

Upgrading Your Hi Fi System (Part 1)

by
Steve Dickinson

Assuming that, like most real people, you have a fixed amount of money to spend, to improve your hifi system, the big question is always going to be: what should you spend it on?

Some people will tell you about the 'front end first' principle, about how if your CD player or turntable doesn't retrieve as much information off the disc as possible, then no amount of improvement elsewhere in the system can make up for that.

Other people will tell you that the loudspeakers, and the way they interact with the room, is the most critical aspect of a system, so getting the best speakers you can afford is the way to go.

A third group will say that the amplifier and loudspeaker must be considered as a system, so the important thing is to ensure that you have an amplifier which is best-suited to driving the particular loudspeakers you use, so if your amp is less than ideal, from the speakers' point of view, then the only sensible option is to change to a more suitable amp, and see where that takes you.

The problem is that these points of view all have some validity in their own terms, but every person's situation, and system, is different. Also, and this is an often-overlooked bit, it's not always easy to tell which is the weakest link, nor indeed whether that link is performing as well as it possibly can.

So, how would it be if I suggested a way to improve all your components at the same time, and which would give you the confidence that your existing equipment is working as well as it can? And that, in some cases, the sort of improvements you can expect are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve by changing the equipment alone. What's more, it would be an upgrade to your system that would continue to give you the same benefits, even if you later decide to upgrade your CD, turntable, amp or speakers.

You'd be daft, not to at least think about it, wouldn't you?

The thing is, a hifi system is exactly that: a system. And the system extends way beyond mere source, amplifier and loudspeakers. What the equipment rests on, how it is supplied with power and how the equipment is connected together all seem to have a fundamentally important influence on how well the system ultimately performs. What some people have found, including the guys at The AudioWorks, is that paying attention to all these elements will reap dividends. So, careful attention to the components themselves is a given, any dealer worth the time of day will do that (though it's still worth seeking out one whose priorities and interests match your own, if you can). But the tricky, and sometimes contentious, part, is the role which the mains, the connecting cables and the support platform has to play in the overall performance of the system.

So what I'd like to do is tell you of my personal experiences with upgrades to the mains, the interconnects and loudspeaker cables, and the support platform I use, and leave you to decide whether this is something you want to explore, or ignore. I hope you'll decide to look into it, because it turns out

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to be at least as much fun as upgrading the boxes (though sometimes harder to explain to your other half, I admit) and, if your experience matches mine, it can bring the sort of musically important benefits which no amount of money spent on the component boxes will achieve.

Part of the fun, for me, has been in trying to understand why on Earth this stuff makes such a difference. I don't have any definitive answers, but here's my take on it, for what it's worth.

The whole point of a hifi system is to reproduce the energy that the performers put in when they made the original recording. As far as I know Mogadon was not often the recreational drug of choice for musicians, but some systems can give that distinct impression. When systems sound dull or boring, people often blame the music, or the recording, or sometimes think that perhaps it is the frequency response or the volume levels which are deficient. In my experience, it's more likely to be that the system just doesn't convey the energy in the performance properly. If you can't hear that a pianist is putting his (or her) whole upper body behind their playing, or a violinist is attacking the strings with energy from their elbow and shoulders, not just their wrist, then you're not getting the full sense of musicianship, the way the performers apply themselves to their art. Sometimes, it's not simply about power - you can tell that a player is holding back, that in a quiet passage there's a kind of pent-up energy, a tension, which is not being released. Some systems gloss over this aspect of a performance, but the performer did it for a reason, almost certainly a musically important one, and you should expect to share in that experience.

So it's mostly about energy management. Getting the musical energy off the recording and into the room, and making sure that it doesn't create havoc once it's out there. Some equipment is better than others at conveying that sense of energy, and your dealer may have chosen his stock with this in mind (though he may have different priorities, which is why I say you should find a dealer who matches your own interests, if you can). So assuming your equipment is capable of this, then proper attention to mains, and other cabling, can ensure that as much energy as possible is recreated by your hifi, so you can be pretty sure that you're getting all the performance from the equipment that you've paid for.

The problem then is that if your system can put lots of energy into the room, this can feed back into the system and be re-radiated, at a much lower level but also delayed in time. This can make the system sound muddy, or smeared, or congested, or just plain fatiguing to listen to at realistic volume levels. This is where making sure your equipment is stood on decent supports comes in, because energy management works at both ends of your system.

I went down this route a few years ago. Until then, I could well have been an inveterate box-shifter, changing this and swapping that, never quite getting what I wanted. Nowadays, I find the fact that a cable, or a support, can make so much difference is such an astonishingly unexpected discovery that, in an odd way, it's just as exciting as getting to know a new component. Once you get over the 'my friends will think I've really lost the

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plot, now' factor, you can focus on the actual musical benefits. When you get this right, these can far outweigh what the same money spent on a better box would have achieved. There is a fascinating and intriguing world of possibilities to explore.

In my next piece I'll look at what I found when I discovered what a difference mains and cables could make. Then I'll look at what supports and platforms can do. Doing mains and cables first helps to get a handle on why we're doing what we're doing and makes the benefits of each step clearer. This is the logical way round: first get more energy out of your system, then manage how your system responds to that extra energy. There are some little puzzles along the way, like why a change can still be an improvement even when it makes your system sound worse; and there's no real reason why you couldn't do supports first, then tackle the mains and cabling. So whichever way you approach it I hope you find, as I did, that the experience makes you look at what your hifi system actually consists of, and the relative importance of each element within it, a little differently from now on.