



Stillpoints (Part One)

By Chris Thomas.

Photography by Simon Marsh

Sometimes, late at night, I sit alone and quiet in the house with the loudness of the day behind me and pick away at my acoustic guitar. It's a wonderful vintage instrument, built during the 2nd World War and at least 70 years old now. Often I play nothing specific, but just experiment with different sounds. Strike the string half way between the bridge and the fretted note for the richest, strongest and most harmonically colourful sound as the aged Adirondack Spruce top sings with resonance. Change the fingerpicking position or the plectrum angle of attack to let the tonewood fill with energy and open its throat so wide that you can feel the sound as its reassuring warmth vibrates through your body. I am endlessly fascinated at the way the notes decay. The rich harmonies as the undamped strings add their sympathetic chorus grow amazingly complex but, like snowflakes, they are never quite the same twice.

Ever since I began listening to music I have always wanted to be this close to its source. I used to sit with my ear wedged next to the speaker of my Dad's primitive sound system, marvelling at what I could hear. Nothing much has changed. When I go to a concert I want to be as near to the stage as possible. I know this is not the best place for pure sound quality but I like to see the musicians up close and watch how they play. I'll gladly forgo the sonic integration for a view of their hands and to see how they interact physically with their instruments. My time in audio has been very much the same. I have a smallish room but love the intimacy of the near-field experience. Even if I had a large room I think I would still sit close to the speakers. I am not interested in creating the live event in my living room and don't see the comparison as relevant for me. I want to feel emotionally connected and spiritually moved by musical artistry and whether it makes me sad or sit in wonder, I really need to feel as if it means something. I want to feel as close to it as I do to my guitar. Hardly surprising then that I have a weakness for anything 'audio' that takes me to that place.

Musical or Monetary Upgrades?

There comes a time in the life of every audiophile when he sits back and asks where all this upgrading is taking him and if he truly still enjoys listening to music through his home system. It takes a lot of honesty to answer that question and it is one that I have thought about many times. For as long as I can remember, the whole process of moving the system

forward musically has been somewhat historic. The dealer's answer has always been "Trade in your old box, add some money and I'll give you a new and better one". Cash changed hands and the industry was nourished. For those who have been around audio for many years and have invested time and lots and lots of money in their love, hobby, obsession, or whatever it has become, there will always come that brick-wall moment. The simple question remains. What should a system upgrade really achieve?

Floating The System

Ever since Paul Wakeen of Stillpoints first visited these shores over four years ago I have been lucky enough to use his products to bring the music closer to me. Back then Paul told me that to really hear what resonance control could do I needed to treat the whole system. The only problem, as the box-count of my system grew, was getting enough products to achieve this. At that time Paul was making the original (cone-shaped) Stillpoints, the Component Stand and the ESS rack at several performance levels. But last year he replaced the original devices by introducing the Ultra SS and what followed was a complete renewal of his catalogue. The Component Stand is no more and there are now essentially three levels of freestanding isolation available. First and smallest is the Ultra Mini. This is a development of the circuit board standoff that is directly available in various sizes to component manufacturers who have incorporated the unique benefits of internal isolation. You will find those and Stillpoints feet fitted to a growing number of audio electronics, including the Berning QZ amplifiers that I use, where they are available as an option but the feet are standard. As an Ultra Mini it is shrouded within a smart stainless steel body with a threaded hole at the base enabling it, like all of the filters, to be mounted on the round 3-inch diameter, machined steel plate that is the Ultra Base. This itself has a significant role to play in both levelling and sound quality. Internally the Mini utilises Paul's unique design of ceramic balls and steel races, though the latest four-tiered construction is radically different to the

- original design. In fact there are no bending parts within any of the new range of Stillpoints resonance control filters.

