

As I walked through my front door, the smell of burning hit me. Has anyone torched some food in the oven?, I asked one of my sons. A few days later all became crystal clear when I sat down to play a Count Basie album on my hifi. One channel was notably silent, a victim of overzealous death metal and a melted voice coil on one of my ATC SCM 11s. After an angry conversation with my son, I set about finding a solution and unbeknown to me, there was an ATC dealer just down the road in Cheadle. Result!

I rang The Audioworks and they suggested bringing in both speakers for testing along with the power amps to make sure they were undamaged. With the rest of my gear having a clean bill of health, they ordered me a new driver from ATC. No charge for testing or fitting, just the cost of the driver. While I was there, I inquired after the next model up (SCM 19). "Would you like to try them?" was the response and I duly returned home with the demo pair on loan. This approach based on evaluating upgrades with the ear was to persist in all of my dealings with Larry, Ed and Steve at Audioworks along with flexibility to try things out in my own environment. I bought the SCM 19s and these speakers would prove to be the purchase that forced me to change my approach.

Up until then, I had spent a not insignificant amount of money on my HiFi but I was still not happy with it. My upgrade path was quite impulsive, influenced by reviews and trends plus a lack of basic understanding of what is important for a great musical experience. I had previously abandoned vinyl and then CD in favour of streaming. The source of my streaming set up was made from popular components and my belief that in the digital domain, the zeros and ones are all the same. What my system needed was a better DAC, I thought, so proceeded with my next (and last) impulsive upgrade. I bought a very well reviewed product for a four-figure price tag online without listening to it first. Oh dear! Upon first listen, I could hear previously uncovered detail but after a while, I found the sound to be cold and fatiguing to the point where I would only listen to a small portion of my music. What was wrong? Was it my room acoustics that needed sorting (I have an odd shaped living room)? Did I need to change the amplification to better tonally match my shiny new DAC?

Enough was enough. I dropped in at The Audioworks to talk about my problems and Larry suggested coming round to my house for a listen. After listening to a few tracks, Larry suggested that the digital streaming source (a popular multi-room device) may be the cause of the issue as the sound lacked dynamic range. This was verified by the connection of a modest CD player to the system, which gave a more musically satisfying sound. I wasn't expecting this outcome but put my trust in Larry and we went about exploring a solution. After a lengthy comparison between a selection of integrated streamers and lots of nice coffee at the shop, my preferred choice of a Lumin streamer came home with me on loan to see how it sounded in my system. That evening, my partner and I stayed up very late listening to all kinds of music. It was a night and day improvement with more dynamic punch and most of all, I was enjoying the music again. My impulsive DAC purchase and multi-room streamer were promptly listed on eBay and written off as expensive mistakes. The ATC speakers had ruthlessly exposed the limitation of the source and capitalised on the improvement of its replacement.

So, what was going on here? I have observed that the team at Audioworks pay particular attention to the preservation of energy and the temporal aspects of music that makes it coherent. This is coupled with the elimination of unwanted energy being introduced through noise and vibration. Furthermore, all products and accessories have to prove their place in the line up by demonstrating that they improve the musical performance through listening. This takes away the "roulette" of ordering products from the Internet blind or on the basis of great reviews. Additionally, Larry facilitates and assists your decision making process by suggesting options to try. You can then make the decision based on what your ears can hear rather than what someone else tells you.

This has helped my digital audio journey progress much further now. Having understood that good digital performance relies not only on the preservation of the zeros and ones, but also on their timing and the added amount of electrical noise, I have been able to make clearly audible upgrades. These include the introduction of an improved power supply through the star-earthed MusicWorks mains block, an external linear power supply for the streamer and optical isolation from the ethernet switch.

Feeling that my amplification had become the weak link in the chain, I discussed this with Larry and borrowed an Accuphase amplifier to try at home. After a few days of listening, the performance improvement was clear so I took the plunge and purchased one with the knowledge that the rest of my system would have room to grow without needing to revisit the amp for a long while.

Each upgrade has improved the dynamic range, the soundstage, the natural tone of instruments and improved my appreciation of the music. Each step has also wrung more performance from my SCM 19 speakers. I then made an interesting discovery.

