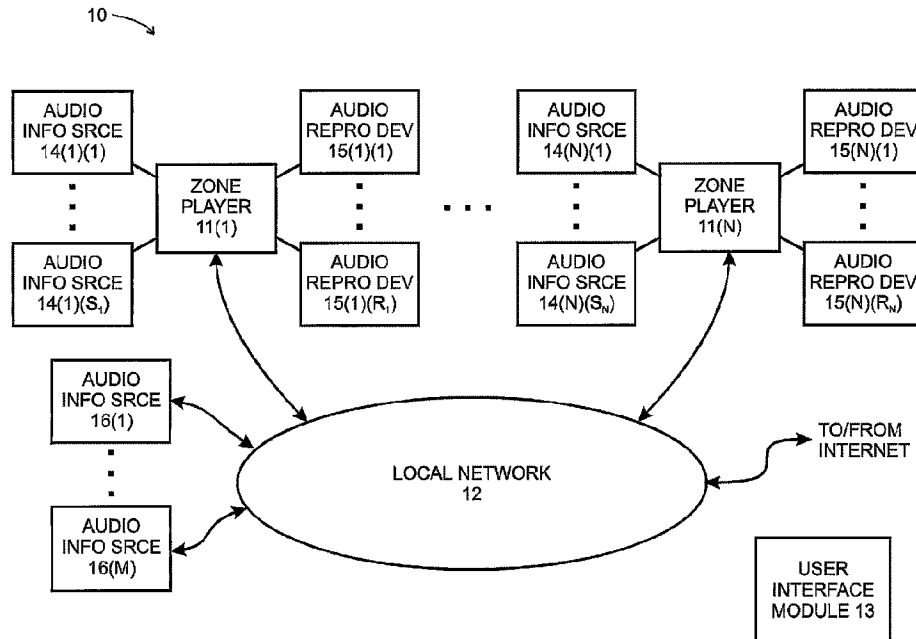




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(54) **Titre : SYSTEME ET PROCEDURE DE SYNCHRONISATION D'OPERATIONS PARMIS UNE PLURALITE DE DISPOSITIFS DE TRAITEMENT DE DONNEES NUMERIQUES INDEPENDAMMENT SYNCHRONISEES**  
 (54) **Title: SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR SYNCHRONIZING OPERATIONS AMONG A PLURALITY OF INDEPENDENTLY CLOCKED DIGITAL DATA PROCESSING DEVICES**



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

A tangible computer-readable memory having instructions stored thereon that when executed cause a zone player to: receive control information from any one of a plurality of user interface modules; based on the received control information enter into a synchrony group with a second zone player; and transmit status information to at least one of the plurality of user interface modules, wherein the status information provides an indication of an operational status of the synchrony group.

### **Abstract**

A tangible computer-readable memory having instructions stored thereon that when executed cause a zone player to: receive control information from any one of a plurality of user interface modules; based on the received control information enter into a synchrony group with a second zone player; and transmit status information to at least one of the plurality of user interface modules, wherein the status information provides an indication of an operational status of the synchrony group.

## **SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR SYNCHRONIZING OPERATIONS AMONG A PLURALITY OF INDEPENDENTLY CLOCKED DIGITAL DATA PROCESSING DEVICES**

### **FIELD OF THE INVENTION**

The present invention relates generally to the field of digital data processing devices, and more particularly to systems and methods for synchronizing operations among a plurality of independently-clocked digital data processing devices. The invention is embodied in a system for synchronizing operations among a plurality of devices, in relation to information that is provided by a common source. One embodiment of the invention enables synchronizing of audio playback as among two or more audio playback devices that receive audio information from a common information source, or channel.

More generally, the invention relates to the field of arrangements that synchronize output generated by a number of output generators, including audio output, video output, combinations of audio and video, as well as other types of output as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, provided by a common channel. Generally, the invention will find utility in connection with any type of information for which synchrony among independently-clocked devices is desired.

### **BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

There are a number of circumstances under which it is desirable to maintain synchrony of operations among a plurality of independently-clocked digital data processing devices in relation to, for example, information that is provided thereto by a common source. For example, systems are being developed in which one audio information source can distribute audio information in digital form to a number of audio playback devices for playback. The audio playback devices receive the digital information and convert it to analog form for playback. The audio playback devices may be located in the same room or they may be distributed in different rooms in a residence such as a house or an apartment, in different offices in an office building, or the like. For example, in a system installed in a residence, one audio playback device may be located in a living room, while another audio playback device is located in a kitchen, and yet other audio playback devices may be located in various bedrooms of a house. In such an arrangement, the audio information that is distributed to various audio playback devices may relate to the same audio program, or the information may relate to different audio programs. If the audio information source provides audio information relating to the same audio program to two or more audio playback devices at the same time, the audio playback devices will generally contemporaneously play the same program. For

example, if the audio information source provides audio information to audio playback devices located in the living room and kitchen in a house at the same time, they will generally contemporaneously play the same program.

One problem that can arise is to ensure that, if two or more audio playback devices are contemporaneously attempting to play back the same audio program, they do so simultaneously. Small differences in the audio playback devices' start times and/or playback speeds can be perceived by a listener as an echo effect, and larger differences can be very annoying. Differences can arise because for a number of reasons, including delays in the transfer of audio information over the network. Such delays can differ as among the various audio playback devices for a variety of reasons, including where they are connected into the network, message traffic and other reasons as will be apparent to those skilled in the art.

Another problem arises from the following. When an audio playback device converts the digital audio information from digital to analog form, it does so using a clock that provides timing information. Generally, the audio playback devices that are being developed have independent clocks, and, if they are not clocking at precisely the same rate, the audio playback provided by the various devices can get out of synchronization.

#### **SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION**

The invention provides a new and improved system and method for synchronizing operations among a number of digital data processing devices that are regulated by independent clocking devices. Generally, the invention will find utility in connection with any type of information for which synchrony among devices connected to a network is desired. The invention is described in connection with a plurality of audio playback devices that receive digital audio information that is to be played back in synchrony, but it will be appreciated that the invention can find usefulness in connection with any kind of information for which coordination among devices that have independent clocking devices would find utility.

In brief summary, the invention provides, in one aspect, a method to be performed by a system comprising a first set of network devices, the method comprising:

receiving, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, a first control instruction for at least a second network device and a third network device to enter into a synchrony group, wherein the first set of network devices comprises:

a first network device comprising a first clock that is configured to provide a first local clock time of the first network device;

the second network device, the second network device comprising a second clock that is configured to provide a second local clock time of the second network device; and

the third network device, the third network device comprising a third clock that is configured to provide a third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third network devices include respective network interfaces that are configured to facilitate network communication between the first, second, and third network devices via one or more data networks,

after receiving, by the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction, selecting, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the second network device from among a second set of network devices that comprises the second network device and the third network device, to serve as an audio distributor in the synchrony group comprising the second network device and the third network device;

after selection of the second network device to serve as the audio distributor in the synchrony group:

operating, by the second network device and the third network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the third network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, (a) audio information and (b) playback timing information associated with the audio information, wherein the playback timing information is indicative of at least one future time at which the second network device and the third network device are to engage in synchronized playback of the audio information;

and engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third local clock times are different during synchronous playback.

In another aspect, the invention provides a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium comprising instructions that, when executed by a system comprising a first set of network devices, perform functions comprising:

receiving, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, a first control instruction for at least a second network device and a third network device to enter into a synchrony group, wherein the first set of network devices comprises:

a first network device comprising a first clock that is configured to provide a first local clock time of the first network device;

the second network device, the second network device comprising a second clock that is configured to provide a second local clock time of the second network device; and

the third network device, the third network device comprising a third clock that is configured to provide a third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third network devices include respective network interfaces that are configured to facilitate network communication between the first, second, and third network devices via one or more data networks,

after receiving, by the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction, selecting, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the second network device from among a second set of network devices that comprises the second network device and the third network device, to serve as an audio distributor in the synchrony group comprising the second network device and the third network device;

after selection of the second network device to serve as the audio distributor in the synchrony group:

operating, by the second network device and the third network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the third network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, (a) audio information and (b) playback timing information associated with the audio information, wherein the playback timing information is indicative of at least one future time at which the second network device and the third network device are to engage in synchronized playback of the audio information; and

engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third local clock times are different during synchronous playback.

In another aspect, the invention provides a system comprising:

a first set of network devices comprising:

a first network device comprising a first clock that is configured to provide a first local clock time of the first network device;

a second network device comprising a second clock that is configured to provide a second local clock time of the second network device;

a third network device comprising a third clock that is configured to provide a third local clock time of the third network device,

wherein the first, second, and third network devices include respective network interfaces that are configured to facilitate network communication between the first, second, and third network devices via one or more data networks, and

wherein the first, second, and third network devices each include a respective at least one processor and respective tangible, non-transitory computer-readable storage media having stored therein instructions that, when executed, cause the first set of network devices to collectively perform functions including:

receiving, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, a first control instruction for at least the second network device and the third network device to enter into a synchrony group;

after receiving, by the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction, selecting, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the second network device from among a second set of network devices that comprises the second network device and the third network device, to serve as an audio distributor in the synchrony group comprising the second network device and the third network device;

after selection of the second network device to serve as the audio distributor in the synchrony group:

operating, by the second network device and the third network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the third network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, (a) audio information and (b) playback timing information associated with the audio information, wherein the playback timing information is indicative of at least one future time at which the second network device and the third network device are to engage in synchronized playback of the audio information; and

engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third local clock times are different during synchronous playback.

In another aspect, the invention provides a method performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

exchanging, via at least one asynchronous data network, clock timing information with a second zone player in a networked audio system that facilitates time synchronization between the first zone player and a set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system that includes the second zone player, wherein as a result of the time synchronization, the first zone player and the set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system maintain a common notion of clock time;

receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content with at least one other zone player from the set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content with the at least one other zone player:

obtaining audio information that is representative of the audio content;

transmitting, to the at least one other zone player via at least one asynchronous data network, the obtained audio information and an indication of at least one future playback time at which the first zone player and the at least one other zone player are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future playback time is relative to the common notion of clock time; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the at least one other zone player using the at least one future playback time.

In another aspect, the invention provides a first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one asynchronous data network;

at least one processor;

a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium; and

program instructions stored on the tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium that are executable by the at least one processor such that the first zone player is configured to:

exchange, via the at least one asynchronous data network, clock timing information with a second zone player in a networked audio system that facilitates time synchronization between the first zone player and a set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system that includes the second zone player, wherein as a result of the time synchronization, the first zone player and the set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system maintain a common notion of clock time;

receive a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content with at least one other zone player from the set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content with the at least one other zone player:

obtain audio information that is representative of the audio content;

transmit, to the at least one other zone player via the at least one asynchronous data network, the obtained audio information and an indication of at least one future playback time at which the first zone player and the at least one other zone player are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future playback time is relative to the common notion of clock time; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the at least one other zone player using the at least one future playback time.

In another aspect, the invention provides a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media comprising instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed, cause a first zone player to perform functions comprising:

exchanging, via at least one asynchronous data network, clock timing information with a second zone player in a networked audio system that facilitates time synchronization between the first zone player and a set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system that includes the second zone player, wherein as a result of the time synchronization, the first zone player and the set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system maintain a common notion of clock time;

receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content with at least one other zone player from the set of one or more other zone players in the networked audio system;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content with the at least one other zone player:

obtaining audio information that is representative of the audio content;

transmitting, to the at least one other zone player via at least one asynchronous data network, the obtained audio information and an indication of at least one future playback time at which the first zone player and the at least one other zone player are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future playback time is relative to the common notion of clock time; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the at least one other zone player using the at least one future playback time.

In another aspect, the invention provides a method performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group that includes at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network, wherein the second zone player comprises a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the second zone player, and wherein the local clock time of the first zone player differs from the local clock time of the second zone player;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

obtaining audio information that is representative of the audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generating playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least one future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future time is determined based on the local clock time of the second zone player;

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information.

In another aspect, the invention provides a first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the first zone player;

at least one processor;

a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium; and

program instructions stored on the tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium that are executable by the at least one processor such that the first zone player is configured to perform functions comprising:

receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group that includes at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, wherein the second zone player

comprises a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the second zone player, and wherein the local clock time of the first zone player differs from the local clock time of the second zone player;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

obtaining audio information that is representative of the audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generating playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least one future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future time is determined based on the local clock time of the second zone player;

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information.

In another aspect, the invention provides a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media comprising instructions encoded therein, wherein the instructions, when executed, cause a first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group that includes at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network, wherein the second zone player comprises a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the second zone player, and wherein the local clock time of the first zone player differs from the local clock time of the second zone player;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

obtaining audio information that is representative of the audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generating playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least one future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future time is determined based on the local clock time of the second zone player;

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information.

In another aspect, the invention provides a method performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

receiving, via a network interface, a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group comprising at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging, via the network interface with a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between at least the first zone player and the third zone player, wherein the third zone player is not a member of the synchrony group, and wherein as part of the time synchronization, the first zone player maintains an adjusted clock time that (i) is different from its local clock time and (ii) tracks a clock time of the third zone player;

receiving, via the network interface from the second zone player, (i) audio information that is representative of the audio content and (ii) playback timing information associated with the audio information that comprises an indicator of at least a first future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time and the adjusted clock time.

In another aspect, the invention provides a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media having instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed, cause a first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving, via a network interface, a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group comprising at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging, via the network interface with a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between at least the first zone player and the third zone player, wherein the third zone player is not a member of the synchrony group, and wherein as part of

the time synchronization, the first zone player maintains an adjusted clock time that (i) is different from its local clock time and (ii) tracks a clock time of the third zone player;

receiving, via the network interface from the second zone player, (i) audio information that is representative of the audio content and (ii) playback timing information associated with the audio information that comprises an indicator of at least a first future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time and the adjusted clock time.

In another aspect, the invention provides a first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

a local clock that is configured to provide a clock time of the first zone player;

at least one processor; a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium; and

program instructions stored on the tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium that are executable by the at least one processor such that the first zone player is configured to:

receive, via the network interface, a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group comprising at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content as part of the synchrony group:

exchange, via the network interface with a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between at least the first zone player and the third zone player, wherein the third zone player is not a member of the synchrony group, and wherein as part of the time synchronization, the first zone player maintains an adjusted clock time that (i) is different from its local clock time and (ii) tracks a clock time of the third zone player;

receive, via the network interface from the second zone player, (i) audio information that is representative of the audio content and (ii) playback timing information associated with the audio information that comprises an indicator of at least a first future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information; and

engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time and the adjusted clock time.

In another aspect, the invention provides a system comprising a first zone player, a second zone player, and a third zone player, wherein the first, second, and third zone players are communicatively coupled via at least one data network, wherein the first zone player is configured to perform functions comprising: (1) receiving, via a network interface at the first zone player, a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group comprising at least the second zone player, (2) after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content as part of the synchrony group: (A) exchanging, via the network interface with the third zone player, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between at least the first zone player and the third zone player, wherein the third zone player is not a member of the synchrony group, and wherein as part of the time synchronization, the first zone player maintains an adjusted clock time that (A-i) is different from its local clock time and (A-ii) tracks a clock time of the third zone player; (B) receiving, via the network interface from the second zone player, (B-i) audio information that is representative of the audio content and (B-ii) playback timing information associated with the audio information that comprises an indicator of at least a first future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information; and (C) engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time and the adjusted clock time.

In another aspect, the invention provides a method performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:

exchange messages with the second zone player that are indicative of a common clock reference for the synchrony group;

obtain audio information that is representative of given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least a first future time, relative to the common clock reference for the

synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information and the common clock reference for the synchrony group, wherein a local clock time of the first zone player differs from a local clock time of the second zone player.

In another aspect, the invention provides a first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the first zone player;

at least one processor;

tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media having instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed, cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network;

in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:

exchange messages with the second zone player that are indicative of a common clock reference for the synchrony group;

obtain audio information that is representative of given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least a first future time, relative to the common clock reference for the synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information and the common clock reference for the

synchrony group, wherein a local clock time of the first zone player differs from a local clock time of the second zone player.

In another aspect, the invention provides a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media comprising instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed cause a first zone player to perform a method comprising:

receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:

exchange messages with the second zone player that are indicative of a common clock reference for the synchrony group;

obtain audio information that is representative of given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least a first future time, relative to the common clock reference for the synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information and the common clock reference for the synchrony group, wherein a local clock time of the first zone player differs from a local clock time of the second zone player.

In another aspect, the invention provides a method to be performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

receiving, via a network interface configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network, a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network;

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, (i) detecting an indication that, based on a performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network, the first zone player is to operate as an audio distributor for the synchrony group and (ii) operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor;

while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor:

obtaining, via the network interface, audio information that is representative of given audio content;

generating playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmitting, via the network interface, the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information.

In another aspect, the invention provides a first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

at least one processor;

data storage storing instructions that are executable by the at least one processor to cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving, via the network interface, a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network; and

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, (i) detecting an indication that, based on a performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network, the first zone player is to operate as an audio distributor for the synchrony group and (ii) operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor,

wherein, while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, the first zone player is configured to:

obtain, via the network interface, audio information that is representative of given audio content;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit, via the network interface, the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information.

In another aspect, the invention provides a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium comprising instructions that, when executed by one or more processors, cause a first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving, via a network interface configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network, a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network; and

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, (i) detecting an indication that, based on a performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network, the first zone player is to operate as an audio distributor for the synchrony group and (ii) operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor;

wherein, while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, the first zone player is configured to:

obtain, via the network interface, audio information that is representative of given audio content;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit, via the network interface, the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information.

In another aspect, the invention provides a method performed by a computing device, the method comprising:

operating in a first mode in which the computing device is not serving as an audio information channel device for any synchrony group;

receiving an indication that the computing device is to begin serving as an audio information channel device for a synchrony group that comprises at least first and second zone players that are communicatively coupled with the computing device over an asynchronous data network configured to exchange digital data packets, wherein the computing device, the first zone player, and the second zone player each have a different respective clock time;

after receiving the indication,

(a) configuring the synchrony group to playback audio in synchrony, wherein configuring the synchrony group comprises sending control information to at least one of the first zone player or second zone player that (i) identifies the computing device as the audio information channel device for the synchrony group, (ii) initiates establishment of at least one communication channel by which audio information will be transmitted by the audio information channel device to the synchrony group, and (iii) instructs the at least one of the first zone player or second zone player to begin operating as part of the synchrony group; and

(b) transitioning from operating in the first mode to operating in a second mode in which the computing device serves as the audio information channel device for the synchrony group, wherein, while operating in the second mode, the computing device is configured to:

exchange, via the asynchronous data network, clock timing information with each of the first zone player and the second zone player that facilitates time synchronization between the computing device and each of the first zone player and the second zone player, wherein the time synchronization establishes a common notion of clock time for each of the first zone player, the second zone player, and the computing device;

obtain given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the given audio content that comprises an indicator of a first future time, relative to the common notion of clock time, at which at least the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the given audio content; and

transmit, via a network interface to the first and second zone players over the asynchronous data network, both (a) the audio information representing the given audio content via the at least one communication channel, and (b) the playback timing information, thereby enabling the first and second zone players to play back the given audio content in synchrony.

In another aspect, the invention provides a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media comprising instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions are executable by one or more processors such that a computing device is configured to:

operate in a first mode in which the computing device is not serving as an audio information channel device for any synchrony group;

receive an indication that the computing device is to begin serving as an audio information channel device for a synchrony group that comprises at least first and second zone players that are communicatively coupled with the computing device over an asynchronous data network configured to exchange digital data packets, wherein the

computing device, the first zone player, and the second zone player each have a different respective clock time;

after receiving the indication,

(a) configure the synchrony group to playback audio in synchrony, wherein configuring the synchrony group comprises sending control information to at least one of the first zone player or second zone player that (i) identifies the computing device as the audio information channel device for the synchrony group, (ii) initiates establishment of at least one communication channel by which audio information will be transmitted by the audio information channel device to the synchrony group, and (iii) instructs the at least one of the first zone player or second zone player to begin operating as part of the synchrony group; and

(b) transition from operating in the first mode to operating in a second mode in which the computing device serves as the audio information channel device for the synchrony group, wherein, while operating in the second mode, the computing device is configured to:

exchange, via the asynchronous data network, clock timing information with each of the first zone player and the second zone player that facilitates time synchronization between the computing device and each of the first zone player and the second zone player, wherein the time synchronization establishes a common notion of clock time for each of the first zone player, the second zone player, and the computing device;

obtain given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the given audio content that comprises an indicator of a first future time, relative to the common notion of clock time, at which at least the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the given audio content; and

transmit, via a network interface to the first and second zone players over the asynchronous data network, both (a) the audio information representing the given audio content via the at least one communication channel, and (b) the playback timing information, thereby enabling the first and second zone players to play back the given audio content in synchrony.

