A Whole New Ball Game...
The Stillpoints Support System

by Chris Thomas

It has long seemed to me that the business of system upgrading is a task fraught with peril and hidden dangers, both financial and emotional. We all do it as and when finance and inclination permit but, if we are buying outside a prescriptive path, certain precautions must be observed. Experience suggests that, excluding money, you need three things to stand any chance of getting to where you want to be:

Firstly, you must have an open mind. This means that you need to leave all your preconceptions about what does or doesn’t work or what role specific hardware has, behind you.

Secondly, you must be honest with yourself, brutally so. The decision to purchase and the subsequent responsibility of ownership distorts our objectivity, honesty and colours our ability to admit when we have bought the wrong thing. We invest more than just money when we upgrade. Most of us have bought rubbish in the past and then tried to convince ourselves that it is good and that we really like it. The audio forums are littered with strange people trying to persuade others to make the same mistakes as they have. It’s an unfortunate side of human nature.

Thirdly, as audio equipment is constantly evolving, you need a quality dealer with a progressive outlook and not someone who is content to sell what he has always sold just because it requires so little effort. Find the right man and form a good relationship with him, as a really enlightened dealer can save you a lot of money and heartache, because when you do buy the right product you get a new record/CD collection every time and later, when you are immersed in the music, it will always seem cheap at the price.

Very occasionally RG sends equipment over to me, knowing full well that he is about to tilt my world on its axis. He sneaks these nuggets into my life and waits for me to ring him as one of the newly converted. It’s a game with no rules but because of it I was introduced to, among others, the Lyra Connoisseur line-stage that has been the beating heart of my system for the past few years, as well as a number of other paradigm shifting products. Just recently he arranged for the visit to my home of Paul Wakeen and his associate Chris Hess from Stillpoints over in Wisconsin, USA to install their ESS rack. At the time I didn’t know the impact this was to have, but not long after they’d left, I realised that he had gone and done it to me again.

I needed no convincing that the choice of supports was crucial and too often underestimated, although I soon realised that my own experience as to their true worth had been more limited than I would have liked. What I was certainly not ready for was the scale of the improvements that the Stillpoints were going to bring and which have left me with the feeling that this was the most profound and important change that my home system has undergone since I bit the not inconsiderable bullet and purchased the Connoisseur a few years ago. I am perhaps rather audio-cynical through experience, but over the years I have heard more claims about Hi-Fi equipment than I can remember. Perhaps it is too easy to adopt cynicism as a default position but I have certainly seen the Emperor naked on too many occasions. For many people, supports, cabling and mains treatments are no more than snake oil and we are the industry’s salesmen. But, the source-first theory is still totally relevant, only these days the source begins with the mains and associated cables and continues with the supports, as these are the ...
bedrocks and absolutely critical to the performance of any system. Stillpoints products, and the ESS rack in particular, go to the heart of the music and are successful simply because most systems are operating at only a fraction of their potential, but the impact is so fundamental and far reaching that to ignore its significance could condemn you to a future of tail-chasing. System building is what we are talking about here and Stillpoints are a group of products that underlines how our concept of what that means really should be changing. It is however still something to be approached with your ears, and mind, very wide open.

