EISA AWARD 40TH ANNIVERSARY — Best Product 2022-2023 — Tested by The Experts

Zidoo Neo S
4K media player

What does the Zidoo do?

It's a 4K media player with Dolby Vision 12-bit HDR. It's a digital audio player, a network player, a DAC, and a headphone amplifier. Let's take this one step at a time…

SUMMARY

Zidoo Neo S

Price: $2299

+ Great video playback
+ High-spec componentry
+ Great build

– Movie ID system a long way off perfect; correction fiddly
– Music navigation not easy

Here's something we don't see enough of — an audio-visual source. As the world tilts ever more towards the streaming platforms, traditional dedicated sources are drying up in the world of video. A smart TV or a media player stick is all you need for Netflix *et al*, while we see regular stories on the decline or death of optical discs. Consequently new Blu-ray and UHD Blu-ray players are very thin on the ground, and we can't remember when we last tested a new PVR.

So the arrival of the Zidoo Neo S was quite the excitement. It originally came to us for assessment with regard to the recently-announced EISA Awards 2022-2023, in which it went on to gather votes from enough judges to earn it the award for Best Media Player.

But when we first unboxed it, we weren't entirely sure exactly what the Zidoo would do. Turns out, it's quite a lot. Here's the summary that appears in the first paragraph from the manual: "*NEO S is an all-in-one Hi-Fi solution, which solves complicated device watching and connection problem and combines 4K UHD media player, audio and video media center, high-fidelity headphone amplifier, music decoder and Bluetooth decoder.*"

Which just about sums it up. During our review we Zoomed and emailed with some of the Zidoo team in Shenzen, China; their enthusiasm was infectious and their support of the product (when it was us asking questions at least) was first-rate. So, what did we end up doing with the multifaceted Zidoo Neo S?

Build & features
There's certainly no doubting the Neo S with regard to physical quality. It's a usefully mid-size unit 29cm wide and 10cm high, with a beautifully-turned case in aircraft-grade aluminium, a thick front panel, and resonance-suppressing measures including structural stiffening and shock-absorbing foot pads.

Inside are some of the best-organised PCBs we've ever seen, isolated from each other by internal aluminium plates, and incorporating industry-leading componentry within (this seems a key way the company aims for high performance), whether that's dual ESS9068 DACs capable up to 768kHz PCM and DSD512, the use of German WiMA and Japanese Nichicon capacitors, or the Qualcomm CSR8675 Bluetooth platform to allow aptX HD and LDAC Bluetooth codecs to flow.

There are twin power supplies inside, a neatly encased toroidal transformer providing a linear power supply for the analogue sections, and a switched mode power supply for the digital circuits. One of Zidoo's numerous patents is for "wide voltage self-adaptation" which intelligently switches between these two supplies as required for different operations.

The front panel shows more of the product's depth, with a lovely knob and a couple of handy USB-A slots on the right, power button and twin headphone outputs (full-size 6.3mm and balanced 4.4mm) on the left, and between them a five-inch colour OLED touch screen beautifully embedded behind darkened glass. This combines with the supplied backlit Bluetooth remote control, Zidoo's own control app and an onscreen TV display via its HDMI output to ensure that however you're using the Neo S, you won't want for control options.

Around the back (see overleaf), we find that the Neo S is also a digital preamplifier, with one each of optical in, coaxial in, AES/EBU in, and USB-B for computer connection, along with another two USB-A slots, these USB 3.0 (the front pair are USB 2.0).

In addition to the HDMI output to your TV there are analogue audio outputs on both RCA unbalanced and XLR balanced socketry, and a digital coaxial output for good measure. There's a gigabit Ethernet socket for networking, and also dual-band Wi-Fi, with three small antennas at the rear for this and Bluetooth. Unusually they manage not to stick up beyond the height of the unit.

So far, so impressive. But sorry, what exactly does the Neo S do again? In brief, it's a 4K media player with Dolby Vision 12-bit HDR. It's also a digital audio player, a network streamer, a DAC, and a headphone amplifier. Let's take this one step at a time...

