

Clementine revives classic Amarok

Old School Tunes

Zonker takes a look at Clementine, a full-featured media player for Linux that can manage your collection as well as play your tunes. *By Joe "Zonker" Brockmeier*

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Although people say they want change, they don't really mean it. At least not when it means trading the tried and true for an unfamiliar design. Case in point: The Amarok developers worked long and hard to update and modernize the user interface of Amarok, only to find many users preferred the old school media player. The result? Clementine, a player "inspired by" Amarok 1.4 but updated to take advantage of the Qt4 toolkit.

Amarok was one of the earliest full-featured media players and managers for Linux. Perhaps not the very first, but it was a step forward from MP3 players such as xmms that were suitable for playing music but not really well-designed for managing a media collection. When your music collection starts spanning several gigabytes, it's time to look to an application that does more than just play back MP3s and OggS – you want an application that can help tame the collection as well.

Amarok debuted in 2003 and continued development and adding features through the KDE 4.x release, when the team started working on Amarok 2.0. The 2.x series has a radically revised interface and, for a time, some of the features originally present (such as Replay Gain support) were omitted while porting to Qt4/KDE4. This did not go over well with all users

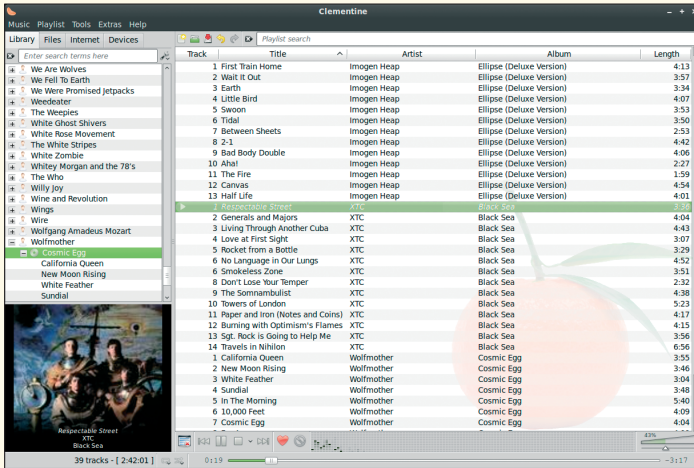


Figure 1: Clementine playing early XTC.

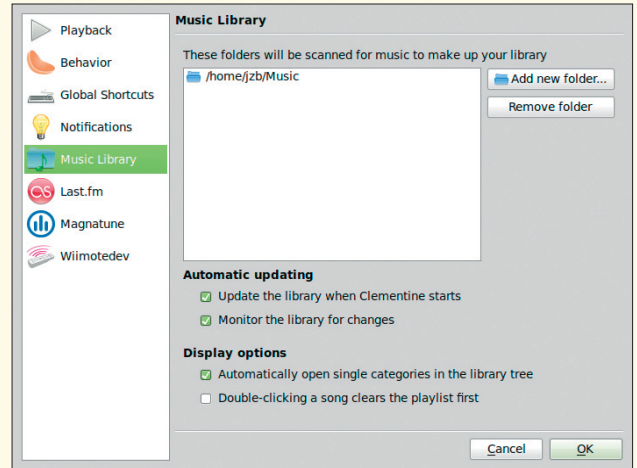


Figure 2: Setting the library preferences in Clementine.

of Amarok, and at least two forks of the 1.4 version (last in the KDE 3.x series) were developed, one of which was Clementine. I've long been a fan of the original Amarok, so when I learned about Clementine, I thought it would be worth installing, and it certainly has been.

Introduction

Clementine is not yet shipping with any major Linux distros, but it's stable and ready to use despite the low (0.5 as of this writing) version number. Remember, it's based on Amarok 1.4, so it's already been road-tested quite a bit.

The Clementine project site [1] has the latest releases and links to downloads. You'll find 32- and 64-bit packages for Ubuntu and Fedora, as well as packages for Windows and Mac OS X Leopard and Snow Leopard. Source is available as well. The Ubuntu package installs cleanly on Linux Mint 9, which is what I'm using. Once it's installed, check your desktop's menu for Clementine. Although it's a KDE-ish program, it's spiffy under Gnome, too.