The next in size, price and with a much higher mass is the Ultra SS. It is a two-piece design where the top section, known as the hard hat, comes screwed directly into the technology pocket itself. Or it can be left off altogether if the Ultra is to be directly coupled in either direction, as between a stand and speaker or electronics and rack for instance. The Hard Hat also allows for a degree of independent levelling of the Ultra (though I still believe this is best achieved through utilising a Base). I suspect most people will sit their electronics straight on top of their Stillpoints but, if you wanted to attach an Ultra SS directly to a component in place of screwed on feet, you could source a threaded convertor from your Stillpoints dealer. They carry a whole range for just this purpose. You will see as the review progresses, Stillpoints products are extraordinarily versatile and you can deploy them in many configurations and I would urge you to spend serious time exploring this as each individual system and installation will be different.

The final resonance control support is the Ultra Five. This chunky and very heavy filter system is a three-inch diameter two-piece, solid stainless steel puck that houses five technology pockets, like those found in the Ultra SS. You wouldn't want to drop this one on your foot, believe me. Again it can be used beneath components or speakers but cannot be independently levelled except when coupled with a Base. Stillpoints also manufacture the LPI record clamp, equipped with five technology pockets. I have also found it to be a very useful freestanding resonance control filter that can be employed in limitless ways when not in use on the turntable. Sitting atop a CD player or an amplifier for instance or employing a pair of them with loudspeakers to drain energy from the cabinets. Again, experimentation with positioning is absolutely essential. I should add that the current LPI is unsuitable for sprung sub-chassis turntables like the Linn LP12 as it is just too heavy and throws the suspension way out of balance.

All Stillpoints products are beautifully made, finished, packaged and laser etched with the company's logo. The grade of stainless steel has been specifically chosen for purpose and every single metal part that Stillpoints use has been cryogenically treated at the factory. The beautiful and rather exotic ESS rack is still in full production but I decided I would discuss that and how it can be used to interact with the individual technologies in the next instalment of the review when I will bring everything together in system-wide context.

If you are thinking that these are just audio accessories to stick under your CD player then you are really going to have to think again. Even a brief exposure to them will leave you in no doubt that the importance of equipment supports has been

seriously undervalued for years. My own lengthy Stillpoints experience changed when last summer I received enough products to float my entire system. This left me in no doubt as to just how limited those early but lengthy listening experiments really were and how I had previously only really scratched the surface of what could be achieved musically - without changing a single component. I think this is both the critical point and the very essence of the whole Stillpoints equation. Having virtually unlimited access to the whole range of Paul's devices has certainly resulted in me enjoying the best music I have ever heard from an audio system, but it also threw up any number of questions and as we know, where hi-fi is concerned, there are as many of those as there are opinions.

