



SpeakerCraft

MODE Multiroom Audio System

The old adage is that “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” That seems to be the philosophy of most A/V manufacturers; when a new feature appears, their solution is usually to sell you a whole new system. In fact, it’s happening *right now* with HDMI: The only way to realize all the benefits of the latest version (1.3) is to purchase a new DVD (Blu-ray or HD) player. And receiver. And TV.

That’s why SpeakerCraft’s MODE system is so refreshing. Instead of abandoning the multizone distribution system they created several years ago, the company engineered a way to integrate new keypads with full metadata feedback that lets you see artist, album, and track information anywhere in the house — hence the name, for Music On Demand Everywhere. Plus, these next-generation keypads can easily replace those *already* installed in existing Speakercraft systems. Sound too good to be true? Read on to see how well they pulled it off. . . .

SETUP

SpeakerCraft’s lineup includes three multizone controllers compatible with the MODE keypad, and my review system included the middle-of-the-line MZC-66 (\$1,920). As the heart of the system,

the MZC-66 routes audio *and* video from six sources to six stereo zones, and has an onboard 12-channel amp rated at 30 watts per channel. Its ability to distribute composite video isn’t unique, but it is unusual — and awesome — at this price point. Keypads, whether the older MKP series or the far cooler new MODE 3.1 (\$399 each), derive both power and control signals over Cat-5 cabling. Audio signals run directly to the speakers from the MZC over traditional speaker wiring.

Like an audio mullet, the MZC chassis is business in the front (with only a single power button) and party in the back, with a rear panel *bristling* with connections. Beyond the inputs you’d expect for each of the six A/V sources, you’ll find the video outputs and requisite keypad and speaker connections for each zone. On top of that are IR connections, buffered source outputs, zone amplifier outputs, a contact closure input, and two expansion ports.

These forward-thinking expansion ports are what make adding the new MODE components possible. And while you *could* simply use the MODE keypads as cool system controllers, they really shine when you add the MODE Jukebox server (not tested; \$2,350 for single-zone output, \$3,600 for 4-zone), or one or

more iPods. Assimilating your Pod tunes requires three additional parts: the MODE Base (\$120), the MODE Adapter (\$120), and the PS-3.0 power supply (\$55). An MZC system supports up to six Bases, or six separate Pods connected at once. This means that Dad, Mom, and the kids can all have access to their favorite tunes and playlists. An Adapter is required for each Base, though a single PS-3.0 can power up to six Adapters.

Cat-5 wiring connects each MODE Base to its Adapter. (Runs of over 250 feet — pretty unlikely in most residential installs — require a local power supply.) This means that you can place the docking Base wherever it’s most convenient — in the kitchen, the bedroom, the office, or elsewhere. A single Cat-5 run then connects *all* of the Adapters to the MZC’s expansion port. The Adapters feature 12-pin sockets that allow them to stack together, sharing power, metadata, and control information. Audio signals run separately from each Adapter to the MZC via stereo minijack outputs.

Both the Base and Adapter also feature stereo minijack *inputs*. While only one can be used (selected during programming), these let you add local sources to your system, perfect for connecting a TV

The Short Form

Snapshot

The iPod-inspired MODE keypad infuses compatibility with the world’s favorite portable into an already impressive multizone system.

Plus

- ⚡ Affordable audio and video distribution.
- ⚡ MODE keypad looks great and is simple to use.
- ⚡ iPod integration terrific — and affordable!
- ⚡ Amplifier cranked out the tunes.

Minus

- ⚡ Limited MODE color choices.

Price \$2,614 (AS TESTED)
System Price \$4,609 (controller, 6 MODE keypads, iPod dock)

PHOTOS BY TONY CORROZZA

or cable box in bedrooms. For the price of a single cable, you can route the TV's audio through your far-better-sounding audio speakers. Sweet!

The last part of setup is the programming, done via SpeakerCraft's EZ Tools software. While not too difficult, it's meant to be performed by a professional installer, so I won't delve into it.

PERFORMANCE

An audio distribution system lives or dies by its controller, and by that count, the MODE is a real success. With a 3¹/₂-inch high, full-color display, ice-blue



glowing hard keys, and a screw-less bezel, it just looks *cool*. Unfortunately, it only comes in a black or white finish, which might be too stark (white) or high-tech (black) for some decors. Most manufacturers of similar systems also offer ivory and almond.

