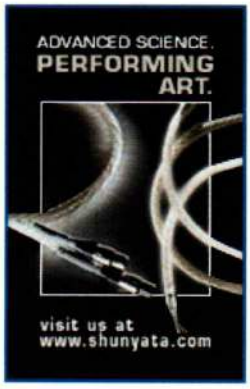
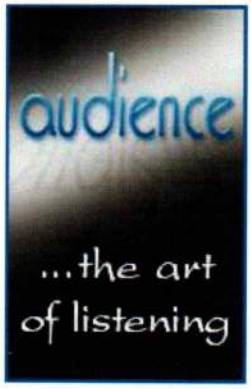
SoundStage!
onhifi.com
with Wes Phillips

ADVERTISER LINKS





May 15, 2004

Solid-Tech Rack of Silence Equipment Rack

If you want to provoke gales of derisive laughter from "normal" people, there's no end to the audiophile topics you could broach in public.

You could say, "LPs sound better than CDs."

Or "Amplifiers -- even well-designed amplifiers -- do not all sound alike."

Of course, "Audio cables can affect the sound of a system" always works like a charm, too.

But for sheer gob-smacked incomprehension, few statements can top, "The shelf that supports an audio system can change the way it sounds."

But, it can.

Oh, stop laughing at me!

Anyone can determine this for himself (or herself) by listening to a CD player on a shelf -- any shelf -- and then placing the CD player on top of three tennis balls and listening to the same track without changing the volume level or anything in the signal chain. It takes, maybe, three minutes, tops -- and it costs less than three bucks.

So why do people find the whole idea so funny?

Hot Product Archives

- 5/2004 - Penaudio Charisma Loudspeakers and Chara Subwoofers
- 4/2004 - Audience Au24 Interconnects and Speaker Cables, and powerChord Power Cord
- 4/2004 - Sennheiser HD 650 Headphones
- More

Partially, I suspect, because it *sounds* so unlikely. Until you actually try it for yourself, that is. But I also suspect that "normal" people roll their eyes at news like this because we audiophiles tend to exaggerate the effect on the sound that equipment support can play.

It's easily audible; I don't dispute that. Mating your gear to a platform that isolates it from room-borne vibrations can open up the sound, creating additional spaciousness and freedom from grunge. But so does changing components. Or cables.

Buying a better CD player -- *that's* something non-audiophiles can understand. Buying a

Introducing something unsual in high-end speakers:

Sennheiser PX200's sealed headphones $49.95

better cable -- well, that's something *other* audiophiles can understand. Buying a better equipment rack? That just seems a little nuts, doesn't it?

That's why I was less than enthusiastic when Audiophile Systems' Anthony Chiarella called me to chat up Solid-Tech's Rack of Silence. I *know* that a good rack can take a good system well into *superb* territory, but how do you evaluate its true worth? How does one describe the effects? And how do you establish what a rack is *worth* when its degree of effectiveness will probably change every time you switch components (a not infrequent occurrence in my line of work)?

"How about this," Anthony suggested. "Why not just *try* it and describe what it does? I guarantee you've never seen -- or heard -- a rack like this one."

My gracious silence, hail!

Indeed, I hadn't. I doubt there's ever been a rack like the Rack of Silence.

It consists of four extruded-aluminum pillars separated by X-shaped "shelves," assembled from beechwood crossbeams. The shelves attach to the extruded pillars with aluminum collars by way of two attachment schemes. For fixed shelves, the collars can be tightened directly onto the pillars with set screws; suspended shelves use a pair of the collars on each pillar -- one attaches to the pillar with set screws, the other is suspended from the attached collar with small springs.

The pillars sit on top of wooden caps, which, in turn, rest upon stainless-steel balls (which serve the same purpose as spikes, only without poking holes in your floor). The pillars are hollow, and can be filled with sand, shot, or a combination of the two.

But that's not all. The Rack of Silence offers several different methods of supporting your audio equipment on those X-shaped crossbars. The simplest is a set of steel ball-bearings, which fit into grooves carved into the beechwood. Simply position three (or four) of them under the component you wish to support, stabilize the bearing with a dab of Blutack, and rest the component on the bearing.

Solid-Tech also offers an extremely clever device called the Feet of Silence ($300-USD/3 or $400/4). The Feet of Silence feature a cast housing that surrounds a piston-like inner platform that, in turn, supports a steel bearing. The inner piston is suspended from the housing by six small O-rings so that it floats freely within it.

The Feet of Silence need to sit upon wooden discs, which nestle over the cross braces ($50/4).

Solid-Tech also offers a second support, the Discs of Silence ($190/3 or $250/4), which also need to rest upon those wooden discs. The Discs of Silence are aluminum rings. Inside the ring, three small springs support a cork-topped disc, which, in turn, supports the audio component of your choice.

A basic Rack of Silence consists of two fixed shelves (necessary for structural stability) and two suspended shelves. The basic system retails for $1730 in kit form, or $1899 fully assembled.

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time

I was initially baffled by the Rack of Silence. I had all the parts; I had the vestigial instructions. I just couldn't figure out how to get the ball-bearings to stay still in the crossbeams' grooves. Even when I could get the ball-bearings to sit still, when I placed the Linn Klimax Twin on them, they'd steadily roll out from under one corner (or several) of the

amp.

