Review: Chestnut Hill Sound George

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AT A GLANCE

Chestnut Hill Sound George

> **MACWORLD RATING**

By Dan Frakes
PCWorld (http://www.pcworld.com/) | Aug 17, 2007 12:00 AM PT

UPDATE: *Ten days after this review was published, Chestnut Hill Sound lowered the price of the George from $549 to $499; the company also announced a promotion that includes the $50 remote-charging stand.*

We've been looking forward to reviewing Chestnut Hill Sound's $549 **George (http://www.chillsound.com/)** since we gave a prototype one of our Best of Show awards (http://www.macworld.com/news/2007/01/11/bosprofile/index.php) at January's Macworld Expo. Taking the desktop audio system several steps beyond a pair of speakers and an iPod dock, the George promises an enticing combination of advanced features, audio quality, and style. And for the most part, it lives up to those promises.

The basics

At first glance, the white-with-gray-trim George looks much like other desktop iPod speaker systems, if a bit flatter and deeper at approximately 14 inches wide by 5 inches tall by 9 inches deep. On the front panel are left and right speakers; interestingly, these use a coaxial design, each with a 3.5-inch midrange driver in back and a 1-inch tweeter in front. In between the speakers is a removable, wireless control panel, which I'll cover in depth below. On top is a Universal iPod dock with a flip-up dust cover. (Chestnut Hill includes five dock adapters for older dockable iPods; newer iPods include their own Universal adapter. The iPhone is compatible with the George, although if you don't turn on AirPlane Mode, you'll occasionally get audible feedback thanks to the iPhone's wireless features.) The bottom of the system hosts a ported, 4-inch "subwoofer."

The back of the George provides the system's AC jack; an auxiliary-input minijack (for listening to an external audio source); a pre-amp-output minijack (for connecting the George to a larger stereo system); a headphone minijack; a USB connection (for software updates, not for syncing your iPod with your computer); AM- and FM-antenna connectors for the George's radio; and a bass control knob. Missing, compared to many other current iPod speaker systems, are a video-out jack for displaying video and photos from a capable iPod on a TV, and a way to sync your iPod with your computer.

But it would be a mistake to think of the George as simply an iPod speaker system, as it offers much more than just iPod playback. It's really a desktop stereo system that happens to offer excellent iPod integration.

Upgrades and makeovers

One area where the George differs from basic iPod speaker systems is in the areas of expandability and customization. As mentioned above, the system's software is upgradeable by connecting the George to your computer via USB and then running a software updater on your computer. In our time testing the system, Chestnut Hill Sound released several updates that provided new features, added options for existing settings, and fixed bugs. (The update procedure is simple, although one particular update required several tries before it was successful.)

But the George's hardware is upgradeable, as well. Specifically, the iPod dock assembly on top is removable, and the underlying connector is designed to accommodate future expansion or upgrade modules. According to the company, the first such module, for HD Radio, should be available later this year for under $200. This design could also, in theory, allow Chestnut Hill to add compatibility with future iPods, or media players from other companies, that don't use Apple's current dock connector. It's unclear whether you'll have to switch between the iPod dock and other modules, or if you'll be able to access both audio sources simultaneously.

You can also customize the look of the George: the front mesh grilles, the wrap-around side panels, and the top panel are all removable, allowing you to replace them with different colors and finishes. Alternate grill covers in red, black, or blue will be available by the end of October for $29; real-wood top and side panels (which Chestnut Hill calls *skins*) with coordinated grilles—black-stained birch with black grilles, natural walnut with brown grilles, and natural cherry with charcoal grilles—will be available at the same time for $99 a set. (The company says additional colors and finishes will be added in the future.)

Take control

The flagship feature of the George is its remote control. Unlike most compact stereo systems, which feature a set of controls on the system itself and another, more limited, set on a remote control, Chestnut Hill has placed all the controls—and there's an wide array—on a removable panel. When inserted into the control "dock" between the speakers, the remote looks and functions as if it's simply another part of the system. But pull gently on the top of the panel and it pops free, offering full control—via ZigBee (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zigbee) radio-frequency (RF) wireless technology—from up to 30 feet away. (A nifty feature is the Quiet button on the back of the dock area that lets you quickly mute the George's audio [or pause playback when your iPod is playing] if you're near the main unit but the remote is elsewhere. Although I would have liked volume controls here, as well.)

