

# Custom Home

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## Trend Lines/Technology

# Personal Touch

A new system offers intelligent audio control.

In the early days of multi-room audio, homeowners gladly took what they could get: AM/FM radio, a CD player, and maybe a tape player delivered to a few zones around the house. From remote keypads, they could control volume, advance tracks forward and back, and choose radio station presets. But they had to store presets in their own memories, too, since there was no return data to tell them which station they were hearing.

Later on, Category 5 wiring to and from keypads enabled consumers to get limited feedback from the tuners, CD play-

### The Digital Home

By Rebecca Day

ers, and cable TV music channels. You knew you were listening to, say, CD No. 3 in the changer or preset No. 5 on the FM dial. But if you couldn't remember that it was Kim Carnes who sang "Bette Davis Eyes," the display couldn't help you.

The digital era has changed everything. Our iPods feed us the names of the track, artist, and album that are playing. XM Radio and Sirius give us those plus the scores for the baseball and football games we follow. It's no longer enough just to hear music or entertainment. We

want to know who, what, when, and how much time is left. After all, it's the Information Age and we expect our electronics to keep up.

Add to that the variety of music sources we want at our fingertips, and the old sound systems are no longer suited to the task. The successful multi-room systems of the future will pack the flexibility and bidirectional communications required by current and future digital audio sources.

Niles Audio has a leg up on the future with its latest distributed audio system, the IntelliControl ICS (Integrated Control Solutions). Unlike conventional multi-zone systems, IntelliControl ICS can be personalized to a homeowner's specific audio needs. If you want to know the name of the Bonnie Raitt song playing on XM Radio, the display on any ICS interface—whether it's a touchpanel, wall-mounted keypad, or handheld remote—will read out that it's "Trinkets" from the *Souls Alike* album.

It's not just about convenience. Menu-driven digital sources demand user interaction for consumers to be able to operate the device. To browse through a category of satellite radio stations, you need to be able to see the category you're in. To get to the MP3 player list of playlists, you have to get to the Playlist menu first.

"Older multi-zone systems pretty much came the way they came," says Frank Sterns, president of Niles Audio. "You'd stack a CD player and radio on it, and in order to customize it you had to write custom software for each touch-screen or keypad to make it do what the customer wanted. It was very expensive because of all the programming." Niles addressed the



**Niles Audio's new distributed audio system provides flexibility for users without the need for programming by installers.**



**For both new and retrofit projects, IntelliControl ICS operates via a GXR2 receiver (below) and remote controls (left), keypads, and touchscreen controllers.**

cost issue with a system that eliminated all the programming by offering a set group of sources, but that limited the flexibility for the user. "You could have AM/FM and then three other sources that were infrared-controlled," he says. "Installers didn't have to do any programming because it wasn't very flexible."

Sterns says IntelliControl ICS brings back flexibility for the user without the need for programming by the installer. The system uses Ethernet-based Web server technology to go out and look at connected devices and then automatically draw the proper interfaces for whatever equipment is connected to the system.

At the heart of IntelliControl ICS is the GXR2 receiver, which is based on card modules, one for each source. Homeowners

choose modules based on their particular tastes. One family could choose two satellite radio tuners and four iPods, one for each member of the family. Another might opt for six separate sources: an AM/FM

radio, Sirius tuner, CD player, satellite TV music channel, MP3 player, and music server.

Card modules can be swapped or added at any time, and as new technologies emerge, the system can be updated with a new card to add a new source to the system.

The company is currently working on modules for HD Radio, along with its own music server that will be launched in September and for a video-based system that will debut within a year. When the video system launches, the number of available sources will expand to a number that has yet to be determined. The system supports 30 zones.

Niles has taken the Switzerland approach to satellite radio, offering both XM and Sirius to meet the tastes of its customers. "One customer is going to pick Sirius to hear Howard Stern," says Sterns, "and someone else is going to want XM Radio to get their favorite baseball team. We want to serve both." The system can also play "legacy audio" music from products including CD players, cable TV music channels, and music DVDs, although the data from those devices can't be sent to keypads or remotes. You can listen to a satellite TV music channel but can't view the song title or artist.

User interfaces come in the form of remote controls, keypads, and touchscreen controllers. From each device, users can not only control sources and volume for that particular room but for any zone in the house. For parents wanting to issue an all-off command without having to do nightly rounds to each room, this is an especially welcome feature.

Unlike most sophisticated whole-house audio systems, IntelliControl isn't just for new construction. Although the system can be wired to keypads with Cat 5 cable to take advantage of the structured wiring systems currently in homes, it doesn't have to be. "It's completely retrofittable," says Sterns. The system can be installed as a wireless solution using the Zigbee meshed network wireless networking standard. Zigbee is a radio-frequency standard that can operate through walls and floors, making it particularly useful for outdoor audio systems where wired keypads and touchscreens aren't practical. A system can incorporate a combination of wireless and wired keypads if a homeowner chooses.

The ICS system carries a premium compared with other Niles systems. Minimum price to consumers for receiver, three card modules, user interfaces, and speakers for six zones is about \$5,000. The price goes up as you add rooms, interfaces, and sources. The company positions IntelliControl ICS as its high-end system, and it will be sold through select Niles custom installation professionals who cater to custom and semi-custom home buyers.

The company is looking at the system for upscale multi-dwelling units as well, Sterns says. "We're seeing a trend in the market where people are downsizing after their kids are gone but still want an upscale lifestyle," he says. "They're getting rid of



the house but moving into a luxury condominium where they want amenities like high-end kitchens and whole-house audio. This would be a perfect fit."—*Rebecca Day specializes in writing about home electronics. She can be reached at [customhomerd@aol.com](mailto:customhomerd@aol.com).*



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