

# Weighty Matters: Stillpoints Ultra LP Isolator

By Roy Gregory, July 4, 2012

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With a comprehensive review of the Stillpoints ESS Rack and system-support solutions already in the works, it might seem premature to evaluate a separate product from the same maker amongst the host clamoring for attention, but I think the Ultra LP Isolator -- LPI for short -- is a special case. Unlike the other Stillpoints products, this is not designed to support equipment or loudspeakers. Nor is it designed to channel energy into a waiting, dispersive structure. Instead, this is a standalone device that works to control mechanical energy induced into records, either by the stylus or the platter/bearing and drive mechanism. It is a specific product designed to tackle a specific problem and is confined to LP replay. As such, with the Stillpoints support system, and any review of it, concentrating so clearly on the issues around component coupling and support, the LPI risks being overlooked -- and it's way, way too good for that.

In reality, although the Ultra LPI is used quite differently from other Stillpoints products, the philosophy and thinking behind it are a natural extension of the same understanding that produced the original Stillpoints cones and everything else that the company has produced since. Once you get past the mistaken idea that we should be isolating our equipment from the outside world and instead think in terms of isolating the signal from extraneous mechanical interference -- interference that exists and is mainly generated within

the equipment itself -- then you will start pushing open a door that leads to dramatic improvements in system performance. And where better to tackle spurious mechanical energy than the stylus-groove interface?

Your cartridge measures tiny, tiny mechanical impulses as faithfully as it possibly can. What it can't do is differentiate between input directly from the groove wall and input that is





transmitted through the vinyl itself. That might be reflected energy from the tracing action of the stylus, or it might have come from within the turntable itself; either way, the stylus doesn't care. It just passes everything along, transduced into its electrical output. That's why the record-platter junction has attracted so much attention over the years, with everything from no platter (Meitner) to lossy interfaces (Linn) to acrylic platters and even vacuum hold down (SOTA, Versa Dynamics, Rockport, etc.). Along the way we've had mats made of everything -- organic and inorganic -- clamps, weights and dampers, all designed to clean up, soak up or disperse unwanted energy before the cartridge gets to read it.

In this context, applying the patented Stillpoints technology to the issue of sinking unwanted energy out of the record and into the substantial body of the LPI seems like a bit of a no-brainer. Knowing just how effectively the various Stillpoints products drain spurious vibrations from the complex structure of electronic components, a slab of vinyl should be a piece of cake. In fact, the LPI is an adaptation of the Ultra 5 large component support. Take the top half of that device, with its five Stillpoints modules sunk inside it, drill a hole in the middle to drop it over a record player spindle and away you go. The five Stillpoints modules rest directly on the record label, coupling the weight directly to the surface. Of course, the LPI has been tidied up considerably, but that's the essence of the product. It has a beautifully tactile, chamfered profile that makes it a joy to handle as well as pleasing to the eye. The stainless-steel body might be low of profile, but it's also incredibly dense, its compact form belying its near pound-and-a-half dead weight. At \$495 (£440 in the UK), it is not cheap, but nor is it anywhere near the top of the scale for aftermarket record clamps/weights.

## Putting theory into practice

Anybody who has lived with the vagaries and frustrations that seem to attend any hi-fi component will know only too well that theory is nice but it doesn't pay the musical rent. The proof of the LPI pudding will be in how it sounds -- and in this case it's got some competition. A quick scout

around the shelves of the hi-fi racks, the listening room and the storage area turned up two different VPI clamps, a VPI record weight, two other metal weights/strobes and a couple of wooden weights, although not the Kuzma or Shun Mook ones that are the best wooden weights I've heard. Those will have to wait for another day, but used on the VPI Classic 4, the LPI swiftly disposed of all other pretenders.

