

its 8GB capacity, larger (along with the MSI player) than all the other players. However, like the iPod nano, it's not possible to simply drag and drop music files on to the player using Windows – the SonicStage software has to be installed. The installation **wizard** refused to work on our test PC, so we had to browse the supplied CD, find the appropriate setup file, and run the installation program directly, after which it worked.

The buttons can be a little tricky to press, as they are small and recessed slightly into the body of the player. The menus are easy to follow, however. The player is a little slower than most of the others, on account of using a hard disk rather than flash memory for storage. This takes longer to search through, so there was a slight delay when finding tracks, and similar tasks.

Playback quality was good, and the player's screen, although it's only a monochrome green screen, is readable. We noticed a lot of flicker on the screen, though, which may be a problem for some. It only plays music, not pictures or video, but it has a few nice touches such as an intelligent shuffle mode and the ability to play through favourite songs. There's also the ability to output a line-out signal through the headphone socket, which means it can play

music through unamplified speakers. The supplied earbud headphones were a good quality pair.

The winners are...

All the players use a USB connection to the PC, although only the MSI and Creative players use standard leads, so if the others break, it could mean an expensive replacement. The difference between hard disks and flash memory is small in use, so the two hard disk players in our group test have the advantage, capacity-wise.

All the players use similar menu systems for locating tracks, but the iPod's scroll wheel is by far the easiest navigation tool, a method Apple protects with a patent, which it refuses to license to rivals. Only the Sandisk Sansa comes

close, while the others are all hamstrung by some aspect of their navigation.

The screen sizes are similar, except for the smaller screens on the Apple and Sony players. The Sony player is the only monochrome screen, but this won't matter too much as the player can't show images anyway. All the others can, and in addition the Iriver, MSI and Sandisk players can play video in specific formats.

Because the merits of the iPod nano and Sansa e260 are so closely matched, we have awarded two Buy It awards. The Sansa has a microphone and recorder, and plays video, while the Apple is sleeker, slimmer and easier to use. For most it will be down to personal preference.

On a similar level is the MSI P640, which has a decent navigation system, a good screen, and lots of storage. Finally the Creative and Iriver players are worthwhile buys, although none of them reaches the level of the Sandisk and Apple devices.

Anthony Dhanendran



► The Sony's buttons can be tricky to press

PORTABLE PLAYERS COMPARED

MANUFACTURER	APPLE BUY IT!	CREATIVE	IRIVER	MSI	SANDISK BUY IT!	SONY
Model	iPod nano	Zen V	U10	P640	Sansa e260	NW-A1200
Price (£)	129	120	159	153	135	160
Telephone	0800 039 1010	0800 376 7954	0131 273 4387	0870 120 4930	No UK number	020 7365 2947
Website	www.apple.com/uk	http://uk.europe.creative.com/	www.advancedmp3players.co.uk	www.morgancomputers.co.uk	www.sandisk.co.uk	www.sony.co.uk
Storage (GB)	4	4	2	8	4 (plus Micro-SD cards)	8
Song capacity (approx)	1,000	1,000	500	2,000	1,000	2,000
Memory type	Flash	Flash	Flash	Hard disk	Flash	Hard disk
Display type	Colour	Colour	Colour	Colour	Colour	Monochrome
Accessories	None	Cloth case	Cradle and remote	Mains adapter	None	Mains adapter
Case	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
FM radio	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Mac compatible	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Audio Formats	Mp3/AAC/Audible	Mp3/WMA/Audible	Mp3/WMA	Mp3/WMA	Mp3/WMA	Mp3/Atrac3
Picture viewer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Video player	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Games	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Warranty	1 year	1 year	2 years	1 year	1 year	1 year
Dimensions (mm) wxd xh	89x7x41	44x16x68	69x16x47	95x13x45	44x13x89	55x19x88
Weight (g)	43	44	69	80	75	109
Pros	Supremely easy to use; very compact design	Very small; colourful, clear screen	Plays games; clever menu system	Comfortable to hold	Navigation wheel rivals the nano	Large storage capacity
Cons	Online music purchases limited to the iTunes store; no radio	Slightly plastic feel to unit	Menu system slow to respond to key presses; small storage capacity	Outdated-looking menus	Can't add music to playlists while playing	No extras at all; heavier than others
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★

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