Stillpoints Technology systems are about resonance control and low mass, as mass means energy storage and that is anathema to them. These are recurring themes when discussing audio designs these days but with the recent improvements to the ESS rack Paul Wakeen has taken these concepts to a completely new level. You may already be familiar with their extremely versatile conical shock absorber design that we on Hi-Fi+ have been big fans of for quite a while now. Inside is a circle of ceramic balls supporting a protruding ball, also ceramic, which contacts directly with the component. The lower internal level is restrained within a slightly flexible petal-like outer case, known as the Calyx, made from Delrin. As the vibration travels down it is transferred through the smaller balls, changing direction at the point of contact, denying resonances a vertical outlet. The weight of the component causes the lower tier to expand the Calyx, the vibration is damped and the resonance is absorbed. These are the quickest and cheapest way to get into Stillpoints systems and three of them sat beneath your CD player will give you a taste of what to expect before you consider moving onto more complex resonance control products. They can be used in a number of situations. As stand-alone individual component absorbers, or attached to threaded risers for levelling. Or you could employ them with other Stillpoints products like the impressive skeletal Component Stand, built around a lockable central hub and usually configured as a three or four-legged equipment support. Together they impressed RG so much that he gave them an award in 2005. Highly versatile, this can be physically coupled with other Component Stands to provide extended support for much larger pieces of equipment or even employed beneath loudspeakers. It represents the next level of isolation and comes equipped with the Delrin Mini Inverse Risers (MIR) as standard feet, but can be upgraded with the addition of the preferable aluminium Hard Coat (HC) MIRs. Slip a three-legged Component Stand under your CD player and you will be in for a shock. You will certainly hear a more vibrant and dynamic view of the music with sharper timing, better resolution across the bandwidth and a broader soundstage with greater depth and much better articulation and expression. Within the base of both these (and also the ESS rack) there is another kind of resonance control system that, though different in external shape and size, functions in the same way as the Stillpoint cone. This also uses a system of smaller balls in a restraining conical housing to absorb resonant energy. These embedded units are threaded and will accept the Delrin and the HC MIRs, or even Stillpoint cones themselves, as feet. The more you use the individual pieces, the more configuration possibilities appear. There is no redundancy with these products and any that you already use can be incorporated into a custom ESS rack installation with no problem, and this enhances the possibilities greatly as the layering of resonance control systems brings undeniable musical benefits.

The ESS itself is available in three heights (26, 32 and 40 inches) and in three widths (20, 26 and 36 inches). RG reviewed a similar system back in issue 46 but since then the whole unit and in particular the shelving options have undergone some radical design improvements. Each rack comprises two Masts (uprights) for the height and a pair of crossbars, each internally tensioned with a threaded rod, to form the width. Both Masts are constructed from a 63mm steel tube that is damped inside and powder coated externally with a clear coat for additional damping. A pair of 19mm milled aluminium horizontal arms, top and bottom, are fitted to these and held in place by stainless steel end caps. They are then equipped with a pair of steel cables, attached by aluminium collars and to which the shelves are subsequently attached. Tensioned to inhibit resonance, each has minimum break strength of 2000 lbs and that means that the ESS will bear just about any load you ask of it, even American behemoth amplifiers. Imagine each cable as a long, thin, leaf spring having inherent frictional damping that is not only an additional...
part of the resonance control system, but also avoids cross-contamination of vibration between shelves. Constrained layer damping is employed throughout the whole rack and achieved by using different materials wherever there is an interface. All parts are also treated in an in-house cryogenic unit presumably to help stabilise their crystalline structure.

There are now four different levels of shelving available and these may be mixed. The first three comprise a pair of support bars that clamp to the cables with ball-ended grub screws (to avoid cable kinking) concealed behind smart polished stainless steel end caps and firmly attached to an acrylic shelf. Set up using a spirit level, each shelf can be precisely spaced as convenient. The first level of performance has half-inch aluminium bars supporting a half-inch thick acrylic shelf and these are available in only 20 and 26-inch widths.

Bar/shelf decoupling is by hard plastic dimples. The second level increases the aluminium bar size to three-quarter inch and this means that Stillpoint devices can be directly embedded in three places along each bar to support the three-quarter inch acrylic shelf. This is available in the same widths. At the third level the bars are now three-quarter inch solid stainless steel, again with three resonance control devices in each, while the acrylic remains at three-quarters of an inch. The rack I use is the 40-inch tall version equipped with five of these third level shelves. There is also an optional one-inch acrylic shelf available to match the steel bars for particularly heavy components. The top echelon of performance dispenses with the acrylic shelf altogether and has a four-legged Component Stand mounted directly into four of the resonance control devices in the stainless steel bars, making eight in all, in two layers for this one level alone. Here the equipment is sat straight onto the Component Stand and if you really wanted to go over the top (as I did) you could fit four Stillpoint cones atop the stand as well, making 12 resonance control devices for this single component.