Finally, I went to CES 2004 in Las Vegas, where the Rack's designer Bjorn Ohlson was demonstrating it. I enjoyed his demo immensely, but I wanted to see how he solved the ball-bearing problem. I stuck my head under his display rack and saw that he'd used Blutack to keep the bearings from wandering about. D'oh!

Other than that, assembling the ROS was a piece of cake. I used the Feet of Silence beneath my Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista CD player, and the Discs of Silence beneath the Nu-Vista and Blue Circle BC3 Galatea Mk III preamplifiers. Under the Klimax Twin, darTZeel NHB-108, and McCormack DNA-500, I just used the ball-bearing/Blutack interface.

That roar that lies on the other side of silence

There are two questions that apply to a product like the Rack of Silence: *Does it work* and *is it worth the money*?

It definitely works. Compared to the rack I've been using for the last five years -- OSAR's Selway/Magruder rack -- the Rack of Silence was . . . well, *different*.

I started by just transferring the CD player. Instrumental lines stood out more distinctly from one another -- even when it was the same instrument, played by a single individual, such as on Glenn Gould's *Goldberg Variations* [S3K 87703 CD]. The individual lines of the fugue were even more distinct from one another with the Nu-Vista on the ROS. They seemed to leap out of the silence with greater clarity. And Gould's grunts and moans (singing a third line, one Bach only imagined, perhaps?) were easier to hear, as well -- but also easier to ignore, since they did not have the same weight as the instrumental lines.

And here is where that second question kicks in: *Is the difference worth $2000?*

Well, no -- not if you can make a substantial improvement in other elements of your system. I love my Nu-Vista -- in terms of musicality and practicality, it's a first-rate unit. And I could afford it (always a plus). But if I were set on upgrading *my* system for $2000, I'd probably replace it with an Ayre CX-7 CD player.

But let's say I already had the front-end of my dreams, and really liked the sound of my system. What if I wanted what I had, only *more* of it?

In that case, I'd put the Rack of Silence on the top of my list, because that's exactly what it did -- gave me *more* of what I liked.

As I added components to the Rack, the effects were cumulative. I noticed the biggest difference simply placing the CD player on the crossbeam/Blutack/bearing, but adding the Feet of Silence increased my impression that the music emerged even further from the background sounds -- and the acoustic space of the recording venue.

When I put the preamp on the Rack, as well, I again heard increased clarity. Adding the preamp also seemed to free the music rhythmically. Tempos seemed freer and less rigid -- I could hear rhythm sections "lock" into one another far more easily than before.

I don't mean the Rack *changed* the degree of swing, but it certainly made me more conscious of the swing that was there.

It's easy to see how a CD player -- which is part mechanical device, part electronic instrument -- or a tubed preamplifier could benefit from an improved support structure, but surely a solid-state power amp shouldn't sound any different simply because it is sitting on a less-resonant surface. That doesn't make a lot of sense, does it?

Once again, reality has felt it necessary to remind me that it doesn't *have* to behave in a manner consistent with my puny human intellect. All three power amplifiers sounded better on the Rack of Silence.

Again, there was greater contrast between foreground and field. Again, there was greater sense of detail. And that swing thing? More of that, too. What I wasn't prepared for was an increase in low-end solidity -- which is something that the Aerial 20Ts I'm currently auditioning *clearly* revealed.

More slam, ma'am! *Thank you.*

The muse in silence sings aloud

There's no question that the Rack of Silence ranks among the best audio racks I've ever heard. I think it's good looking, in a giant Erector Set kind of way. I also like the Feet of Silence, which could be used without the Rack of Silence to great effect -- although they are *much* better in combination with the Rack. I was less impressed by the Discs of Silence, but mostly because I couldn't see why they would be used in preference to the FOS.

But the question of value is one that you'll have to determine for yourself. Solid-Tech's products are not inexpensive -- which means the Rack of Silence costs as much as a fairly pricey electronic component. It needs to be viewed as a component, which means it needs to be considered in the context of the system it will be used in.

If your system needs the kind of improvement that upgrading a piece of electronics can bring, you'll probably be better served by making that upgrade. But if you're fine-tuning a system that's almost there, you could spend *more* money than the price of the Rack of Silence -- and discover that you've taken two steps backward.

And if you don't know what you need -- you just might want to listen to the Rack of Silence anyway. It might just whisper sweet nothings in your ear.

Which, personally, I find a lot more exciting than mere silence.

...Wes Phillips
wes@onhifi.com

Solid-Tech Rack of Silence Equipment Rack
Price: $1730 USD in kit form; $1899 fully assembled.
Warranty: Two years parts and labor.

Solid-Tech
Klagerupsvagen 357
S-212 36 Malmo
Sweden
Phone: +46 40 491 352
Fax: +46 40 491 352

E-mail: info@solid-tech.net
Website: www.solid-tech.net

North American distributor:
Audiophile Systems, Ltd.
8709 Castle Park Drive
Indianapolis, IN 46256
Phone: (888) 272-2658 (toll free); (317) 841-4100