In another aspect, the invention provides a computing device comprising:

a network interface;

a clock that is configured to provide a clock time of the computing device;

at least one processor;

at least one tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium; and

program instructions stored on the at least one tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium that are executable by the at least one processor such that the computing device is configured to:

operate in a first mode in which the computing device is not serving as an audio information channel device for any synchrony group;

receive an indication that the computing device is to begin serving as an audio information channel device for a synchrony group that comprises at least first and second zone players that are communicatively coupled with the computing device over an asynchronous data network configured to exchange digital data packets, wherein the computing device, the first zone player, and the second zone player each have a different respective clock time;

after receiving the indication,

(a) configure the synchrony group to playback audio in synchrony, wherein configuring the synchrony group comprises sending control information to at least one of the first zone player or second zone player that (i) identifies the computing device as the audio information channel device for the synchrony group, (ii) initiates establishment of at least one communication channel by which audio information will be transmitted by the audio information channel device to the synchrony group, and (iii) instructs the at least one of the first zone player or second zone player to begin operating as part of the synchrony group; and

(b) transition from operating in the first mode to operating in a second mode in which the computing device serves as the audio information channel device for the synchrony group, wherein, while operating in the second mode, the computing device is configured to:

exchange, via the asynchronous data network, clock timing information with each of the first zone player and the second zone player that facilitates time synchronization between the computing device and each of the first zone player and the second zone player, wherein the time synchronization establishes a common notion of clock time for each of the first zone player, the second zone player, and the computing device;

obtain given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the given audio content that comprises an indicator of a first future time, relative to the common notion of clock time, at which at least the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the given audio content; and

transmit, via the network interface to the first and second zone players over the asynchronous data network, both (a) the audio information representing the given audio

content via the at least one communication channel, and (b) the playback timing information, thereby enabling the first and second zone players to play back the given audio content in synchrony.

In another aspect, the invention provides a system comprising a computing device and a first zone player, wherein:

the computing device comprises:

a network interface;

a clock that is configured to provide a clock time of the computing device;

at least one first processor;

at least one first tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium; and

program instructions stored on the at least one first tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium that are executable by the at least one first processor such that the computing device is configured to:

operate in a first mode in which the computing device is not serving as an audio information channel device for any synchrony group;

receive an indication that the computing device is to begin serving as an audio information channel device for a synchrony group that comprises at least first and second zone players that are communicatively coupled with the computing device over an asynchronous data network configured to exchange digital data packets, wherein the computing device, the first zone player, and the second zone player each have a different respective clock time;

after receiving the indication,

(a) configure the synchrony group to playback audio in synchrony, wherein configuring the synchrony group comprises sending control information to at least one of the first zone player or second zone player that (i) identifies the computing device as an audio information channel device for the synchrony group, (ii) initiates establishment of at least one communication channel by which audio information will be transmitted by the audio information channel device to the synchrony group, and (iii) instructs at least the first zone player and second zone player to begin operating as part of the synchrony group; and

(b) transition from operating in the first mode to operating in a second mode in which the computing device serves as the audio information channel device for the synchrony group, wherein, while operating in the second mode, the computing device is configured to:

exchange, via the asynchronous data network, clock timing information with each of the first zone player and the second zone player that facilitates time synchronization between

the computing device and each of the first zone player and the second zone player, wherein the time synchronization establishes a common notion of clock time for each of the first zone player, the second zone player, and the computing device;

obtain given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the given audio content that comprises an indicator of a first future time, relative to the common notion of clock time, at which at least the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the given audio content; and

transmit, via the network interface to the first and second zone players over the asynchronous data network, both (a) the audio information representing the given audio content via the at least one communication channel, and (b) the playback timing information, thereby enabling the first and second zone players to play back the given audio content in synchrony; and

the first zone player comprises:

at least one second processor;

at least one second tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium; and

program instructions stored on the at least one second tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium that are executable by the at least one second processor such that the first zone player is configured to:

play back the given audio content in synchrony with the second zone player using the audio information and the playback timing information transmitted by the computing device.

In another aspect, the invention provides a method performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, while in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:

receive, from a network device that is not a member of the synchrony group via the at least one data network, a control message indicating an adjustment to a playback volume of the synchrony group that has been requested by a user; and

in response to receiving the control message, cause the playback volume of the synchrony group to be adjusted by (1) adjusting an individual playback volume of the first

zone player, and (2) transmitting, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual playback volume of the second zone player.

In another aspect, the invention provides a first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

at least one processor; and

tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media comprising program instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed by the at least one processor, cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network;

in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, while in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:

receive, from a network device that is not a member of the synchrony group via the at least one data network, a control message indicating an adjustment to a playback volume of the synchrony group that has been requested by a user; and

in response to receiving the control message, cause the playback volume of the synchrony group to be adjusted by (1) adjusting an individual playback volume of the first zone player, and (2) transmitting, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual playback volume of the second zone player.

In another aspect, the invention provides a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media comprising program instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed cause a first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, while in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:

receive, from a network device that is not a member of the synchrony group via the at least one data network, a control message indicating an adjustment to a playback volume of the synchrony group that has been requested by a user; and

in response to receiving the control message, cause the playback volume of the synchrony group to be adjusted by (1) adjusting an individual playback volume of the first

zone player, and (2) transmitting, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual playback volume of the second zone player.

### **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

This invention is pointed out with particularity in the appended claims. The above and further advantages of this invention may be better understood by referring to the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

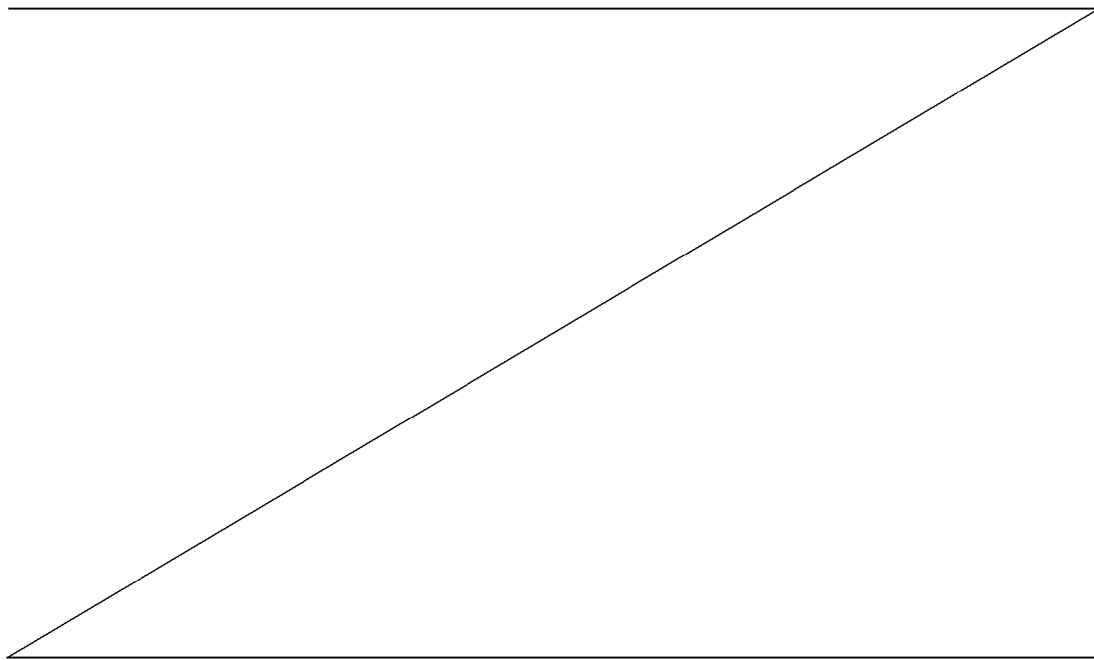
FIG. 1 schematically depicts an illustrative networked audio system, constructed in accordance with the invention;

FIG. 2 schematically depicts a functional block diagram of a synchrony group utilizing a plurality of zone players formed within the networked audio system depicted in FIG. 1;

FIG. 2A schematically depicts two synchrony groups, illustrating how a member of one synchrony group can provide audio information to the members of another synchrony group;

FIG. 3 depicts an functional block diagram of a zone player for use in the networked audio system depicted in FIG. 1; and

FIG. 4 is useful in understanding an digital audio information framing methodology useful in the network audio system depicted in FIG. 1.



may be located in respective bedrooms, to selectively provide entertainment in those rooms. On the other hand, if the zone players 11(n) and their associated audio information source(s) and/or audio reproduction device(s) are distributed throughout an office complex, one may, for example, be provided in each office to selectively provide entertainment to the employees in the respective offices. Similarly, if the zone players 11(n) and associated audio information source(s) and/or audio reproduction device(s) are used in a hotel, they may be distributed throughout the rooms to provide entertainment to the guests. Similar arrangements may be used with zone players 11(n) and associated audio information source(s) and/or audio reproduction device(s) used in an amphitheater or auditorium. Other arrangements in other types of environments will be apparent to those skilled in the art. In each case, the zone players 11(n) can be used to selectively provide entertainment in the respective locations, as will be described below.

The audio information sources 14(n)(s) and 16(m) may be any of a number of types of conventional sources of audio information, including, for example, compact disc ("CD") players, AM and/or FM radio receivers, analog or digital tape cassette players, analog record turntables and the like. In addition, the audio information sources 14(n)(s) and 16(m) may comprise digital audio files stored locally on, for example, personal computers (PCs), personal digital assistants (PDAs), or similar devices capable of storing digital information in volatile or non-volatile form. As noted above, the local network 12 may also have an interface (not shown) to a wide area network, over which the network audio system 10 can obtain audio information. Moreover, one or more of the audio information sources 14(n)(s) may also comprise an interface to a wide area network such as the Internet, the public switched telephony network (PSTN) or any other source of audio information. In addition, one or more of the audio information sources 14(n)(s) and 16(m) may comprise interfaces to radio services delivered over, for example, satellite. Audio information obtained over the wide area network may comprise, for example, streaming digital audio information such as Internet radio, digital audio files stored on servers, and other types of audio information and sources as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art. Other arrangements and other types of audio information sources will be apparent to those skilled in the art.

Generally, the audio information sources 14(n)(s) and 16(m) provide audio information associated with audio programs to the zone players for playback. A zone player that receives audio information from an audio information source 14(n)(s) that is connected thereto can provide playback and/or forward the audio information, along with playback timing information, over the local network 12 to other zone players for playback. Similarly, each audio information source 16(m)

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that is not directly connected to a zone player can transmit audio information over the network 12 to any zone player 11(n) for playback. In addition, as will be explained in detail below, the respective zone player 11(n) can transmit the audio information that it receives either from an audio information source 14(n)(s) connected thereto, or from an audio information source 16(m), to selected ones of the other zone players 11(n'), 11(n''),... (n not equal to n', n'',...) for playback by those other zone players. The other zone players 11(n'), 11(n''),... to which the zone player 11(n) transmits the audio information for playback may be selected by a user using the user interface module 13. In that operation, the zone player 11(n) will transmit the audio information to the selected zone players 11(n'), 11(n''),... over the network 12. As will be described below in greater detail, the zone players 11(n), 11(n'), 11(n''),... operate such that the zone players 11(n'), 11(n''),... synchronize their playback of the audio program with the playback by the zone player 11(n), so that the zone players 11(n), 11(n'), 11(n'') provide the same audio program at the same time.

Users, using user interface module 13, may also enable different groupings or sets of zone players to provide audio playback of different audio programs synchronously. For example, a user, using a user interface module 13, may enable zone players 11(1) and 11(2) to play one audio program, audio information for which may be provided by, for example, one audio information source 14(1)(1). The same or a different user may, using the same or a different user interface module 13, enable zone players 11(4) and 11(5) to contemporaneously play another audio program, audio information for which may be provided by a second audio information source, such as audio information source 14(5)(2). Further, a user may enable zone player 11(3) to contemporaneously play yet another audio program, audio information for which may be provided by yet another audio information source, such as audio information source 16(1). As yet another possibility, a user may contemporaneously enable zone player 11(1) to provide audio information from an audio information source connected thereto, such as audio information source 14(1)(2), to another zone player, such as zone player 11(6) for playback.

In the following, the term "synchrony group" will be used to refer to a set of one or more zone players that are to play the same audio program synchronously. Thus, in the above example, zone players 11(1) and 11(2) comprise one synchrony group, zone player 11(3) comprises a second synchrony group, zone players 11(4) and 11(5) comprise a third synchrony group, and zone player 11(6) comprises yet a fourth synchrony group. Thus, while zone players 11(1) and 11(2) are playing the same audio program, they will play the audio program synchronously. Similarly, while zone players 11(4) and 11(5) are playing the same audio program, they will play the audio program

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synchronously. On the other hand, zone players that are playing different audio programs may do so with unrelated timings. That is, for example, the timing with which zone players 11(1) and 11(2) play their audio program may have no relationship to the timing with which zone player 11(3), zone players 11(4) and 11(5), and zone player 11(6) play their audio programs. It will be appreciated that, since "synchrony group" is used to refer to sets of zone players that are playing the same audio program synchronously, zone player 11(1) will not be part of zone player 11(6)'s synchrony group, even though zone player 11(1) is providing the audio information for the audio program to zone player 11(6).

In the network audio system 10, the synchrony groups are not fixed. Users can enable them to be established and modified dynamically. Continuing with the above example, a user may enable the zone player 11(1) to begin providing playback of the audio program provided thereto by audio information source 14(1)(1), and subsequently enable zone player 11(2) to join the synchrony group. Similarly, a user may enable the zone player 11(5) to begin providing playback of the audio program provided thereto by audio information source 14(5)(2), and subsequently enable zone player 11(4) to join that synchrony group. In addition, a user may enable a zone player to leave a synchrony group and possibly join another synchrony group. For example, a user may enable the zone player 11(2) to leave the synchrony group with zone player 11(1), and join the synchrony group with zone player 11(6). As another possibility, the user may enable the zone player 11(1) to leave the synchrony group with zone player 11(2) and join the synchrony group with zone player 11(6). In connection with the last possibility, the zone player 11(1) can continue providing audio information from the audio information source 14(1)(1) to the zone player 11(2) for playback thereby.

A user, using the user interface module 13, can enable a zone player 11(n) that is currently not a member of a synchrony group to join a synchrony group, after which it will be enabled to play the audio program that is currently being played by that synchrony group. Similarly, a user, also using the user interface module 13, can enable a zone player 11(n) that is currently a member of one synchrony group, to disengage from that synchrony group and join another synchrony group, after which that zone player will be playing the audio program associated with the other synchrony group. For example, if a zone player 11(6) is currently not a member of any synchrony group, it, under control of the user interface module 13, can become a member of a synchrony group, after which it will play the audio program being played by the other members of the synchrony group, in synchrony with the other members of the synchrony group. In becoming a member of the synchrony group, zone player 11(6) can notify the zone player that is the master device for the synchrony group

that it wishes to become a member of its synchrony group, after which that zone player will also transmit audio information associated with the audio program, as well as timing information, to the zone player 11(6). As the zone player 11(6) receives the audio information and the timing information from the master device, it will play the audio information with the timing indicated by the timing information, which will enable the zone player 11(6) to play the audio program in synchrony with the other zone player(s) in the synchrony group.

Similarly, if a user, using the user interface module 13, enables a zone player 11(n) associated with a synchrony group to disengage from that synchrony group, and if the zone player 11(n) is not the master device of the synchrony group, the zone player 11(n) can notify the master device, after which the master device can terminate transmission of the audio information and timing information to the zone player 11(n). If the user also enables the zone player 11(n) to begin playing another audio program using audio information from an audio information source 14(n)(s) connected thereto, it will acquire the audio information from the audio information source 14(n)(s) and initiate playback thereof. If the user enables another zone player 11(n') to join the synchrony group associated with zone player 11(n), operations in connection therewith can proceed as described immediately above.

As yet another possibility, if a user, using the user interface module 13, enables a zone player 11(n) associated with a synchrony group to disengage from that synchrony group and join another synchrony group, and if the zone player is not the master device of the synchrony group from which it is disengaging, the zone player 11(n) can notify the master device of the synchrony group from which it is disengaging, after which that zone player will terminate transmission of audio information and timing information to the zone player 11(n) that is disengaging. Contemporaneously, the zone player 11(n) can notify the master device of the synchrony group that it (that is, zone player 11(n)) is joining, after which the master device can begin transmission of audio information and timing information to that zone player 11(n). The zone player 11(n) can thereafter begin playback of the audio program defined by the audio information, in accordance with the timing information so that the zone player 11(n) will play the audio program in synchrony with the master device.

As yet another possibility, a user, using the user interface module 13, may enable a zone player 11(n) that is not associated with a synchrony group, to begin playing an audio program using audio information provided to it by an audio information source 14(n)(s) connected thereto. In that case, the user, also using the user interface module 13 or a user interface device that is specific to the audio information source 14(n)(s), can enable the audio information source 14(n)(s) to provide audio information to the zone player 11(n). After the zone player 11(n) has begun playback, or

contemporaneously therewith, the user, using the user interface module 13, can enable other zone players 11(n'), 11(n''),... to join zone player 11(n)'s synchrony group and enable that zone player 11(n) to transmit audio information and timing information thereto as described above, to facilitate synchronous playback of the audio program by the other zone players 11(n'), 11(n'')....

A user can use the user interface module 13 to control other aspects of the network audio system 10, including but not limited to the selection of the audio information source 14(n)(s) that a particular zone player 11(n) is to utilize, the volume of the audio playback, and so forth. In addition, a user may use the user interface module 13 to turn audio information source(s) 14(n)(s) on and off and to enable them to provide audio information to the respective zone players 11(n).

Operations performed by the various devices associated with a synchrony group will be described in connection with FIG. 2, which schematically depicts a functional block diagram of a synchrony group in the network audio system 10 described above in connection with FIG. 1. With reference to FIG. 2, a synchrony group 20 includes a master device 21 and zero or more slave devices 22(1) through 22 (G) (generally identified by reference numeral 22(g)), all of which synchronously play an audio program provided by an audio information channel device 23. Each of the master device 21, slave devices 22(g) and audio information channel device 23 utilizes a zone player 11(n) depicted in FIG. 1, although it will be clear from the description below that a zone player may be utilized both for the audio information channel device for the synchrony group 20, and the master device 21 or a slave device 22(g) of the synchrony group 20. As will be described below in more detail, the audio information channel device 23 obtains the audio information for the audio program from an audio information source, adds playback timing information, and transmits the combined audio and playback timing information to the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) over the network 12 for playback. The playback timing information that is provided with the audio information, together with clock timing information provided by the audio information channel device 23 to the various devices 21 and 22(g) as will be described below, enables the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) of the synchrony group 20 to play the audio information simultaneously.

The master device 21 and the slave devices 22(g) receive the audio and playback timing information, as well as the clock timing information, that are provided by the audio information channel device 23, and play back the audio program defined by the audio information. The master device 21 is also the member of the synchrony group 20 that communicates with the user interface module 13 and that controls the operations of the slave devices 22(g) in the synchrony group 20. In addition, the master device 21 controls the operations of the audio information channel device 23 that

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provides the audio and playback timing information for the synchrony group 20. Generally, the initial master device 21 for the synchrony group will be the first zone player 11(n) that a user wishes to play an audio program. However, as will be described below, the zone player 11(n) that operates as the master device 21 can be migrated from one zone player 11(n) to another zone player 11(n'), which preferably will be a zone player that is currently operating as a slave device 22(g) in the synchrony group.

In addition, under certain circumstances, as will be described below, the zone player 11(n) that operates as the audio information channel device 23 can be migrated from one zone player to another zone player, which also will preferably will be a zone player that is currently operating as a member of the synchrony group 20. It will be appreciated that the zone player that operates as the master device 21 can be migrated to another zone player independently of the migration of the audio information channel device 23. For example, if one zone player 11(n) is operating as both the master device 21 and the audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20, the master device 21 can be migrated to another zone player 11(n') while the zone player 11(n) is still operating as the audio information channel device 23. Similarly, if one zone player 11(n) is operating as both the master device 21 and the audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20, the audio information channel device 23 can be migrated to another zone player 11(n') while the zone player 11(n) is still operating as the master device 21. In addition, if one zone player 11(n) is operating as both the master device 21 and the audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20, the master device 21 can be migrated to another zone player 11(n') and the audio information channel device can be migrated to a third zone player 11(n'').

