
Rick's Place

Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience

by Rick Hein, AMIS web master

After tea, they had some music. For they were a musical family, and knew what they were about, when they sung a Glee or Catch, I can assure you: especially Topper, who could growl away in the bass like a good one, and never swell the large veins in his forehead, or get red in the face over it. Scrooge's niece played well upon the harp; and played among other tunes a simple little air (a mere nothing; you might learn to whistle it in two minutes), which had been familiar to the child who fetched Scrooge from the boarding-school, as he had been reminded by the Ghost of Christmas Past. When this strain of music sounded, all the things that Ghost had shown him, came upon his mind; he softened more and more; and thought that if he could have listened to it often, years ago, he might have cultivated the kindnesses of life for his own happiness with his own hands, without resorting to the sexton's spade that buried Jacob Marley.

Charles Dickens
A Christmas Carol

Glad tidings of the festive season, whatever celebration(s) you choose to honour. In this seasonal time of preparation, it is worth surveying some of the 'treats' you may be considering for yourself or for those you love.

The world of digital music players has been revolutionised yet again by the iPod Nano and the iPod Video. The iPod Shuffle (120 or 240 songs) is the perfect music carrying device for when you want to listen to music you like, but aren't particularly fussed by what songs they are. The size of a USB drive, it slips easily into a pocket. A friend likened it to being just like radio only there's no annoying disc jockey, no annoying ads and you like all the music. The iPod Nano (500 or 1000 songs) is for serious amounts of music - with the larger one you can put your entire teaching repertoire of recorded music into an object as thick as a pencil and roughly the size of a credit card. Colour screen, by the way.

For the true believers, the top of the range is *de rigueur*. I'll let Apple say it:

In 30GB and 60GB models that hold up to 15,000 songs, full-colour album art and up to 25,000 photos, the new iPod makes the most of your music and more. Yeah, you've heard that tune before. Only now, you can watch it, too. With support for up to 150 hours of video and a 2.5-inch colour display, the new iPod lets you take music videos and TV shows on the road.

To assist you in the size of digital music player you may need, my iTunes library at school currently has 181 items, a mere 15.3 hours of continuous music. It will fit into 1.24 Gigabytes of hard disk space. These are mostly jazz and pop selections between two and seventeen minutes. Your mileage may vary.

Why have I only mentioned Apple instead of the the fine offerings by Sony and Creative? The iPod variants hold over a seventy percent share of the market on average in all types of digital music players. I'll be the first to admit, they don't have FM tuners, and the Shuffle doesn't even have a screen. However, most people who want FM radios will spend the £9.99 to buy the credit card sized radio. If they want to listen to their own mixes or creations, they don't need a tuner.

If a digital music player isn't in your sights, there are new speaker accessories from Bose, Harmon Kardon and Altec Lansing to lift your computer, digital player or computer to dizzying heights of fidelity. There are also a variety of solutions to link your computer's music playing capabilities into your home wireless network so you can connect to speakers all around the house without stringing wires. If it is headphones you need, look at the range of headphone/microphone sets from Sennheiser. "Why do I need a microphone?" I hear you ask - all the better to Skype you with, my dear. If you have even an entry level broadband connection you can sign up with Skype and have free long distance telephone calls to other Skype users anywhere in the world. This is an extension of the AOL Instant Messenger/iChat/MSN Messenger technology called Voice over Internet Protocol.

I haven't even begun to cover the camera technology that is now available. A five megapixel camera with a 3X optical zoom lens is around £100 - down from £400 a year ago. Memory cards for cameras are so inexpensive now there is no reason not to buy the biggest one you can afford and take only high quality pictures. A five megapixel camera at highest quality will quite happily print a stunning A4 size image. Perfect stocking stuffers are the ubiquitous USB drives (thumb drives, pen drives...) with the 256 MB models available for under £15. Friends don't let friends use floppy disks.

The technology season is long and bright; by the time many of us meet in next year, all this will be old news and the next wonders of the manufacturers will be amazing us. I hope that your technology wishes will be granted in this holiday season and that they will serve to help you cultivate "the kindnesses of life" for your own happiness and the happiness of others.

Rick Hein
rahein@mac.com
