



Crestron

Adagio Entertainment System

And the Trojans wheeled the great wooden horse into their city and shut the gates. Later, while the city of Troy slept, Greek warriors slipped out from inside the horse and pillaged the city.

With the Trojan horse, the Greeks gave us the ultimate sneak attack. That, as you'll see, is a bit like what Crestron has done with its new Adagio Entertainment System — except in a really cool, distributed-audio kind of way (and without all the pillaging).

Crestron is virtually synonymous with high-end automation. When you flip through magazines like *Lifestyles of the Obscenely Wealthy*, it's usually Crestron video touchpanels you see in those sexy shots. But programming a complete Crestron system can be measured in *days* at \$100+ an hour, which has kept them from mass-market acceptance.

So when I heard Crestron was introducing a new, lower-priced audio distribution system that would work “out of the box” with “no programming required,” well, you can understand my skepticism.

SETUP

Crestron's new Adagio products (pronounced ah-dah-gee-oh, with Italian panache) are designed for true plug-and-play capability, automatically discovering and configuring themselves for operation. The main unit is the Adagio Entertainment System (AES), which can handle up to 10 separate sources, including up to three dual-tuner card modules that load into slots in the AES chassis. The basic system comes packaged with one of three different cards as either the AES-FM, with dual AM/FM tuners (\$3,700); AES-XM, with AM/FM plus XM satellite radio

(\$4,100); or the AES-SR, with AM/FM plus Sirius satellite radio (\$4,100). (Additional tuner cards cost \$500 for the dual AM/FM and \$900 each for the AM/FM/satellite combos.) Our test system included an AES loaded with an AM/FM/XM tuner card, which accounted for two sources; all other source components were connected via traditional audio interconnects.

The AES also has a built-in multichannel amplifier to power up to six stereo audio zones with 45 watts per channel (into 8 ohms). By adding Adagio Audio Expanders (\$1,800), the system is expandable in six-zone increments to a total of 24 zones.

Out of the box, Adagio supports two different controllers: a 12-button keypad (C2N-DBF12, \$260), or the far cooler LCD APAD (\$500). Either connects to the AES via the company's proprietary Cresnet cabling, while speakers connect via traditional 2-conductor speaker wiring. Since the amplifiers can handle a 4-ohm load, two speakers can be connected to each channel, providing up to four speakers per zone. My home has an existing audio distribution system, so connecting four

The Short Form

Snapshot

The easiest audio distribution system we've ever installed, with formidable power and pedigree to take you way beyond music.

Plus

- ⚡ Incredibly easy installation.
- ⚡ iPod-like APAD interface.
- ⚡ Ability to browse your iPod or satellite tuner from any controller.
- ⚡ Full system control from AES main unit.
- ⚡ Crestron Series 2 processor for future expansion

Minus

- ⚡ Amp may lack power for large rooms or high playback levels.
- ⚡ Minimal buttons on APAD means hunting through screens.

Price \$13,600 (AS TESTED)

zones (bed, bath, dining, and pool) to the AES was easy-breezy. All the Adagio components also connect and communicate through a network router via Cat-5.

The system is so simple to set up that it comes packed with a 10-step quick-start guide, but to make sure there were no hiccups, Crestron had one of their techs deliver mine and walk me through the install. The entire setup, from un-box to playback, took less than an hour, with much of that time filled with me asking questions. Amazing!

PERFORMANCE

Most audio distribution controllers are buttonless black boxes — the only way to initiate any command is with external controllers. But the AES looks more like an A/V receiver and would be just as at home in a living-room rack as in an equipment closet. With its large silver knobs and green, backlit buttons, it not only looks cool, but also offers complete control over the system and connected sources. You can easily select one or more rooms for playback, decide on your music source for each, adjust volumes for different zones, browse your music library (using its front panel display), or turn the system on or off. This extra bit of control was a welcome treat.

Even so, the keypad *is* the primary control interface for any distributed audio system, and the system's success or failure usually lies therein. The APAD controller does a first-rate job. It fulfills the most critical requirement for next-gen keypad controllers: displaying artist/album information from the metadata imbedded in each song. With so much music coming from disk-based servers (iPod or other) or satellite radio these days, this feature is no longer merely cool: it's necessary. Whether I was browsing the server, an iPod, or satellite radio channels, the APAD told me everything I needed to pick the songs I wanted.