The master device 21 receives control information from the user interface module 13 for controlling the synchrony group 20 and provides status information indicating the operational status of the synchrony group to the user interface module 13. Generally, the control information from the user interface module 13 enables the master device 21 to, in turn, enable the audio information channel device 23 to provide audio and playback timing information to the synchrony group to enable the devices 21 and 22(g) that are members of the synchrony group 20 to play the audio program synchronously. In addition, the control information from the user interface module 13 enables the master device 21 to, in turn, enable other zone players to join the synchrony group as slave devices 22(g) and to enable slave devices 22(g) to disengage from the synchrony group. Control information from the user interface module 13 can also enable the zone player 11(n) that is currently operating as the master device 21 to disengage from the synchrony group, but prior to

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doing so that zone player will enable the master device 21 to transfer from that zone player 11(n) to another zone player 11(n'), preferably to a zone player 11(n') that is currently a slave device 22(g) in the synchrony group 20. The control information from the user interface module 13 can also enable the master device 21 to adjust its playback volume and to enable individual ones of the various slave devices 22(g) to adjust their playback volumes. In addition, the control information from the user interface module 13 can enable the synchrony group 20 to terminate playing of a current track of the audio program and skip to the next track, and to re-order tracks in a play list of tracks defining the audio program that is to be played by the synchrony group 20.

The status information that the master device 21 may provide to the user interface module 13 can include such information as a name or other identifier for the track of the audio work that is currently being played, the names or other identifiers for upcoming tracks, the identifier of the zone player 11(n) that is currently operating as the master device 21, and identifiers of the zone players that are currently operating as slave devices 22(g). In one embodiment, the user interface module 13 includes a display (not separately shown) that can display the status information to the user.

It will be appreciated that the zone player 11(n) that is operating as the audio information channel device 23 for one synchrony group may also comprise the master device 21 or any of the slave devices 22(g) in another synchrony group. This may occur if, for example, the audio information source that is to provide the audio information that is to be played by the one synchrony group is connected to a zone player also being utilized as the master device or a slave device for the other synchrony group. This will be schematically illustrated below in connection with FIG. 2A. Since, as noted above, the zone player 11(n) that is operating as the audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20 may also be operating as a master device 21 or slave device 22(g) for another synchrony group, it can also be connected to one or more audio reproduction devices 15(n)(r), although that is not depicted in FIG. 2. Since the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) are all to provide playback of the audio program, they will be connected to respective audio reproduction devices 15(n)(r). Furthermore, it will be appreciated that one or more of the zone players 11(n) that operate as the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) in synchrony group 20 may also operate as an audio information channel device for that synchrony group or for another synchrony group and so they may be connected to one or more audio information sources 14(n)(s), although that is also not depicted in FIG. 2. In addition, it will be appreciated that a zone player 11(n) can also operate as a audio information channel device 23 for multiple synchrony groups.

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If the audio information channel device 23 does not utilize the same zone player as the master device 21, the master device 21 controls the audio information channel device by exchanging control information over the network 12 with the audio information channel device 23. The control information is represented in FIG. 2 by the arrow labeled CHAN\_DEV\_CTRL\_INFO. The control information that the master device 21 provides to the audio information channel device 23 will generally depend on the nature of the audio information source that is to provide the audio information for the audio program that is to be played and the operation to be enabled by the control information. If, for example, the audio information source is a conventional compact disc, tape, or record player, broadcast radio receiver, or the like, which is connected to a zone player 11(n), the master device 21 may merely enable the zone player serving as the audio information channel device 23 to receive the audio information for the program from the audio information source. It will be appreciated that, if the audio information is not in digital form, the audio information channel device 23 will convert it to digital form and provide the digitized audio information, along with the playback timing information, to the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g).

On the other hand, if the audio information source is, for example, a digital data storage device, such as may be on a personal computer or similar device, the master device 21 can provide a play list to the audio information channel device 23 that identifies one or more files containing the audio information for the audio program. In that case, the audio information channel device 23 can retrieve the files from the digital data storage device and provide them, along with the playback timing information, to the master device 21 and the slave devices 22(g). It will be appreciated that, in this case, the audio information source may be directly connected to the audio information channel device 23, as, for example, an audio information source 14(n)(s), or it may comprise an audio information source 16(m) connected to the network 12. As a further alternative, if the audio information source is a source available over the wide area network, the master device 21 can provide a play list comprising a list of web addresses identifying the files containing the audio information for the audio program that is to be played, and in that connection the audio information channel device 23 can initiate a retrieval of the files over the wide area network. As yet another alternative, if the audio information source is a source of streaming audio received over the wide area network, the master device 21 can provide a network address from which the streaming audio can be received. Other arrangements by which the master device 21 can control the audio information channel device 23 will be apparent to those skilled in the art.

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The master device 21 can also provide control information to the synchrony group's audio information channel device 23 to enable a migration from one zone player 11(n) to another zone player 11(n'). This may occur if, for example, the audio information source is one of audio information sources 16 or a source accessible over the wide area network via the network 12. The master device 21 can enable migration of the audio information channel device 23 for several reasons, including, for example, to reduce the loading of the zone player 11(n), to improve latency of message transmission in the network 12, and other reasons as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art.

As noted above, the audio information channel device 23 provides audio and playback timing information for the synchrony group to enable the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) to play the audio program synchronously. Details of the audio and playback timing information will be described in detail below in connection with FIGS. 3 and 4, but, in brief, the audio information channel device 23 transmits the audio and playback timing information in messages over the network 12 using a multi-cast message transmission methodology. In that methodology, the audio information channel device 23 will transmit the audio and playback timing information in a series of messages, with each message being received by all of the zone players 11(n) comprising the synchrony group 20, that is, by the master device 21 and the slave devices 22(g). Each of the messages includes a multi-cast address, which the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) will monitor and, when they detect a message with that address, they will receive and use the contents of the message. The audio and playback timing information is represented in FIG. 2 by the arrow labeled "AUD+PBTIME\_INF0," which has a single tail, representing a source for the information at the audio information channel device 23, and multiple arrowheads representing the destinations of the information, with one arrowhead extending to the master device 21 and other arrowheads extending to each of the slave devices 22(g) in the synchrony group 20. The audio information channel device 23 may make use of any convenient multi-cast message transmission methodology in transmitting the audio and playback timing information to the synchrony group 20. As will be described in detail in connection with FIG. 4, the audio and playback timing information is in the form of a series of frames, with each frame having a time stamp. The time stamp indicates a time, relative to the time indicated by a clock maintained by the audio information channel device 23, at which the frame is to be played. Depending on the size or sizes of the messages used in the selected multi-cast message transmission methodology and the size or sizes of the frames, a message may contain one frame, or multiple frames, or, alternatively, a frame may extend across several messages.

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The audio information channel device 23 also provides clock time information to the master device 21 and each of the slave devices 22(g) individually over network 12 using a highly accurate clock time information transmission methodology. The distribution of the clock time information is represented in FIG. 2 by the arrows labeled "AICD\_CLK\_INF (M)" (in the case of the clock time information provided to the master device 21) and "AICD\_CLK\_INF (S<sub>i</sub>)" through "AICD\_CLK\_INF (S<sub>g</sub>)" (in the case of audio information channel device clock information provided to the slave devices 22(g)). In one embodiment, the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) make use of the well-known SNTP (Simple Network Time Protocol) to obtain current clock time information from the audio information channel device 23. The SNTP makes use of a unicast message transfer methodology, in which one device, such as the audio information channel device 23, provides clock time information to a specific other device, such as the master device 21 or a slave device 22(g), using the other device's network, or unicast, address. Each of the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) will periodically initiate SNTP transactions with the audio information channel device 23 to obtain the clock time information from the audio information channel device 23. As will be described below in more detail, the master device 21 and each slave device 22(g) make use of the clock time information to determine the time differential between the time indicated by the audio information channel device's clock and the time indicated by its respective clock, and use that time differential value, along with the playback time information associated with the audio information and the respective device's local time as indicated by its clock to determine when the various frames are to be played. This enables the master device 21 and the slave devices 22(g) in the synchrony group 20 to play the respective frames simultaneously.

As noted above, the control information provided by the user to the master device 21 through the user interface module 13 can also enable the master device 21 to, in turn, enable another zone player 11(n') to join the synchrony group as a new slave device 22(g). In that operation, the user interface module 13 will provide control information, including the identification of the zone player 11(n') that is to join the synchrony group to the master device 21. After it receives the identification of the zone player 11(n') that is to join the synchrony group, the master device 21 will exchange control information, which is represented in FIG. 2 by the arrows labeled SLV\_DEV\_CTRL\_INF (S<sub>i</sub>) through SLV\_DEV\_CTRL\_INF (S<sub>g</sub>) group slave control information, over the network 12 with the zone player 11(n') that is identified in the control information from the user interface module 13. The control information that the master device 21 provides to the new zone player 11(n') includes the network address of the zone player 11(n) that is operating as the audio information channel

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device 23 for the synchrony group, as well as the multi-cast address that the audio information channel device 23 is using to broadcast the audio and playback timing information over the network. The zone player that is to operate as the new slave device 22(g') uses the multi-cast address to begin receiving the multi-cast messages that contain the audio information for the audio program being played by the synchrony group.

It will be appreciated that, if the zone player 11(n) that is operating as the master device 21 for the synchrony group 20 is also operating the audio information channel device 23, and if there are no slave devices 22(g) in the synchrony group 20, the audio information channel device 23 may not be transmitting audio and playback timing information over the network. In that case, if the new slave device 22(g') is the first slave device in the synchrony group, the zone player 11(n) that is operating as both the master device 21 and audio information channel device 23, can begin transmitting the audio and playback timing information over the network 12 when the slave device 22(g') is added to the synchrony group 20. The zone player 11(n) can maintain a count of the number of slave devices 22(g) in the synchrony group 20 as they join and disengage, and, if the number drops to zero, it can stop transmitting the audio and playback timing information over the network 12 to reduce the message traffic over the network 12.

The new slave device 22(g') added to the synchrony group 20 uses the network address of the audio information channel device 23 for several purposes. In particular, the new slave device 22(g') will, like the master device 21 (assuming the zone player 11(n) operating as the master device 21 is not also the audio information channel device 23), engage in SNTP transactions with the audio information channel device 23 to obtain the clock timing information from the audio information channel device 23. In addition, the new slave device 22(g') can notify the audio information channel device 23 that it is a new slave device 22(g') for the synchrony group 20 and provide the audio information channel device 23 with its network address. As will be described below, in one embodiment, particularly in connection with audio information obtained from a source, such as a digital data storage device, which can provide audio information at a rate that is faster than the rate at which it will be played, the audio information channel device 23 will buffer audio and timing information and broadcast it over the network 12 to the synchrony group 20 generally at a rate at which it is provided by the source. Accordingly, when a new slave device 22(g') joins the synchrony group 20, the playback timing information may indicate that the audio information that is currently being broadcast by the audio information channel device 23 using the multi-cast methodology is to be played back some time in the future. To reduce the delay with which the new slave device 22(g')

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will begin playback, the audio information channel device 23 can also retransmit previously transmitted audio and timing information that it had buffered to the new slave device 22(g') using the unicast network address of the slave device 22(g').

The master device 21 can also use the slave device control information exchanged with the slave devices 22(g) for other purposes. For example, the master device 21 can use the slave device control information to initiate a migration of the master from its zone player 11(n) to another zone player 11(n'). This may occur for any of a number of reasons, including, for example, that the master device 21 is terminating playback by it of the audio program and is leaving the synchrony group 20, but one or more of the other devices in the synchrony group is to continue playing the audio program. The master device 21 may also want to initiate a migration if it is overloaded, which can occur if, for example, the zone player 11(n) that is the master device 21 for its synchrony group is also operating as an audio information channel device 23 for another synchrony group.

The user can also use the user interface module 13 to adjust playback volume by the individual zone players 11(n) comprising the synchrony group. In that operation, the user interface module 13 provides information identifying the particular device whose volume is to be adjusted, and the level at which the volume is to be set to the master device 21. If the device whose volume is to be adjusted is the master device 21, the master device 21 can adjust its volume according to the information that it receives from the user interface module 13. On the other hand, if the device whose volume is to be adjusted is a slave device 22(g), the master device 21 can provide group slave control information to the respective slave device 22(g), to enable it to adjust its volume.

The user can also use the user interface module 13 to enable a synchrony group 20 to cancel playing of the track in an audio program that is currently being played, and to proceed immediately to the next track. This may occur, for example, if the tracks for the program is in the form of a series of digital audio information files, and the user wishes to cancel playback of the track that is defined by one of the files. In that case, when the master device 21 receives the command to cancel playback of the current track, it will provide channel device control information to the audio information channel device 23 so indicating. In response, the audio information channel device 23 inserts control information into the audio and playback timing information, which will be referred to as a "resynchronize" command. In addition, the audio information channel device 23 will begin transmitting audio information for the next track, with timing information to enable it to be played immediately. The resynchronize command can also enable playback of a track to be cancelled before it has been played. Details of these operations will be described below.

As noted above, there may be multiple synchrony groups in the network audio system 10, and further that, for example, a zone player 11(n) may operate both as a master device 21 or a slave device 22(g) in one synchrony group, and as the audio information channel device 23 providing audio and playback timing information and clock timing information for another synchrony group. An illustrative arrangement of this will be described in connection with FIG. 2A. With reference to FIG. 2A, that FIG. depicts elements of two synchrony groups, identified by reference numerals 20(1) and 20(2), respectively. For clarity, FIG. 2A does not show a number of elements, the presence of which would be evident from FIGS. 1 and 2 as described above. For example, FIG. 2A does not depict the audio information sources from which audio information is obtained for the synchrony groups or the audio reproduction devices that are used to produce sound for the master and slave devices, which are depicted in both FIGS. 1 and 2. In addition, FIG. 2A does not depict arrows that represent control information provided by the respective master devices to the slave devices in the respective synchrony groups, or to the audio information channel devices that provide audio and timing information for the respective synchrony groups, which are depicted in FIG. 2. In addition, FIG. 2A does not depict the arrows that represent the clock timing information provided by the audio information channel devices to the respective members of the respective synchrony groups, which are also depicted in FIG. 2. As will be noted below, however, FIG. 2A does depict arrows representing the audio and playback timing information provided by the respective audio information channel devices for the respective synchrony groups 20(1), 20(2), to the master and slave devices comprising the respective synchrony groups 20(1), 20(2).

Each synchrony group 20(1), 20(2) comprises elements of a number of zone players. A functional block diagram of a zone player will be described below in connection with FIG. 3. Synchrony group 20(1) includes a master device 21(1) and "K" slave devices 22(1)(1) through 22(K)(1) (the index "1" in reference numeral 21(1) and the last index in reference numeral 22(1)(1) through 21(K)(1) corresponds to the index of the synchrony group 20(1) to which they belong) utilize zone players 11(1) and 11(K+1) respectively. Similarly, synchrony group 20(2) includes a master device 21(2) and "L" slave devices 22(1)(2) through 22(L)(2) that utilize zone players 11(K+2) through 11(K+L+2). In the illustrative arrangement depicted in FIG. 2A, both synchrony groups 20(1) and 20(2) are controlled by the user interface module 13, which can provide control information to, and receive status information from, the master devices 21(1) and 21(2) independently. It will be appreciated that separate user interface modules may be provided to

provide control information to, and receive status information from, the respective master devices 21(1), 21(2).

As noted above, the slave device 22(1)(2) in synchrony group 20(2) utilizes zone player 11(K+3). In the illustrative arrangement depicted in FIG. 2A, the audio information channel device 23(1) that provides audio and playback timing information to the master and slave devices 21(1), 22(1)(1),..., 22(K)(1) of synchrony group 20(1) also utilizes zone player 11(K+3). As noted above, this may occur if, for example, the audio information source that is to provide audio information to be played by the synchrony group 20(1) is connected to the zone player 11(K+3). Thus, when the master device 21(1) of synchrony group 20(1) exchanges channel device control information with the audio information channel device 23(1), it is effectively exchanging channel device control information with the zone player 11(K+3). Similarly, when the master and slave devices 21(1), 22(1)(1),..., 22(K)(1) of synchrony group 20(1) receive audio and playback timing information, as well as clock timing information, from the audio information channel device 23(1), they are effectively receiving the information from the zone player 11(K+3). FIG. 2A depicts a multi-headed arrow representing audio and playback timing information transmitted by the zone player 11(K+3), as audio information channel device 23(1), to the master and slave devices 21(1), 22(1)(1),..., 22(K)(1) comprising synchrony group 20(1).

On the other hand, in the illustrative arrangement depicted in FIG. 2A, the synchrony group 20(2) utilizes a zone player 11(K+L+3) as its audio information channel device 23(2). As with synchrony group 20(1), when the master device 21(2) of synchrony group 20(2) exchanges channel device control information with the audio information channel device 23(2), it is effectively exchanging channel device control information with the zone player 11(K+L+3). Similarly, when the master and slave devices 21(2), 22(1)(2),..., 22(L)(2) of synchrony group 20(2) receive audio and playback timing information, as well as clock timing information, from the audio information channel device 23(2), they are effectively receiving the information from the zone player 11(K+L+3). FIG. 2A depicts a multi-headed arrow representing audio and playback timing information transmitted by the zone player 11(K+L+3) as audio information channel device 23(2) to the master and slave devices 21(2), 22(1)(2),..., 22(L)(2) comprising synchrony group 20(2).

In the illustrative arrangement depicted in FIG. 2A, zone player 11(K+L+3), which is the audio information channel device 23(2) for synchrony group 20(2), is not shown as being either a master or a slave device in another synchrony group. However, it will be appreciated that zone player 11(K+L+3) could also be utilized as the master device or a slave device for another synchrony

group. Indeed, it will be appreciated that the zone player that is utilized as the audio information channel device for synchrony group 20(2) may also be a zone player that is utilized as the master device 21(1) or a slave device 22(1)(1),..., 22(K)(1) in the synchrony group 20(1).

A zone player 11(n) that is utilized as a member of one synchrony group may also be utilized as the audio information channel device for another synchrony group if the audio information source that is to supply the audio information that is to be played by the other synchrony group is connected to that zone player 11(n). A zone player 11(n) may also be utilized as the audio information channel device for the other synchrony group if, for example, the audio information source is an audio information source 16(m) (FIG. 1) that is connected to the network 12 or an audio information source that is available over a wide area network such as the Internet. The latter may occur if, for example, the zone player 11(n) has sufficient processing power to operate as the audio information channel device and it is in an optimal location in the network 12, relative to the zone players comprising the other synchrony group (that is the synchrony group for which it is operating as audio information channel device) for providing the audio and playback timing information to the members of the other synchrony group. Other circumstances under which the zone player 11(n) that is utilized as a member of one synchrony group may also be utilized as the audio information channel device for another synchrony group will be apparent to those skilled in the art.

As was noted above, the master device 21 for a synchrony group 20 may be migrated from one zone player 11(n) to another zone player 11(n'). As was further noted above, the audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20 may be migrated from one zone player 11(n) to another zone player 11(n'). It will be appreciated that the latter may occur if, for example, the audio information source that provides the audio program for the synchrony group is not connected to the zone player 11(n) that is operating as the audio information channel device 23, but instead is one of the audio information sources 16(m) connected to the network 12 or a source available over a wide area network such as the Internet. Operations performed during a migration of an audio information channel device 23 from one zone player 11(n) to another zone player 11(n') will generally depend on the nature of the audio information that is being channeled by the audio information channel device 23. For example, if the audio information source provides streaming audio, the zone player 11(n) that is currently operating as the audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20, can provide the following information to the other zone player 11(n') that is to become the audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20:

- (a) the identification of the source of the streaming audio information,

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(b) the time stamp associated with the frame that the zone player 11(n) is currently forming, and

(c) the identifications of the zone players that are operating as the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) comprising the synchrony group 20.

After the zone player 11(n') receives the information from the zone player 11(n), it will begin receiving the streaming audio from the streaming audio information source identified by the zone player 11(n), assemble the streaming audio information into frames, associate each frame with a time stamp, and transmit the resulting audio and playback timing information over the network 12. The zone player 11(n') will perform these operations in the same manner as described above, except that, instead of using the time indicated by its digital to analog converter clock 34 directly in generating the time stamps for the frames, the initial time stamp will be related to the value of the time stamp that is provided by the zone player 11(n) (reference item (b) above), with the rate at which the time stamps are incremented corresponding to the rate at which its (that is, the zone player 11(n')'s) clock increments. In addition, the zone player 11(n') will notify the zone players that are operating as the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) of the synchrony group 20 that it is the new audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20, and provide the multi-cast address that it will be using to multi-cast the audio and playback timing information, as well as its unicast network address. After the members of the synchrony group 20 receive the notification from the zone player 11(n') indicating that it is the new audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20, they will receive the audio and playback timing information from the zone player 11(n') instead of the zone player 11(n), using the multi-cast address provided by the zone player 11(n'). In addition, they can utilize the zone player 11(n')'s unicast network address to obtain current time information therefrom. It will be appreciated that the zone player 11(n') will determine its current time in relation to the time stamp that is provided by the zone player 11(n) (reference item (b) above) or the current time information that it received from the zone player 11(n) using the SNTP protocol as described above.

