

Apple's restriction-free music downloads create pause

February 11 2009, By Eric Benderoff

When Apple Inc. announced in January that it would sell restriction-free music files, that was supposed to mean consumers could buy songs and play them on the portable gadget of their choice.

Finally, music buyers would have in digital music what they had with vinyl, 8-track and CDs: interoperability, meaning the music could play on any device. If your record or CD player broke, you'd buy a new one.

Well, that's not the case with digital music. If your iPod breaks, replacing it with a Creative Zen may not work for you if you want to hear all your music.

There have been strides to improve this interoperability issue, and Apple's move to sell digital-rights-free music was a big step in the right direction.

But those "unprotected" songs from iTunes, dubbed iTunes Plus, won't play on every music player. That's because there are different types of unprotected music files.

Let me illustrate with the albums I downloaded recently from three online sellers of digital music - eMusic, Amazon and iTunes - using software from iTunes and Microsoft Corp.'s Windows Media Player and Zune.

From eMusic: I downloaded new albums from A.C. Newman, Andrew

Bird and Wee Hairy Beasties. I was able to move the files into the music-playing software from Windows Media, Zune and iTunes with little trouble.

I then burned CDs of those three albums. When I tried to rip them into iTunes software on a different computer, song titles from two albums did not appear. (Few things are more tedious than keying in song titles.)

From Amazon: I downloaded an album from hip-hop band The Knux and a classic recording by Thelonious Monk with John Coltrane. The Knux easily went into iTunes without prompting, but Monk did not. But both albums moved successfully into Windows Media Player and the Zune software.

From iTunes: I bought Charlie Haden's "Rambling Boy." I was able to move the album into the Zune software, but not Windows Media. That means I can't play the Haden album on the nifty Zen X-Fi music player I used for this test.

One would think that album would play on both Microsoft products.

Well, the problem is that Apple's "unprotected files" are in the AAC format, which Windows Media player does not support. But the Zune software does. Unprotected AAC files are not the same as unprotected MP3 files, which eMusic pointed out when it retracted a statement applauding Apple's decision to sell music without digital-rights-management software.

Unprotected MP3 files, sold by Amazon and eMusic, will play on any music software or any portable device. But not all software plays unprotected AAC files.

It would be easy to overlook this fact if you read what Apple says on its

Web site:

"With iTunes Plus, you get high-quality, 256 Kbps AAC encoding. All free of burn limits and digital rights management. So iTunes Plus music will play on iPod, Apple TV, all Mac and Windows computers, and many other digital music players."

Yes, iTunes Plus songs play on Windows computers, just not with Windows Media software. Which music players work with iTunes Plus and which don't? Apple won't say.

Does this really matter? Yes, if you want options.

There are a lot of fine music players that cost less than similar size iPods.

As much as I like iPods, I'm also fond of the Zune (the 16GB model is \$45 less than the 16GB iPod Nano). And there's a lot to like about the 16GB Creative Zen X-Fi (\$170 at Amazon, \$30 less than the Nano.) Another fine player is the 4GB Sansa Clip, spotted recently for \$50 at Best Buy. A 1GB iPod Shuffle sells for \$50.

When I test music players from Creative, Sansa and others, I use Windows Media to put music, videos and photos onto those devices.

The important software provides choice by allowing any gadgetmaker to produce a music player. So it's pretty frustrating that an album I buy at iTunes can't play using Windows Media.

Does this really matter?

The Charlie Haden album I bought at iTunes includes a bonus track. If I want to hear the bonus song, I need the right combination of software

and player.

Not even the CD will help. Does that matter to you?

—

(c) 2009, Chicago Tribune.

Visit the Chicago Tribune on the Internet at www.chicagotribune.com/

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Apple's restriction-free music downloads create pause (2009, February 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-02-apple-restriction-free-music-downloads.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.