If you've used old-style Amarok before, the interface should look very familiar. If not, take a look at Figure 1, which shows the default interface after adding some songs to the library.

On the surface, Clementine is pretty simple and easy to use, and you should be able to start playing music right away. But there's a bit more under the surface that bears mentioning. Let's start with importing your music collection. Go to the *Edit* menu, and then *Preferences*. You'll see a dialog similar to the one in Figure 2. Click the *Music Library* icon, and you'll be able to add folders on your computer with your music collection. Be sure to click the *Automatic updating* option, unless you want to inform Clementine manually each time a new song is added.

Clementine is pretty perky when it comes to slurping in new tunes, by the way. I added a collection in the range of 80GB and it took less than two minutes (on a Core i7 machine with 8GB of RAM) to index the entire collection.

What if your music collection isn't terribly large, or you just like discovering new tunes? Clementine has a few options. While in *Preferences*, go to the Last.fm tab and enter your Last.fm credentials. If you don't have an account, you'll want to sign up for one. The basic accounts are free and allow you to stream music and "scrobble" your tunes. This keeps a record of everything you listen to through Clementine, so you can see your musical trends and share with other folks. Clementine also supports SomaFM, if you're into that. All the streaming options are in the *Internet* tab.

If you have a Magnatune account, be sure to enter that as well. Because the indie label switched to a download service, you can

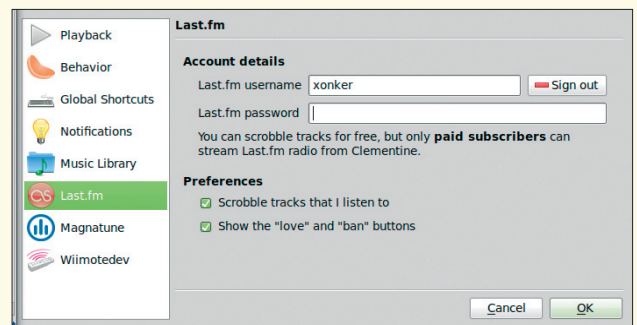


Figure 3: Configuring Last.fm with Clementine.

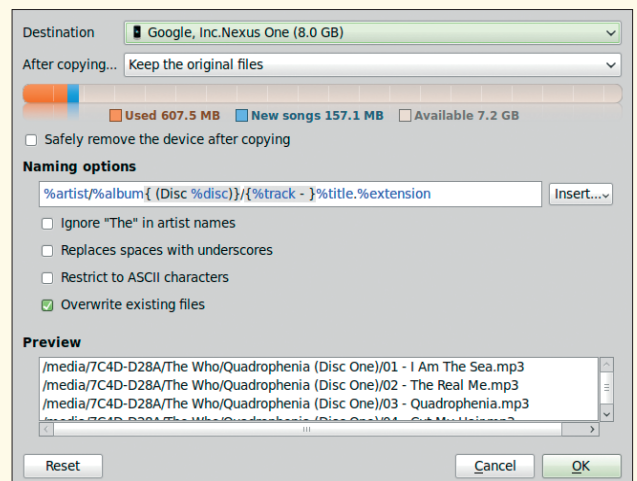


Figure 4: Preparing to copy *Quadrophenia* to the Nexus One.

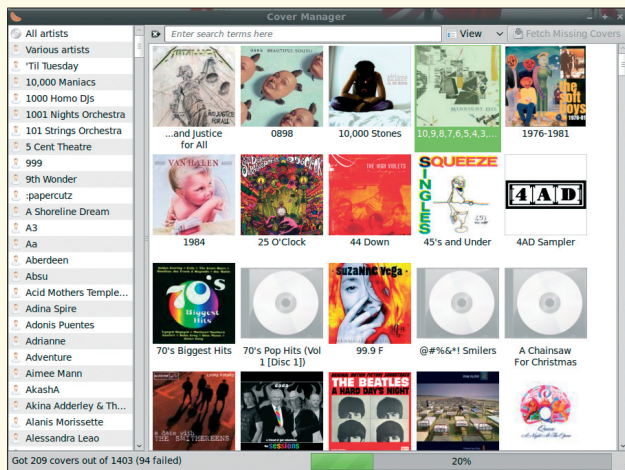


Figure 5: Fixing up album cover art.

