

# Just Like Buses...

## How to ignore a whole decade's worth of tweaks and then discover them all at once!

by Paul Messenger

Listen up, and don't skip over this section, 'cos I'm about to reveal the biggest improvement in my hi-fi system for a decade. More than that, it actually puts CD reproduction right up there as a serious competitor to vinyl – something I never thought I'd ever find myself writing. Indeed, it's such a momentous change, I'm still struggling to come to terms with it.

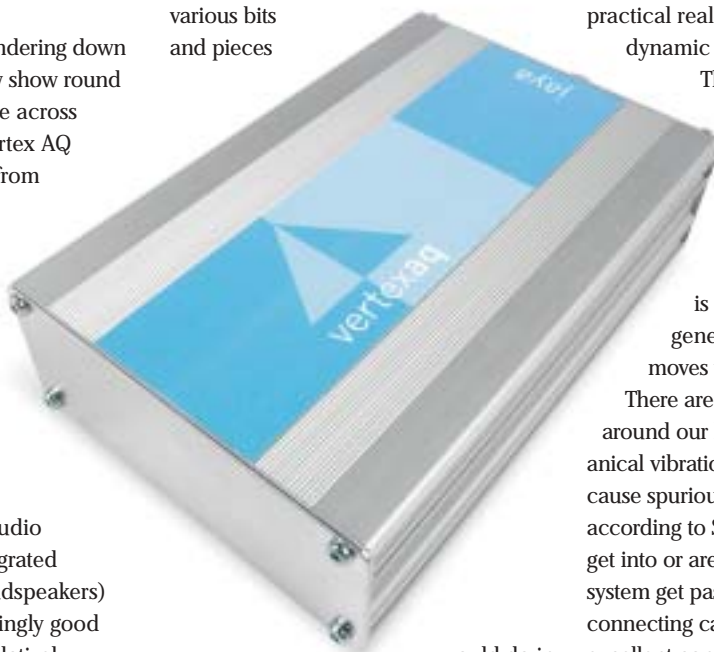
It all started whilst wandering down a corridor at the Heathrow show round about closing time. I came across a room with the name Vertex AQ on the door. This I knew from nothing; nor did it carry any obvious meaning. I hovered; it was late; should I go in, or just pass by?

I entered cautiously to find a room empty of all but the exhibitors (not unusual towards the end of a trade day). A simple system (comprising Simaudio Moon CD player and integrated amplifier, and Perigee loudspeakers) was making some surprisingly good sounds, considering its relatively modest pretensions.

The reason for the superior sound, I was told, lay in the various 'accessory' components that Vertex AQ has developed, and which underpin and link the whole system together. They consist of a slightly oddball granite platform, plus a variety of cables decorated by strategically placed little metal boxes. These have equally peculiar names – proof positive that

this is no marketing-led operation – but essentially a common purpose, which is to reduce the mechanical and electrical noise throughout the system.

Although impressed by what I heard at Heathrow, I don't trust my judgement under show conditions, and so suggested it would be interesting to hear what these various bits and pieces



would do in my own home

and system. Would they like me to try them out?

A couple of weeks after show I got a phone call offering to just that, and a couple of weeks after that Steve Elford arrived with a large box of quite costly goodies in the back of his car. It was lunch time, so we adjourned to the pub, giving Steve a chance to explain what it was all about, and how it all worked.

The simplistic theory or rationalisation behind Vertex AQ's approach and products is that our systems receive, generate and pass around wideband mechanical (ie sonic) vibrations. These, it is suggested, adversely interfere with both digital and analogue low level electrical signals, which in turn compromises the practical real-world noise floor and dynamic range of our hi-fi systems.

This might sound a little far fetched at first hearing, but it shouldn't be totally dismissed. After all, a pillar of electrical theory and practice is that current will be generated if a conductor moves within an electrical field.

There are plenty of electrical fields around our hi-fi systems, so mechanical vibration could quite possibly cause spurious signals. Furthermore, according to Steve, any vibrations that get into or are generated within the system get passed around via the metal connecting cables, because metal is an excellent conductor of sound.