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The remote is an impressive piece of technology. The screen is large and easy to read, despite some minor ghosting, and includes an adjustable backlight that can automatically dim or brighten depending on the ambient light; you even get fine control over how bright the display should be in a dark room, a nice touch for bedroom use. Just below the screen are eight numbered, backlit buttons, which Chestnut Hill calls Jump Buttons. Below those is the main control area, containing Menu, Play/Pause, Back, and Forward buttons, along with a large, rubber-coated Volume/Navigation knob that also acts as a "select" button. Finally, on the top of the remote is a large, wide

Snooze/Mute/Pause button. The remote is fairly wide by remote-control standards—it measures 3.75 inches wide by 4.4 inches high by 1 inch thick (not including the protruding knob)—but is fairly comfortable to hold in your hand. (One minor complaint I had is that because the Mute button is so large, if you pick up the remote off a table or other flat surface, you have to remember to grab the remote's sides; if you grab the top and bottom, you'll often press the Mute button accidentally.)

The remote provides the same user-friendly—and, for most people in the George's target market, familiar—menu interface as an iPod. Press the Menu button and the George's settings menus appear; rotate the knob to navigate to a menu or setting, and then press the knob to select it; press Menu again to move back up the menu hierarchy. A variety of useful settings are available: You can adjust audio levels at 8 different frequencies (approximating an 8-band EQ); set the time; change the radio region (which changes the frequency "steps"); change the ZigBee wireless channel to avoid interference; choose whether the default display is the time or the audio source; choose the timeout time (the time of inactivity after which the screen returns to the default display); and more.

Another useful feature is that the Jump Buttons are contextual. For example, when in radio mode, they act as preset buttons, and a matching onscreen grid displays the frequency associated with each button. But when the screen shows its main time-display view, the top four buttons act as source selectors, with each button's function (iPod, Radio, Alarm, or Aux) displayed on the screen just above the button. (Attention To Detail Award: in this mode, only those four buttons are backlit; the other four are dimmed.) The remote's screen also provides useful feedback; for example, if you switch to iPod mode without an iPod connected, the screen reads, "George needs your iPod"; if the battery is getting low, instead of a tiny low-battery icon, you'll see the message that "George needs to charge the remote soon."

The company's range estimates are fair; I was indeed able to control the George from approximately 30 feet away (unobstructed; sticking a wall in between reduced that range). However, it's worth noting that once you approach the maximum distance, the remote's menu-navigating performance slows because, unlike with most remotes, information flows both ways between the remote and the main unit. For example, the contents of each iPod-navigation menu, covered below, are actually stored in the George itself, and are sent to the remote when you access each menu.

The one real downside to the remote is its battery life. Although the remote charges when placed in the George, a full charge provides only a few hours of frequent use. During my testing, this short battery life meant that I had to remember to put the remote back in its dock after use; if I left it on my desk or on the coffee table between uses—for example, overnight—the battery would often die during the next use. (The battery does go into a sleep mode that lets it last for a day or so between charges if you're not actively using it; and all of your settings and data are stored in the main unit, so you don't lose them if the remote's battery dies.)

Because of this battery-life limitation, if you tend to use (and keep) your remote across the room from the main unit, or if you want to take advantage of the system's alarm-clock features (covered below), I recommend purchasing Chestnut Hill's optional $50 charging stand, which is shown in the image above. This clear-and-white accessory includes its own AC adapter and provides a handy docking station that holds the remote in a usable and visible position. It actually makes the remote a great alarm clock for your nightstand. (If you regularly store and charge the remote in this stand, Chestnut Hill includes an attractive, speaker-grille-matching mesh panel to cover the George's own dock area.)

iPod onscreen

Although the remote's menu design makes it easy to adjust settings and control the system, it's when playing music from an iPod that the remote really shines. And that's because the George effectively puts your iPod's menus on the remote's screen: When you place an iPod in the George's iPod dock, the system downloads information about every track on the iPod and makes that information available to the remote. The process can take a while, depending on the size of your iPod and how much content it contains; on my 80GB iPod with around 9000 items, it took nearly 3 minutes for the first sync. However, after this initial exchange of information, subsequent synchronizations are much quicker. A useful AutoPlay mode, found in the Settings screen, can automatically begin playback—of either a particular playlist or shuffle mode—after the sync finishes.

(A couple notes about this sync process: If you remove an iPod from the George and later replace it *without* syncing it to iTunes in between, the George will use the previously-stored information about that iPod and won't need to rescan it. However, if you sync your iPod with iTunes in between, the George will rescan the iPod the next time you connect it. Similarly, whenever you put a different iPod in the George, the system will forget the previous iPod's contents and scan and store information about the new iPod.)

You can then navigate, on the remote's screen, menus that nearly replicate those found in an iPod's Music menu: Playlists, Artists, Albums, Songs, Podcasts, Genres, Audiobooks, and Settings (shuffle and repeat); as well as Shuffle Songs and Now Playing commands. The navigation knob, its center Select button, and the Menu button together work much like an iPod's own Click Wheel, letting you navigate the menus just as you would an iPod's (although the remote's menus don't accelerate with faster turning like those on an iPod). Suffice it to say that if you've used an iPod, you'll feel right at home browsing your music collection on the George. (Note that you can't use your iPod's own controls when it's docked in the George; in addition, because the George has no video output, you won't be able to browse video or photo menus.)