There are on-TV menus and app menus (the on-screen ones are better). ❶ shows the main interface with access to Music, PosterWall, Folders, Apps and Settings. PosterWall movie navigation is shown in ❷, and music playback in ❸; ❹ and ❺ show access via IP address to change movie details.
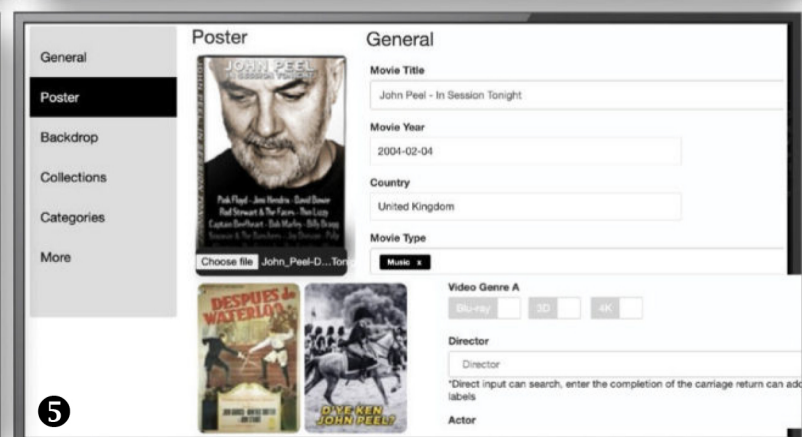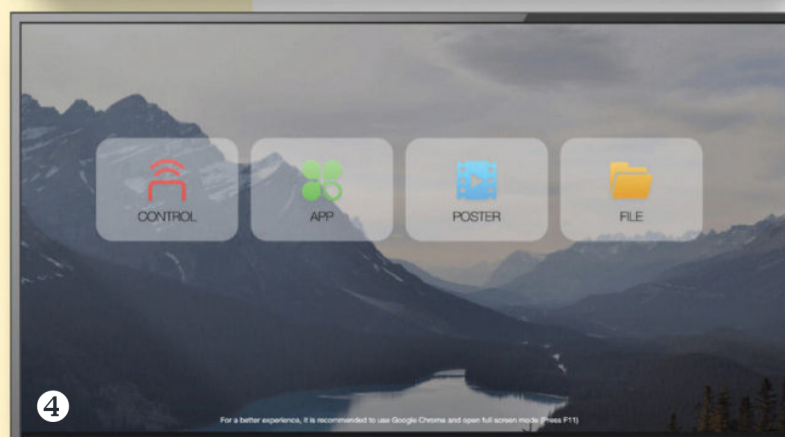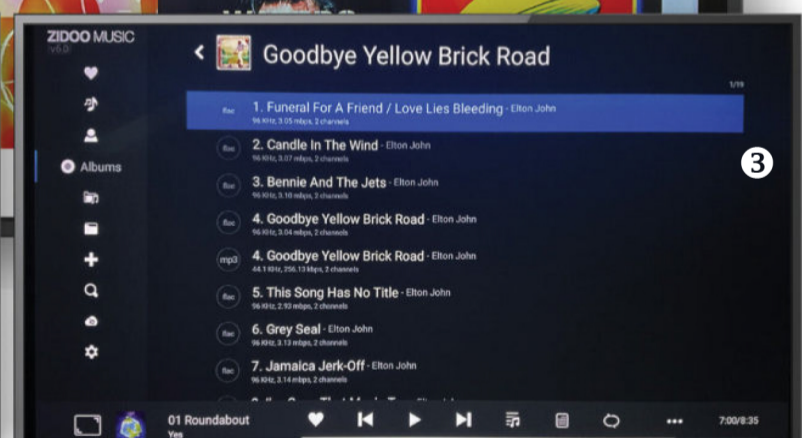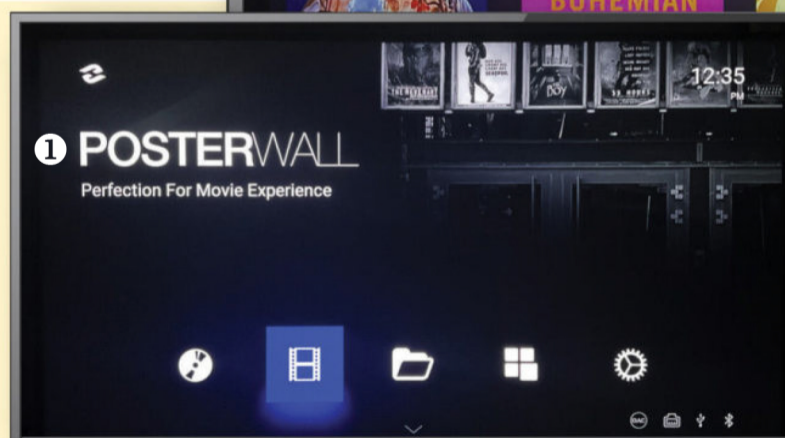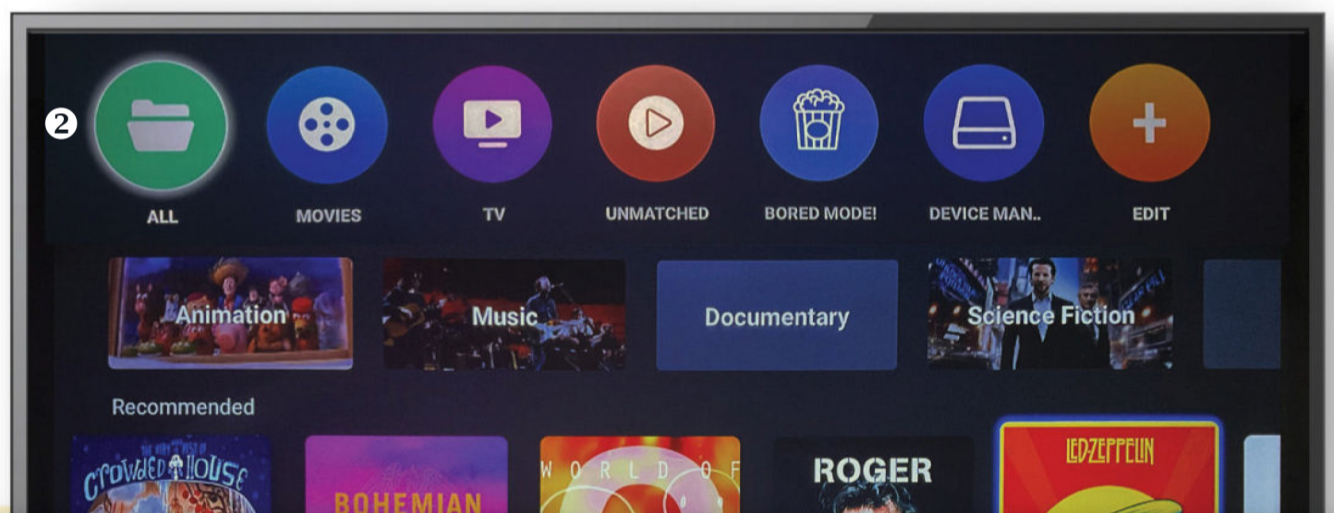
4K playback