Generally similar operations can be performed in connection with migrating the audio information channel device from one zone player 11(n) to another zone player 11(n') if the audio information is from one or more audio information files, such as may be the case if the audio information comprises MP3 or WAV files that are available from sources such as sources 16(m) connected to the network 12 or over from sources available over a wide area network such as the Internet, except for differences to accommodate the fact that the audio information is in files. In that

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case, the zone player 11(n) that is currently operating as the audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20 can provide the following information to the zone player 11(n') that is to become the audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20:

(d) a list of the audio information files containing the audio information that is to be played;

(e) the identification of the file for which the zone player 11(n) is currently providing audio and playback timing information, along with the offset into the file for which the current item of audio and playback timing information is being generated and the time stamp that the zone player 11(n) is associating with that frame, and

(f) the identifications of the zone players that comprise the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) comprising the synchrony group 20.

After the zone player 11(n') receives the information from the zone player 11(n), it will begin retrieving audio information from the file identified in item (e), starting at the identified offset. In addition, the zone player 11(n') can assemble the retrieved audio information into frames, associate each frame with a time stamp and transmit the resulting audio and playback timing information over the network 12. The zone player 11(n') will perform these operations in the same manner as described above, except that, instead of using the time indicated by its digital to analog converter clock 34 directly in generating the time stamps for the frames, the value of the initial time stamp will be related to the time stamp that is provided by the zone player 11(n) (reference item (e) above), with the rate at which the time stamps are incremented corresponding to the rate at which its (that is, the zone player 11(n')'s) clock increments. In addition, the zone player 11(n') will notify the zone players that are operating as the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) of the synchrony group 20 that it is the new audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20, and provide the multi-cast address that it will be using to multi-cast the audio and playback timing information, as well as its unicast network address. After the members of the synchrony group 20 receive the notification from the zone player 11(n') indicating that it is the new audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20, they will receive the audio and playback timing information from the zone player 11(n') instead of the zone player 11(n), using the multi-cast address provided by the zone player 11(n'). In addition, they can utilize the zone player 11(n')'s unicast network address to obtain current time information therefrom. It will be appreciated that the zone player 11(n') will determine its current time in relation to the time stamp that is provided by the zone player 11(n) (reference item (b) above) or the current time information that it received from the zone player 11(n) using the SNTP

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protocol as described above. The zone player 11(n') will process successive audio information files in the list that it receives from the zone player 11(n) (reference item (d)).

Operations performed by the zone players 11(n) and 11(n') in connection with migration of the audio information channel device 23 for other types of audio information will be apparent to those skilled in the art. In any case, preferably, the zone player 11(n) will continue operating as an audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20 for at least a brief time after it notifies the zone player 11(n') that it is to become audio information channel device for the synchrony group, so that the zone player 11(n') will have time to notify the zone players in the synchrony group 20 that it is the new audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group.

Before proceeding further in describing operations performed by the network audio system 10, it would be helpful to provide a detailed description of a zone player 11(n) constructed in accordance with the invention. FIG. 3 depicts a functional block diagram of a zone player 11(n) constructed in accordance with the invention. All of the zone players in the network audio system 10 may have similar construction. With reference to FIG. 3, the zone player 11(n) includes an audio information source interface 30, an audio information buffer 31, a playback scheduler 32, a digital to analog converter 33, an audio amplifier 35, an audio reproduction device interface 36, a network communications manager 40, and a network interface 41, all of which operate under the control of a control module 42. The zone player 11(n) also has a device clock 43 that provides timing signals that control the general operations of the zone player 11(n). In addition, the zone player 11(n) includes a user interface module interface 44 that can receive control signals from the user interface module 13 (FIGS. 1 and 2) for controlling operations of the zone player 11(n), and provide status information to the user interface module 13.

Generally, the audio information buffer 31 buffers audio information, in digital form, along with playback timing information. If the zone player 11(n) is operating as the audio information channel device 23 (FIG. 2) for a synchrony group 20, the information that is buffered in the audio information buffer 31 will include the audio and playback timing information that will be provided to the devices 21 and 22(g) in the synchrony group 20. If the zone player 11(n) is operating as the master device 21 or a slave device 22(g) for a synchrony group, the information that is buffered in the audio information buffer 31 will include the audio and playback timing information that the zone player 11(n) is to play.

The audio information buffer 31 can receive audio and playback timing information from two sources, namely, the audio information source interface 30 and the network communications

manager 40. In particular, if the zone player 11(n) is operating as the audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20, and if the audio information source is a source 14(n)(s) connected to the zone player 11(n), the audio information buffer 31 will receive and buffer audio and playback timing information from the audio information source interface 30. On the other hand, if the zone player 11(n) is operating as the audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20, and if the audio information source is a source 16(m) connected to the network 12, or a source available over the wide area network, the audio information buffer 31 will receive and buffer audio and playback timing information from the network communications manager 40. It will be appreciated that, if the zone player 11(n) is not a member of the synchrony group, the zone player 11(n) will not play this buffered audio and playback timing information.

On yet another hand, if the zone player 11(n) is operating as the master device 21 or a slave device 22(g) in a synchrony group, and if the zone player 11(n) is not also the audio information channel device 23 providing audio and playback timing information for the synchrony group 20, the audio information buffer 31 will receive and buffer audio and playback timing information from the network communications manager 40.

The audio information source interface 30 connects to the audio information source(s) 14(n)(s) associated with the zone player 11(n). While the zone player 11(n) is operating as audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20, and if the audio information is to be provided by a source 14(n)(s) connected to the zone player 11(n), the audio information source interface 30 will selectively receive audio information from one of the audio information source(s) 14(n)(s) to which the zone player is connected and store the audio information in the audio information buffer 21. If the audio information from the selected audio information source 14(n)(s) is in analog form, the audio information source interface 30 will convert it to digital form. The selection of the audio information source 14(n)(s) from which the audio information source interface 30 receives audio information is under control of the control module 42, which, in turn, receives control information from the user interface module through the user interface module interface 44. The audio information source interface 30 adds playback timing information to the digital audio information and buffers the combined audio and playback timing information in the audio information buffer 21.

More specifically, as noted above, the audio information source interface 30 receives audio information from an audio information source 14(n)(s), converts it to digital form if necessary, and buffers it along with playback timing information in the audio information buffer 21. In addition,

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the audio information source interface 30 will also provide formatting and scheduling information for the digital audio information, whether as received from the selected audio information source 14(n)(s) or as converted from an analog audio information source. As will be made clear below, the formatting and scheduling information will control not only playback by the zone player 11(n) itself, but will also enable other zone players 11(n'), 11(n''),... that may be in a synchrony group for which the zone player 11(n) is the master device, to play the audio program associated with the audio information in synchrony with the zone player 11(n).

In one particular embodiment, the audio information source interface 30 divides the audio information associated with an audio work into a series of frames, with each frame comprising digital audio information for a predetermined period of time. As used herein, an audio track may comprise any unit of audio information that is to be played without interruption. On the other hand, an audio program may comprise a series of one or more audio tracks that are to be played in succession. It will be appreciated that the tracks comprising the audio program may also be played without interruption, or alternatively playback between tracks may be interrupted by a selected time interval. FIG. 4 schematically depicts an illustrative framing strategy used in connection with one embodiment of the invention for a digital audio stream comprising an audio work. More specifically, FIG. 4 depicts a framed digital audio stream 50 comprising a sequence of frames 51(1) through 51(F) (generally identified by reference numeral 51(f)). Each frame 51(f), in turn, comprises a series of audio samples 52(f)(1) through 52(f)(S) (generally identified by reference numeral 52(f)(s)) of the audio track. Preferably all of the frames will have the same number "S" of audio samples, although it will be appreciated from the following that that is primarily for convenience. On the other hand, it will be appreciated that, the number of audio samples may differ from "S"; this may particularly be the case if the frame 51(f) contains the last audio samples for the digital audio stream for a particular audio work. In that case, the last frame 51(F) will preferably contain samples 52(F)(1) through 52(F)(x), where "x" is less than "S." Generally, it is desirable that the number of samples be consistent among all frames 51(f), and in that case padding, which will not be played, can be added to the last frame 51(F).

Associated with each frame 51(f) is a header 55(f) that includes a number of fields for storing other information that is useful in controlling playback of the audio samples in the respective frame 51(f). In particular, the header 55(f) associated with a frame 51(f) includes a frame sequence number field 56, an encoding type field 57, a sampling rate information field 58, a time stamp field 60, an end of track flag 61, and a length flag field 62. The header 55(f) may also include fields (not shown)

for storing other information that is useful in controlling playback. Generally, the frame sequence number field 56 receives a sequence number "f" that identifies the relative position of the frame 51(f) in the sequence of frames 51(1)..51(f)...51(F) containing the digital audio stream 50. The encoding type field 57 receives a value that identifies the type of encoding and/or compression that has been used in generating the digital audio stream. Conventional encoding or compression schemes include, for example, the well-known MP3 and WAV encoding and/or compression schemes, although it will be appreciated that other schemes may be provided for as well. The sampling rate information field 58 receives sampling rate information that indicates the sampling rate for the audio samples 52(f)(s). As will be apparent to those skilled in the art, the sampling rate determines the rate at which the zone player 11(n) is to play the audio samples 52(f)(s) in the frame, and, as will be described below, determines the period of the digital to analog converter clock 34.

The condition of the end of work flag 61 indicates whether the frame 51(f) contains the last digital audio samples for the audio track associated with the framed digital audio work 50. If the frame 51(f) does not contain the audio samples that are associated with the end of the digital audio stream 50 for a respective audio work, the end of work flag will be clear. On the other hand, if the frame 51(f) does contain the audio samples that are associated with the end of the digital audio stream 50 for a respective audio work, the end of work flag 61 will be set. In addition, since the number of valid audio samples 52(F)(s) in the frame 51(F), that is, the samples that are not padding, may be less than "S," the default number of audio samples in a frame 51(f), the length flag field 62 will contain a value that identifies the number of audio samples in 52(F)(s) in the last frame 51(F) of the audio work 50. If, as noted above, the frames have a consistent number "S" of samples, the samples 52(F)(x+1) through 52(F)(S) will contain padding, which will not be played.

The time stamp field 60 stores a time stamp that identifies the time at which the zone player 11(n) is to play the respective frame. More specifically, for each frame of a framed digital audio stream 50 that is buffered in the audio information buffer 21, the audio information source interface 30, using timing information from the digital to analog converter clock 34, will determine a time at which the zone player 11(n) is to play the respective frame, and stores a time stamp identifying the playback time in the time stamp field 60. The time stamp associated with each frame will later be used by the playback scheduler 32 to determine when the portion of the digital audio stream stored in the frame is to be coupled to the digital to analog converter 33 to initiate play back. It will be appreciated that the time stamps that are associated with frames in sequential frames 51(1), 51(2),...,51(F), will be such that they will be played back in order, and without an interruption

between the sequential frames comprising the digital audio stream 50. It will further be appreciated that, after a time stamp has been determined for the first frame, stored in frame 51(1), of a digital audio stream 50, the audio information source interface 30 can determine time stamps for the subsequent frame 51(2), 51(3),...,51(F) in relation to the number of samples "S" in the respective frames and the sample rate. The time stamps will also preferably be such that frames will be played back after some slight time delay after they have been buffered in the audio information buffer 21; the purpose for the time delay will be made clear below.

Returning to FIG. 3, in addition to dividing the digital audio information into frames, the audio information source interface 30 also aggregates and/or divides the frames 51(f) as necessary into packets, each of which will be of a length that would fit into a message for transmission over the network, and associates each packet with a packet sequence number. For example, if a packet will accommodate multiple frames 51(f), 51(f+1),... 51(f+y-1), it will aggregate them into a packet and associate them with a packet number, for example p(x). If the entire frames 51(f) and 51(f+y-1) was accommodated in packet p(x), where "x" is the sequence number, which will occur if the size of a packet is an exact multiple of the frame size, the next packet, p(x+1) will begin with frame 51(f+y) and will include frames 51(f+y),..., 51(f+2y-1). Subsequent packets p(x+2),... will be formed in a similar manner. On the other hand, if the packet length will not accommodate an exact multiple of the frame size, the last frame in the packet will be continued at the beginning of the next packet.

If the audio information source interface 30 is aware of track boundaries, which may be the case if the tracks are divided into files, the packets will reflect the track boundaries, that is, the packets will not contain frames from two tracks. Thus, if the last frames associated with a track are insufficient to fill a packet, the packet will contain padding from the last frame associated with the track to the end of the packet, and the next packet will begin with the first frames associated with the next track.

In one embodiment, the audio information source interface 30 stores the packets in the audio information buffer 31 in a ring buffer. As is conventional, a ring buffer includes a series of storage locations in the buffer. Each entry will be sufficient to store one packet. Four pointers are used in connection with the ring buffer, a first pointer pointing to the beginning of the ring buffer, a second pointer pointing to the end of the ring buffer, an third "write" pointer pointing to the entry into which a packet will be written and a fourth "read" pointer pointing to the entry from which packet will be read for use in playback. When a packet is read from the ring buffer for playback, it will be read

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from the entry pointed to by the read pointer. After the packet has been read, the read pointer will be advanced. If the read pointer points beyond the end of the ring buffer, as indicated by the end pointer, it will be reset to point to the entry pointed to by the beginning pointer, and the operations can be repeated.

On the other hand, when the audio information source interface 30 stores a packet in the ring buffer, first determine whether the entry pointed to by the write pointer points to the same entry as the entry pointed to by the read pointer. If the write pointer points to the same entry as the entry pointed to by the read pointer, the entry contains at least a portion of a packet that has not yet been read for playback, and the audio information source interface 30 will delay storage of the packet until the entire packet has been read and the read pointer advanced. After the read pointer has been advanced, the audio information source interface 30 can store the packet in the entry pointed to by the write pointer. After the packet has been stored, the audio information source interface 30 will advance the write pointer. If the write pointer points beyond the end of the ring buffer, as indicated by the end pointer, it will be reset to point to the entry pointed to by the beginning pointer, and the operations can be repeated.

As noted above, the zone player 11(n) can operate both as an audio information channel device 23 and a member of the synchrony group 20 of which it is a member. In that case, the audio information buffer 31 can contain one ring buffer. On the other hand, the zone player 11(n) can operate as an audio information channel device 23 for one synchrony group 20(1) (FIG. 2A) and a member of another synchrony group 20(2). In that case, the audio information buffer 31 would maintain two ring buffers, one for the audio and timing information associated with synchrony group 20(1), and the other for the audio and timing information associated with synchrony group 20(2). It will be appreciated that, in the latter case, the zone player 11(n) will only use the audio and timing information that is associated with synchrony group 20(2) for playback.

The playback scheduler 32 schedules playback of the audio information that is buffered in the audio information buffer 31 that is to be played by the zone player 11(n). Accordingly, under control of the playback scheduler 32, the digital audio information that is buffered in the audio information buffer 21 that is to be played by the zone player 11(n) is transferred to the digital to analog converter 33 for playback. As noted above, if the zone player 11(n) is operating as an audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20 for which it is not a member, the playback scheduler 32 will not schedule the digital audio information that is to be played by that synchrony group 20 for playback. The playback scheduler 32 only schedules the digital audio information, if

any, that is buffered in the audio information buffer 31 that is associated with a synchrony group for which the zone player 11(n) is a member, whether as master device 21 or a slave device 22(g).

Essentially, the playback scheduler 32 makes use of the read pointer associated with the circular buffer that contains the audio and playback timing information that is to be played by the zone player 11(n). The playback scheduler 32 retrieves the packet information from the entry of the ring buffer pointed to by the read pointer, and then advances the ring pointer as described above. The playback scheduler 32 determines the boundaries of the frames in the packet and uses the time stamps in the time stamp fields 60 associated with the respective frame 51(f), along with timing information provided by the zone player 11(n)'s digital to analog converter clock 34, to determine when the respective frame is to be transferred to the digital to analog converter 33. Generally, when the time stamp associated with a buffered digital audio information frame corresponds to the current time as indicated by the digital to analog converter clock 34, the playback scheduler 32 will enable the respective frame to be transferred to the digital to analog converter 33.

The digital to analog converter 33, also under control of the digital to analog converter clock 34, converts the buffered digital audio information to analog form, and provides the analog audio information to the audio amplifier 35 for amplification. The amplified analog information, in turn, is provided to the audio reproduction devices 15(n)(r) through the audio reproduction device interface 36. The audio reproduction devices 15(n)(r) transform the analog audio information signal to sound thereby to provide the audio program to a listener. The amount by which the audio amplifier 35 amplifies the analog signal is controlled by the control module 42, in response to volume control information provided by the user through the user interface module 13.

The network communications manager 40 controls network communications over the network 12, and the network interface 41 transmits and receives message packets over the network 12. The network communications manager 40 generates and receives messages to facilitate the transfer of the various types of information described above in connection with FIG. 2, including the channel device control information, slave device control information, audio and playback timing information and the audio information channel device's clock timing information. In connection with the channel device control information and the slave device control information, the network communications manager 40 will generate messages for transfer over the network 12 in response to control information from the control module 42. Similarly, when the network communications manager 40 receives messages containing channel device control information and slave device

control information, the network communications manager will provide the information to the control module 42 for processing.

With regards to the audio information channel device's clock timing information, as noted above, the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) of the synchrony group 20 obtain the clock timing information from the audio information channel device 23 using the well-known SNTP. If the zone player 11(n) is operating as the audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group, during the SNTP operation, it will provide its current time, particularly a current time as indicated by its digital to analog converter clock 34. On the other hand, if the zone player 11(n) is operating as the master device 21 or slave device 22(g) of a synchrony group 20, it will receive the clock timing information from the audio information channel device 23. After the respective device 21, 22(g) has obtained the audio information channel device's clock timing information, it will generate a differential time value  $\Delta T$  representing the difference between the time T indicated by its digital to analog converter clock 34 and the current time information from the audio information channel device 23. The differential time value will be used to update the time stamps for the frames of the digital audio stream 50 (FIG. 4) that are received from the audio information channel device.

With regards to the audio and playback timing information, operations performed by the network communications manager 40 will depend on whether

(i) the audio and playback timing information has been buffered in the audio information buffer 31 for transmission, as audio information channel device 23, over the network 12 to the master device 21 and/or slave devices 22(g) of a synchrony group, or

(ii) the audio and playback timing information has been received from the network 12 to be played by the zone player 11(n) as either the master device 21 for a synchrony group or a slave device in a synchrony group.

It will be appreciated that the network communications manager 40 may be engaged in both (i) and (ii) contemporaneously, since the zone player 11(n) may operate both as the audio information channel device 23(1) for a synchrony group 20(1) (reference FIG. 2A) of which it is not a member, and a member of another synchrony group 20(2) for which another zone player 11(n') is the audio information channel device 23(2). With reference to item (i) above, after a packet that is to be transmitted has been buffered in the respective ring buffer, the network communications manager 40 retrieves the packet, packages it into a message and enables the network interface 41 to transmit the message over the network 12. If the control module 42 receives control information from the user interface module 13 (if the master device 21 is also the audio information channel device 23 for

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the synchrony group 20) or from the master device (if the master device 21 is not the audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20) that would require the transmission of a "resynchronize" command as described above, the control module 42 of the audio information channel device 23 enables the network communications manager 40 to insert the command into a message containing the audio and playback timing information. Details of the operations performed in connection with the "resynchronize" command will be described below. As noted above, the "resynchronize" command is used if the user enables a synchrony group to terminate the playback of a track that is currently being played, or cancel playback of a track whose playback has not begun.

On the other hand, with reference to item (ii) above, if network interface 41 receives a message containing a packet containing frames of audio and playback timing information that the zone player 11(n) is to play either as a master device 21 or a slave device for a synchrony group 20, the network interface 41 provides the audio and playback timing information to the network communications manager 40. The network communications manager 40 will determine whether the packet contains a resynchronize command and, if so, notify the control module 42, which will enable operations to be performed as described below. In any case, the network communications manager 40 will normally buffer the various frames comprising the audio and playback timing information in the audio information buffer 31, and in that operation will generally operate as described above in connection with the audio information source interface 30. Before buffering them, however, the network communications manager 40 will update their time stamps using the time differential value described above. It will be appreciated that the network communications manager 40 will perform similar operations whether the messages that contain the packets were multi-cast messages or unicast messages as described above.