In order to absorb mechanical vibrations, the company uses a number of different 'accessories' (for want of a better word). These consist of support platforms and connecting cables, the latter with chunky little metal boxes along their length. These are distributed throughout the system, as this is the best way of absorbing the vibrations and preventing them from being passed around. ▶

## Jaya

One could describe the effect of treating the whole system, stem to stern, and while that is truly dramatic, it didn't actually happen that way. First off, Steve handed me a Jaya mains filter unit. Priced at £295, this is a small, featureless but quite hefty alloy box (17x11x5cm) on the end of about twenty centimetres of decent mains cable, with a good quality 13-amp plug.

Unlike conventional mains filters, it doesn't sit between the mains and any particular component, but is instead plugged into a spare socket nearby. The box contains some sort of electrical filtering (no details divulged), to remove not only spikes but especially the radio frequency interference (RFI) that increasingly pollutes mains purity these days. Apparently, the biggest improvement is found with digital sources. Vibration absorbtion materials are also included.

I haven't had happy experiences with mains treatments in the past, usually finding that they 'slug' the sound, slow things down and rob the music of some of its vibrancy. That didn't seem to be the case with this Jaya device, however. As I plugged in first one and then a second Jaya, I was conscious of a sweetening and 'tidying up' of the top end, and a general reduction the 'graininess', although the quality of the musical communication seemed in no way compromised or impaired. Indeed, rather the reverse, since the cleaner, sweeter top only served to make the finest detail that much clearer, enhancing the whole experience. I wouldn't describe the improvement here as massive, but it was certainly worthwhile.

## Roirama

After Jaya, the next stage was to use Vertex AQ's Roiramas mains leads (£329 each) to feed the system CD player and pre-amp – a Naim CDS-2 and NAC 552, in case you wanted to know, and replacing Naim's normal mains leads. Roiramas

are made from 2m of fairly stiff cable, with a decent 13amp plug at one end, and a classy Furutech kettle adaptor at the other.

Halfway down its length is a small alloy box that looks the same as that used in the Jaya, though in this case there are no electronic components involved. The chunky box is filled with solid heavy material that purely acts as a vibration absorber (in both directions).

It was suggested that it was important to apply Jaya prior to introducing Roirama, which may or may not be true, but changing to these mains leads did seem to make a rather larger total effect than had just applying the parallel Jaya absorbers.

The system was now really starting to get into its stride. The background noise seemed to have become quieter, resulting in an increase in overall dynamic range. Stereo images seemed better layered and started showing more coherent and convincing depth perspectives. I was starting to get seriously interested now!

## Kinabalu

Phase three was rather different, and I was initially very sceptical. The rather grandly entitled 'Kinabalu Coupling System' (from £327.50) is basically a support platform, albeit a rather elaborate and carefully specified one. At its heart lies a seriously hefty slab of granite, which serves as a 'pseudo mechanical earth', and this was placed on three squidgy Sorbothane discs on top of my regular Mana support platform.

However, the key component here

is a 'Precision Coupling Tripod', a carefully shaped and wickedly sharp piece of specially chosen and heat-treated metal that provides a single path route for 'sinking' vibrations out of the CD player. Two rubber-tipped cones create a three-legged support for the player, but are merely there to match the height of the Tripod.

Frankly, my expectations were low. Unlike the vast majority of CD players,

Naim's CDS-2 is already equipped with 'floating' internals, independently spring-suspending the transport mechanism and the circuit board. Why should an additional support offer any further advantage? I put this to Steve who merely smiled knowingly and went on putting the arrangement in place.

Sceptically I cued a well familiar CD – Christy Moore's *Live at the Point*, as I recall – and was slightly shocked at what I heard. No longer was my silver disc version of this recording the obvious poor relation of the slab of vinyl I also possess. That grungy grain that always seems to put an upper limit on the transparency of the digital source had somehow been substantially reduced. And the system could be played significantly louder without fatigue too.

I queried how such a support could improve a fully spring-suspended ▶



▶ device like Naim's top CDP Steve pointed out that a spring will only provide isolation across a relatively narrow frequency band – and furthermore that the Kinabalu's prime role is to try and remove, or 'sink' wideband vibrations generated by the player itself.