Let's begin with the headline ability of the Neo S — 4K media playback. Sure, like any media player you can load a stick or drive of files and have the Zidoo skidoo them off to your TV. But this is to greatly underestimate what the Neo S would like to do, which is to present a whole library of videos with their artwork for your perusal, in a similar way to systems like Zappiti and Kaleidescape, though not with quite their level of snazzy graphics.

The Neo S passed every video playback test we gave it — video playback runs up to 4K/60, with high dynamic range including HDR10/10+ and Dolby Vision. Not only did it successfully handle our relatively few 4K test files when plugged into the unit itself, it streamed video glitch-free over our network, including archives which no previous video player under review has managed to handle without issues. Down in our basement lurks a rather old networked hard-drive onto which, in some decade now long past, we ripped hundreds of music DVDs as complete folders (so they play like a DVD, with menus, rather than as individual video files). Few are the media players that handle these rips even when plugged in directly. Nothing has ever previously played them over our network.

The Neo S looked at our distant NAS, saw the files, and conquered them, identifying a good percentage of the ripped DVDs and offering up their covers via its onscreen TV display, and on the app (the artwork comes from matching the files against tmdb.com and tvdb.com). We were soon watching classic music DVDs we had forgotten were there.

A good number of videos were, however, misidentified. We were surprised to see *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* in our old collection of DVDs, and when we played it this was, in fact, *Divine Madness*, a video music collection from the nutty boys of Camden Town. Similarly a DVD of *John Peel – In Session Tonight* appeared amusingly but inaccurately labelled as the 1935 British adventure film *D'Ye Ken John Peel?*

So, how to correct such errors? A menu button labelled Rematch can change keywords and have the Zidoo search its online resources again; this worked for some titles but not all — and could never work for, say, videos you have made yourself. The manual was silent on any of this, but on enquiry the folk at Zidoo explained how to access the Neo S via its IP address using a browser (specifically its allocated IP address then ':9528'). This access allows you to edit everything from title and

Inputs
The well-built Neo S networks via either Ethernet or Wi-Fi, and offers digital audio inputs on USB-B for computer, optical, coaxial and AES/EBU, along with two USB-A 2.0 slots and two USB-A 3.0 slots. Three small antennas also cater to Bluetooth of pretty much every popular flavour.