The updating of the time stamps by the master device 21 and the slave devices 22(g) in the synchrony group 20 will ensure that they all play the audio information synchronously. In particular, after the network communications manager 40 has received a frame 51(f) from the network interface 41, it will also obtain, from the digital to analog converter clock 34, the zone player 11(n)'s current time as indicated by its digital to analog converter clock 34. The network communications manager 40 will determine a time differential value that is the difference between the slave device's current clock time, as indicated by its digital to analog converter 34, and the audio information channel device's time as indicated by the audio information channel device's clock timing information. Accordingly, if the master or slave device's current time has a value  $T_s$  and the audio information channel device's current time, as indicated by the clock timing information, has a value  $T_c$ , the time

differential value  $\Delta T = T_S - T_C$ . If the current time of the master or slave device in the synchrony group 20, as indicated by its digital to analog converter clock 34, is ahead of the audio information channel device's clock time as indicated by the clock timing information received during the SNTP operation, the time differential value will have a positive value. On the other hand, if the master or slave device's current time is behind the audio information channel device's clock time, the time differential value  $\Delta T$  will have a negative value. If the zone player 11(n) obtains clock timing information from the audio information channel device 23 periodically while it is a member of the synchrony group 20, the network communications manager 40 can generate an updated value for the time differential value  $\Delta T$  when it receives the clock timing information from the audio information channel device 23, and will subsequently use the updated time differential value.

The network communications manager 40 uses the time differential value  $\Delta T$  that it generates from the audio information channel device timing information and zone player 11(n)'s current time to update the time stamps that will be associated with the digital audio information frames that the zone player 11(n) receives from the audio information channel device. For each digital audio information frame that is received from the audio information channel device, instead of storing the time stamp that is associated with the frame as received in the message in the audio information buffer 21, the network communications manager 40 will store the updated time stamp with the digital audio information frame. The updated time stamp is generated in a manner so that, when the zone player 11(n), as a member of the synchrony group plays back the digital audio information frame, it will do so in synchrony with other devices in the synchrony group.

More specifically, after the zone player 11(n)'s network interface 41 receives a message containing a packet that, in turn, contains one or more frames 51(f), it will provide the packet to the network communications manager 40. For each frame 51(f) in the packet that the network communications manager 40 receives from the network interface 41, the network communications manager 40 will add the time differential value  $\Delta T$  to the frame's time stamp, to generate the updated time stamp for the frame 51(f), and store the frame 51(f), along with the header 55(f) with the updated time stamp in the audio information buffer 31. Thus, for example, if a frame's time stamp has a time value  $T_F$ , the network communications manager 40 will generate an updated time stamp  $T_F^U$  having a time value  $T_F^U = T_F + \Delta T$ . Since time value  $T_F^U$  according to the slave device's digital to analog converter clock 34 is simultaneous to the time value  $T_F$  according to the audio information channel device's digital to analog converter clock 34, the zone player 11(n) device will play the digital audio information frame at the time determined by the audio information channel device 23.

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Since all of the members of the synchrony group 20 will perform the same operations, generating the updated time stamps  $T_F^U$  for the various frames 51(f) in relation to their respective differential time values, all of the zone players 11(n) in the synchrony group 20 will play them synchronously. The network communications manager 40 will generate updated time stamps  $T_F^U$  for all of the time stamps 60 in the packet, and then store the packet in the audio information buffer 31.

It will be appreciated that, before storing a packet in the audio information buffer 21, the network communications manager 40 can compare the updated time stamps  $T_F^U$  associated with the frames in the packet to the slave device's current time as indicated by its digital to analog converter clock 34. If the network communications manager 40 determines the time indicated by the updated time stamps of frames 51(f) in the packet are earlier than the zone player's current time, it can discard the packet instead of storing it in the audio information buffer 21, since the zone player 11(n) will not play them. That is, if the updated time stamp has a time value  $T_F^U$  that identifies a time that is earlier than the zone player's current time  $T_S$  as indicated by the zone player's digital to analog converter clock 34, the network communications manager 40 can discard the packet.

If the zone player 11(n) is operating as the master device 21 of a synchrony group 20, when the user, through the user interface module 13, notifies the zone player 11(n) that another zone player 11(n') is to join the synchrony group 20 as a slave device 22(g), the control module 42 of the zone player 11(n) enables the network communications manager 40 to engage in an exchange of messages, described above in connection with FIG. 2, to enable the other zone player 11(n') to join the synchrony group 20 as a slave device. As noted above, during the message exchange, the messages generated by the network communications manager 40 of the zone player 11(n) will provide the network communications manager of the zone player 11(n') that is to join the synchrony group 20 with information such as the multi-cast address being used by the audio information channel device 23 that is providing the audio program to the synchrony group 20, as well as a unicast network address for the audio information channel device 23. After receiving that information, the network communications manager and network interface of the zone player 11(n') that is to join the synchrony group 20 can begin receiving the multi-cast messages containing the audio program for the synchrony group, engage in SNTP transactions with the audio information channel device 23 to obtain the latter's current time, and also enable the audio information channel device 23 to send the zone player 11(n') frames 51(f) that it had previously broadcast using the unicast message transmission methodology as described above.

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On the other hand, if the network communications manager 40 and network interface 41 of the zone player 11(n) receive a message over the network 12 indicating that it is to become a slave device 22(g) of a synchrony group for which another zone player 11(n') is the master device, the network communications manager 40 for zone player 11(n) will provide a notification to the control module 42 of zone player 11(n). Thereafter, the control module 42 of zone player 11(n) can enable the network communications manager 40 of zone player 11(n) to perform the operations described above to enable it to join the synchrony group 20.

As noted above, the user, using user interface module 13, can enable the synchrony group to terminate playback of a track of an audio program that is currently being played. After playback of a track that is currently being played has been terminated, playback will continue in a conventional manner with the next track that has been buffered in the audio information buffer 31. It will be appreciated that that could be the next track that is on the original play list, or a previous track. In addition, the user can enable the synchrony group 20 to cancel playback of a track that it has not yet begun to play, but for which buffering of packets has begun in the synchrony group 20. Both of these operations make use of the "resynchronize" command that the master device 21 of the synchrony group 20 can enable the audio information channel device 23 to include in the multi-cast message stream that it transmits to the synchrony group 20. Generally, in response to receipt of the resynchronize command, the members of the synchrony group 20 flush the ring buffer containing the packets that they are to play in the future. In addition, if the members of the synchrony group provide separate buffers for their respective digital to analog converters 33, the members will also flush those buffers as well. After the audio information channel device transmits a packet containing the resynchronize command:

(i) in the case of the use of the resynchronize command to terminate playing of a track that is currently being played, the audio information channel device 23 will begin multi-casting packets for the next track, to begin play immediately, and will continue through the play list in the manner described above; and

(ii) in the case of the use of the resynchronize command to cancel play of a track for which buffering has begun, but which is to be played in the future, the audio information channel device 23 will begin multi-casting packets for the track after the track that has been cancelled, to be played beginning at the time the cancelled track was to begin play, and will also continue through the play list in the manner described above.

It will be appreciated that,

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(a) in the first case (item (i) directly above), the resynchronize command can enable the read pointer to be set to point to the entry in the circular buffer into which the first packet for the next track will be written, which will correspond to the entry to which the write pointer points, but

(b) in the second case (item (ii) directly above), the resynchronize command can enable the write pointer for the circular buffer to be set to point to the entry that contains the first packet for the track whose play is being cancelled.

It will further be appreciated that, if a track is cancelled for which buffering has not begun, the resynchronize command will generally not be necessary, since the audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20 need only delete that track from the play list.

Operations performed in connection with use of the resynchronize command to cancel playback of a track that is currently being played will be described in connection with Packet Sequence A below, and operations performed in connection with the use of the resynchronize command to cancel playback of a track that is has not yet begun to play, but for which buffering of packets has begun, will be described in connection with Packet Sequence B below.

Packet Sequence A

(A1.0) [packet 57]

(A1.1) [continuation of frame 99]

(A1.2) [frame 100, time = 0:00:01, type = mp3 audio]

(A1.3) [frame 101, time = 0:00:02, type = mp3 audio]

(A1.4) [frame 102, time = 0:00:03, type = mp3 audio]

(A2.0) [packet 58]

(A2.1) [continuation of frame 102]

(A2.2) [frame 103, time = 0:00:04, type = mp3 audio]

(A2.3) [frame 104, time = 0:00:05, type = mp3 audio]

(A2.4) [frame 105, time = 0:00:06, type = mp3 audio]

(A3.0) [packet 59]

(A3.1) [continuation of frame 105]

(A3.2) [frame 106, time = 0:00:07, type = mp3 audio]

(A3.3) [frame 107, time = 0:00:08, type = mp3 audio]

(A3.4) [frame 108, time = 0:00:09, type = mp3 audio]

(A4.0) [packet 60]

(A4.1) [continuation of frame 108]

(A4.2) [frame 109, time = 0:00:10, type = mp3 audio]

(A4.3) [Resynchronize command]

(A4.4) [Padding, if necessary]

(A5.0) [packet 61]

(A5.1) [frame 1, time = 0:00:07, type = mp3 audio]

(A5.2) [frame 2, time = 0:00:08, type = mp3 audio]

(A5.3) [frame 3, time = 0:00:09, type = mp3 audio]

(A5.4) [frame 4, time = 0:00:10, type = mp3 audio]

(A6.0) [packet 62]

(A6.1) [continuation of frame 4]

(A6.2) [frame 5, time = 0:00:11, type = mp3 audio]

(A6.3) [frame 6, time = 0:00:12, type = mp3 audio]

(A6.4) [frame 7, time = 0:00:13, type = mp3 audio]

Packet Sequence A comprises a sequence of six packets, identified by packet 57 through packet 62, that the audio information channel device 23 multi-casts in respective messages to the members of a synchrony group 20. It will be appreciated that the series of messages that the audio information channel device 23 may multi-cast to the synchrony group 20 may include a messages prior to the packet 57, and may also include messages after packet 62. Each packet comprises a packet header, which is symbolized by lines (A1.0), (A2.0),...(A6.0) in Packet Sequence A, and will generally also include information associated with at least a portion of a frame. In the packets represented in Packet Sequence A, each packet includes information associated with a plurality of frames. Depending on the lengths of the packets, each packet may contain information associated with a portion of a frame, an entire frame, or multiple frames. In the illustration represented by Packet Sequence A, it is assumed that each packet may contain information associated with multiple frames. In addition, it is assumed that a packet does not necessarily contain information associated with an integral number of frames; in that case, a packet may contain information associated with

a portion of a frame, and the next packet will contain the information associated with the rest of a frame.

The frames and associated header playback timing information contained in the various packets are symbolized by lines (A1.1), (A1.2),..., (A1.4), (A2.1),..., (A6.4) of Packet Sequence A. Thus, for example, line (A1.2) of packet 57 represents the one-hundredth frame, that is, frame 51(100) (reference FIG. 4), of the track whose audio information is being transmitted in the sequence of packets that includes packet 57. The frame 51(100) is to be played at an illustrative time, according to the audio information channel device's digital to analog converter clock, of "time = 0:00:01," and the frame is encoded and/or compressed using the well-known MP3 encoding and compression methodology. In that case, the legend "time = 0:00:01" represents the time stamp that would be included in field 60 (FIG. 4) of the header associated with the frame 50(100) as multi-cast by the audio information channel device for the synchrony group. It will be appreciated that the playback time and encoding/compression methodology will be referred in the header 55(100) that is associated with the frame 51(100). It will also be appreciated that the header may also contain additional information as described above.

Similarly, line (A1.3) of packet 57 represents the one-hundred and first frame, that is, frame 51(101), of the track whose audio information is being transmitted in the sequence of packets that includes packet 57. The frame 51(101) is to be played at an illustrative time, according to the audio information channel device's digital to analog converter clock, of "0:00:02," and the frame is also encoded and/or compressed using the MP3 encoding and compression methodology. Line (A1.4) of packet 57 represents similar information, although it will be appreciated that, depending on the length of packet 57, the line may not represent the information for an entire frame 51(102) and/or its associated header. If the length of packet 57 is not sufficient to accommodate the information for the entire frame 51(102) and/or associated header, the information will continue in packet 58, as represented by line (A2.1) in Packet Sequence A. Similarly, if the length of packet 56 was not sufficient to contain the information for an entire frame 51(99) preceding frame 51(100), packet 57 (lines (A1.0) through 1.4) may contain any information from frame 51(99) that packet 56 was unable to accommodate.

As noted above, when the master device 21 or a slave device 22(g) in the synchrony group 20 receives the packet 57, its respective network communications manager 40 will update the time stamps associated with the various frames 51(f) as described above before buffering the respective frames in the respective audio information buffer 31.

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Packets 58 and 59 contain information that is organized along the lines described above in connection with packet 57.

Packet 60 also contains, as represented by lines (A4.1) and (A4.2), information that is organized along the lines of the information represented by lines (Ax.1) and (Ax.2) ("x" equals an integer) described above in connection with packets 57 through 59. On the other hand, packet 60 contains a resynchronize command, as represented by line (A4.3). Packet 60 also may contain padding, as represented by line 4.4, following the resynchronize command. As noted above, the master device 21 of a synchrony group 20 will enable the audio information channel device 23 that is providing audio information to the synchrony group 20 to multi-cast a message containing the resynchronize command when it receives notification from the user interface module 13 that the user wishes to cancel playback of a track that is currently being played. In the example depicted in Packet Sequence A, as will be described below, the audio information channel device 23 receives notification from the master device 21 that the user wishes to cancel playback of a track at a time corresponding to "time = 0:00:07" according to its digital to analog converter clock 34, and, in line (A4.3) of packet 60 it will provide the resynchronize command, followed by padding, if necessary.

As will be apparent from examining lines (A3.1) through (A3.4) of packet 59 and lines (A4.1) and (A4.2) of packet 60, although the audio information channel device 23 has received the notification from the synchrony group's master device 21 to multi-cast the resynchronize command at a time corresponding to "time = 0:00:07" according to the clock time indicated by its digital to analog converter clock 34, it (that is, the audio information channel device 23) has already multi-cast messages containing frames that are to be played at that time and subsequently. That is, the audio information channel device 23 has, multi-cast in packet 59, frames 51(106) through 51(108) that contain time stamps "time = 0:00:07," "time = 0:00:08" and "time = 0:00:09," respectively, and, in packet 60, in addition to the continuation of frame 51(108), frame 51(109) that contains time stamp "time = 0:00:10." (It will be appreciated that the times indicated by the illustrative time stamps are for illustration purposes only, and that in an actual embodiment the time stamps may have different values and differentials.)

As noted above, the audio information channel device 23 multi-casts a message containing a packet that, in turn, contains the resynchronize command when it receives the notification from the master device 21 to do so. In the example depicted in Packet Sequence A, the packet will be multi-cast when the audio information channel device's digital to analog converter clock time corresponds to "0:00:07." Subsequently, two things happen. In one, aspect, when the master device 21 and slave

devices 22(g) receive the packet that contains the resynchronize command, they will stop playing the audio program that they are playing.

In addition, the audio information channel device 23 will begin transmitting frames containing audio information for the next track, including therewith time stamps immediately following the digital to analog converter clock time at which the packet including the resynchronize command was transmitted. Accordingly, and with further reference to Packet Sequence A, the audio information channel device 23 will multi-cast a message containing packet 61. As indicated above, packet 61 contains, as represented in lines (A5.1) through (A5.3), frames 51(1) through 51(3), which are the first three frames of the next track of the audio program that is to be played. It is also compressed and encoded using the MP3 encoding and compression scheme, and it is accompanied by time stamps "time = 0:00:07," "time = 0:00:08" and "time = 0:00:10." As noted above, the time stamp "time = 0:00:07" corresponds to the clock time at which the audio information channel device 23 multi-casts the resynchronize command, and, when the master device 21 and slave devices 22(g) receive these frames, they would be expected to begin playing them very shortly, if not immediately after the audio information channel device 23 multi-casts the message containing the packet that, in turn, contains the resynchronize command. Packet 61 also includes at least a portion of the next frame, that is, frame 51(4), for that track. In addition, Packet Sequence A depicted above further includes a subsequent packet, namely, packet 62, that contains any necessary continuation of frame 51(4), as well as three subsequent frames. If any additional packets are required for the track, as well as for subsequent tracks, they can be multi-cast in a similar manner.

As further noted above, the resynchronize command can also be used to cancel playing of one or more tracks for which playback has begun. This will be illustrated in connection with Packet Sequence B:

Packet Sequence B

- (B1.0) [packet 157]
- (B1.1) [continuation of frame 99]
- (B1.2) [frame 100, time = 0:00:01, type = mp3 audio]
- (B1.3) [frame 101, time = 0:00:02, type = mp3 audio]
- (B1.4) [frame 102, time = 0:00:03, type = mp3 audio]
  
- (B2.0) [packet 158]
- (B2.1) [continuation of frame 102]

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- (B2.2) [frame 103, time = 0:00:04, type = mp3 audio]
- (B2.3) [frame 104, time = 0:00:05, type = mp3 audio]
- (B2.4) [frame 105, time = 0:00:06, type = mp3 audio]

(B3.0) [packet 159]

- (B3.1) [continuation of frame 105]
- (B3.2) [frame 106, time = 0:00:07, type = mp3 audio]
- (B3.3) [track boundary notification]
- (B3.4) [Padding, if necessary]

(B4.0) [packet 160]

- (B4.1) [frame 1, time = 0:00:08, type = mp3 audio]
- (B4.2) [frame 2, time = 0:00:09, type = mp3 audio]
- (B4.3) [frame 3, time = 0:00:10, type = mp3 audio]

(B5.0) [packet 161]

- (B5.1) [continuation of frame 3]
- (B5.2) [frame 4, time = 0:00:11, type = mp3 audio]
- (B5.3) [Resynchronize, after packet 159]
- (B5.4) [Padding, if necessary]

(B6.0) [packet 162]

- (B6.1) [frame 1, time = 0:00:08, type = mp3 audio]
- (B6.2) [frame 2, time = 0:00:09, type = mp3 audio]
- (B6.3) [frame 3, time = 0:00:10, type = mp3 audio]
- (B6.4) [frame 4, time = 0:00:11, type = mp3 audio]

(B7.0) [packet 163]

- (B7.1) [continuation of frame 4]
- (B7.2) [frame 5, time = 0:00:12, type = mp3 audio]
- (B7.3) [frame 6, time = 0:00:13, type = mp3 audio]
- (B7.4) [frame 7, time = 0:00:14, type = mp3 audio]

Packet Sequence B comprises a series of seven packets, identified by packet 157 through 163, that the audio information channel device 23 multi-casts to the members of a synchrony group 20. As with Packet Sequence A, it will be appreciated that the series of packets that the audio information channel device 23 may multi-cast to the synchrony group 20 may include packets prior to the packet 157, and may also include packets after packet 162. Each packet comprises a packet header, which is symbolized by lines (B1.0), (B2.0),...(B7.0) in Packet Sequence B. As in Packet Sequence A, each packet will also generally include information associated with at least a portion of a frame 51(f) along with its associated frame 55(f). As in the packets represented in Packet Sequence A, each packet includes information associated with a plurality of frames. Depending on the lengths of the packets, each packet may contain information associated with a portion of a frame, an entire frame, or multiple frames. Further, as with Packet Sequence A, it is assumed that each packet may contain information associated with multiple frames. In addition, it is assumed that a packet does not necessarily contain information associated with an integral number of frames; in that case, a packet may contain information associated with a portion of a frame, and the next packet will contain the information associated with the rest of a frame.

The structures of the packets represented by Packet Sequence B are similar to those described above in connection with Packet Sequence A, and will not be repeated here. Generally, Packet Sequence B illustratively contains a sequence of packets that represent at least portions of three tracks that may have been selected from, for example, a play list. In particular, packets 157 through 159 represent frames from a portion of one track, packets 160 and 161 represent frames from a second track and packets 162 and 163 represent frames from a third track. The play list indicated that the first, second and third tracks were to be played in that order. With particular reference to Packet Sequence B, it should be noted that line (B3.3) indicates that packet 159 includes an indication that that packet contains the last frame for the track, and line (B3.4) provides for padding to the end of the packet. The first frame of the next track begins in packet 160.

