

Sonos Port review: flexibility for a price

I was halfway through reviewing the Sonos Port when the company called me to say the price was going up by \$50 to \$449.

The diminutive box, which allows you to integrate Sonos' whole-home audio into virtually any kind of setup you might have, was already feeling a little expensive to me. Now it seems like there's a clear break between the Sonos devices meant for consumers and the devices meant for high-end AV integrators to sell as part of extremely custom – and extremely expensive – audio systems.

Verge Score 7.5 out of 10

Good Stuff

- Lots of configuration and compatibility options
- Small and compact
- Can be integrated into custom smart home setups

Bad Stuff

- Wildly expensive for what it does
- Cannot control receiver volume over a network
- Some limitations with Google Assistant voice control

Let's back up: the Sonos Port is part of a welcome reboot of the Sonos product line that's been happening since new CEO Patrick Spence took over. One of his stated goals was to move

a little faster, and he's accomplished that: first by quickly introducing new consumer products like the Sonos One and Beam, partnering with Ikea on the Symfonisk line of speakers, and then by making sure the professionals who install custom Sonos systems had new, modern products to use.

The first of those products, the Sonos Amp, was a total reboot of the older Sonos Connect:Amp. While it's expensive (more so now), I really liked it and thought it made a case for itself in a variety of situations since it is a self-contained high-end amplifier with Sonos capabilities. But at \$449, I'm less sure about the Port, which is an update of the Sonos Connect, and it really can't do anything until you plug it into something else. The Port worked flawlessly in my testing, and it offers a tremendous amount of configuration options that allow Sonos to work with almost any kind of audio system you might have. But it's priced to match, and I think it's entirely too expensive for the two things most people would want it to do: connecting a record player to an existing Sonos system, or integrating an existing audio system into a Sonos setup.

The Port has connections for most common types of audio gear

Photo by Dan Seifert / The Verge

The Port is an unassuming black box that can either send audio *from* your Sonos system out to an amplifier or take audio *in* from a component like a turntable or AirPlay and send it out to your Sonos system. It's a simple idea executed extremely well – everything works and sounds solid, and the box itself is highly configurable for a variety of wacky situations. There's a 12V trigger output so it can power up an external amp when it detects incoming audio, and it can accept commands over the network from custom smart home controllers. If you have a Pioneer or Onkyo surround receiver, it can even power them up over the network so they integrate into your Sonos

system. (Sadly, the Sonos app cannot control the volume of a receiver over the network in that configuration, which seems like a miss.)

Setup is as easy as any other modern Sonos device: you plug it in, open the app, and tap the connect button on the back when prompted, and then you're off and running. If you're swapping out an older Connect, the only hard part will be rerunning the power cable, since the Port uses a different connector.

All of this works exactly as intended, and as elegantly and powerfully as you'd expect from Sonos. I tested it with both the analog audio out and the composite digital output to my Denon receiver, and it sounded excellent with both, although the digital output was a little quieter than I expected. I also used it as an AirPlay target to stream audio to the rest of my Sonos system, and that worked just fine as well. The only disappointment I had was with Google Assistant; Google and Sonos have not yet added the ability to set a Sonos speaker as the default output for music in a room, so saying "Hey Google, play some music" resulted in audio playing from my Nest Hub, not the Sonos. Alexa has this ability; it's a miss that it's not there for Google users. I asked Sonos when this might be added, and there's no timeline yet, but the company is certainly aware of the gap.

Most people will basically use the \$449 Port as the top half of a Sonos One SL, which sells for \$179

That's a small issue, however – the bigger issue is the price, which seems more reflective of everything the Port *can* do, and less related to the main things people *need* to do.

For example, if all you want to do is stream a turntable to a couple of Sonos One speakers around your house, the Port is an incredible overkill at \$449 – you're paying for a million features you'll never use. If you've got a surround sound setup that you'd like to include as part of your Sonos system, the Port still seems like an overkill – you're basically using

it as the top half of a Sonos One SL, which sells for \$179.

I'm sure there are people out there who will get every cent of power and flexibility out of the Port's \$449 price tag, but I also doubt they're reading this review, because they are busy setting up their CEDIA booths or helping billionaires make sure the sauna is heated when the Bentley pulls in or whatever.

I asked Sonos why the Port was so expensive, and the company didn't shy away from it – product manager Benji Rappoport told me it was priced to reflect the total value of the product and its ability to connect to the Sonos ecosystem, and that Sonos assumed most consumers would simply buy its cheaper offerings. And it's true that if you are looking to do something as simple as update your aging 5.1 system with Sonos, you're better off buying a more modern Sonos consumer product like the Beam for less money. It also seems clear that Sonos knows that the professional AV integrators who are most likely to buy the Port will simply pass the cost along to their clients, who are already spending thousands on custom solutions.

And really, that all seems fine – go ahead and soak the people who can afford completely custom, professionally installed home audio systems. But it stings that the very expensive Port is the only solution for many use cases the rest of us might have, since one of the best reasons to go with a Sonos system is that it is by far the most flexible, complete product line for multiroom audio on the market.

The last time Sonos CEO Patrick Spence was on *The Vergecast*, he told me that one way Sonos had sped up its product cycles was by modularizing things: most Sonos products now use the same processor, networking components, and so on. If that approach can yield a \$100 Ikea speaker – complete *with actual speaker* – I don't know why it can't help make a simple box that helps people stream a turntable or get more out of an existing stereo.

I am sure the people who sell racks of \$10,000 amps and custom surround processors aren't going to flinch one bit at the Sonos Port – it will help them do their jobs, and it'll perform admirably. But there are a million little edge cases where a product like the Port makes sense for consumers, and it's a shame Sonos doesn't have a cheaper, simpler version of the Port that helps regular people get the most out of their systems, especially when Amazon seems intent on making sure it has a million cheap Echo devices that can play audio in almost every room as well. That's ultimately the value of Sonos compared to every other smart speaker system out there: the product line is big enough, and capable enough, for almost every situation. It's just that for a few of those situations, your only choice is to pay as much money as a pro.

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