In designing the APAD, Crestron clearly looked at the success of the iPod interface and said, "We can do that!" In fact, I doubt the APAD would look *any* different were "Apple" silk-screened at the top instead of "Crestron." Besides Power and Enter buttons, there are just four other buttons and a scroll wheel. That's good and bad — it simplifies the keypad and makes it less

intimidating, but fewer buttons usually means more hunting through screen menus to get to what you want. Also, the display is limited to two transport commands at a time (such as Play and Pause, or Track Back or Forward). I did love that I could access and control any zone from any keypad.

The iPod is a primary audio source for many people, and Crestron has responded with their CEN-IDOC (\$700). This Apple-esque docking/charging cradle supports any late-generation iPod that has connectors on the bottom. Once your Pod is docked, the Crestron logo appears on its screen, and you can browse and retrieve all of your music from the APAD as if the iPod were in your hand. (Photo and video files aren't accessible, though.)

Though it's not a mandatory component, Crestron also included their four-stream Adagio Audio Server with matching remote (AAS-4, 250GB, \$6,800), which occupies four source inputs on the AES. The AAS is a full-fledged server in its own right, and could have an entire review dedicated to it. In short, it handles MP3, WMA, and WAV formats, automatically retrieves album information, and provides all the build quality and user control and management options you'd expect from a top-shelf product. Adding a more advanced touchpanel controller with a video display to the AES or AAS (like Crestron's TPS-4L, \$1,250) allows you to view cover art along with the song/album info — an extra bit of razzle-dazzle that always impresses me. And since the server was designed to be plug-and-play with the Adagio system, it interacts seamlessly with the APAD controller. Adding music to playlists on the AAS directly from the APAD is so easy that party guests could quickly learn to do it, creating an ever-changing source of music for your next gathering.

In-ceiling speakers — typical with whole-house audio systems — can be a little shy on bass, so being able to adjust bass and treble from the APAD independently in each zone was a plus. There's also a selectable loudness mode that I preferred for low-volume listening. Sound quality was good, though I felt the multichannel amplifier in the AES could use a little more juice. No matter how many speakers it was driving, I found that I listened at the upper end of the volume range most of the time, and ran near max to get enough *oomph!*

for poolside listening. If you like to rock out or you have a large room, budgeting for an external amplifier might be prudent.

BEYOND AUDIO

Yes, the AES is a competent audio distribution system, but, to quote Crestron, "Audio is just the beginning."

Like the Trojan horse, every Adagio system has something packed inside: Crestron's Series 2 processor. This is the heart and soul of full-blown Crestron automation and control systems — an equivalent standalone model sells for \$1,600.

"What can it do?" you ask. How about virtually *anything*. Start by adding any of Crestron's wired or wireless touchpanels for full two-way communication. Then you can easily integrate your entire home theater system. But don't just stop there . . . add your lighting, climate-control, and security systems as well. The processor also incorporates full Web-based control. The AES front panel has buttons labeled HOUSE and SCHED, just itching to be filled with *something*. Of course, this requires professional programming and additional modules, but the infrastructure is there and waiting for the day you're ready to use it!

BOTTOM LINE

This system surprised and impressed me in a number of ways. Interestingly, even though it installs easily, Adagio is *not* meant for end-user installation — Crestron intends it to be sold, installed, and serviced through their dealer channel. While it's not as inexpensive as a typical audio distribution system, its potential automation capabilities make it a downright *steal*. Forget the old adage about Greeks bearing gifts: welcome Greeks (or anyone else) bearing Adagio! **S&V**

Key Features

- :: Ten-source capacity
- :: Six listening zones, expandable to 24
- :: Options for XM, Sirius, iPod playback
- :: Crestron Series 2 processor
- :: AES: 7³/₈ x 17¹/₈ x 18¹/₂ in; 43 lbs
- :: AAS: 4 x 17¹/₄ x 14¹/₂ in; 18³/₄ lbs

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