5 stars (would love for the audio to have been in stereo)
Performance – 5 out of 5 stars
Features – 4 out of 5 stars (the optional remote would have been great included with the unit)
Design/Appearance – 5 out of 5 stars
Overall Rating – 4.5 out of 5 stars

WEB SITES

Logitech web site: **www.logitech.com**
Squeezebox: **www.mysqueezebox.com**