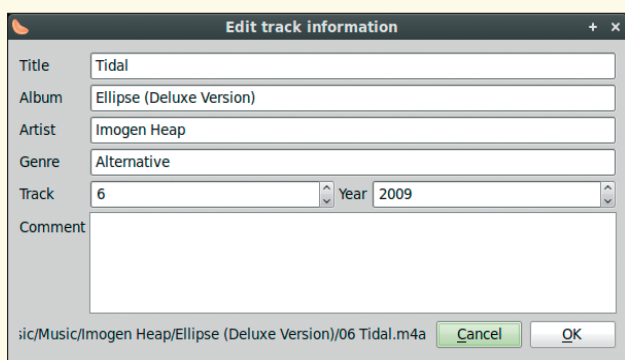


Figure 6: Editing track information using Clementine.

use Clementine to download albums via the service in MP3 or Ogg formats. You might need to uncompress the zip files, though, before integrating into your collection – which brings me to the next feature. Notice the tabs shown in Figure 1 on the left-hand side of the Clementine interface.

You can select the *Files* tab to browse the file system and add files to your library. Just downloaded some MP3s from Firefox? Browse to the *Download* directory and right-click on the file or files. You'll see several options from loading the song into the playlist (so Clementine will play it where it's at) or copying or moving the file into your library. You can also use the file manager to delete songs if you need to free up some room or accidentally downloaded some Justin Bieber.

Device Support

One thing that's improved, or at least kept up with current devices, is the support for iPods and other music players with Clementine. Keeping up with Apple's gadgets can be tricky, because the company doesn't go out of its way to help third parties support iPods, iPhones, etc. Quite the opposite, Apple frequently changes things up so it's harder for third parties to interact with its devices.

Despite that, Clementine has support for plenty of third-party players. I tested this out with an iPhone, which Clementine recognized and immediately indexed the music on. For some reason, though, Clementine doesn't offer the option of copying music to the library from the iPhone. The same is true for the iPod Classic. On the other hand, Clementine was happy to manage my Google Nexus One and also offered to copy music off the device for me. You can also copy music to the devices as easily from the library. Just right-click and select "Copy to Device." You'll then see a dia-

log like the one shown in Figure 4.

One of the things I quite like in a media player is seeing my album covers. Generally it's the only way I see the album art after buying a CD, ripping it to digital, and then stuffing the CD away for safe keeping. Downloading and copying album art manually is tedious, though – but Clementine will do it for you. Just go to *Tools | Cover Manager* and then click *Fetch Missing Covers*, as shown in Figure 5. Clementine will scour the Internet for you to find the album cover art that's appropriate.

What does Clementine lack? Not much, but it does seem to be lacking one major feature – namely, the ability to rip tracks from CD. You can transcode music from one format to another if it's already ripped. For example, if you want to get an Ogg from MP3, or MP3 from a WAV, just go to *Tools | Transcode Music*, and you'll get a dialog that allows you to add any supported file and then select the output format that you want.

Clementine is also great for cleaning up the files. Select any track or tracks that are on disk and right-click on them. You can edit the metadata as shown in Figure 6, which makes Clementine a great one-stop shop for managing your music files.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention Clementine's visualizations and the special feature. Clementine offers a metric ton of visualizations for your visual enjoyment while you're listening to tunes. Go to *Tools | Visualizations* and you'll be able to visualize your music. If you don't like the default visualizations, right-click on the window and choose the *Select visualizations* dialog. The Clementine package came with dozens of great (and some not-so-great) visualizations.

And my favorite, though least practical, feature? Futurama fans will be pleased to see that they can invoke the Hypnotoad at any time. Just got to the *Extras* menu and select *Hypnotoad*. Everyone's favorite Hypnotoad will be displayed in all its hypnotic glory in the lower left-hand corner, along with the signature Hypnotoad noise.

Music junkies should grab Clementine straight away. It's a solid, full-featured player with an interface that's a bit plain but also highly functional and flexible. Spend some time with Clementine, and you'll be hooked all over again. ■■■

INFO

[1] Clementine website: The project: <http://www.clementine-player.org/>