

AS WE SEE IT by ROBERT DEUTSCH

THIS ISSUE: Robert Deutsch offers the thinking audiophile's guide to crazy-sounding tweaks.

Panacea or Snake Oil?

You know about them: audio products or tweaks that fall outside the standard definition of *audio component*. They're not source components like CD players, not amplifiers or preamplifiers, not loudspeakers, not power-line conditioners or cables—and, if aimed at modifying room acoustics, they're not the standard devices that absorb or disperse sound. Let's call them Unorthodox Audio Products (UAPs). They promise a kind of audio panacea: something that fixes whatever's wrong with the sound of your system.

The first such product to create a controversy among audiophiles was the Tice Clock, an accessory that was claimed to improve the sound of any audio system by simply being plugged into an AC outlet in the same room. (For the record, write-ups in *Stereophile* did not confirm this claim.) The latest products in this category include the Harmonizers, Magic Stones, and Magic Diamonds from Stein Music, discussed in "Sam's Space" in September 2011—and Sam was most enthusiastic about their effects.

Whenever such UAPs are introduced, they tend to trigger extreme responses from the audiophile community. Some claim such products illustrate that "there are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Shakespeare), and deflect criticism by saying that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Arthur C. Clarke). Others dismiss them as "snake oil," an illustration of the fact that "there's a sucker born every minute" (P.T. Barnum).

I don't suppose that anything I might say here will change the minds of those in a deeply entrenched position on either side of this debate. What I'd like to do instead is describe what the issues are in considering the purchase of any unorthodox audio component—issues that, in debates on this topic, are often confused.

Does it make a difference?

This is the first and most important question. And with due deference to my reviewer colleagues, it must be answered by *you*, the listener. For products of this sort, a money-back home trial is essential. Then you can do whatever you need to do to determine whether you can hear it make a consistent sonic difference in your system: A/B comparisons with various types of music, repeated as many times and for as long as you want, until you feel you have a handle on what the product does or doesn't do. Keep in mind that some of us have a tendency to exaggerate whatever differences we hear, while others tend to minimize those differences. (See my "As We See It" of February 2009, "Are You A Sharpener or a Leveler?," www.stereophile.com/asweseeit/are_you_a_sharpener_or_a_leveler/index.html.) If you can hear a difference, then it doesn't matter if others can't; and if you can't hear a difference, it doesn't matter if others can.

Is it an improvement?

Assuming that you can hear the product making a difference, the next thing is to decide whether that difference is an improvement. It's possible for a UAP, or any standard audio component, to make the music sound different: for example, some instruments might now sound more prominent. But if the sound of other instruments is now obscured, then it's not an overall

improvement. And, again, whether or not the change is to be considered an improvement must be your decision alone. One person's "crystal clear" is another's "overbright and clinical."

Is it cost-effective?

Judging the degree of improvement is a subjective matter, but you should think about the extent to which the improvement you hear justifies the UAP's cost. If the cost is relatively low and the improvement is quite significant, then by all means go for it. But if the UAP you're considering is fairly expensive, you need to ask whether replacing one of the standard components of your system (eg, the amplifier) would provide a greater improvement. Also, keep in mind resale value. If you buy a well-regarded component of the conventional sort, you can always sell it and get most of your money back. Unorthodox components tend to be faddish, which means that the resale market for them is much more limited.

What is the ratio of manufacturing cost to retail price?

In online discussions, I often see postings that read like this: "It's a rip-off. They sell it for \$60, but I made one in my workshop and the materials cost me only \$20." Statements like this, whether they refer to normal or unorthodox products, show a lack of understanding of the economics of the specialty-audio business. These are not products that are sold in huge numbers, so they don't benefit from economies of scale. A rule of thumb in the high-end audio business is that the ratio of retail price to manufacturing cost (which includes much more than the cost of materials) needs to be between four and five. Much lower than that, and the manufacturer is on the path to bankruptcy.

How does it work?

Explanation of how certain UAPs accomplish their effects are often muddled, and tend to make people with training in science see red. Manufacturers may use scientific terms such as *quantum mechanics* in ways that indicate little or no understanding of them. As a result, the scientist-audiophile is prone to say, "If the product's designers can't provide a plausible scientific explanation of how the thing works, then they're charlatans, and I won't consider buying their product." I sympathize with this view—I have a background in experimental psychology, and cringe whenever I read about an audio product whose designer refers to "paranormal phenomena" in his explanation. But I think we have to be careful not to reject a product just because we don't like the designer's explanation of how it works. The history of science is replete with phenomena whose initial explanations were wrong, though the phenomena themselves were real. I think it's reasonable to demand that the designer of a UAP provide a clear explanation of how the product works—and if they *don't* know, then to admit that.

But if it's been determined that the UAP makes an audible improvement in my system, that improvement is cost-effective, and the UAP's price is within the range of normal profit margin for the manufacturer, then I would not reject a product out of hand just because there is no currently acceptable explanation—or any explanation at all—of how it works. ■

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