

MEDIA PLAYERS

Mede8er MED500X2

Even better magic

As regular readers of AVSA know, I'm a keen fan of the Mede8er media player family, and currently run both a MED500X and a MED400X in my home network.

Besides the fact that these players link excellent video processing to extended compatibility with a wide range of audio and video codecs, they're also very well supported, with an active forum of users and developers, and regular firmware updates, often addressing user requests.

It comes as no surprise then that these players just keep on getting better. Ongoing improvements to the firmware have seen big strides in the user interface, which has become the slickest and most intuitive in the business, while catering for both geeks and novices.

The debut of the Mede8er 500X2 marks a further round of updates to that interface, together with extended support for more formats and codecs. At the same time, the hardware has also been improved.

Changes include the introduction of a new Realtek processor, increased memory, and

support for SATA2 drives of up to 3 TB. New integrated heatsinking allows the heat generated by these drives to be dissipated more efficiently, while a quieter 40 mm fan and revised TPE fan mounts reduce noise.

For Mac supporters, there's also good news: the X2 now offers 'basic' support for Mac HSF+ formatted volumes.

The Ethernet port now supports gigabyte speeds, and the USB slave port is USB 3.0-compatible – an example of some pre-emptive future-proofing, as the USB 3.0 interface is only starting to come on stream. The optional Wi-Fi dongle will run up to 802.11n, with potential transfer speeds of 300 Mb/sec.

Mede8er also states that the 500X2 will allow the use of an even faster PCIe wi-fi kit, to be offered as an optional aftermarket upgrade at a later date. For those with an allergy for wiring, that sounds like a promising development, and one we'll report on as soon as we get to sample one.

A glance at the summary of supported audio and video codecs and formats listed in our Vital Stats box shows that the 500X2 is compatible

with a wider range than ever before. In fact, it can cope with pretty much anything.

However, most of the improvements offered by the X2 are directly related to the enhanced user interface. The Mede8er has always been a powerful and versatile device, but the previous interface was clunky and less intuitive than it could have been.

The latest GUI addresses this element comprehensively. It is not only prettier, slicker and faster, but it also provides greatly extended functionality.

Thus, you'll find an extended range of on-line options, which now includes media streaming. This allows access to services like YouTube XL, a variety of video podcasts, Facebook and Twitter. A wireless keyboard is a must-have, though.

Internet radio remains as before, although it appeared the number of services on offer have been reduced. You can still search by genre, and store regularly accessed stations as favourites.

The improved interface places a lot of emphasis on being able to browse, identify and



Vital Stats

play movies and music from a large catalogue – important, since the extended internal capacity of the X2 means that movie libraries can run into hundreds of items.

For starters, the Mede8er now supports extended metadata via a feature dubbed XML Med Data. It provides information such as a rating, a synopsis of the plot, a list of the actors and the movie's running time. Existing collections have to be scanned using a Mede8er-specific info acquisition programme called Y2M, available from the Mede8er website.

The program scans collections on the 500X2's own hard drive, and on locations such as USB drives and network locations. There are some naming conventions to consider; but the effort is well worth it, because suddenly, an entire movie collection can be browsed with far greater convenience than before. It works for series, too.

There's a choice of five different views in the Media Library – movies, music, picture, list and preview mode. The Video Wall feature, which arranges movie titles by cover art, has been retained, too.

Searching and browsing is further assisted by 'Go To' and 'Info Search' functionality, which again allows the user to find a specific item quickly. Or you can press an alphanumeric key, and all content starting with that letter/number is displayed. Of course, you can still search for media-specific content such as movies/series, music, or images, but only on the internal HDD, or an attached USB drive.

The extended Favourites functionality is another enhancement. Almost anything – a movie, an Internet radio station, a series, a music album – can be stored as a favourite, regardless of its location. All these favourite links are consolidated on a single page, which can be amended at any time.

As before, the MED500X2 offers PIN-protected content management to prevent youngsters from viewing rated material, for instance. And the watched indicator has also been carried over, providing an at-a-glance reference of content that has been watched before.