As I mentioned earlier, the Stillpoints components go to the heart of the music and strip away what I can only assume is the rubbish that is a result of resonance and microphony, leaving it in a far more pristine state, yet without eroding the signal, without the tonal balance ever becoming too lean or bleached. So, musical articulation is enormously enhanced as pure resolution is taken to completely new levels and the repercussions of this alone are absolutely enormous, especially where tempo and timing issues are concerned. There is more “air” in the sound and certainly much greater separation and space between instruments too, but the tranquillity...
of that space between them is also blacker as the system’s noise floor seems greatly reduced. Not only is it much easier to hear the shape and character of each and every instrument in isolation, but also the duration of the intervals between the notes are incredibly vivid. A high potential system becomes hypersensitive to the smallest dynamic shifts and this brings new understanding to playing techniques like phrasing which lay at the heart of every musician’s expression. And as you also get a fascinatingly clear look at the tonal characteristics and colours of their instrument, meaning that your listening experiences are much more intense and involving. When you hear the striking increase in speed, musical dynamism and the resultant rhythmic power that seems to flow like a river through the system, it is initially very hard to credit that this has been bought about by a change of supports.

The word energy and the way the system packages it so efficiently become more and more evident as you are acclimatising yourself to the radical changes the ESS brings. I was sent a level one shelf so I could hear and understand for myself what improvements each upgrade delivered and the difference between this and the level three design, with its stainless steel bars and six embedded resonance control devices, is simply huge. But the level one shelf is still comfortably good enough to see off the competition I have heard. It certainly left me very impressed, and don’t forget that it is a lot cheaper too. Upgrade to the level three shelf and the unmistakable increase in momentum, musical transparency and resolution of microdynamics might easily be enough in themselves, but there are also equal improvements in bandwidth, instrumental weight and a sure-footed rendition of pitch that make the case for the extra outlay so compelling. I think I may be especially sensitive to it, but the whole question of pitch and audio systems has interested me for years and piano remains the most glaring culprit I think. The beating influence of the harmonic halo against the fundamental during sustain has so often left me with the uncomfortable impression that the instrument is wandering in and out of tune. Also, when the playing becomes fast and florid, notes can often seem as if they are tripping over each other and if there is any sign of compression at the leading edge, even a magnificent 12 foot Steinway Grand can take on slight honky-tonk characteristics. But the rock solid foundation provided by the ESS rack brings focus, clarity and a sense of order to the associated jumble so that even rapid semi-tone shifts are easy to understand. The higher quality shelves add to this a greater sense of scale and an unwavering stability. This is applicable across the whole bandwidth too as the tonal balance that the Stillpoints bring is exceptional, with no emphasis or hollowness anywhere that I could detect. At this level the ESS allows great electronics complete command of the music, from the heaviest orchestral salvo right down to note level where the attack, colour, sustain and decay is just so informative and understandable. High frequencies are explicit and extremely concise without ever becoming over analytical, too cool or detached. Cymbals have tremendously fast, realistic attack and ring with superb freedom and clarity throughout their envelope and they never saturate or become blurred. Bass too is better controlled and shaped than I have ever heard at home before with dynamic independence and a depth of grip that seems to extend forever downwards with no loosening or softening of texture or blurring of pitch. If you are interested in highly complex music of any genre then the ESS will delight you with its abilities to unravel the densest of playing and arrangements while maintaining an unswerving atmosphere of musical intensity.

