

Google Music: Definitely beta

May 18 2011, By Brier Dudley

Google has been accused of overusing the "beta" tag on products it releases early. But with its new music service - Music - the beta tag is mandatory. It's still pretty raw, judging from my experience with it today.

The service was announced at Google's recent developer conference and it's available now only by invitation. It's really an online-offline version of the [music player](#) that's offered with devices running Google operating systems such as [Android](#).

You can use the service - which I'll call gTunes - to upload music files to Google and access them on PCs and up to eight Android devices with [Web access](#). Not all Android devices will work; it requires at least version 2.2 and a device running OpenGL2.0.

You can also use it to directly load music files to devices with a cable, and the player stores recently played songs on devices, so you can have some music if they're offline.

I spent a few hours trying the service on a PC running Windows 7, on an Android 3.0 [Xoom](#) tablet and on a new T-Mobile Sidekick 4G running Android 2.2.

It took about 10 minutes to sign up and download the "music manager" client application to the PC, where it began uploading my music files to Google. It took about five minutes to scan a 2.7 gigabyte music file with 437 [music files](#) and about 45 minutes for them to all be uploaded.

Then I could access the files from a browser pointed at gTunes.

Google provides a batch of free songs to get you started. That's good because I couldn't access my own, uploaded music from the Sidekick, only the free batch of gTunes songs.

There was some buffering to get online songs started on the Sidekick. It took 15 to 20 seconds for music to start playing after I pressed play on a song. This was over T-Mobile's 4G network with a full signal showing. Advancing to an artist's next song was quicker, and took only a few seconds.

On the Xoom, when I connected through the browser, the application fluttered and partly blinked out. After switching to a different category - from artists to genre, for instance - it recovered and began to work.

This may be an unfair test of the Xoom because gTunes requires Adobe's Flash, the latest version of which suggests using version 3.1 of Google's Android operating system for tablets. Google's going to make 3.1 available to the Xoom, but I was still running 3.0 and couldn't get Flash to fully install.

I also had a funny thing happen on the Xoom. While playing a song with the device's media player, I opened the Web version of the player. The song on the device paused. I chose a song stored online and hit play, but something else came out of the speakers - the song paused on the device. This may have been operator error, but there still needs to be better coordination - or clearer controls - between the offline and online players.

The gTunes page displayed in the browser has tabs for "my library" and a "new and recent" window that displays album art that you click to access songs. You can rate songs with a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down"

and then play just the "up" songs.

There's also an "instant mix" feature that lets you choose a song and click to automatically generate a mix of 25 songs. But I couldn't get this to work; no matter which song I chose, it said I didn't have enough "similar songs" to create an instant mix.

The design is barebones and bland with a mix of simple type styles. It's nicer than Gmail, but a far cry from the polished media apps now available for free from Apple, Microsoft and others.

Having your music available online can be handy, but there are other ways to do this and new "cloud" music services are expected from RealNetworks and Apple. It remains to be seen whether Google gets into a spat with music labels over its service, and whether it begins charging for storage or using its service to deliver ads.

If it becomes a pay service, it will have a hard time competing with streaming services such as Rhapsody that provide unlimited access to millions of songs on PCs, smartphones and some stereo gear. Unless Google uses bundling to build market share.

My guess is that [Google](#) isn't out to build a big, online music venture as much as it's trying to be sure there's a decent music option for buyers of its upcoming Chromebook computers. Operating systems are a bigger, more lucrative market than online music.

You can't store a music collection on a Chromebook because the machines have minimal storage capacity. They're designed to run Web applications and handle files stored online. This could make Chrome a non-starter for people who expect their computer to store and access their digital [music](#) collection.

Now gTunes is providing a way for people to begin transferring their digital media from computers in their home to Google's datacenters, like the one humming alongside the Columbia River in Oregon.

But before it takes the beta tag off gTunes, it has to work out a few kinks and provide more details about where the service is heading.

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