Outputs
You could play everything via HDMI through a TV system, but best music quality can be extracted via unbalanced RCA or balanced XLR analogue outs.

poster to director and actors, to allocate movies to collections and categories, and more. We reckon cinephiles will love this combination of initial autofill and then manual correction. They will certainly love the extensive playback options available in settings, ensuring frame rates are matched and even allowing negative audio sync (i.e. video delay), a rarity which can sometimes overcome latency issues elsewhere.

It's odd that the editing function and others aren't detailed in the manual — it's true that an exhaustive manual would be enormous, because the unit does so much, but that doesn't stop the likes of Zappiti and especially Cocktail Audio from including full documentation. Better still, the ability to edit video titles and pictures could be made accessible from the app itself, which is surely the right place for it. But the app proved to be a pretty bare-boned affair beyond that PosterWall functionality.

Audio playback
While video playback was thereby easy to navigate and enjoy, music is a little harder, with UPnP-style access to collections, whether plugged in on a drive, across the network, or loaded to the unit's own 256GB internal hard drive. This needs long scrolling through extensive lists of artists or albums, though a search box is available on the app. When you select a track to play, it'll start playing but you may not hear it, because if you've been using a different input you have to manually switch the Zidoo to its 'internal player'; we can't recall any other media player which doesn't auto-switch when you select a track this way.

Having said that, its playback quality was well up to its price level and, as with movies, very widely compatible in terms of file type, with some we've never even heard of (NRG? M4R ringtones?), up to 32-bit/768kHz PCM or DSD512, though we confess we only tested it up to DSD64 and 24-bit/384kHz. There's full MQA support. We also like that when you list "All Musics" (sic) to show all available tracks, you can select specific file rates (96kHz, DSD64 etc), though not, as in Roon or Bluesound, say, multiple options or simply 'anything CD quality and above'. It also omits 88.2kHz as an option to select.

Such were the complexities of music listing via the app or screen that we much preferred just using our computer and playing to the Zidoo via USB-B. Indeed we made the Zidoo boss of our system by using its variable outputs direct into our power amps; if you don't have any analogue sources, this unit can operate very nicely as a preamplifier in this way. If you use the balanced XLR outputs for this, the Zidoo further shows its advanced technicality by offering reverse XLR polarity for those occasional pro-gear sockets that require it.

There are two headphone outputs on the front — standard full-size quarter inch and the new-fangled balanced 4.4mm, and you can switch the Zidoo's headphone gain from low (for 16-32-ohm headphones) to high (for anything else). The main quarter-inch socket drove both budget and esoteric headphones beautifully, with plenty of gain available from the lovely front-panel knob.

Conclusion
This is very much an enthusiast's product; it's not something you'll be getting for your auntie. It requires a certain amount of work to list movie files accurately, and to delve into all options. But in this age of music subscriptions and movie streaming, it is likely to be only the enthusiasts who will even be seeking a device to play files and rips in this way; the Netflix and Spotify crowd wouldn't know what to do with a Neo S if they had one. Enthusiasts, then, can have confidence in the technologies used here for high-quality playback, both video and audio, and will likely take the time required to become fully accustomed to its ways, and seek out its secrets, like the unadvertised IP-address access. Once you're settled in and familiar, the Neo S is a multifunctional delight.

SPECS

Zidoo Neo S $2299

Inputs: USB-B, optical digital, coaxial digital, AES/EBU, 2 x USB 2.0, 2 x USB 3.0, Bluetooth (SBC/AAC/aptX/aptX LL/aptX HD/LDAC), Ethernet/Wi-Fi

Outputs: analogue RCA, analogue balanced XLR, HDMI out, USB out available by selection, headphone 6.3mm unbalanced, 4.4mm balanced

Hard-drive: 256GB SSD included

Remote control: Bluetooth, backlit

Dimensions (whd): 292 x 100 x 213mm

Weight: 14.0kg

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