

Audience adeptResponse 12-TS Power Conditioner

Nicholas Bedworth

Introduction

Over the years, power conditioners suitable for consumer electronics applications have taken various forms, ranging from massive, potted autotransformers and chokes, to the



more *svelte* and sophisticated designs of

today. Elaborate ground planes, esoteric capacitors, cryogenic treatment of key components, exotic internal wiring—some products even use silver while

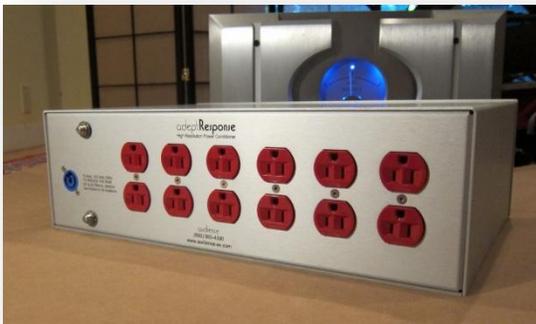


others employ liquid-polymer conductors—differentiate the many offerings on the market.

The Audience adeptResponse aR12-TS is the third incarnation of their popular Adept Response power conditioner series that started in 2005, and it embodies many of the latest trends in this product category. The engineering improvements in Audience's TS model are numerous: Specialized Teflon capacitors with monocrystalline copper leads; widespread use of welds rather than ordinary soldering; hand-wiring rather than printed circuit boards; and several refinements to the unit's grounding topology.

Audience’s fundamental strategies for clearing out the noisy crud and delivering the idealized, pure energy that sensitive electronics require, include: Isolation, power-factor correction—meaning compensating for current vs voltage phase anomalies caused by the load—and several forms of filtering.

Keep in mind that in addition to purifying the power going into your system as a whole, there are plenty of gremlins generating noise inside each component



as well. Thus, another important role of any power conditioner is to keep the bad guys from escaping and contaminating other components.

Power to the people

Fundamentally, the electrical grid in most developed countries keeps myriad light bulbs lit and motors turning. However, providing decent juice for

devices with phase noise specifications in handfulls of femtoseconds is probably not high on the list of priorities for most power companies.

Here in upcountry Maui, we have local outages every month, and a major or even island-wide blackout once or twice a year. Keeping the lights on seems to be something of a continuing battle, or at very least, a work in progress. Between drunks hitting phone poles that jumped out in front of them, vegetation that grows several feet a year, major earthquakes, storms and salt spray, well, put it this way, most everybody knows the phone number to the power company trouble desk by heart. And, apart from all these issues, the grid itself isn’t very stable. Despite all the enthusiasm for alternative energy sources, our “real world” experience in Hawaii suggests that electrical “multiculturalism” may prove to be a really bad idea: Maui County is typical for the state, in that we generate power from many sources, including coal, mountains of it; bagasse (from sugar cane) and other vegetable waste; fuel oil; water; the wind, the sun; eventually algae and, possibly, ocean waves. Other islands add geothermal energy and ocean-temperature-gradient heat pumps to the mix. While each of these power

sources has its advantages, integrating them into an existing grid is another matter entirely.

Just one example: If clouds suddenly roll in over the island of Lana'i, where solar photovoltaic panels are widely used for lots of good reasons, the sudden drop in capacity causes the grid frequency to droop slightly from its nominal 60 Hertz, which in turn inconveniently triggers automatic load-shedding at various random locations elsewhere. This isn't exactly what the utility company or alternate energy proponents had in mind, but it's a reality of what happens when conventional power distribution grids are forced to deal with multiple generation technologies.

Apart from getting power to one's abode in the first place, truly enjoyable musical experience also requires a "clean" pathway from the main electrical panel to the listening room. However, especially in existing structures, replacing ancient breakers and buss bars, pulling heavy-gauge copper wire through the framing and swapping out corroded fixtures are not activities one anticipates with much pleasure.

Given decent power in the wall, and finally replacing those existing \$1.79 no-name wall outlets with high-grade ones

from Hubbell or Wattgate, there's still the task of conditioning and the distributing the juice to all the components. My own system, for example, which to me always seems like the essence of simplicity, but isn't, actually requires at least ten power cords for the capital items (DACs, numerous small power supplies, power amps, USB-S/PDIF transports and so on) along with half-a-dozen additional outlets on a



connector strip for the accessories! That's a lot of cabling and connectors for what is, conceptually, a straight-forward system.

Setting up the Audience is straightforward. The powerChord e or Au 24 powerChord, each with a Wattgate plug goes into the wall outlet (mine has both audio-grade Hubbell and Wattgate 318 ag receptacles); the specialized Neutrik Powercon at the other end of

the Au24 goes into the back of the aR12-TS chassis. There's nothing like secure connectors such as the Neutrik, compared to the sloppy fit and instability of many, if not most, IEC plugs. Just flip up the magnetic circuit breaker, and a blue, three-digit seven-segment display shows the line voltage.