I'm still experimenting with Kinbalus. I've placed other examples under my NAC 552 pre-amp, and the power supplies that feed both the pre-amp and CD player. Each extra one added has pushed the sound ahead a little further, adding to the openness and freedom from boxiness, though none as dramatically as that first one under the CDP I've also still to play around with the placing of the tripod spike, as this can significantly influence its effectiveness. Elsewhere in Smorgasbord, Chris Binns contributes his own Kinabalu experiences, in quite different system contexts.

### Moncayo

Naim's DIN socketry made it difficult to use the Solfonn interconnects, so the final Vertex AQ component which I tried on that first day was the Moncayo speaker cables. These are costly affairs, prices starting at £1,295 for a mono-wire 3m pair (plus £50 per extra metre), or £1,745 + £100 for the bi-wire equivalent.

High class locking WBT 4mm connectors were fitted at the amp end of the set I used, with spades at the speaker end of things, though I gather the plan is to change over to Furutech terminals. Whatever, the mechanical integrity of the connection is considered a very important part of making the cables work properly.

The conductors themselves not specifically identified. They're quite stiff, but can easily be bent into shape. Most significantly, there are two alloy absorber boxes here – rather longer (23x11x5cm) and heavier than those used on the mains leads – situated about a metre from each end. It's

not a particularly pretty looking arrangement, but it does seem to be rather effective.

I don't normally hear dramatic changes when swapping speaker cables, but Moncayo is something different, and the word dramatic is nothing short of the truth. While it's true that the Naim NACA5 cable I mostly use is inexpensive – dramatically so compared to Moncayo – that's not for want of trying numerous alternatives, and finding that they offer relatively minor differences.

Aided no doubt by the substantial improvements 'upstream', Moncayo wrought changes which were altogether more obvious. Once again it was noticeable how effectively this 'quietened' the system's background, yet allowed full range to the dynamic expression and 'punch' of the music.

More obvious still was the improvement in coloration and a considerable reduction in 'boxiness', plus superior stereo depth and spaciousness. The top end was sweeter and cleaner and the bass seemed to go deeper with more weight – perhaps a tad too much weight I sometimes felt.

### Solfonn

I did get to try the Solfonn interconnect a couple of weeks later. This is another costly device, priced from £595 for a 1.5m phono-terminated pair, and also available with balanced XLR connectors and 2m lengths. It uses high quality WBT locking phono plugs, ensuring a tight mechanical linkage, and has two of the vibration absorbing alloy boxes a few centimetres from each end – a little like the speaker cable, but very much smaller and lighter here.

The sonic improvement it offers is rather similar to – if quantitatively rather less than – that supplied by the speaker cables. Once again the sound took on extra air and freedom from boxiness, and fine detail was enhanced, especially at the frequency extremes.

### Conclusions

One can fairly criticise the various Vertex AQ treatments for being costly and decidedly tweaky, and hardly enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the system. But the proof of the pudding lies in the dramatic effect they have on sound quality, lowering background 'grunge', improving dynamic contrasts, cleaning up colorations, reducing 'boxiness' and enhancing the stereo image depth, coherence and precision.

Although all sources are improved, the biggest and most dramatic improvements are found when playing CDs. Indeed I'd go so far as to say that the full Vertex AQ treatment puts CD replay up on a par with vinyl overall, which is a comment I never thought I'd make. Through their removal of 'digital grain', these accessories elevate CD replay to previously unsuspected heights.

While there's no denying the high cost of these treatments, there's no denying their considerable effectiveness either – or their considerable cost-effectiveness in a high end system context too. I'm impressed by the way Vertex AQ adopts a holistic system-oriented approach, underpinned by a consistency of philosophy and methodology. Good results may be obtained without going the whole hog, as I have done here, but the bottom line is that this stuff really works, and that's by no means always the case in the wacky world of hi-fi accessories. ▶+

Contact:  
Vertex AQ  
Tel. (44) (0) 1454 326496  
Net. [www.vertexaq.com](http://www.vertexaq.com)