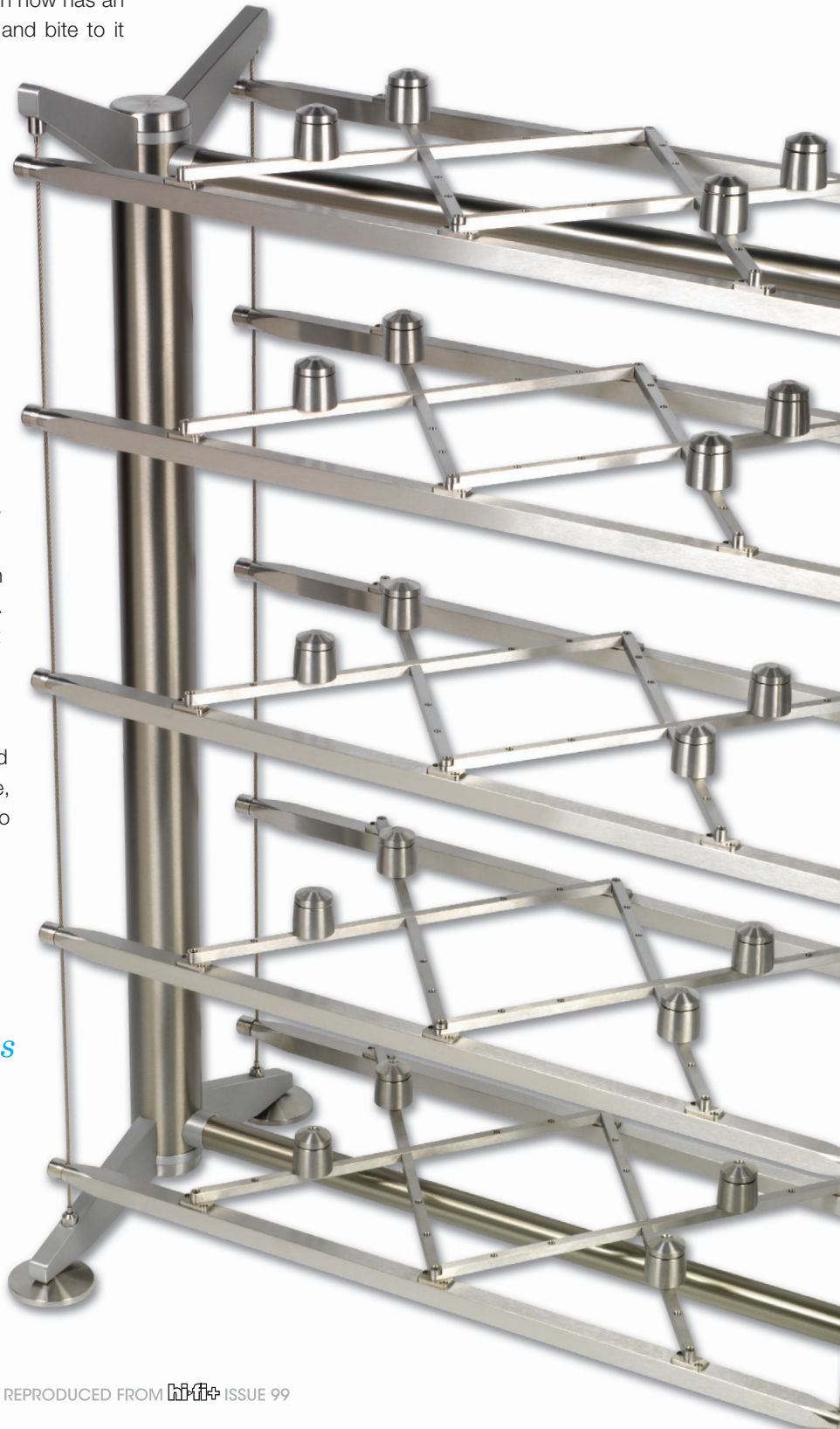
So, what is actually happening here that yields such startling results? I think it is easy to rationalise explanations that fit different theories and viewpoints. There is no Stillpoints white paper and to do the detailed science would be a huge and costly undertaking, but what seems certain is that the products are able to drain resonances from equipment to differing levels of efficiency, leaving a more pristine, less polluted signal, depending on exactly which of them you employ and exactly how and where you couple them. By far the most important thing though is the truly significant musical benefits that they bring.

This review grew and grew as the scale and depth of the products themselves and the implications of their worth as a system-building tool has become more and more apparent to me. So let me start the listening experiences with a simple four-box system comprising of the Moon 260D CD player and the 250i integrated amplifier. These are a pair of very reasonably priced components that are clean and quite explicit in their character without any performance foibles. I chose to use a pair of Focal Diablo speakers to provide an open window and used a loom of Crystal Piccolo cable for the same reason while the electronics were sat on an Atacama Eris Eco Bamboo rack.

Herbie Hancock's *The New Standard* and the Peter Gabriel song 'Mercy Street' starts with a tight percussive burst before Dave Holland's wonderful bass line enters and sits underneath the rolling sequence to invite us in. Without resonance control it slips by almost unnoticed, and the timing is hard to pick up on as if it is tripping forward and over itself. But slip four Mini Ultras on bases beneath both the CD player and the amplifier and the difference is incredible. Now the percussion has shape and the tabla and bongo patterns and pushes emphasise and establish the coming tempo and rhythmic feel before the bass, so murky before, now weights the tune superbly. As the piece gets into full flow the gains in musical structure are not just different, they are vital as the precision and freshness of the time signature

