



Radio star

Ruark has refreshed its popular R2 radio with features including multi-room functionality. **Adrian Justins** tunes in...

Having carved quite a cosy niche for itself in the premium DAB radio sector, Ruark has a portfolio of attractive-looking products that offer a range of cutting-edge features as well as delivering consistently good sound for the size. With a seemingly ageless aesthetic, this third version of the stereo R2 radio looks very similar to the 2007 original, but there have been some significant changes to the spec over the years and the latest model has more sources than most. Established favourites DAB, DAB+ and FM tuners remain, along with a rear-mounted USB for charging and playing back tethered smartphones and external drives.

Wireless is the real name of the game, though, with the almost laughable idea of an iPod dock happily sinking without trace to be supplanted by aptX-compatible Bluetooth. Ruark has eschewed AirPlay in favour of Bluetooth for streaming from a smartphone or tablet, with the added benefit of embracing non-Apple devices into the bargain. Wi-fi really opens things up with the inputs roster including DLNA audio streaming from networked storage devices and computers, while the convenience of a built-in Spotify

Connect client allows you to control playback of a playlist.

With more features than you'd expect given the price, it comes as no surprise to find that the R2 even has Sonos in its sights with multi-room compatibility. There is no optical input, as on the step-up R4, but phono line-ins are on hand for use with a CD player or even a TV. With all that technology under the hood and selling for a penny under £400, it represents pretty good value.

It is available in a range of three finishes, including rich walnut veneer, soft white and soft black lacquers. All are high-quality, but to me they are marred visually in two respects – firstly, the wooden casing is not one continuous piece of wood, with the grain of the curved corners running at 90° to the top and sides. Secondly, the headphone and 3.5mm input jack on the front are blots on the front fascia. Build quality is mostly top notch, though, with the R2 meeting Ruark's high standards for durability except for the central power button, which pings in and out a tad too loosely.

The OLED display is a joy and makes the LCD version of the original seem laughably outdated. You can alter the brightness for both active and standby modes and tweak the

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Ruark R2 Mk3
- ORIGIN**
China
- TYPE**
Stereo DAB radio with network music streaming and multi-room
- WEIGHT**
3.6kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
340 x 120 x 185mm
- FEATURES**
• 2x 3.5in custom-made drivers
• 20W power output
• DAB; DAB+; FM; wi-fi, DLNA, Spotify Connect; aptX Bluetooth
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Ruark Audio
- TELEPHONE**
01702 601410
- WEBSITE**
ruarkaudio.com

settings so that the date and time can be displayed according to your preferences. While listening to music you can also change the parameters, for example Spotify Connect shows the track name but also allows you to choose from a progress bar, artist name, album name, format (eg 320kbps/44.1kHz) or the date.

There's a setup wizard that guides you through the installation process with options for the wi-fi region, bizarrely divided into Most of Europe, USA, Canada, Spain, France, Japan, Singapore and Australia. As for hooking the R2 on to your router, I'd recommend using WPS as the password entry process is highly

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laborious. More positively, once entered it connects to my Netgear router in a few brief moments.

Operating the R2 is a combination of using the top-mounted RotoDial controller and the blister-button remote. The former is as slick and impressive as the later is cheap and cheerful. Yes, the remote works okay, but is an inferior mismatch for such a premium product and with options for tweaking the loudness, bass, treble and 3D sound all taking several button presses, it doesn't have the efficiency of a slightly larger remote with dedicated buttons. The RotoDial makes for a much quicker way of doing things, but Ruark could learn a thing or two from the likes of Audio Pro and Bang & Olufsen when it comes to remote operation.

With so many streaming services available, and with so many more seeming to join the fray all the time, it must be hard for manufacturers to decide which, if any, to support. Spotify makes a lot of sense, though, with its Connect feature that hands control from the app to a third-party device using wi-fi. This is pleasing for someone like me who's averse to too much smartphone interaction but arguably more useful in that (with a Spotify Premium account) you can pause or skip tunes using the controls on the R2 and even if it is turned off, when next turned on, simply by pressing the play button the music resumes from where it last finished. This happens even if the phone, tablet or computer is switched off. For other music services you can use Bluetooth, and both sources, along with DLNA networking, will work in a multi-room set up with WMA, AAC, FLAC, MP3, MP2 and Real Audio files including 24/96 hi-res tracks (but not ALAC files over wi-fi).

Sound quality

We only managed to secure one R2 for this review so I can't comment on how well it works as part of a multi-room system, but I can compare its sound with a single Sonos Play:3 speaker by streaming the same music from Spotify directly. China Crisis' *Wishful Thinking* proves more revelatory on the Sonos, the R2 delivers a warmer sound with less sparkle in the higher frequencies of the synth and a more restrained snare drum. Vocals too sound more nicely balanced in the mix. The R2 has a more relaxed sound, lacking the in-yr-face power and clarity of the Sonos. Selecting the R2's 3D effect widens the soundfield, giving vocals and synth a bit more air, while spreading the bass. But sitting close to the speaker the lower frequencies



Stylish and not overly large, the R2 looks at home anywhere

sound rather boomy in 3D mode, and it's better left switched off.

With DAB selected, the lower line of the display scrolls with radio text (if selected) while the signal info shows that Classic FM transmits at a bitrate of just 128kbps. The vocals of the presenters also give things away, adding a lisp-like quality to their announcements.

The R2 nonetheless makes a decent fist of things, and Haydn's *Symphony No.31 in D major*, for example, is a nice airy presentation with reasonable clarity to the violins and flute. Much better things happen by streaming hi-res files over Bluetooth from a computer (although no metadata is transmitted so you don't get any track info). A 24/96 ALAC file of The King's Consort's *Motet Pour Le Jour De Pâques: Victoria* is smooth and refined with a delicacy that does justice to the upper register vocals, with never any sign of distortion despite the occasional glass-shattering chord. The chorus from Handel's *Messiah – And The Glory Of The Lord* by the Dunedin Consort is likewise pleasingly

portrayed with the drivers serving up a well-balanced soundfield, coping with extremes in the dynamic range, alto vocals blending nicely with the tenors. Even the harpsichord, an instrument that can very quickly become tiresome, has a pleasing smoothness to it.

Lower frequency handling is more than reasonable, with the bass in The Knife's *Silent Shout* (an AAC file) having good punch and extension. James Bay's *Hold Back The River* is coherent and has a satisfying texture to it, the vocals and guitars are underpinned by a smooth bass and can be played nice and loud without any hint of distortion. Perhaps the greatest frustration is the narrowness of the stereo imaging caused by the close proximity of the drivers.

Conclusion

In terms of power, the R2 is never going to match a dedicated separates setup but as a lifestyle product that looks as stylish on your sideboard as it does on a table, it takes some beating especially considering its mastery of so many sources ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Clean sound; features; OLED display

DISLIKE: Directional sound; cheap remote control

WE SAY: The stylish Ruark delivers sonically and offers fantastic versatility in terms of streaming

OVERALL ★★★★★