Learning to operate MODE takes no time, especially if you're in the 90th percentile that's used an iPod. Non-techies will appreciate an actual volume knob that features ramping LEDs to indicate the level. Sources appear in the LCD display, and a scroll wheel lets you navigate among them. Adding to its versatility, each MODE pad has a built-in infrared receiver to relay signals from any handheld remote to the system.

The MODE Base resembles a typical iPod dock and includes numerous inserts for bottom-docking iPods, plus it charges your Pod while docked. It also has a USB connection so you can update your Pod while *in situ*, perfect if the Base is near

your computer. This lets you load up podcasts or iTunes purchases, which immediately show up as playable selections on the system.

If iPod ain't your thing, then SpeakerCraft offers other source options that also deliver metadata to the MODE's screen. The MODE Jukebox music server mentioned earlier is said to offer feedback and functionality identical to the iPod interface, while the company's STT 2.0 dual tuner (\$720) plays two different AM or FM stations at once. SpeakerCraft is also finalizing support for XM satellite tuners that offer RS-232 control (such as Polk's XRt12). Feedback from any source (other than iPod) requires using SpeakerCraft's RSA-1.0 RS232 Interface Adapter (\$200).

Once an iPod is docked, MODE extracts and displays the Pod's name on its display screen. When no Pod is present, the display reads "Not in Dock." I took my Pod in and out of the Base multiple times and it never locked up or failed to recognize it.

Multiple iPods docked to the system are simultaneously available as sources to all rooms, though each iPod can only stream one music selection at a time. The MZC's programming arsenal fea-

tures some cool tricks for managing these and your other sources through its Priority options. One option gives exclusive control rights to whoever selects a source first; other zones can *listen* to that source, but not make changes to it (such as skipping a tune or switching the radio station). Another priority option gives a specific zone hierarchy over all others. I like to call this, "Daddy pays the bills, Daddy picks the music!"

Browsing a Pod via MODE is nearly identical to having it in your hand, with tunes neatly sorted by Playlist, Artist, Album, Genre, and so on. The only option unavailable was "Podcasts," and SpeakerCraft says this will likely be included by the time you read this. Also, MODE only extracts your Pod's music, so don't get any crazy ideas about watching videos or photos stored on it. Overall, MODE was very easy to use — certainly easy enough for the whole family — and worked flawlessly.

At the speaker end, the system blasted out the tunes, playing notably loud and clear — a big surprise given the modest specifications and heft of the MZC's amplifier. Only at very extreme volume levels did the audio start to sound strained, though, even out by my swimming pool, I never had to run the system wide open. And each zone had independent bass and treble adjustments, which really help fine-tune the sound of in-wall/ceiling speakers.

Excellent performance aside, I should note for the record that I detected a slight buzz (similar to ground-loop noise) while listening via the Base, through both the iPod and an XM satellite tuner connected to the minijack input. Speakercraft helped trace the problem to our receiving an early sample of the MODE adapter, which was reengineered before production to eliminate a line noise problem. Although our deadline prevented us from testing a second sample in time for print, we're told this isn't an issue for units in the field. Readers can check soundandvisionmag.com/mode for an update.

BOTTOM LINE

SpeakerCraft has done what many manufacturers won't: They've added a host of killer new features to an existing system. And they did it without any performance compromises. The MZC-66 starts out as the capable backbone of a fully distributed audio/video system. Modernized with the affordable new MODE 3.1 controllers and iPod components, it puts full control over thousands of tunes at your fingertips, and successfully catapults SpeakerCraft's multiroom offerings to the next level. **S&V**

Key Features

MZC-66

- ⚡ 6-source/6 zones, expandable to 24
- ⚡ Audio plus video distribution
- ⚡ 12 x 30-watt amplifier
- ⚡ Supports up to 6 iPods with MODE Base
- ⚡ 17 x 5¹/₄ x 14³/₄ in; 23 lb

MODE 3.1

- ⚡ 3¹/₂-in, 176 x 220-pixel color LCD
- ⚡ 8 backlit hard keys
- ⚡ Built-in IR receiver

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