For those interested specifically in the music playback capabilities of the 500X2, the good news is that playback support has been extended to include FLAC files of up to 192 kHz/24-bit, although only on pass-through via the SPDIF digital outputs. In other words, you'll need a standalone DAC, or an AV receiver with DACs capable of coping with

high-res signals.

Comparing the MED500X2 directly with my existing MED500X and MED400X units, I could see no difference in video processing quality, which was quite superb in all instances. Colours were lush, resolution crisp, and contrast levels excellent, while there were no movement-related artefacts.

Video quality has always been a talent of the Mede8ers, and this latest model is certainly no different. Given any half-decent video file (even reasonable AVI files) the MED500X2 really made the most of the video on offer. MKVs were glorious, and true high-def files were given the reverent, top-quality treatment they deserve.

On the sonic side of the AV coin, the Mede8er leaves the real work to external devices, although it will downmix multichannel content to two-channel stereo if required. However, in most applications, users will use HDMI audio or SPDIF digital (coaxial or Toslink) to feed digital audio to the system's AV receiver, or a standalone DAC.

Thus, outright sound quality is more a function of the encoding quality of the movie or music content, and the ability of the associated amp/receiver/DAC to translate the digital signal into decent sound. Using a Marantz SR-6003 AV receiver, and a coaxial digital feed, produced excellent results for both two-channel stereo music and DTS/Dolby Digital surround sound.

On that note, the X2 does offer improved support for music and playlists, and does a decent job of reading a variety of lossy and lossless formats. Again, it accompanies this with track listings and cover art, and also offers playlist creation, together with repeat and random play, making it a viable party jukebox.

The Mede8er MED500X2 is easily the best and most polished member of the Mede8er family. It combines excellent performance with a superior, highly functional and yet intuitive user interface and further extended functionality.

Important to mention here is the very pro-active support being offered for all Mede8er products. Firmware updates are a regular occurrence, and joining the Mede8er forum for access to this ongoing improvement process is a must.

The Mede8er MED500X2 ups the ante yet again, making it one of the very best and most versatile media player buys in the business.

Deon Schoeman

Processor	Realtek RTD1185
Memory	256 MB DDR2 SRAM, 256 MB SPI Flash
Video resolution	Up to 1080p (1920 x 1080), 24 Hz
Supported video formatsAVI, BDMV Light, BDISO Light, MKV, TS, TP, TRP, M2TS, MPG, MP4, MOV, M4V, VOB, ISO, IFO, DAT, WMV, ASF, RM, RMVB, FLV resolution up to 720p/1080i/1080p.
Supported video codecsMPEG-1, MPEG-2, MPEG-4 SP, ASP, AVC (H.264), XviD, DivX, WMV9 (VC-1), RealVideo 8/9/10 (up to 720p)
Supported audio codecsMP3, MP2, OGG Vorbis, APE-APE Cue, PCM, LPCM, AAC, RA, Dolby True HD and DTS MA (pass-through on HDMI), LAC up to 24-bit/192 kHz, WAV, WMA Standard (DRM and Advanced Profile not supported)
Supported image formatsJPEG, BMP, PNG
Supported file systemsFAT32 (up to 2TB), NTFS (up to 3TB), MAC HFS+ (USB Only)
Inputs/outputs	HDMI 1.3, component video, composite video outputs Analogue stereo RCA output SD / Sony Pro Duo card slot SPDIF optical and coaxial digital audio outputs USB 2.0 host ports (x2) USB 3.0 slave port
Network Ethernet, NAS compatible. Optional Wi-Fi.
Hard driveUp to 3 TB, SATA2-compatible

VERDICT

Tweaks to hardware and further, significant improvements to software and interface make this the ultimate media player. Exceptional breadth of capability, and more user-friendly than ever.

PRICE..... R2 500
Excl Hard Drive

SUPPLIED BY Sanji Electronics
011-266-7500

WEBSITE www.mede8er.co.za