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Having tasted some of the Audioworks/Musicworks magic on a few occasions, it was suggested that I take the journey from the start and follow the path towards this dreamland destination where Larry and his cronies believe true music lives. As I am currently furloughed and eager to find out more, I offered to write about these experiences. Et me voila!

When I met Larry at the wine shop years ago, I didn't imagine for a second I'd become Alice, swooping into a rabbit hole connecting the world of music and that of pure engineering geekery. It's a different kind of Wonderland, but wonders abound as I found out.

So here I am, booked in for an afternoon of musical experimentation. I'd consider myself a newbie at this HiFi thing and it took some calibration from a listening point of view but suffice to say, this experience is fast changing the way I approach and feel music. You see, I'm discovering how we are highly conditioned to experience things a certain way. If I allow myself a somewhat crude generalisation, I'd say most people's idea of a good sound is roughly similar to most people's idea of a good wine. It's flavoursome and wholesome, it's got fruit and it's got bass... and it can be played loud without spitting (too much) perceptible distortion. I've always been opened to the idea that there was more to music than just punchy bass and "a good sound" but until you taste it and understand it, true musical rendering can seem elusive.

Point of note: throughout this whole exercise, I was left to make up my own mind as to what my experience was, at no point was I told what I should hear or feel. I was only guided so as to ask myself the right questions which come down to how the music makes me feel, before and after the change. Do I feel like we are closer to the music/the musicians or further away? I always focused on the instruments before "Yeah nice tune, good guitar solo, really energetic track, good melody etc..." and sometimes I like a track because the core of the tune is ticking my boxes, plucking at my strings, no matter how good the musical rendition is. Just like everyone else after all. When listening at home however, never do I stop and think "How close do I feel to the music? How strong is that performance?". It may sound obvious to look for these feelings, to assess and appreciate the music in this way, but it's not quite the way I go about it. And, as I'm about to find out, that might be a key to getting much more from the music.

What we wanted to test first was what Larry believes is the most essential part of any system setup: the power distribution. Over the years, MusicWorks have developed a range of ancillary equipment that (supposedly) corrects certain issues with the electricity supply to the system. The ReFlex Lite is their entry level power distribution block retailing around £550. Then we tested two MusicWorks power cables against a standard one: the ReEntry 2 at £190 and the ReVive at £750.

Here's the rig used for the test, which is pretty much what I have at home:

Rega Brio Amp, Rega Apollo CD player and a pair of Focal Chora 806 - value of the system approx £1,800 all in.*



Honestly, it's a really good system and I think you get a lot of music for the money... it's punchy and dynamic and handles all frequencies really well and the volume doesn't need to be too high for the Chora speakers to deliver the goods. In other words, music doesn't have to be loud before you start feeling

something. Once it's warmed up it's really quite neat. After all, I bought it for myself. So at this point I was very curious to see what the power equipment was going to do.

Enters the ReFlex power block.

For anyone not quite sure what we're talking about here, this block thing goes between your main plug socket on the wall and your equipment. It looks like a fancy multi socket extension lead. Of course, it's much more than that.



After an inconclusive run of Metallica's latest release, the S&M 2, we changed to Matthew Halsall's Oneness. In hindsight, a live recording of a symphony orchestra mixed with amplified heavy metal isn't the best place to start in order to understand the changes that are unfolding. "Oneness" is one of my favourite modern Jazz albums in recent years and altogether far more serene a recording. Things started to make sense. On the standard setup (no block) I had the sound I have at home: a very nice piece of music that I really enjoy. The first track "Life" starts with floaty lines of Rachel Gladwin's harp leading on to a few quiet notes on the piano before Matthew's trumpet kicks in gently. Really quite delicate and atmospheric.

Once we plugged in the block, it became apparent that Rachel wasn't plucking the simple-ish chords we thought she was initially. More strings were being played than we had noticed previously. If you go back and remove the block and listen again and really pay attention then you will hear these because the brain now knows what to look for but the ReFlex is making it easier for the system to give you this information and the richness of the music is ultimately more present. Matthew's trumpet was more tuneful and the whole thing was simply more coherent. It brought life to the music. Now let's not get carried away, it's not a change anyone would notice if music was being played in the background while doing something else. But for those of us who really enjoy just sitting down and listening, it's quite meaningful. It gets us that much closer to what the artist(s) intended.

Ok...how much more improvement can we get? It appears once you open this box, there's no end to all the things that can make a difference.

We changed track but we stayed with Matthew. We got familiar with "Stan's Harp" for a bit and then we introduced the ReEntry 2 power cable into the block. This cable is screened so that less electrical noise gets in the way. How much difference can a short piece of cable make? A subtle yet substantial one as it happened. Each instrument had more expression, more space. Before, when the trumpet and the harp were playing together, it could feel like they were getting in each-other's way, which is not conducive to delivering the message the artists intended.



