

By September 20, 2008 Editor, Software Reviews

Winamp's Future Competitor

Crystal quality audio

When it comes to playing music on the computer the possibilities are almost endless. The myriad of audio players on the market provide you with all the options you need, not only for playing your audio files but also for Audio CD ripping, burning, converting and other music files relate operations. The great majority of users employ Winamp for the task. The application is well built, looks very nice by default and provides a bit more than just playing your music as it can function very well as a video player. An Internet connection allows you to launch online radios and even watch ShoutCast TV. What's not to like? Foobar is my alternative to Winamp... It is not all that flexible but the sound quality, EQ, audio converter and the general feel are to my taste, plus it is portable. But the best options in this sense are not limited to these and programs like DeliPlayer or MusicMatch Jukebox. AIMP is a new entry in the category and judging by the looks and feel of the latest version one would not think it is in beta stage. The application is free to use and share and it can be run on both Vista and XP with almost the same rate of success. Installation runs smoothly and there are little settings to be made, but still, you cannot blindly hit "Next" button as you must choose the components to be installed (plugins, visualizations, skins, audio library, utilities and language packs). The first time you launch AIMP a wizard will help you configure the application and walk you through making the right decisions regarding playlist saving format, make a couple of adjustments to how AIMP behaves when opening files, when reaching the end of the playlist, choose the skin, integrate a menu in Windows Explorer or select which files should be associated with the program. All these settings can be modified from AIMP's Options menu with the least effort. The interface is similar to Winamp's, but it's not quite the same thing. There are two main windows available: one containing the playlist and a main panel comprising all the control buttons, EQ, volume control, progress bar, etc. All's well until you decide to resize main panel as this feature is not yet supported. Playlist window instead is fully resizeable, both in Vista and in XP. AIMP's menu is not in plain view as it is located in the topmost left hand corner of the application window. From all options available I have to say that Auto Shutdown is the most particular. Unlike other audio players AIMP provides the means of programming a computer shutdown at a user defined time, after playlist is finished playing or after a certain period of time elapses. All in all the looks are pretty good, with one objection: there are too many functions and information crowded in main panel. In the left part there is displayed the frequency and bitrate of the playing file, a copying function (copies the file to clipboard), shuffle and repeat options and radio recorder. If you don't have a keen eye you may miss them. In the lower right hand there is the playlist button, equalizer and visualization options. The 18 band EQ comes with a series of presets (Live, Classic, Club, Dance, Full Bass, Full Treble, Party, Pop, Rock, etc.) and also lets you save your own presets. Additional adjustments include setting playing speed, balance, chorus level, add a bit of echo, flanger or reverb, according to the listening environment and the song played. Options menu is the core of the application as it contains all the settings and configuration, making the player more suitable to your needs. The menus available include setting cross fade and fade effect length, playlist saving (absolute paths or relative), visualization screen refresh time, buffer size and time out for online audio streaming, radio recording format (WAV or MP3) and defining the folder to save the recording. AIMP even comes with a series of automatic actions triggered by adding files, like autoscanning the playlist or adjusting to track genre preset. When starting the program it can be configured to react in three ways: start playing the first file, switch to the same state it was prior to closing or just do nothing. When the playlist end is reached AIMP can take actions like jumping to next playlist, repeat the playlist or enter in stand by. Opening files are not left without automatic tasks, either. The events triggered by this activity include creating a new playlist, integrate the file into current playlist, add it to empty Default playlist or play it immediately. Though still in beta stage AIMP comes with lots of configuration options that can rival with the best on the market. The list of files supported by the application is quite large and contains all popular formats (MP3, OGG, WAV, WMA, MID, FLAC, CUE) as well as less formal ones like UMX, WV, AIF or AIFF. AIMP does not come only with audio file playing capabilities and a set of four utilities is also available. Audio Converter helps you grab the music from Audio CDs and saves the tracks as MP3,

WAV, WMA or OGG. Depending on the chosen file format you can make some settings regarding the quality and size of the output result (frequency, bitrate, mode, number of channels). The speed for converting the files is not the greatest but the result is very good and will not disappoint. Tag editor is a handy tool regardless if you want to edit a single file or an entire group or rename them using a pattern. The tool has explorer-like interface and is extremely easy to maneuver. Additionally you can remove or the modified files to a folder of your choice. A few clicks and typing the desired text in the correspondent fields and all your files are properly renamed, with the least effort from your part. During our testing AIMP did a great job at playing files, but at a closer look there is no doubt why it is in beta stage. There are still details to attend to, starting with the interface and ending with minor options like allowing the user to program the application to play a number of files in a certain order or adding a Tag option in playlist context menu. **The Good** It is highly configurable and the Auto Shutdown option is just great as it allows you to schedule the computer to enter sleep mode, shutdown computer or log off. The utilities come in handy, especially audio converter/ripper and tag editor. AIMP is easy to use and I am sure that you will find it to your liking. **The Bad** It is a beta, it is normal to have glitches, flukes and mishaps here and there. My greatest concern is the main panel containing a myriad of functions and options, too many for its size. **The Truth** The application is on the right track. There are lots of options, it supports all popular audio formats and during our testing it did not crash at all. *Here are some snapshots of the application in action:*