I noticed that my locally streamed files (ripped from CD in FLAC) sounded clearly better than the same tracks streamed from Qobuz. This was irrespective of the resolution of the Qobuz stream. I recall Larry commenting that despite all the advances in streaming they still get the best results from CD and vinyl. I was a bit skeptical of this at first but perhaps that is the outcome that I was heading towards. One of the things that Larry had also found whilst auditioning a streamer was that WAV files sounded better than FLAC of the same track. I tried it and he was right; I re-ripped my CD collection into WAV (which took ages) and found myself buying discs once again.

One of the things I have come to realise is not to pre-empt the outcome of what is best to do next. I called in at the shop to discuss a potential speaker upgrade with Larry. I wanted to get more bass extension and started talking about floorstanding options. Larry seemed less concerned about my speakers than I was and suggested we might get a better result by looking at further improvements to the source. We discussed trying out the DAC card for the Accuphase amplifier but instead agreed on trying an Accuphase CD player. The thinking was that the in-built DAC would benefit the streamer as well as providing me with CD playback; I was quite excited about going back to physical media, I was already buying and ripping CDs so why not just play them?

After installing it into my system, it took about 10 seconds of music playback to realise that this was a significant step up. The Accuphase DAC indeed elevated the streamer's performance to another level and the CD playback was even better. Instruments had a natural warmth, with more texture. Vocals sounded more natural and better placed in the soundstage. Most of all, I could appreciate the musical performance more; I played CDs that had done nothing for me before and now enjoyed them. This was like the missing piece of the puzzle in my system with a clear synergy between the CD player and my Accuphase amplifier. And the bass? Well, the Accuphase CD player digs down deeper, with bass instruments fleshed out more fully (as they naturally are). So, my SCM 19s are still there and have stepped up their performance in response to the quality of the upstream electronics, improvements to the mains power and the reduction of electrical noise.

I suspect that Larry knew this would be the likely outcome but helped me discover it for myself. The CD player never went back and I was doubly happy having spent less money than I was prepared to invest in a speaker upgrade.

Each Thursday, Larry hosts a music night for Audioworks customers in the shop. This is a great opportunity to get together with others to share a passion for music, gear, wine, craft beer and food. I've discovered a lot of new music at these evenings along with great tips to get the best performance from my system. It was at one of these evenings where I discovered the replacement solution to my

glass shelved equipment support. One evening, we had a side by side comparison of equipment supports; a simple test of playing a track, moving the CD player to a different table, playing it again then going back to the original. MusicWorks had been experimenting with different materials for isolating equipment and after many years, had arrived at AcouPlex, a unique composite of PEEK and acrylic. From what I have heard with my own ears on many occasions, this material possesses an obvious ability to absorb unwanted vibrations, which in term lowers the noise floor of the system. The effect on the music is profound in terms of its coherence, rhythm and dynamic range. It just sounds right. Recently, they have been able to manufacture an entire table from this material. Once I had heard this improvement, I couldn't un-hear it. With the snappily named MusicWorks ReVue Ultra Gen 2 AcouPlex support installed in my system, it pulled off the same party trick in my own living room.

My system and music wouldn't be where it is now without the help of Larry, Ed and Steve at Audioworks. I've spent quite a bit on my system now but each step of the way has yielded a worthwhile return on investment in terms of musical satisfaction. That to me is great value for money. The Audioworks approach is different to many dealers I have previously experienced. Their never-ending pursuit of musical nirvana transcends the sale of black boxes and explores less "conventional" methods of preserving musical energy and suppressing unwanted artefacts to great effect. Every innovation must contribute an audible improvement to musical enjoyment to be offered as a potential solution.

I've had a lot of fun too; Through Larry's approach to engaging with his customers, I've learned a lot, met new people and discovered more music. The HiFi world seems to be heading more and more to the direct sales model influenced by technical specs, YouTube reviews and fiery debates on the forums. I'd highly recommend the Audioworks experience as a tonic to this. For me, it's provided a supportive environment where I can benefit from their experience, choice of proven equipment options and ultimately let my ears make the decisions.