We went "back to Georgia" with Nanci Griffith for a change of scenery (and to get some vocals) and repeated the exercise. The extra space translates just as much to vocals and with a duet, this improvement

is significant. Nanci and Adam singing in harmony instead of over each other is much desirable. We then tried a couple of movements from Nicola Benedetti's interpretation of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concertos. Now that was quite a shock. I am opened to classical music but I have next to no education in it and rarely reach out for it. I had never heard of Nicola before, it was totally new music to me. The change was really quite profound, I wasn't even sure we were listening to the same track. The music was so much more memorable, meaningful and emotional. Before I was like "yep, sounds like good classical music that." Then it was more "wow...ok, I'm interested and I want more please"

Before this exercise, when listening to music I didn't think was delivering what it could, I would have blamed the recording, the mixing or mastering engineers... or the musicians themselves even. Now? It changes everything. How much of every piece of music we listen to is hidden from us when using below par equipment (especially basic streaming and cheap headphones) or a badly setup system? How many songs have I discarded because I couldn't really get to what the singer wanted me to feel, because I was missing part of the music?

We then swapped the ReEntry for the rather unreasonable (in the context of this system) ReVive IEC power cable. Admittedly, at £750 this is a significant portion of the overall cost. Could it be worth it though?



Too right it is! Nicola's violin had so much more to say, especially on the fast parts. The virtuosity was more palpable, sharper, and the emotion expressed, and felt, was that much stronger. Another layer of muck has been removed, the system isn't working as hard to give us what's on the CD. We played Youss N'Dour's "Without a smile (Same)" and again, the singing and the arrangements showed more depth, more subtleties with the ReVive. The music was more alive.

It was very surprising. Having heard other enthusiasts raving about it and the fact MusicWorks have been developing this equipment for years, I knew they were valid and worthwhile pieces of kit but we weren't sure how much impact they'd have on a moderate HiFi system. We were very pleased with the result and I was really impressed...and a bit worried about what it means for my system at home... and my wallet.

If I had to summarise the whole thing, I'd say these items will not change the way a system "sounds". Again, if you just play music in the background, these differences will likely pass you by. But if you're in the game of wanting to feel the music, then it's a game changer. I have now started to inherently understand the difference between sound and music (more to come on these pages). Yes, having powerful bass when you play Reggae is cool and you're going to feel it. But music, and musicians offer feelings beyond just deep vibrations. This is what these things do, they unleash the music so you can be moved, even where you didn't think you could.

And that's not quite it yet. I had a bit of time left and I was thoroughly enjoying myself of course so we decided to run one last experiment. What would happen if instead of upgrading to a ReVive cable, we'd upgrade the CD player? A more expected route in most situations I imagine. From Apollo we go to Saturn, a £1,600 CD player, again from Rega.

So to be clear we're testing:

A -ReVive/ReFlex/Brio/Apollo/Focal Chora 806 (£3,100 all in)

versus

B - ReEntry 2/ReFlex/Brio/Saturn/Focal Chora 806 (£3,600 all in)

B showcases a much pricier CD player (more than double the price tag of the Apollo) but an affordable power cable for the ReFlex block.

Well there's no two ways about it, I go for the ReVive + "cheap" CD player over the more expensive CD player and save me £500 for better music. It's the most obvious comparison of the afternoon and it's quite revealing about the whole thing really. In a way, a better, more transparent CD player will highlight the shortcomings even more, I'm guessing because it's more sensitive to all the other environmental issues such as noisy power input. The music was duller, more muted when compared to the previous setup. So it bears the question: Should you consider any system without sorting out the power supply and distribution first?

Following our afternoon, I asked Larry if I could borrow the kit (you're actually encouraged to borrow and test any equipment for yourself in the comfort of your home, especially while we're in lockdown). I wanted more time to switch back and forth on my less-than-perfectly-setup home system, with other types of music. Here are some further notes:

The ReFlex + ReVive combination seem to make the silences more silent. I guess it removes a lot of background noise between the notes you didn't know was there but when it's removed you notice how much clarity there is. A bit like the blacks on a really good TV, they're more black allowing for a better image, especially when the scene is dark. It opens up the space for the instruments to fully express themselves. Resulting in music that is more detailed, richer, more generous, more meaningful. It feels like the system isn't fighting itself to do what it needs to do. The music appears more effortlessly.

It's not going to be easy to let this kit go but I now know what the next upgrade is for my system. If you love your music, this is pretty much essential.

And yet, it's only the start. There is more work to do. Where do we go from here? That'll be the next story.

Nic.... out!

*My speakers are an older version of Rega's bookshelf speakers which are not available anymore so we opted for a similar if slightly better pair from Focal.