

MAKING THE CONNECTION

The LAOC Audiophile Society meeting at LA Audio Video; Quite an event!

Sunday June the 28th saw Nordost President Joe Reynolds and latest recruit Roy Gregory at LA Audio Video in Los Angeles, CA, to be recognized as lifetime members by the Los Angeles and Orange County Audiophile Society, an honor that wasn't entirely without strings attached – if “strings” fully covers the heavy lifting involved in the demonstration laid on to entertain the LAOC members. Unlike many such events, which concentrate on simply playing a new product or high-end system, this was an altogether more ambitious affair that attempted to set out the basis for Foundation Theory, a system optimization strategy that should apply across product lines and to all equipment. The resulting demonstration is both complex and intricately choreographed – a combination which isn't without associated risks!



Just some of the LA/OC membership enjoying the show...

Working with a system that comprised an Audio Research CD8 player, LS17 line-stage, a pair of VTL MB450 mono-blocs and Focal Scala Utopia loudspeakers offers plenty of scope for performance. Set up with a Cambre rack, amp stands and a range of high-quality AC and signal cabling drawn from around the shop, you'd be expecting pretty good performance – but you'd be disappointed. In fact the sound was disjointed, lumpy and ill-defined in the bass, murky across the mid-band and hard and glassy in the treble. Dynamic range was limited and sure enough, as soon as the music got dense or complex the soundstage collapsed and the whole performance became congested and confused. Playing music like the recent (excellent)

Roy Gregory praying that THIS TIME it will all go according to plan...



XRCD reissue of the Mehta Planets, the system quickly fell apart, becoming quite unpleasant on the orchestral tuttis, but even the relatively simple Shawn Colvin track 'Sonny Came Home' soon revealed the set-up's shortcomings.

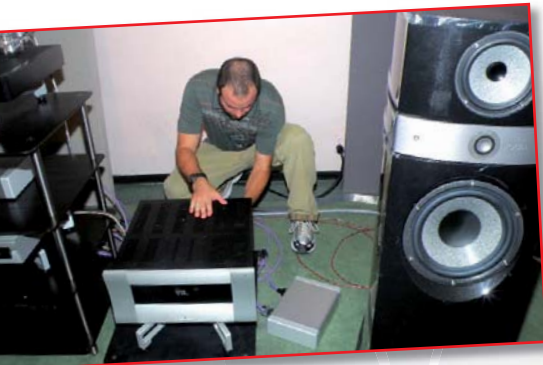
Which was really the point of the exercise: not to show how bad the system sounded, but how critical set up and ancillaries are to the overall performance. It's not that the equipment chosen is poor (it isn't) or that the rack and range of different cables are individually bad – rather that they are not realizing their potential.

Time then to put things right, starting with the AC supply. First step was to remove the expensive but mixed range of power

cords connecting the equipment directly to dedicated wall sockets, replacing them with a matched set of cables fed from a QBASE QB4 star-earthed distribution block. The result was a big improvement in both dynamic range and musical intelligibility. Extend that coherence further to the signal cables, replacing the cables in use with interconnects and speaker cables drawn from the same range as the power cords and you get another, equally big improvement. Next step was to place a Stillpoints Component Stand beneath the CD player, followed finally by the addition of a Quantum Qx4, placed between the CD player and line-stage. Each time we experienced a serious lift in system performance, the Stillpoints support adding transparency, focus and a huge increase in dynamic range, while the Qx4 brought a welcome sense of life and presence to proceedings. Altogether, a very worthwhile set of upgrades that turned the system from an unlistenable mess into a communicative and engagingly musical performer. But the best we kept for last: even

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Mike Mercer, set-up man for a day, does his thing

given the combined cost of the Qx4 and the Stillpoints Component Stand, the final system would have priced out significantly lower than the original set-up. Why? Because all those expensive cables, including top of the range Synergistic and Tara, as well as MIT speaker leads, were replaced with Magus and WyreWizard – that’s right, the most affordable cables in the Nordost range!

So, are we really saying that WyreWizard and Magus are better than Tara Prime? We couldn’t possibly comment... But more seriously, the point being made is that it’s not just what you use but how you use it that counts. Which is where Foundation Theory comes in.

In short, the theory states that unless you provide a stable operating environment for the equipment in your system, you won’t even begin to hear what it’s capable of. That means using a properly organized, star-earthed AC supply system, a set of coherent power and signal leads, drawn from the same range and using the same materials and technology throughout, and a properly engineered support solution that drains internal mechanical energy from inside the equipment as well as isolating it from external interference. Using WyreWizard and even just a single Stillpoints stand makes that point, but clearly it’s not really appropriate in the context of this system, so the next stage was to raise the bar to a more representative level. That meant Vishnu power cords, Tyr interconnects and speaker leads, Stillpoints Component Stands under every unit and no fewer than four Qx4s influencing both the electronics and speakers. Now the system was really singing. The soundstage extended beyond the rear wall of the room and well outside the speakers, with space emerging between and around performers, as well as clearly defined boundaries where appropriate. Instrumental

colours bloomed and dynamics became far more explosive. But arguably more important were the smaller, lower level changes in terms of clarity, micro-dynamic detail and immediacy, which combined to produce a more musically immediate, communicative and intimate presentation. This system wasn’t just singing, it was speaking too – and straight to the point, finally justifying the investment made in all those expensive electronics and speakers. Which is what Foundation Theory is all about; giving those core components the operating conditions they need to actually deliver their performance potential.