I also found myself in the fortunate position of having a four-legged Component Stand (complete with cones) that I fitted straight onto the stainless steel bars after removing the acrylic top shelf. On this I sat either the Naim CD 555 head unit or the Teac Esoteric X-01 D2 CD player. I experimented with the exact positioning of each Stillpoint cone beneath the supported equipment by individually sliding them along the leg rail and discovered that where these are sited is vitally important to the results you will hear. Around this time I had also slotted three inverted Stillpoints and Risers between the Micro Be speakers and their stands and as Paul Wakeen had promised me, the results moved to yet another level. Like inserting the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle, with these in place the sound became completely detached from the speakers and I heard a fully energised and animated soundstage unlike any I have ever achieved at home. With yet another incremental leap in speed, instrumental clarity and sheer power, the musical picture was totally transparent with an almost surreal sense of separation, depth and vocal and instrumental independence. There was something so organic, natural
and yes, real, about the music now that I was glued to the system for hours on end, delighting by rediscovering musical pieces that I thought I knew so well, wondering how I’d previously missed pearls of musicianship or simply marveling at the way that events were just happening in front of me in such an unreconstructed way. I haven’t heard many systems with such broad capabilities and able to do so many different things at the same time, yet with such a core of stability at its heart. Incorporating Stillpoints throughout the system is a very smart and cost-effective thing to do as the cost of introducing resonance control at the speakers is comparatively small and the results in a system already equipped with an ESS rack are exponential.

The acid test for any component is how its presence draws you into the music and I am still having many intense listening sessions with the fully Stillpointed system. Whenever I get hold of a new piece of equipment that really impresses me it inspires me to look ever more deeply into the music. The longer I experienced the ESS rack, the more I realized that the way it operates and all the very clever thinking behind it had bought me to the point where I could really understand the music, how it was being played and the way in which it had been put together and produced, in a more enlightened way. I tried the rack with many different components spanning a large price range and found that it benefits them all equally. It remains hugely enjoyable, emotional and endlessly interesting, which for me is really what hi-fi should be all about, but so seldom is.

I have always been fascinated with tremolo and vibrato techniques and they have been a constant source of both interest and irritation to me for years. I admire the expression offered by variability of speed and depth both instrumentally and vocally but cannot begin to understand that kind of switch on and off one-speed, rapid, tremulous quivering loved by so many highly rated classical violin players (and Michael Jackson). But, good or bad, I have never heard the technique better illustrated than with an ESS supported system, simply because the life and sustain of each note is so beautifully preserved. It has also led me to think more deeply about the relationship between chord progressions and melody and enabled me to separate and examine harmony more intimately. It taught me details about tunes I had been trying to understand for years, got me listening to vocal intonation, phrasing and breathing and ultimately left me feeling a greater attachment to the music I listen to. These are personal things to me that may or may not be important to you, but then the enjoyment of music is a personal thing isn’t it? There may be a better support system out there somewhere, but I certainly haven’t heard it. The ESS takes the equipment that it supports to places it hasn’t been before and I now think of all the Stillpoints products as truly effective musical system tools that, together, should really be considered as an audio component rather than as add-on accessories. That is how I have written about them and I now can’t imagine not having them as an integral part of my home listening. As for the ESS rack, its limitations lie within the electronics that sit on it and its function is one of liberation rather than invention. It is certainly not cheap, particularly in its higher spec levels, but when you consider its cost as a percentage of what a top audio system will set you back and compare that with its level of impact, it makes an extremely persuasive case as to its true value. If I had spent the same amount on a new pre-amplifier or CD player and got these improvements I would be absolutely delighted. It opens up new and exciting system building options and those in the market for a serious system upgrade should perhaps consider Stillpoints before they look at some new electronic box, because what the ESS rack and in fact all of the Stillpoints products are really about are the musicians that make it all happen – and I have never heard them given such an eloquent voice.

With so many variations available it would be foolish to try and list them all. As for the ESS rack, you can customise one for your particular installation by choosing from three heights and three widths (see text for sizes) and select from three shelf options plus the ability to utilise the Component Stand.

Manufacturer:
Stillpoints Inc.
Net. www.stillpoints.us

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

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