is established and forces its way into your head. The energy of the piece is transformed into a much deeper, faster and involving view of the song and when the subtle horn section begin their work, the possibilities of where this may go are starting to become apparent. Slide four Ultra SS filters, with no Bases under each speaker (four is better than three) and the music becomes liberated as the percussion now has an even greater sense of dynamic shape, snap and bite to it and the bass bounces further into focus and moves outside the confines of the cabinets and sits in the room, anchoring the whole harmonic route of the tune. The horn section that sounded so morphed together without resonance control gains a level of resolution and independence that makes identifying each instrument much easier and the sliding arrangement that the players use as they slip rolling waves of brass colour through the piece are a thing of beauty. There is more space and air too as the soundstage has expanded. The essence and direction of the piece is the expression of Hancock's playing and his extraordinary touch eloquently shows that piano keys are not on/off switches. They are highly pressure-sensitive links to controlling the string hammers and the way that he can "shape" a note is pure feel and sensitivity. Without resonance control it sounds decent but flat and lacking in character. But if you want to hear the harmonic possibilities he can create and gain insight to the genius of a musician who can change the direction and flavour of a whole tune with a single phrase, then the articulation that the Stillpoints bring to each note and chord is a must.

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► Sit the electronics on Ultras instead of Minis and the rewards are instantaneous. They knit the music together even more powerfully. The Moon components that always sounded like they were punching above their weight now seem a more suitable match. That Focal Beryllium tweeter is one of the best available, but it can be an unforgiving taskmaster. It demands quality and punishes harshness ruthlessly whether it is from inadequate electronics, cabling or bad system installation. It needs to be, as Hancock's memorable interpretation of The Beatles' 'Norwegian Wood' is a masterpiece of exquisite piano phrasing and milky guitar textures all arranged around Jack DeJohnette's delicate but busy drum kit. As he works the skin with the brush the system now maintains the sort of perspectives, with an energised solidarity and depth of image intensity, that is classic resonance control territory. The cymbals have a lustrous ring with full of wood-on-metal attack and impact as he uses them for shade and highlight. They are detached from the body of the music, above the drums and hang in the air somewhere outside the speakers as if by magic. It is a musical tour de force and a huge step up in quality, yet without a single component change and a great example of the way in which Stillpoints can liberate an existing system to another performance level completely. Adding the Ultras frees the speaker from the energy-conserving constraints of its own rather cumbersome stand and gives it low frequency speed and dynamic attack making it a more evenly-balanced speaker with an organic tonality and lack of high frequency emphasis that I don't hear from the standard fixed-mount package.

I could finely tune the electronics by moving the Stillpoints around to where they sounded best. Forget symmetrical spacing. As a starting point, find where the transformer is and sit your first device there then perhaps, for the CD player, locate the next beneath the transport and then use the other two to balance the component. But remember that is just a start. Hard coupling of the steel of the Stillpoints to the case (not under the feet)

means you will in effect be altering the vibrational characteristics of the whole structure, depending on where you locate them. You may be surprised at where they are at their most effective. But this isn't really about achieving a tighter and more focussed bass or projected midband or indeed any of the classic hi-fi improvements. Yes, the energy levels of the music are certainly better, as is the resolution right across the bandwidth but a fully floated system is so much more communicative and engaging. The small details may be enough to catch the ear, but it's being able to hear 'how' the instruments are being played that is so endlessly interesting. Stillpoints strip the music of electronic artefacts leaving it more natural and less processed and I hear the music as being freer and less constrained and inhibited and of course the lower noise floor certainly helps the improved dynamics as well.

So, this is an introduction to the Stillpoints products, how they can be incorporated into your system and what musical benefits they can bring. So far though I have just scratched the surface as there is much more and in the final instalment (in issue 101) I will consider the ESS rack and its role plus the truly remarkable Ultra 5's in greater detail. I will also bring Paul Wakeen's philosophy together by floating an entire high-end system and closing the circle, and in doing so I hope to show you just how large that circle can be. +



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