To make navigating long lists of items (artists, albums, songs, etc.) easier, the function of the Jump Buttons changes during iPod playback so that each corresponds to several letters of the alphabet, displayed in a representative onscreen grid: abc, def, ghi, jkl, mno, pqrs, tuv, and wxyz. Press *ghi* once and the list jumps to items beginning with the letter G; press it again, and you go to items beginning with H; and so on. The remote's menus are also circular; if you try to scroll "past" the end of a list, it doesn't stop scrolling, as an iPod's menus do; the list wraps around to the other end. This can be disorienting with short menus, but it's useful for quickly getting to the other end of a long list.

That's not to say the remote's iPod-browsing menus are perfect. For example, it can take a second or two for each menu to appear; for example, when selecting an album, there's a slight delay while the album contents are sent from the George to the remote. And if you switch from iPod playback to another source—for example, the radio—the remote doesn't remember the last menu you were viewing, or even the last song you were playing

The remote's Play/Pause, Back, and Forward buttons work just as you'd expect them to, letting you pause and resume playback and skip or scan through tracks. (Scanning was added in a recent software update.)

While listing to music on an iPod, the clock display shows the artist, track, and album names for the current track; the iPod display lists that same information at larger sizes, but provides additional information such as the track time, play mode (shuffle, repeat), and track number. In iPod mode, the top four Jump Buttons let you quickly return to the Playlist, Artists, Albums, or Songs menu.

One-band band

If you're the observant type, you may have noticed that there's only a single Radio audio source, rather than separate AM and FM buttons. That's because the George has only a single radio band—one that tunes both AM *and* FM. (Chestnut Hill calls this Bandless Radio, although SingleBand might be more accurate.) When tuning FM frequencies, if you try to go up from 107.9, the next frequency is 520 on the AM scale; similarly, if you're at 1720 on the AM "band," increasing the frequency takes to you FM 87.9. This works in both directions.

You choose a station by pressing the control knob once to enter radio-tuning mode and then turning the knob. (You can use the Back and Forward buttons, as well, although the knob is much faster for traversing a large swath of frequencies.) You can also save up to 24 presets for any combination of AM and FM stations. These correspond to four banks of Jump Buttons; in each bank, the six Jump Buttons on the left correspond to six presets and the two on the right function as Previous Bank and Next Bank buttons. My favorite feature here is that, as I mentioned above, the Jump Button display on the screen shows the actual frequency to which each preset button corresponds.

I appreciated this excellent preset functionality, especially since I'm not quite convinced of the convenience of Bandless Radio. On the one hand, it does reduce the number of audio sources, making overall operation simpler; on the other hand, it requires more effort than a standard radio to switch from, say, FM 97.7 to AM 1080. Having presets spaced throughout the radio spectrum helps, as these presets let you quickly jump to a frequency near the one to which you're actually trying to get.

The George's FM reception was excellent in my testing, pulling in all but the weakest FM stations using the included single-wire antenna; this was one of the few FM tuners good enough that I didn't feel the need to connect a powered or higher-end passive antenna. AM reception, on the other hand, was mediocre (although, to be fair, I don't see many integrated AM radios with decent reception these days).

Alarming features

Although not advertised as an alarm clock, the George is nevertheless a very good one, offering a standard sleep timer and *four* different types of alarms. The sleep timer can be set to turn the system off after anywhere from one minute to 23 hours, 59 minutes, although after activating sleep mode, the remote's display doesn't let you know how much time is left.

The first two alarms, Alarm 1 and Alarm 2, are everyday versions; each can be set to a different time, and for each alarm you can choose a separate volume level and audio source—a tone, the radio, or your iPod. If you choose radio, the George will switch to the radio and let you choose a station; if you choose iPod, the system will switch to iPod mode and let you choose a particular song to wake to. When you're done, the system will return to whatever audio you were previously listening to. (If you want to wake to whatever you happen to be listening to when you set the alarm, a convenient Now Playing option automatically sets that source—a radio station or an iPod playlist, for example—as the alarm.)

The other two alarms are One Time and Nap Timer. One Time works just like Alarm 1 and Alarm 2, except that it doesn't repeat each day; it's a handy way to set a one-time alarm without affecting your everyday alert(s). Nap Timer lets you set an alarm to sound after a certain amount of time—the opposite of sleep mode. (Like sleep mode, you can set the Nap Time alarm's time for anywhere from one minute to 23:59.)