In connection with the use of the resynchronize command to cancel playback of a track, at least a portion of which the audio information channel device 23 has multi-cast to the members of the synchrony group, packet 161, in line (B5.3) represents a resynchronize command that indicates that resynchronization is to occur after packet 159, that is, immediately after the packet that contains the last frame of the first of the three tracks represented by the packets in Packet Sequence B. It should be noted that the resynchronize command is in the packet 161, while the resynchronization is to occur at packet 160, that is, the synchrony group is to not play the track starting with packet

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160, but instead is to begin playing the track frames for which begin with the next packet, that is, packet 162. As with Packet Sequence A, in Packet Sequence B the audio information channel device 23, in packet 162 and 163, multi-casts frames whose time stamps indicate that they are to be played when the frames that were multi-cast in packets 160 and 161 were to be played. By use of the resynchronize command and specifying a packet in this manner, the audio information channel device can cancel playback of a track for which playback has not yet begun.

It will be appreciated that the resynchronize command is generally not necessary for cancelling play back of a track that the audio information channel device 23 has not started multi-casting to the synchrony group 20, since the audio information channel device 23 itself can re-order the play list to accommodate the cancellation.

The invention provides a number of advantages. In particular, the invention provides a network audio system in which a number of devices share information can reproduce audio information synchronously, notwithstanding the fact that packets, which may contain digital audio information, transmitted over the network to the various zone players connected thereto may have differing delays and the zone players operate with independent clocks. Moreover, although the invention has been described in connection with audio information, it will be appreciated that the invention will find utility in connection with any type of isochronous information for which synchrony among devices is desired. The system is such that synchrony groups are created and destroyed dynamically, and in such a manner as to avoid requiring a dedicated device as the master device.

It will be appreciated that a number of changes and modifications may be made to the network audio system 10 as described above. For example, although the invention has been described as providing that the audio information channel device 23 provides digital audio information to the members synchrony group 20 that has been encoded using particular types of encoding and compression methodologies, it will be appreciated that the audio information channel device 23 can provide digital audio information to various members of the synchrony group 20 that have been encoded and compressed using different types of encoding and compression methodologies, and, moreover, for which different sampling rates have been used. For example, the audio information channel device 23 may provide digital audio information to the master device 21 and slave devices 22(1) through 22( $g_1$ ) using the MP3 methodology at a specified sampling rate, the digital audio information for the same program to slave devices 22( $g_1+1$ ) through 22( $g_2$ ) using the WAV methodology at one specified sampling rate, and to slave devices 22( $g_2+1$ ) through 22( $G$ )

using the WAV methodology at another specified sampling rate. In that case, the audio information channel device 23 can specify the particular encoding and compression methodology that has been used in the encoding type field 57 associated with each frame and the sampling rate in the sampling rate field 58. Moreover, since the encoding and compression type and sampling rate are specified for each frame, the encoding and compression type and sampling rate can be changed from frame to frame. The audio information channel device 23 may use different multi-cast addresses for the different encoding and compression types and sampling rates, but it will be appreciated that that would not be required.

It will be appreciated that two advantages of providing that the encoding and compression methodology and the sampling rate is provided on a frame-by-frame basis, instead of on, for example, a track-by-track basis, is that that would facilitate a slave device joining the synchrony group 20 at a frame mid-track, without requiring, for example, the master device 21 or the audio information channel device 23 to notify it of the encoding and compression methodology or the sampling rate.

Another modification is that, instead of the network communications manager 40 of a member of a synchrony group 20 generating the updated time stamp  $T_F^u$  for a digital audio information frame by adding the time differential value  $\Delta T$  to the time stamp  $T_F$  associated with a frame, the network communications manager 40 may instead generate the updated time stamp  $T_F^u$  by subtracting the differential time value  $\Delta T$  from the member's current time  $T_s$  as indicated by the member's digital to analog converter clock 34 at the time at which the digital audio information is received. It will be appreciated, however, that there may be variable time delays in processing of messages by the slave device's network communications manager 40, and so it may be preferable to generate the time differential value  $\Delta T$  using the time stamp  $T_F$  provided by the audio information channel device 23.

In addition, instead of the network communications manager 40 of a member of a synchrony group generating an updated time stamp to reflect the difference between the times indicated by the member's digital to analog converter clock and the audio information channel device's digital to analog converter clock, the network communications manager 40 can generate the time differential value  $\Delta T$  and provide it to the member's playback scheduler 32. In that case, the member's network communications manager 40 can store each digital audio information frame along with the time stamp  $T_F$  as received from the master device in the audio information buffer 21. The playback scheduler 32 can utilize the time differential value  $\Delta T$ , and the time stamps  $T_F$  associated with the

digital audio information frames, to determine when the respective digital audio information frames are to be played. In determining when a digital audio information frame is to be played, the playback scheduler can add the time differential value to the time stamp  $T_F$  associated with the digital audio frame, and enable the digital audio frame to be coupled to the digital to analog converter 33 when the time indicated by the sum corresponds to the current time as indicated by the slave device's digital to analog converter clock 34. Alternatively, when the member's digital to analog converter clock 34 updates its current time  $T_S$ , the playback scheduler can generate an updated current time  $T'_S$  by subtracting the differential time value  $\Delta T$  from the current time  $T_S$ , and using the updated current time  $T'_S$  to determine when to play a digital audio information frame.

As described above, the members of a synchrony group 20 periodically obtain the audio information channel device's current time value and uses the current time value that it receives from the audio information channel device to periodically update the time differential value  $\Delta T$  that it uses in updating the time stamps associated with the various frames. It will be appreciated that, if the digital to analog converter clock(s) associated with the member(s) of a synchrony group 20 are ensured to have the same rate as the digital to analog converter clock, a member need only obtain the current time value from the audio information channel device once, at the beginning of playback.

As another alternative, if the zone players are provided with digital to analog converter clock 34 whose time and rate can be set by an element such as the network communications manager 40, when a zone player 11(n) is operating as a member of a synchrony group 20, its network communications manager 40 can use the various types of timing information that it receives from the audio information channel device 23, including the current time information and the playback timing information indicated by the time stamps that are associated with the various frames 51(f) comprising the audio and playback timing information that it receives, to adjust the synchrony group member's digital to analog converter clock's time value and/or the clock rate that it uses for playback. If the clock's time value is to be adjusted, when the synchrony group member's network communications manager 40 initially receives the current time information from the audio information channel device 23 for the synchrony group 20, the network communications manager 40 can set the synchrony group member's digital to analog converter clock 34 to the current time value as indicated by the audio information channel device's current time information. The network communications manager 40 can set the clock 34 to the current time value indicated by the audio information channel device's current time information once, or periodically as it receives the current time information.

Alternatively or in addition, the synchrony group member's network communications manager 40 can use one or both of the current time information and/or the playback timing information in the time stamps associated with the respective frames 51(f) to adjust the clock rate of the clock 34 that it uses for playback. For example, when the synchrony group member's network communications manager 40 receives a frame 51( $f_x$ ) having a time stamp having a time value  $T_{f_x}$ , it can generate the updated time value  $T_{f_x}^U = T_{f_x} + \Delta T$  as described above, and store the frame with the time stamp with the updated time value in the audio information buffer 30. In addition, since both the number of samples in a frame and the sampling rate, which determines the rate at which the frame is to be played, are known to the network communications manager 40, it can use that information, along with the updated time value  $T_{f_x}^U$  that is to be used for frame 51( $f_x$ ) to generate an expected updated time value  $T_{f_{x+1}}^E$  that is expected for the updated time stamp of the next frame 51( $f_{x+1}$ ). After the synchrony group member's network communications manager 40 receives the next frame 51( $f_{x+1}$ ), it can generate the updated time value  $T_{f_{x+1}}^U$  and compare that value to the expected updated time value  $T_{f_{x+1}}^E$ . If the two time values do not correspond, or if the difference between them is above a selected threshold level, the clock that is used by the audio information channel device 23 to generate the time stamps is advancing at a different rate than the synchrony group member's digital to analog converter clock 34, and so the network communications manager 40 can adjust the rate of the digital to analog converter clock 34 to approach that of the clock used by the audio information channel device 23 so that the differential time value  $\Delta T$  is constant. On the other hand, if the two time values do correspond, then the time differential value  $\Delta T$  is constant, or the difference is below a threshold level, and the network communications manager 40 need not change the clock rate of the digital to analog converter clock 34. It will be appreciated that, if the clock rate is to be adjusted, the rate adjustment can be fixed, or it can vary based on, for example, the difference between the updated time value  $T_{f_{x+1}}^U$  and the expected updated time value  $T_{f_{x+1}}^E$ .

It will also be appreciated that, if no rate adjustment is performed for one frame 51( $f_{x+1}$ ), the synchrony group member's network communications manager 40 can generate an expected updated

time value  $T_{f_{x+2}}^E$  that is expected for the updated time stamp of the next frame 51( $f_{x+2}$ ) using the updated time value  $T_{f_x}^U$  determined for frame 51( $f_x$ ), along with the number of samples in a frame and the sampling rate, and compare the expected updated time value  $T_{f_{x+2}}^E$  to the updated time value  $T_{f_{x+2}}^U$  that it generates when it receives frame 51( $f_{x+2}$ ). At that point, if the network communications manager 41 determines that two time values do not correspond, or if the difference between them is above a selected threshold level, it can adjust the rate of the digital to analog converter clock 34. Similar operations can be performed if no rate adjustment is performed for several successive frames 51( $f_{x+1}$ ), 51( $f_{x+2}$ ),.... This will accommodate the possibility that the rate differential between the clock 34 and the clock used by the audio information channel device 23 in generating the time stamps have rates that differ by an amount sufficiently small that it cannot be detected using time stamps of two or more successive frames.

Instead or in addition to adjusting the clock rate as described above, the synchrony group member's network communications manager 40 can perform similar operations in connection with adjusting the clock rate in connection with the current time information that it receives from the audio information channel device 23.

Furthermore, although the network audio system 10 has been described such that the master device 21 of a synchrony group 20 can, in response to control information provided thereto by a user through the user interface module 13, provide a notification to a zone player 11(n) that it is to become a member of its synchrony group 20 as a slave device 22(g), it will be appreciated that the user interface module 13 can provide the notification directly to the zone player 11(n) that is to become a member of the synchrony group 20. In that case, the zone player 11(n) can notify the master device 21 that it is to become a slave device 22(g) in the synchrony group 20, after which the master device 21 can provide information regarding the synchrony group 20, including the multi-cast and unicast addresses of the audio information channel device and other information as described above.

Similarly, although the network audio system 10 has been described such that the master device 21 of a synchrony group 20 can, in response to control information provided thereto by a user through the user interface module 13, provide a command to a slave device 22(g) to enable the slave device 22(g) to adjust its volume, it will be appreciated that the user interface module 13 can provide

control information directly to the slave device 22(g) to enable the slave device 22(g) to adjust its volume.

In addition, although the network audio system 10 has been described such that each frames 51(f) is associated with a frame sequence number (reference field 56, FIG. 4), it will be appreciated that, if the packets described above in connection with Packet Sequence A and Packet Sequence B are provided with packet sequence numbers, the frame sequence numbers need not be provided, since the packet sequence numbers can suffice for defining the frame sequencing.

Furthermore, although the network audio system 10 has been described such that the zone players 11(n) are provided with an audio amplifier 35 for amplifying the analog signal provided by the respective digital to analog converters 33, it will be appreciated that a zone player may be provided that does not itself include an audio amplifier. In that case, the analog signal may be coupled to an external amplifier for amplification as necessary before being provided to the audio reproduction device(s) 15(n)(r). It will be appreciated that a single zone player 11(n) may be provided with multiple audio amplifiers and audio reproduction device interfaces, and, if necessary, multiple digital to analog converters 33, to provide audio programs for corresponding numbers of synchrony groups.

Similarly, although the zone players 11(n) have been described such that they may be connected to one or more audio information sources, it will be appreciated that an audio information source may form part of and be integrated into a zone player 11(n). For example, a zone player may include a compact disk player, cassette tape player, broadcast radio receiver, or the like, that has been integrated into it. In addition, as noted above, an individual zone player 11(n) may be connected to multiple audio information sources and may contemporaneously operate as the audio information channel device 23 for multiple synchrony groups .

In addition, although FIG. 1 shows the network audio system 10 as including one user interface module 13, it will be appreciated that the system 10 may include a plurality of user interface modules. Each user interface module be useful for controlling all of the zone players as described above, or alternatively one or more of the user interface modules may be useful for controlling selected subsets of the zone players.

Moreover, it will be appreciated that, although the invention has been described in connection with audio information, it will be appreciated that the invention will find utility in connection with any type of information for which synchrony among devices connected to a network is desired.

As noted above, while a zone player 11(n) is operating as audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20, when the zone player 11(n)'s audio information source interface 30 or network communications manager 40 stores digital audio information frames based on audio information from an audio information source 14(n)(s) in the audio information buffer 31, it will provide time stamps for the respective frames to schedule them for playback after some time delay after they have been buffered in the audio information buffer 31. The delay is provided so that, for other zone players 11(n'), 11(n''),... that are operating as members of a synchrony group, there will be sufficient time for the audio and playback timing information to be transferred over the network 12 to those other zone players 11(n'), 11(n''),... so that it can be processed and played by them at the appropriate time as described above. The time period that is selected for the time delay may be fixed or variable, and in either case may be based on a number of factors. If the time period selected for the time delay is fixed, it may be based on, for example, factors such as an estimate of the maximum latency in the network 12, the estimated maximum loading of the various components comprising the zone players 11(n), and other estimates as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art.

The time delay may be the same for audio information from all types of audio information sources, and may be constant over the entire period that the synchrony group 20 is playing an audio work. Alternatively, different time delays may be utilized based on various criteria. For example, if the audio information is to be played independently of information associated with other types of media, the time delay may be selected to be relatively long, on the order of a significant fraction of a second, or longer. On the other hand, if the audio information is to be played contemporaneously with, for example, video information, which may be supplied by, for example, a video disk, video tape cassette, over cable, satellite, or broadcast television, which may not be buffered or which may be displayed independently of the network audio system 10, it may be undesirable to provide for such a lengthy delay, since the time delay of the audio playback, in relation to the video display, may be noticeable. In that case, the zone player 11(n) may provide for a much shorter time delay. In one embodiment, the time delay provided for audio information to be played concurrently with video information is selected to be generally on the order of fifty milliseconds, which would barely, if at all, be perceptible to someone viewing the video. Other desirable time delays for information from other types of sources will be apparent to those skilled in the art.

As yet a further possibility, the zone player 11(n), when operating as an audio information channel device 23 for a synchrony group 20, can dynamically determine the time delay based on a number of conditions in the network audio system 10, including, for example, the message transfer

latency in network 12, the loading of microprocessors or other components that are used in the various zone players 11(n), 11(n''),... that may comprise a synchrony group 20, as well as other factors. For example, if the audio information channel device 23 determines that the latency in the network 12 has increased beyond a selected threshold, the audio information channel device 23 can adjust the delay to increase the likelihood that the members of the synchrony group 20 will be able to receive the packets and process the frames so that they will be able to play them at the appropriate times. Similarly, if the audio information channel device 23 is notified that a member of the synchrony group 20 to which it provides audio information requires additional time to receive and process the frames that it transmits, the audio information channel device 23 can adjust the delay accordingly. It will be appreciated that, to reduce or minimize possible discontinuities in the audio playback by the members of the synchrony group, the audio information channel device 23 can, instead of adjusting the time delay during a particular audio track, adjust the time delay between tracks, during silent periods of a track or otherwise as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art. In addition, the audio information channel device 23 can use conventional audio compression methodologies to facilitate a speeding up and/or slowing down of playback of an audio track while it is in the process of providing additional time delay. Generally, the members of the synchrony group 20 can provide notifications to the audio information channel device 23 if they determine that they will need an additional time delay, and the audio information channel device 23 can adjust the time delay in accordance with the notifications from the members of the synchrony group 20.

It will be appreciated that a system in accordance with the invention can be constructed in whole or in part from special purpose hardware or a general purpose computer system, or any combination thereof, any portion of which may be controlled by a suitable program. Any program may in whole or in part comprise part of or be stored on the system in a conventional manner, or it may in whole or in part be provided in to the system over a network or other mechanism for transferring information in a conventional manner. In addition, it will be appreciated that the system may be operated and/or otherwise controlled by means of information provided by an operator using operator input elements (not shown) which may be connected directly to the system or which may transfer the information to the system over a network or other mechanism for transferring information in a conventional manner.

The foregoing description has been limited to a specific embodiment of this invention. It will be apparent, however, that various variations and modifications may be made to the invention, with the attainment of some or all of the advantages of the invention. It is the object of the appended

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claims to cover these and such other variations and modifications as come within the true spirit and scope of the invention.

What is claimed as new and desired to be secured by Letters Patent is:

## CLAIMS

1. A method to be performed by a system comprising a first set of network devices, the method comprising:

receiving, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, a first control instruction for at least a second network device and a third network device to enter into a synchrony group, wherein the first set of network devices comprises:

a first network device comprising a first clock that is configured to provide a first local clock time of the first network device;

the second network device, the second network device comprising a second clock that is configured to provide a second local clock time of the second network device; and

the third network device, the third network device comprising a third clock that is configured to provide a third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third network devices include respective network interfaces that are configured to facilitate network communication between the first, second, and third network devices via one or more data networks,

after receiving, by the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction, selecting, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the second network device from among a second set of network devices that comprises the second network device and the third network device, to serve as an audio distributor in the synchrony group comprising the second network device and the third network device;

after selection of the second network device to serve as the audio distributor in the synchrony group:

operating, by the second network device and the third network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the third network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, (a) audio information and (b) playback timing information associated with the audio information, wherein the playback timing information is indicative of at least one future time at which the

second network device and the third network device are to engage in synchronized playback of the audio information;

and engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third local clock times are different during synchronous playback.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
  - receiving, by the second network device from the third network device, timing information; and
  - generating, by the second network device, the playback timing information associated with the audio information using at least the received timing information.
3. The method of claim 2, wherein the received timing information was generated based on the third clock of the third network device.
4. The method of claim 2, wherein the system further comprises a fourth network device, and wherein the method further comprises:
  - operating, by the fourth network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the fourth network device is configured to:
    - receive, from the second network device, (a) the audio information and (b) the playback timing information associated with the audio information; and
    - engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and a fourth local clock time of the fourth network device.
5. The method of claim 4, further comprising:
  - while the fourth network device is operating as part of the synchrony group, determining, by the fourth network device, a time differential based on at least the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device, wherein engaging in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device comprises engaging in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on

at least the playback timing information, the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device, and the determined time differential.

6. The method of claim 2, wherein the system further comprises a fourth network device, and wherein the method further comprises: sending, by the fourth network device, to the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction.

7. The method of claim 1, wherein the system further comprises a fourth network device, and wherein the method further comprises:

receiving, from the fourth network device by a given one of the second network device or the third network device, a first volume control instruction for the synchrony group; and

after receiving the first volume control instruction for the synchrony group, the given one of the second network device or the third network device:

adjusting a respective volume level of the given one of the second network device or the third network device based on the received first volume control instruction;

and sending, to the other of the second network device or the third network device, a second volume control instruction based on the received first volume control instruction.

8. The method of claim 1, wherein selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices to serve as the audio distributor comprises: selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices based on at least one of (1) a load of one or more network devices and (2) a network latency.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices comprises:

selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices based on at least a network performance metric of the second network device.

10. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

while the third network device is operating as part of the synchrony group, receiving, by the third network device from the second network device, clock timing information comprising an indication of the second local clock time of the second network device.

11. A tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium comprising instructions that, when executed by a system comprising a first set of network devices, perform functions comprising:

receiving, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, a first control instruction for at least a second network device and a third network device to enter into a synchrony group, wherein the first set of network devices comprises:

a first network device comprising a first clock that is configured to provide a first local clock time of the first network device;

the second network device, the second network device comprising a second clock that is configured to provide a second local clock time of the second network device; and

the third network device, the third network device comprising a third clock that is configured to provide a third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third network devices include respective network interfaces that are configured to facilitate network communication between the first, second, and third network devices via one or more data networks,

after receiving, by the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction, selecting, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the second network device from among a second set of network devices that comprises the second network device and the third network device, to serve as an audio distributor in the synchrony group comprising the second network device and the third network device;

after selection of the second network device to serve as the audio distributor in the synchrony group:

operating, by the second network device and the third network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the third network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, (a) audio information and (b) playback timing information associated with the audio information, wherein the playback timing information is indicative of at least one future time at which the second network device and the third network device are to engage in synchronized playback of the audio information; and

engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third local clock times are different during synchronous playback.

12. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 11, wherein the functions further comprise:

receiving, by the second network device from the third network device, timing information; and

generating, by the second network device, the playback timing information associated with the audio information using at least the received timing information.

13. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 12, wherein the received timing information was generated based on the third clock of the third network device.

14. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 12, wherein the system further comprises a fourth network device, and wherein the functions further comprise:

operating, by the fourth network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the fourth network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, (a) the audio information and (b) the playback timing information associated with the audio information; and

engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and a fourth local clock time of the fourth network device.

15. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 14, wherein the functions further comprise:

while the fourth network device is operating as part of the synchrony group, determining, by the fourth network device, a time differential based on at least the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device, wherein engaging in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device comprises engaging in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on

at least the playback timing information, the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device, and the determined time differential.

16. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 12, wherein the system further comprise a fourth network device, and wherein the functions further comprise: sending, by the fourth network device, to the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction.

17. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 11, wherein the system further comprises a fourth network device, and wherein the functions further comprise:

receiving, from the fourth network device by a given one of the second network device or the third network device, a first volume control instruction for the synchrony group; and

after receiving the first volume control instruction for the synchrony group, the given one of the second network device or the third network device:

adjusting a respective volume level of the given one of the second network device or the third network device based on the received first volume control instruction;

and sending, to the other of the second network device or the third network device, a second volume control instruction based on the received first volume control instruction.

18. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 11, wherein selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices to serve as the audio distributor comprises:

selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices based on at least one of (1) a load of one or more network devices and (2) a network latency.

19. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 11, wherein selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices comprises:

selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices based on at least a network performance metric of the second network device.

20. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium of claim 11, wherein the functions further comprise:

while the third network device is operating as part of the synchrony group, receiving, by the third network device from the second network device, clock timing information comprising an indication of the second local clock time of the second network device.

21. A system comprising:

a first set of network devices comprising:

a first network device comprising a first clock that is configured to provide a first local clock time of the first network device;

a second network device comprising a second clock that is configured to provide a second local clock time of the second network device;

a third network device comprising a third clock that is configured to provide a third local clock time of the third network device,

wherein the first, second, and third network devices include respective network interfaces that are configured to facilitate network communication between the first, second, and third network devices via one or more data networks, and

wherein the first, second, and third network devices each include a respective at least one processor and respective tangible, non-transitory computer-readable storage media having stored therein instructions that, when executed, cause the first set of network devices to collectively perform functions including:

receiving, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, a first control instruction for at least the second network device and the third network device to enter into a synchrony group;

after receiving, by the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction, selecting, by at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the second network device from among a second set of network devices that comprises the second network device and the third network device, to serve as an audio distributor in the synchrony group comprising the second network device and the third network device;

after selection of the second network device to serve as the audio distributor in the synchrony group:

operating, by the second network device and the third network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the third network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, (a) audio information and (b) playback timing information associated with the audio information, wherein the playback timing information is indicative of at least one future time at which the second network device and the third network device are to engage in synchronized playback of the audio information; and

engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the third local clock time of the third network device, wherein the first, second, and third local clock times are different during synchronous playback.

22. The system of claim 21, the functions further comprising:  
receiving, by the second network device from the third network device, timing information; and  
generating, by the second network device, the playback timing information associated with the audio information using at least the received timing information.

23. The system of claim 22, wherein the received timing information was generated based on the third clock of the third network device.

24. The system of claim 22, further comprising a fourth network device, the functions further comprising:

operating, by the fourth network device, as part of the synchrony group, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the fourth network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, (a) the audio information and (b) the playback timing information associated with the audio information; and

engage in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and a fourth local clock time of the fourth network device.

25. The system of claim 24, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the fourth network device is further configured to:

determine a time differential based on at least the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device, wherein engaging in synchronous playback of the audio information with

the second network device based on at least the playback timing information and the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device comprises engaging in synchronous playback of the audio information with the second network device based on at least the playback timing information, the fourth local clock time of the fourth network device, and the determined time differential.

26. The system of claim 22, further comprising a fourth network device, the functions further comprising:

sending, by the fourth network device, to the at least one network device in the first set of network devices, the first control instruction.

27. The system of claim 21, further comprising a fourth network device, the functions further comprising:

receiving, from the fourth network device by a given one of the second network device or the third network device, a first volume control instruction for the synchrony group; and

after receiving the first volume control instruction for the synchrony group, the given one of the second network device or the third network device:

adjusting a respective volume level of the given one of the second network device or the third network device based on the received first volume control instruction; and

sending, to the other of the second network device or the third network device, a second volume control instruction based on the received first volume control instruction.

28. The system of claim 21, wherein selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices to serve as the audio distributor comprises:

selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices based on at least one of (1) a load of one or more network devices and (2) a network latency.

29. The system of claim 21, wherein selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices comprises:

selecting the second network device from among the second set of network devices based on at least a network performance metric of the second network device.

30. The system of claim 21, wherein, while operating as part of the synchrony group, the third network device is configured to:

receive, from the second network device, clock timing information comprising an indication of the second local clock time of the second network device.

31. A method performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group that includes at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network, wherein the second zone player comprises a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the second zone player, and wherein the local clock time of the first zone player differs from the local clock time of the second zone player;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

obtaining audio information that is representative of the audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generating playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least one future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future time is determined based on the local clock time of the second zone player;

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information.

32. The method of claim 31, wherein receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback comprises:

receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback from one or both of (a) a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network or (b) the second zone player.

33. The method of claim 31 or 32, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data

network comprises: transmitting the playback timing information in a separate communication from the obtained audio information.

34. The method of claim 31, 32 or 33, wherein obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content comprises:

obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content in response to receiving, from a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, an instruction to play back the audio content in the synchrony group.

35. The method of claim 31, wherein obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content comprises:

obtaining a first portion of the audio information that is representative of the audio content before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and obtaining a second portion of the audio information that is representative of the audio content after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

36. The method of claim 31, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises:

transmitting a first portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and transmitting a second portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

37. The method of claim 31, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises:

transmitting a series of frames wherein an individual frame in the series of frames includes a respective portion of the obtained audio information.

38. The method of claim 37, wherein the playback timing information comprises, for an individual frame in the series of frames, a respective indicator of a respective future time value at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the respective frame.

39. The method of claim 31, further comprising, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

receiving a request to adjust a volume of the synchrony group; and

in response to receiving the request to adjust the volume of the synchrony group, (a) causing an adjustment of an individual volume of the first zone player and (b) transmitting, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual volume of the second zone player.

40. The method of claim 31, wherein receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback comprises receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback with the second zone player as well as a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, and wherein the method further comprises, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the third zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the third zone player using the playback timing information.

41. The method of claim 40, further comprising, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the second zone player.

42. The method of claim 41, further comprising, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the third zone player.

43. The method of claim 31, further comprising, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the second zone player.

44. A first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the first zone player;

at least one processor;  
a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium; and  
program instructions stored on the tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium that are executable by the at least one processor such that the first zone player is configured to perform functions comprising:

receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group that includes at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, wherein the second zone player comprises a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the second zone player, and wherein the local clock time of the first zone player differs from the local clock time of the second zone player;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

obtaining audio information that is representative of the audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generating playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least one future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future time is determined based on the local clock time of the second zone player;

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information.

45. The first zone player of claim 44, wherein receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback comprises: receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback from one or both of (a) a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network or (b) the second zone player.

46. The first zone player of claim 44, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises:

transmitting the playback timing information in a separate communication from the obtained audio information.

47. The first zone player of claim 44, wherein obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content comprises:

obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content in response to receiving, from a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, an instruction to play back the audio content in the synchrony group.

48. The first zone player of claim 44, wherein obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content comprises:

obtaining a first portion of the audio information that is representative of the audio content before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and obtaining a second portion of the audio information that is representative of the audio content after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

49. The first zone player of claim 44, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises:

transmitting a first portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and transmitting a second portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

50. The first zone player of claim 44, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises:

transmitting a series of frames wherein an individual frame in the series of frames includes a respective portion of the obtained audio information.

51. The first zone player of claim 50, wherein the playback timing information comprises, for an individual frame in the series of frames, a respective indicator of a respective future time value at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the respective frame.

52. The first zone player of claim 44, the functions further comprising, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

receiving a request to adjust a volume of the synchrony group; and

in response to receiving the request to adjust the volume of the synchrony group, (a) causing an adjustment of an individual volume of the first zone player and (b) transmitting, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual volume of the second zone player.

53. The first zone player of claim 44, wherein:

receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback comprises receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback with the second zone player as well as a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, and

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the third zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the third zone player using the playback timing information.

54. The first zone player of claim 53, the functions further comprising, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the second zone player.

55. The first zone player of claim 54, the functions further comprising, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the third zone player.

56. The first zone player of claim 44, the functions further comprising, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the second zone player.

57. Tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media comprising instructions encoded therein, wherein the instructions, when executed, cause a first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group that includes at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network, wherein the second zone player comprises a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the second zone player, and wherein the local clock time of the first zone player differs from the local clock time of the second zone player;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

obtaining audio information that is representative of the audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generating playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least one future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information, wherein the at least one future time is determined based on the local clock time of the second zone player;

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information.

58. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback comprises:

receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback from one or both of (a) a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network or (b) the second zone player.

59. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises:

transmitting the playback timing information in a separate communication from the obtained audio information.

60. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content comprises:

obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content in response to receiving, from a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, an instruction to play back the audio content in the synchrony group.

61. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein obtaining the audio information that is representative of the audio content comprises:

obtaining a first portion of the audio information that is representative of the audio content before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and obtaining a second portion of the audio information that is representative of the audio content after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

62. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises:

transmitting a first portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and transmitting a second portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

63. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein transmitting the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises:

transmitting a series of frames wherein an individual frame in the series of frames includes a respective portion of the obtained audio information.

64. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 63, wherein the playback timing information comprises, for an individual frame in the series of frames, a

respective indicator of a respective future time value at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the respective frame.

65. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein the functions further comprise, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

receiving a request to adjust a volume of the synchrony group; and

in response to receiving the request to adjust the volume of the synchrony group, (a) causing an adjustment of an individual volume of the first zone player and (b) transmitting, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual volume of the second zone player.

66. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback comprises receiving a request to engage in synchronous playback with the second zone player as well as a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, and wherein the functions further comprise, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

transmitting the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the third zone player via the at least one data network; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the third zone player using the playback timing information.

67. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 66, wherein the functions further comprise, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the second zone player.

68. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 67, wherein the functions further comprise, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the third zone player.

69. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 57, wherein the functions further comprise, after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging clock information with the second zone player.

70. A method performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

receiving, via a network interface, a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group comprising at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging, via the network interface with a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between at least the first zone player and the third zone player, wherein the third zone player is not a member of the synchrony group, and wherein as part of the time synchronization, the first zone player maintains an adjusted clock time that (i) is different from its local clock time and (ii) tracks a clock time of the third zone player;

receiving, via the network interface from the second zone player, (i) audio information that is representative of the audio content and (ii) playback timing information associated with the audio information that comprises an indicator of at least a first future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time and the adjusted clock time.

71. The method of claim 70, wherein the adjusted clock time is based on exchanging timing information with the third zone player.

72. The method of claim 71, wherein engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time comprises:

engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player when the adjusted clock time maintained by the first zone player reaches at least the first future time.

73. The method of claim 70, wherein the third zone player is configured to exchange, via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between the second zone player and the third zone player.

74. The method of claim 70, wherein at least the first future time is relative to a clock time of the third zone player.

75. The method of claim 70, wherein the playback timing information associated with the audio information comprises a plurality of indicators of a plurality of future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information, and wherein at least one future time of the plurality of future times is relative to a clock time of the second zone player.

76. Tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media having instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed, cause a first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving, via a network interface, a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group comprising at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content as part of the synchrony group:

exchanging, via the network interface with a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between at least the first zone player and the third zone player, wherein the third zone player is not a member of the synchrony group, and wherein as part of the time synchronization, the first zone player maintains an adjusted clock time that (i) is different from its local clock time and (ii) tracks a clock time of the third zone player;

receiving, via the network interface from the second zone player, (i) audio information that is representative of the audio content and (ii) playback timing information associated with the audio information that comprises an indicator of at least a first future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time and the adjusted clock time.

77. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 76, wherein the adjusted clock time is based on the exchange of timing information with the third zone player.

78. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 77, wherein engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time comprises:

engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player when the adjusted clock time maintained by the first zone player reaches at least the first future time.

79. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 76, wherein the third zone player is configured to exchange, via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between the second zone player and the third zone player.

80. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 76, wherein at least the first future time is relative to a clock time of the third zone player.

81. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 76, wherein the playback timing information associated with the audio information comprises a plurality of indicators of a plurality of future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information, and wherein at least one future time of the plurality of future times is relative to a clock time of the second zone player.

82. A first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

a local clock that is configured to provide a clock time of the first zone player;

at least one processor; a tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium; and

program instructions stored on the tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium that are executable by the at least one processor such that the first zone player is configured to:

receive, via the network interface, a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group comprising at least a second

zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network;

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content as part of the synchrony group:

exchange, via the network interface with a third zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between at least the first zone player and the third zone player, wherein the third zone player is not a member of the synchrony group, and wherein as part of the time synchronization, the first zone player maintains an adjusted clock time that (i) is different from its local clock time and (ii) tracks a clock time of the third zone player;

receive, via the network interface from the second zone player, (i) audio information that is representative of the audio content and (ii) playback timing information associated with the audio information that comprises an indicator of at least a first future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information; and

engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time and the adjusted clock time.

83. The first zone player of claim 82, wherein the adjusted clock time is based on the exchange of timing information with the third zone player.

84. The first zone player of claim 83, wherein the program instructions that are executable by the at least one processor such that the first zone player is configured to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player comprise program instructions that are executable by the at least one processor such that the first zone player is configured to:

after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of given audio content as part of the synchrony group, engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player when the adjusted clock time maintained by the first zone player reaches at least the first future time.

85. The first zone player of claim 83, wherein the third zone player is configured to exchange, via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between the second zone player and the third zone player.

86. The first zone player of claim 83, wherein at least the first future time is relative to a clock time of the third zone player.

87. The first zone player of claim 83, wherein the playback timing information associated with the audio information comprises a plurality of indicators of a plurality of future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information, and wherein at least one future time of the plurality of future times is relative to a clock time of the second zone player.

88. A system comprising a first zone player, a second zone player, and a third zone player, wherein the first, second, and third zone players are communicatively coupled via at least one data network, wherein the first zone player is configured to perform functions comprising: (1) receiving, via a network interface at the first zone player, a request to engage in synchronous playback of audio content as part of a synchrony group comprising at least the second zone player, (2) after receiving the request to engage in synchronous playback of the audio content as part of the synchrony group: (A) exchanging, via the network interface with the third zone player, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between at least the first zone player and the third zone player, wherein the third zone player is not a member of the synchrony group, and wherein as part of the time synchronization, the first zone player maintains an adjusted clock time that (A-i) is different from its local clock time and (A-ii) tracks a clock time of the third zone player; (B) receiving, via the network interface from the second zone player, (B-i) audio information that is representative of the audio content and (B-ii) playback timing information associated with the audio information that comprises an indicator of at least a first future time at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information; and (C) engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time and the adjusted clock time.

89. The system of claim 88, wherein the adjusted clock time is based on the exchange of timing information with the third zone player.

90. The system of claim 89, wherein the first zone player engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player using at least the first future time comprises the first zone player engaging in synchronous playback of the received audio information with the second zone player when the adjusted clock time maintained by the first zone player reaches at least the first future time.

91. The system of claim 88, wherein the third zone player is configured to exchange, via the at least one data network, timing information that facilitates time synchronization between the second zone player and the third zone player.

92. The system of claim 88, wherein at least the first future time is relative to a clock time of the third zone player.

93. The system of claim 88, wherein the playback timing information associated with the audio information comprises a plurality of indicators of a plurality of future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the received audio information, and wherein at least one future time of the plurality of future times is relative to a clock time of the second zone player.

94. A method performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:  
receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;  
in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:  
exchange messages with the second zone player that are indicative of a common clock reference for the synchrony group;  
obtain audio information that is representative of given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;  
generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least a first future time, relative to the common clock reference for the synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;  
transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information and the common clock reference for the synchrony group, wherein a local clock time of the first zone player differs from a local clock time of the second zone player.

95. The method of claim 94, wherein the common clock reference for the synchrony group comprises the local clock time of the local clock of the first zone player.

96. The method of claim 94, wherein receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group with at least the second zone player comprises:

receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group with at least the second zone player from one or both of (a) a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network or (b) the second zone player.

97. The method of claim 94, wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to:

transmit the playback timing information in a separate communication from the obtained audio information

98. The method of claim 94, wherein being configured to obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content comprises being configured to:

obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content in response to receiving, from a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, an instruction to play back the given audio content in the synchrony group.

99. The method of claim 94,

wherein being configured to obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content comprises being configured to obtain a first portion of the audio information that is representative of the given audio content before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and obtain a second portion of the audio information that is representative of the given audio content after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information; and

wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to transmit a first portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and transmit a second portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

100. The method of claim 94, wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to:

transmit a series of frames, wherein individual frames include one or more respective portions of the obtained audio information, wherein a first frame in the series of frames includes an indicator of the first future time, and wherein the playback timing information further comprises, for individual subsequent frames in the series of frames, an indicator of a respective future time, relative to the common clock reference for the synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to synchronously play back the respective individual subsequent frame.

101. The method of claim 94, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is further configured to:

receive a request to adjust a volume of the synchrony group; and

in response to receiving the request to adjust the volume of the synchrony group, (a) cause an adjustment of an individual volume of the first zone player and (b) transmit, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual volume of the second zone player.

102. A first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

a clock that is configured to provide a local clock time of the first zone player;

at least one processor;

tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media having instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed, cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network;

in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:

exchange messages with the second zone player that are indicative of a common clock reference for the synchrony group;

obtain audio information that is representative of given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least a first future time, relative to the common clock reference for the synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information and the common clock reference for the synchrony group, wherein a local clock time of the first zone player differs from a local clock time of the second zone player.

103. The first zone player of claim 102, wherein the common clock reference for the synchrony group comprises the local clock time of the first zone player.

104. The first zone player of claim 102, wherein receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group with at least the second zone player comprises:

receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group with at least the second zone player from one or both of (a) a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network or (b) the second zone player.

105. The first zone player of claim 102, wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to:

transmit the playback timing information in a separate communication from the obtained audio information.

106. The first zone player of claim 102, wherein being configured to obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content comprises being configured to:

obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content in response to receiving, from a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, an instruction to play back the given audio content in the synchrony group.

107. The first zone player of claim 102, wherein being configured to obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content comprises being configured to:

obtain a first portion of the audio information that is representative of the given audio content before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and obtain a second portion of the audio information that is representative of the given audio content after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

108. The first zone player of claim 102, wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to:

transmit a first portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and transmit a second portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

109. The first zone player of claim 102, wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to:

transmit a series of frames, wherein individual frames include one or more respective portions of the obtained audio information.

110. The first zone player of claim 109, wherein a first frame in the series of frames includes an indicator of the first future time.

111. The first zone player of claim 110, wherein the playback timing information further comprises, for individual subsequent frames in the series of frames:

an indicator of a respective future time, relative to the common clock reference for the synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to synchronously playback the respective individual subsequent frame.

112. The first zone player of claim 102, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is further configured to:

receive a request to adjust a volume of the synchrony group; and

in response to receiving the request to adjust the volume of the synchrony group, (a) cause an adjustment of an individual volume of the first zone player and (b) transmit, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual volume of the second zone player.

113. Tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media comprising instructions stored therein, wherein the instructions, when executed cause a first zone player to perform a method comprising:

receiving a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via at least one data network;

in response to receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, entering into the synchrony group with the second zone player, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is configured to:

exchange messages with the second zone player that are indicative of a common clock reference for the synchrony group;

obtain audio information that is representative of given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of at least a first future time, relative to the common clock reference for the synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to initiate synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player using the playback timing information and the common clock reference for the synchrony group, wherein a local clock time of the first zone player differs from a local clock time of the second zone player.

114. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 113, wherein the common clock reference for the synchrony group comprises the local clock time of the local clock of the first zone player.

115. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 113, wherein receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group with at least the second zone player comprises:

receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group with at least the second zone player from one or both of (a) a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network or (b) the second zone player.

116. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 113, wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to:

transmit the playback timing information in a separate communication from the obtained audio information.

117. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 113, wherein being configured to obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content comprises being configured to:

obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content in response to receiving, from a network device that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network, an instruction to play back the given audio content in the synchrony group.

118. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 113, wherein being configured to obtain the audio information that is representative of the given audio content comprises being configured to:

obtain a first portion of the audio information that is representative of the given audio content before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and obtain a second portion of the audio information that is representative of the given audio content after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

119. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 113, wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to:

transmit a first portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network before beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information and transmit a second portion of the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network after beginning to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information.

120. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 113, wherein being configured to transmit the obtained audio information to the second zone player via the at least one data network comprises being configured to:

transmit a series of frames, wherein individual frames include one or more respective portions of the obtained audio information.

121. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 120, wherein a first frame in the series of frames includes an indicator of the first future time.

122. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 121, wherein the playback timing information further comprises, for individual subsequent frames in the series of frames:

an indicator of a respective future time, relative to the common clock reference for the synchrony group, at which the first and second zone players are to synchronously play back the respective individual subsequent frame.

123. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable media of claim 113, wherein, in the synchrony group, the first zone player is further configured to:

receive a request to adjust a volume of the synchrony group; and

in response to receiving the request to adjust the volume of the synchrony group, (a) cause an adjustment of an individual volume of the first zone player and (b) transmit, to the second zone player via the at least one data network, a command to adjust an individual volume of the second zone player.

124. A method to be performed by a first zone player, the method comprising:

receiving, via a network interface configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network, a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network;

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, (i) detecting an indication that, based on a performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network, the first zone player is to operate as an audio distributor for the synchrony group and (ii) operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor;

while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor:

obtaining, via the network interface, audio information that is representative of given audio content;

generating playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmitting, via the network interface, the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player; and

engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information.

125. The method of claim 124, wherein detecting the indication that the first zone player is to operate as the audio distributor for the synchrony group comprises receiving, via the network interface, an instruction that the first zone player is to operate as the audio distributor for the synchrony group based on the performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network.

126. The method of claim 124, further comprising: after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, exchanging, via the network interface, clock time messages with the second zone player to facilitate time synchronization between the first and second zone players.

127. The method of claim 124, further comprising:

while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor and before obtaining the audio information that is representative of the given audio content, receiving, via the network interface, control information identifying the given audio content to be played back

by the synchrony group that is available at an audio source outside of the at least one data network.

128. The method of claim 124, further comprising:

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group and before operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, operating in the synchrony group as an audio recipient; and

while operating in the synchrony group as the audio recipient, receiving from another zone player (i) audio information and (ii) playback timing information associated with the received audio information.

129. The method of claim 124, wherein the one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information comprise at least one first future time that is determined based on a local clock of a zone player other than the first zone player.

130. The method of claim 129, wherein the zone player other than the first zone player comprises the second zone player.

131. The method of claim 124, further comprising:

while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, receiving, via the network interface, at least one time value that is based on a local clock of a zone player other than the first zone player, wherein engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information comprises engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information and the received at least one time value.

132. A first zone player comprising:

a network interface that is configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network;

at least one processor;

data storage storing instructions that are executable by the at least one processor to cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving, via the network interface, a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network; and

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, (i) detecting an indication that, based on a performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network, the first zone player is to operate as an audio distributor for the synchrony group and (ii) operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor,

wherein, while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, the first zone player is configured to:

obtain, via the network interface, audio information that is representative of given audio content;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit, via the network interface, the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information.

133. The first zone player of claim 132, wherein detecting the indication that the first zone player is to operate as the audio distributor for the synchrony group comprises receiving, via the network interface, an instruction that the first zone player is to operate as the audio distributor for the synchrony group based on the performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network.

134. The first zone player of claim 132, further comprising instructions that are executable by the at least one processor to cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, exchanging, via the network interface, clock time messages with the second zone player to facilitate time synchronization between the first and second zone players.

135. The first zone player of claim 132, wherein, while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, the first zone player is further configured to:

before obtaining the audio information that is representative of the given audio content, receive, via the network interface, control information identifying the given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group that is available at an audio source outside of the at least one data network.

136. The first zone player of claim 132, further comprising instructions that are executable by the at least one processor to cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group and before operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, operating in the synchrony group as an audio recipient,

wherein, while operating in the synchrony group as the audio recipient, the first zone player is configured to receive from another zone player (i) audio information and (ii) playback timing information associated with the received audio information.

137. The first zone player of claim 132, wherein the one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information comprise at least one first future time that is determined based on a local clock of a zone player other than the first zone player.

138. The first zone player of claim 137, wherein the zone player other than the first zone player comprises the second zone player.

139. The first zone player of claim 132, wherein, while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, the first zone player is further configured to:

receive, via the network interface, at least one time value that is based on a local clock of a zone player other than the first zone player, wherein engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information comprises engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information and the received at least one time value.

140. A tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium comprising instructions that, when executed by one or more processors, cause a first zone player to perform functions comprising:

receiving, via a network interface configured to communicatively couple the first zone player to at least one data network, a request to enter into a synchrony group with at least a second zone player that is communicatively coupled to the first zone player via the at least one data network; and

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, (i) detecting an indication that, based on a performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network, the first zone player is to operate as an audio distributor for the synchrony group and (ii) operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor;

wherein, while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, the first zone player is configured to:

obtain, via the network interface, audio information that is representative of given audio content;

generate playback timing information associated with the obtained audio information that is indicative of one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information;

transmit, via the network interface, the obtained audio information and the playback timing information to the second zone player; and

engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information.

141. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium player of claim 140, wherein detecting the indication that the first zone player is to operate as the audio distributor for the synchrony group comprises receiving, via the network interface, an instruction that the first zone player is to operate as the audio distributor for the synchrony group based on the performance metric associated with communication by the first zone player via the data network.

142. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium player of claim 140, further comprising instructions that are executable by the one or more processors to cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group, exchanging, via the network interface, clock time messages with the second zone player to facilitate time synchronization between the first and second zone players.

143. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium player of claim 140, further comprising instructions that are executable by the one or more processors to cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor and before obtaining the audio information that is representative of the given audio content, receiving, via the network interface, control information identifying the given audio content to be played back by the synchrony group that is available at an audio source outside of the at least one data network.

144. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium player of claim 140, further comprising instructions that are executable by the one or more processors to cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

after receiving the request to enter into the synchrony group and before operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, operating in the synchrony group as an audio recipient,

wherein, while operating in the synchrony group as the audio recipient, the first zone player is configured to receive from another zone player (i) audio information and (ii) playback timing information associated with the received audio information.

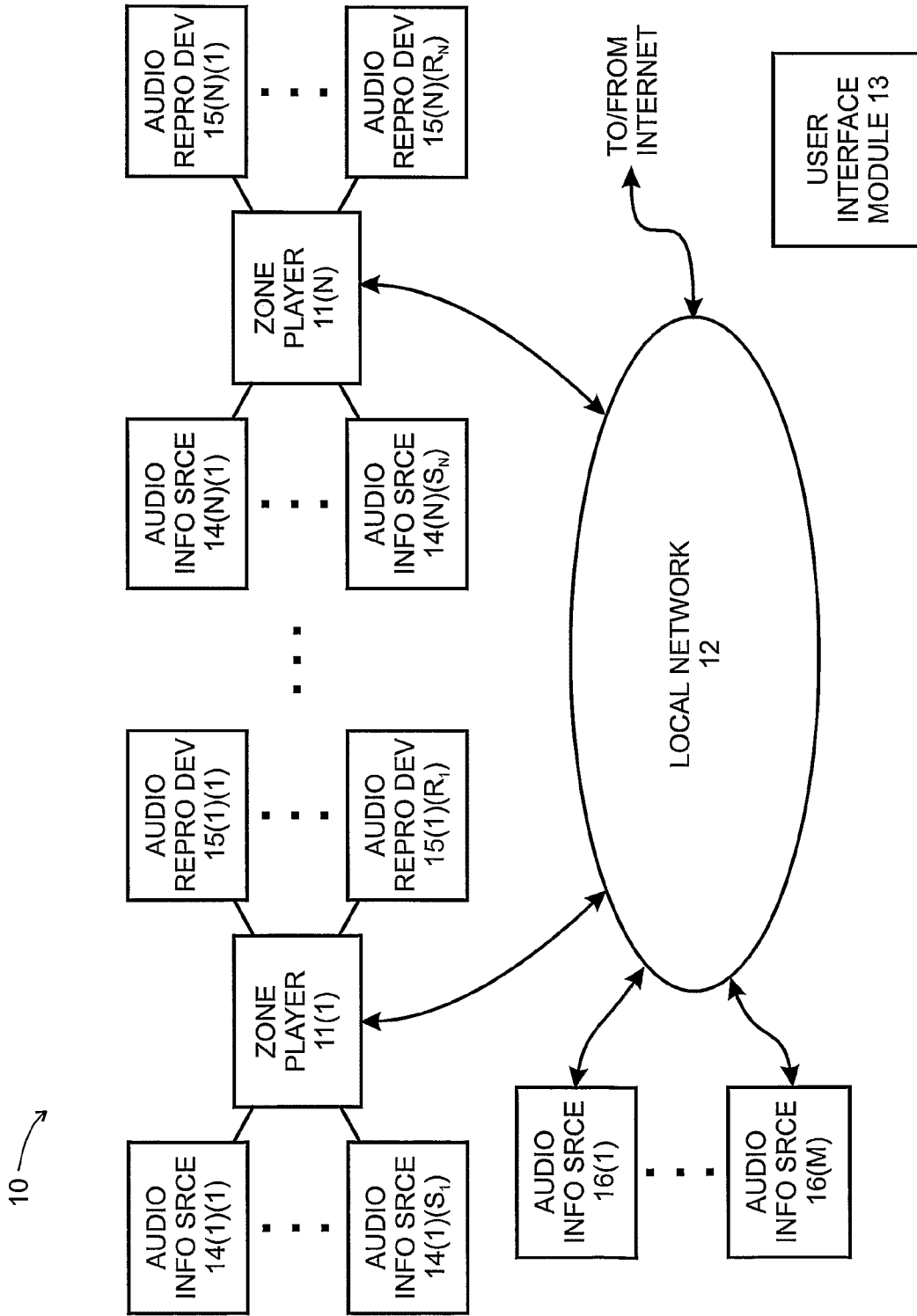
145. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium player of claim 140, wherein the one or more future times at which the first and second zone players are to engage in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information comprise at least one first future time that is determined based on a local clock of a zone player other than the first zone player.

146. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium player of claim 145, wherein the zone player other than the first zone player comprises the second zone player.

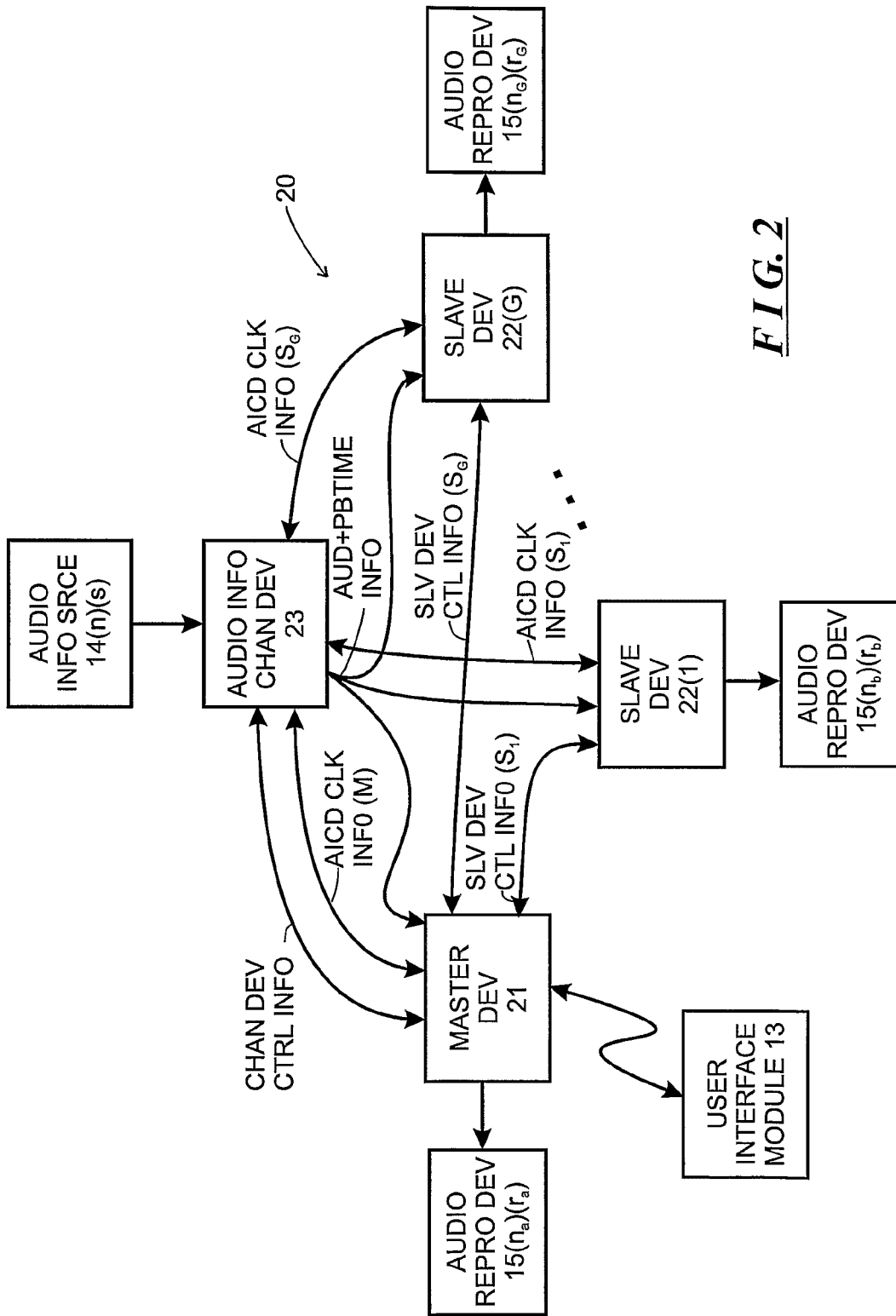
147. The tangible, non-transitory computer-readable medium player of claim 140, further comprising instructions that are executable by the one or more processors to cause the first zone player to perform functions comprising:

while operating in the synchrony group as the audio distributor, receiving, via the network interface, at least one time value that is based on a local clock of a zone player other than the first zone player, wherein engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information comprises

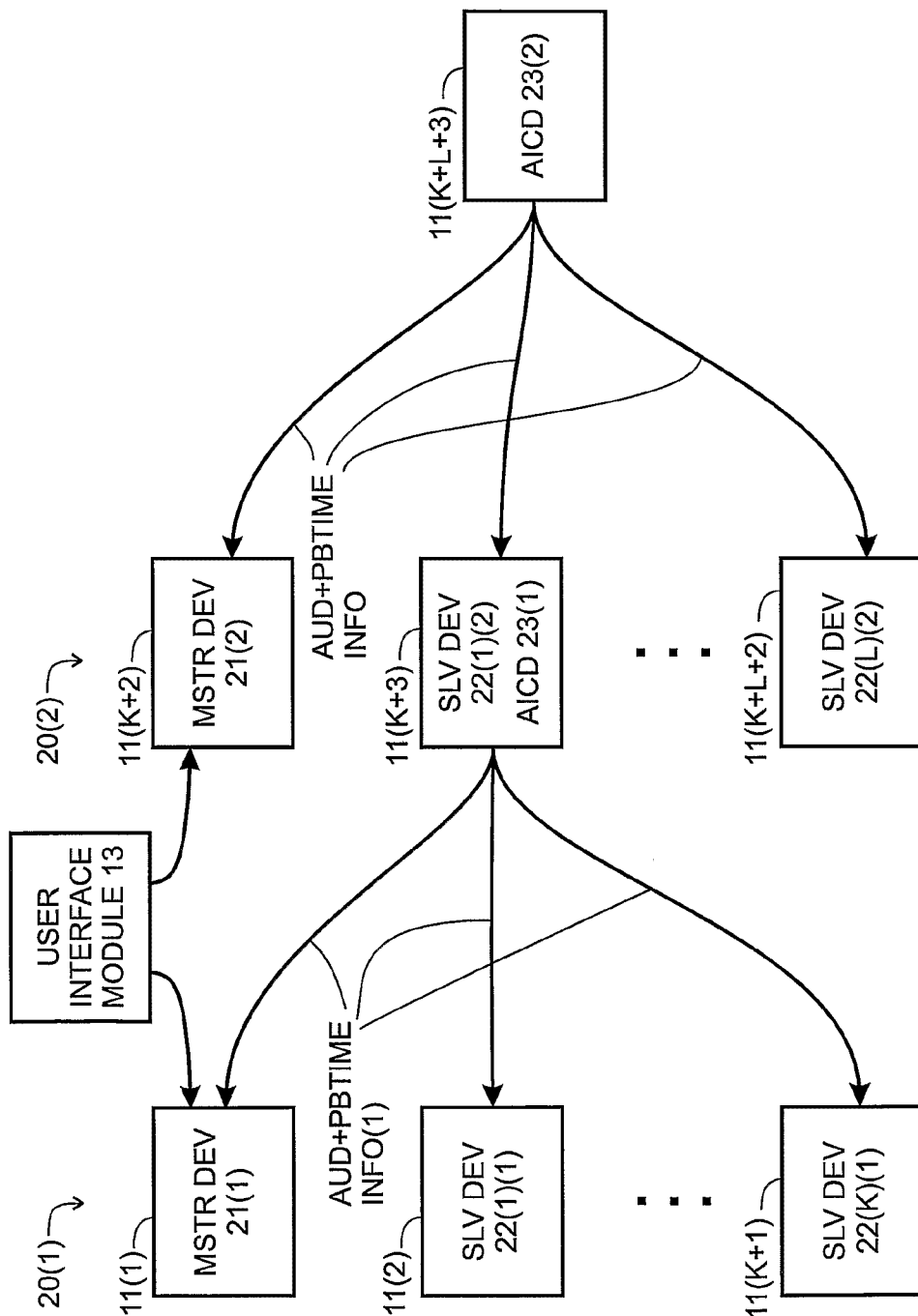
engaging in synchronous playback of the obtained audio information with the second zone player based on the playback timing information and the received at least one time value.



**FIG. 1**

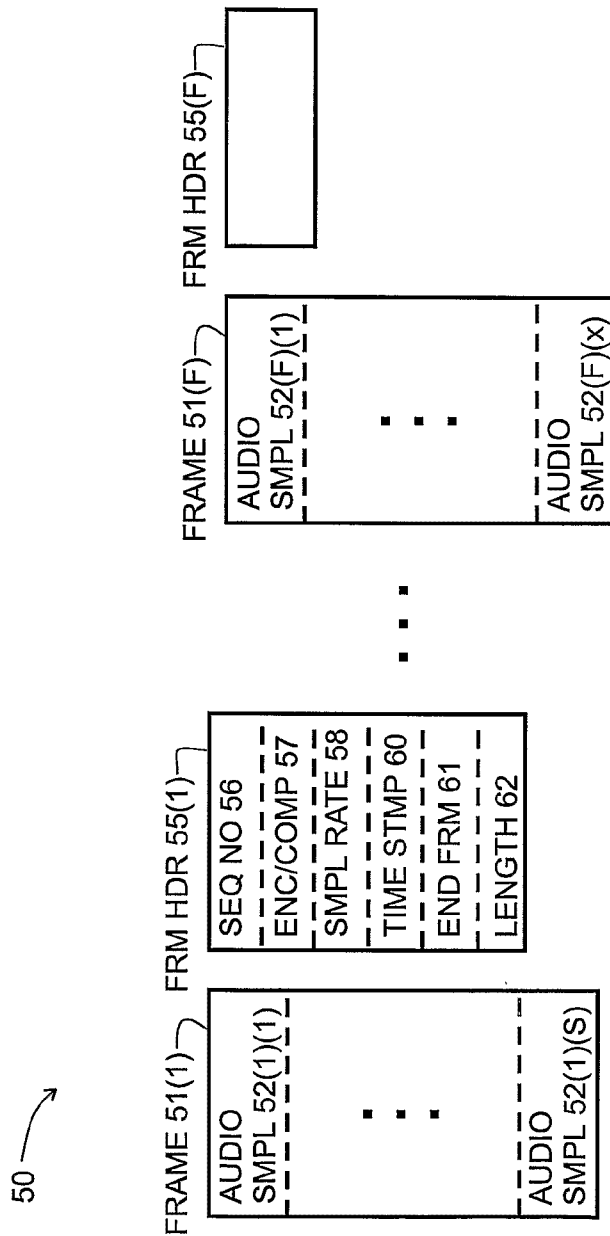


**FIG. 2**



**FIG. 2A**





***FIG. 4***

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