I started by comparing the Stillpoints weight to the sound of the record simply set on the platter with no restraint or damping at all. Take the brash life and energy of Talking Heads' debut album *Talking Heads 77* [Sire SR 6036] and the LPI immediately imposes a sense of balanced calm on proceedings: the band step away from the speakers, the recording becomes a single, coherent entity, while the stereo perspective becomes much more natural, especially in terms of height. The drum kit solidifies into a single compact unit, rather than having elements scattered across the soundstage, the chiming guitars are both better separated and more insistent. But most telling of all is the drop in apparent volume; the music doesn't seem so loud because so much hash and noise has been stripped away. Anybody who doesn't think that Tina Weymouth can play bass should hear this white-girl groove on "Uh-Oh, Love Comes To Town" with the LPI holding the record down. Likewise the deep, insistent throb of "Psycho Killer" takes on a new shape and menace, locking in the drums and jangly guitars.

It's this new sense of foundation and clarity that sets the LPI apart from the competition. Most clamps add a degree of definition or separation; few add the sense of order and musical stability that comes with the Stillpoints weight, the sense of solidity, purpose and poise it reveals in a performance. 77 is a great recording that tests systems and turntables to their limits. Its brashness is musically intentional; it should have edge and an abrasive, in-your-face quality -- but paradoxically it shouldn't sound bright or edgy. If it does, then your system and its setup just failed the test.





Compared to the VPI weight, my previous preferred option, the LPI delivers more space between instruments (and notes), more texture and greater insight into the ensemble playing. Where the VPI weight sounds pleasingly purposeful and a bit thuddy, the Stillpoints delivers far greater subtlety. Weymouth's on/off bass line that opens "Don't Worry About The Government" has more shape, a definite pause between its notes, while Jerry Harrison's chopped, short-string guitar stabs are more incisive, quicker and more definite.

Playing the Analogue Productions double-record 45rpm pressing of the Johanos/Dallas, Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* [APC34145S] underlines these differences even more starkly. The Turnabout recording always had impressive life, presence and dynamics, but suffered from excessive tape noise. Playing the Analogue Productions repressing without any weight at all, the sound is full of life and energy, with noticeably lower tape noise than I'm used to. The VPI weight calms things and adds some much-needed stability to the soundstage, but it also kills the life and vitality in the performance. The LPI offers all the stability of the VPI weight, but with none of the downsides. Tape noise has now all but vanished, the soundstage is deeper, much better defined and provides a bigger, blacker backdrop for the instruments. There's more color and texture to the notes, a clearer delineation of shifts in relative level -- so vital when slowly building to a really big climax -- and dynamics are really explosive. Percussion gains character and texture, but also presence and impact. The *Symphonic Dances* are big, bold

and utterly over the top. Johanos gives them full rein and the Dallas responds with gusto, an outpouring of musical energy that the LPI helps the system take in its stride. It's an impressive step up in performance from something as prosaic as a record weight.

The benefits of the Stillpoints Ultra LPI are not just about the loud bits. Its ability to increase resolution, poise and timing integrity is just as vital to small-scale acoustic pieces, a scenario in which its vitality, black backgrounds and dynamic discrimination really bring recordings to life, adding a real sense of delicacy and an inviting, open quality. In fact, I've found no music that fails to benefit from the LPI and it has become an essential piece of the turntable setup.

My comments refer to its use with the VPI Classic 4. I have no reason to suspect that it would be any less beneficial with other decks, but you'll need to suck it and see. Certainly, a brief listen with the Clearaudio Master Reference was just as positive an experience. But there are a couple of caveats. The LPI is heavy, and you should think twice about using it on a suspended deck, especially the lighter ones like the LP12. It is also heavy enough to alter the speed of your deck, albeit very, very slightly. Using the Feickert Platter Speed app, I needed to tweak the settings on the VPI SDS by around eight notches (which is not a lot) to get the speed bang on -- picky but worthwhile if the LPI becomes a permanent part of your record-playing regimen.

Those brief comments aside, I have nothing but praise for the Stillpoints Ultra LPI. Those of you playing records should give it serious consideration if its weight and purpose suit your 'table of choice. As an adjunct to the Classic 4, sitting as it is on a quartet of Ultra SS feet, mounted atop an ESS rack, it might be the last piece in the jigsaw, but it's far from the least important.



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