All four alarms let you snooze—for a time you set, from one to 60 minutes—by tapping the large snooze button on top of the remote, by pressing the snooze Jump Button, or by pressing the Quiet button on the main unit.

Listening in

Chestnut Hill advertises the George as an audiophile-quality desktop system, and as compact desktop systems go, it's certainly among the best I've heard. The George's overall sound is impressively flat—so much so that those used to speakers with accentuated bass or boosted treble may initially find the George to be, well, boring, because no part of the audio spectrum stands out. But after listening to the George over an extended period, you begin to notice something: a lack of the listening fatigue that often accompanies lesser systems. The George won't "wow" you with big bass or sparkly treble, but the longer you listen, the more you'll appreciate that fact. (And if you personally find that you *want* a bit of emphasis, or de-emphasis, somewhere, there's that 8-band EQ.)

On the other hand, the George does have several minor audio flaws. The first is its lack of stereo separation, although that's difficult to get in a compact system with speakers so close together, so it's hard to fault the George here. The second is that the George sounds best when you're directly in front of the speakers, both vertically and horizontally, and there's a noticeable change when you wander from that position. This means that the George is best placed at least a few feet away from you (rather than on the desk in front of you) and at a height close to listening-ear-level (although the farther away from the George you sit, the less crucial this is).

Finally, thanks to its relatively small woofer and enclosure, the George doesn't have much bass extension. On the other hand, the bass it does have is tight and well-defined; the George avoids the boomy low end you get with systems that try to give the illusion of powerful bass by accentuating the limited bass they do have. In other words, the George knows what it can do and doesn't try to do more, which is refreshing if you're interested more in accurate sound than in shaking the room. (Although you can get *some* boom by cranking the George's bass-level knob and all the lower bands of the remote's EQ to their maximum levels. I don't recommend it.)

In terms of volume, the company says the George was designed to fill a 400- to 600-square-foot room (assuming an 8- to 10-foot ceiling) with high-quality audio, and that jibes with my own testing. In such a room, the George can easily reach uncomfortable listening levels without distorting, and sounds good even at loud volumes. On the other hand, in larger rooms the George starts to exhibit distortion before reaching similar volume levels. In other words, it won't match systems such as Apple's iPod Hi-Fi (http://playlistmag.com/products/complete/493-detail.php) or Logitech's AudioStation (http://playlistmag.com/products/complete/703-detail.php) for pumping out party-level audio. But it wasn't designed to.

The Lowdown

The George is an impressive package of technology, a great iPod speaker system, and a very good desktop stereo. It provides excellent sound quality, is easy to use, and offers unique features not found on any other audio system we've seen. The fact that it's got room to grow—in terms of both software and hardware—means it shouldn't be obsolete in a year or two. (Although, given its extensive functionality and the fact that it sounds so good, I often found myself wishing it had a CD player to make it a truly complete compact system.)

The George's biggest drawback is its price: at $549—plus $50 for the remote charging stand—there are few desktop audio systems even close to the George's price tag. Several standard desktop iPod systems (namely JBL's Radial (http://playlistmag.com/products/complete/554-detail.php) and Logitech's AudioStation (http://playlistmag.com/products/complete/703-detail.php)) offer sound quality that's nearly as good

for much less money. And at the George's price, it's fair to look at alternative solutions. For example, if you've already got a good desktop stereo system, or a good full-size stereo, you can get some of the George's functionality—namely, the iPod-like onscreen menu system—via something like Keyspan's $179 TuneView for iPod (http://www.keyspan.com/products/tvi200c/homepage.spml). Similarly, there are several $150 accessories out there that let you use your iPod itself as its own remote, sending its audio via Bluetooth to your stereo. (The downside to these systems is that Bluetooth compresses audio, but even with some compression artifacts, some people will prefer this solution because, when used with a full-size stereo, you'll get full-range sound and better stereo separation and imaging.) Finally, if your audio system includes a TV, there's also Apple's own $300 Apple TV (http://www.macworld.com/2007/03/reviews/appletvrev/index.php).

Then again, none of these solutions will fit neatly on a desk, dresser, or counter, and none will give you exactly what the George offers: a compact but great-sounding system with a unique and compelling combination of features. You'll have to decide for yourself how much that's worth.

AT A GLANCE

Chestnut Hill Sound George
MACWORLD RATING

Pros

- Future hardware add-ons promised
- Customizable appearance
- Useful and varied alarm-clock features
- Upgradeable software
- Very good sound quality
- Excellent FM reception
- Impressive RF remote with built-in iPod-menu display

Cons

- Slight screen ghosting
- Expensive
- Audio sounds best directly on-axis
- Short remote battery life
- No video output

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