But even dealing with the three principal concerns of AC quality, signal transfer and equipment support isn’t without its own complications and rules. When it comes to signal cabling in particular, clear priorities are required. In order to show this we drafted in a VPI Classic turntable, whose JMW tonearm with adjustable VTA and interchangeable arm-tubes allowed us to set up two identical arms and cartridges, the only difference being the internal arm wiring.

Now, I’ve never subscribed to taking expensive, collectable, audiophile pressings to shows or demonstrations, because:

1. Accidents happen, and...
2. I don’t think it’s fair; if you are demonstrating analogue replay, do it with real records that real people play.

With that in mind, I visited my local thrift store and invested 50 pence (that’s around 75 cents) in that well-known audiophile standard, Ian Dury and the Blockheads classic debut, *New Boots And Panties* – there’s nothing quite like broadening cultural horizons... And after hearing a minute or so of the track ‘Sweet Gene Vincent’, most of those doing the listening would have said that this was nothing like culture in any case. But swapping arm-tubes to a second sample wired with Valhalla internal wire instead of the standard type wrought a transformation that was little short of stunning. Gone was the noisy, scratchy, brittle and congested presentation of the first version. In its place, focused, solid images, acres of space and real musical and dynamic impact that brought the performers, their performance and the song to life. Now you could hear the quality of the band, the directness and uncluttered impact of the late 70’s recording and understand why Ian Dury still enjoys a cult following, nearly a decade after his untimely death. This was the biggest difference of the day, and all from 12” of hair-thin wire, running inside the arm-tube.

But to understand just why the difference was as big as it was, you need to look at the overall context. Sure, the Valhalla wiring, which is a cost option on the VPI arms, will set you back more than the standard item, but it really is difficult to exaggerate just how huge this transformation was. I’d love to say that it’s just down to the sheer quality of the Valhalla, but it’s a lot more complex than that.



Heavy Lifting. Yes, that is a 450 Watt mono-bloc and we are in the middle of the demo



"The final upgrade: when we connect these cables to the bolts through his neck..." Nordost President Joe Reynolds takes one for the team!

Firstly: every other piece of wiring in the system (the Vishnu power cords, the Tyr signal and speaker cables) employs Nordost's micro mono-filament technology and identical conductor materials and structures, so those 12" of Valhalla were actually the last step in creating a complete, coherent cable loom. Secondly, those 12" are not just right at the front of the system, they're also dealing with the smallest signal in that system; roughly 1000 times smaller than the signal many CD players produce. So not only is the positioning super-critical, the signal itself is also particularly vulnerable, magnifying the impact of using the Valhalla, the best of the cables on show, at this point in the set-up. Put those things together and the result becomes more understandable – even if it's still just as astonishing. Once again, the lesson is simple; it's not just what you use, it's how you use it that matters, with

Foundation Theory delivering a simple and effective strategy for getting every last ounce of performance out of the equipment you've already bought.

And there's a bonus, too. This approach governs system improvement in every sense. Not only does it improve the system you have, actually letting you really hear it for the first time, it also means that any changes you make, any upgrades you consider will be just as obvious in their effect – meaning no more expensive and frustrating wrong turns on the upgrade path.

Clearly, organizing a demonstration like this is a serious undertaking, whilst completely re-wiring a live system no fewer than three times, by stages and wholesale, as well as physically relocating it in the process, is

certainly an ambitious proposition – and not without unintended consequences, such as a live demonstration of just how robust Focal's latest Beryllium tweeters really are! But on a more serious note, it took three people and a lot of time, effort and equipment to run this demonstration. Was it worth it? Without a shadow of a doubt. It's only when you hear differences like these that you begin to appreciate just how fundamental the effect of "ancillaries" such as cables and supports really is – and you start to realize that the prevailing, review-led approach to hi-fi has also produced an over emphasis on the boxes themselves, often viewed in isolation. A more considered, system-based approach, building (quite literally, physically and electrically) from the ground up delivers huge musical dividends simply by allowing the equipment to do its job unhindered. The better the system, the better the cables and other foundation components, the better the results, which is where Nordost scores.

Take your foot off the soprano's throat and it's amazing the heights she can hit...



After the event: A smiling Billy Kim is just happy that those Beryllium tweeters still work

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