One point about the breaker is that the magnetic type used in the Audience requires very little force to actuate. If you brush against it, it's pretty easy to flip it to the off position, which happened to me on more than one occasion. On the other hand, it turns out that there's an interesting technical reason behind this behavior. John McDonald at Audience says one of their primary design goals is to eliminate any resistance to the flow of power through the system, and that the electromagnetic types commonly used in breaker panels

and many other audio products have increasing resistance as the current increases; they also require more force to trip the breaker at higher loads.

In addition to the 12 Hubbell outlets, there are two coaxial F connectors for cable TV or satellite users; running the feed through the Audience completely isolates the ground, which goes a long way towards keeping hum and grunge out of the system.

Noise to nectar?

Like most components, the Audience aR12-TS conditioner and powerChords require several weeks of "running in" before they sound their best. Compared to powering your system straight from the wall, you'll hear considerable improvements within the first few minutes of using the Audience. But be patient, as things will get even better over time.

To me, the most obvious and immediately apparent benefit of the aR12-TS is disappearance of the roiling, boiling, gritty, grayish background artifacts that make for tedious listening. All this noise is not only audible on its own, during silent passages, but is somehow convolved into just about every aspect of the musical experience

as well. It's a "presence" that gets on one's nerves after a while. With the Audience in place, these artifacts are greatly reduced, so that now the background is primarily that of the recording, along with whatever the system electronics add to the mix.

And, in addition to what eliminating grunge does for the background, the improvements in dynamics, timbre, the soundstage and imaging are not subtle. Let's hear how this affects the sound, firstly using the aR-TS with the powerChord e, and then with Audience's high-end Au24 powerChord.

The sounds of silence

Angela Hewitt's virtuoso piano renderings of the Bach *Fantasia* on Hyperion are always a good place to start when evaluating a new component. Firstly, there's only a single instrument—Angela's Steinway—which makes it easy to listen to details of timbre, attack and decay. Secondly, it's great music: Bach's composition is captivating, engaging, and makes me, at least, marvel at how these études somehow capture the cosmic nature creation in their understated but powerful expressions.

With the aR12-TS and the powerChord e, one can tell that the recording space is

fairly small, and there's a reasonable experience of soundstage width, but not that much depth. However, the timbres are well-expressed, accurate and differentiated from top to bottom. Overall, there's a smoothness, richness and sense of consolidation which is the exact opposite of the gritty, tense and MP3-like distortion associated with



unconditioned power. The piano seems a little forward, and there's a modest sense of air and ambiance around the instrument; reverberation cuts out quickly. It's eminently listenable, and free from distracting artifacts.

Swapping in the Au24 powerChord, there's a considerable transformation of the sonics. The piano moves slightly back into the soundstage, transients pick up speed, and the soundstage becomes quite a bit deeper and wider in the far

corners. There's definitely more information and detail, which extends very naturally and continuously from the base established with the powerChord e. Hall reverberation, ambiance and air are noticeably more prominent.

With Marni Nixon's *All the Things You Are*, on Reference Recordings, is another



studio performance, with piano, harp and strings accompaniment. Once again, with the powerChord e, the sound is entirely agreeable. There's little reverb from what is probably a rather "dry" venue, instruments have rich and coherent timbre, with some sense of dimensionality, and the dynamics are a little constrained. Adding the Au 24, the soundstage widens and deepens rather dramatically; the various instruments now are surrounded by palpable air and action; and various components of the all reverb are now much more apparent.

Finally, Sir Arthur Sullivan's *The Tempest* Act IV overture, performed by the Kansas City Symphony, and released as a *Reference Recordings* HRx 176 kHz, 24 bit is one of Keith Johnson's best recordings and captures an inspired performance. Here, the powerChord e delivers a wonderfully quiet background, or perhaps no background at all would be a better way to describe it. Dynamics are again slightly limited, and the soundstage a bit narrower than one might expect.

On the other hand, the complex mixture of timbres and interplay of instrumental lines is clear, satisfying and convincing. With the Au24, there's a big increase in soundstage width and depth; images spread out to more natural proportions, and they seem to stand out much more prominently than before. Dynamics have greater range and subtlety. The performance and sonics definitely come alive; everything is much livelier, more expanded and open.

Conclusions

The aR12-TS clearly establishes the conditions for realistic, natural, fatigue-free listening. Backgrounds are just that; they're noticeable by their proper place, which is behind the music, rather than interfering with it. And certainly the

many odious artifacts generated by dubious power quality are highly suppressed. In a more positive sense, every describable quality of sonic



performance is improved compared to using unconditioned power.

While various benighted sorts continue to claim that power cords don't matter, the simple observations made here should, one hopes, give audio enthusiast confidence that, while often costly, power cords and conditioners are fundamentally important for a truly satisfying musical experience. With the powerChord e, the aR12-TS opens up a window into musical reality and delivers the essentials of timbre and image coherence correctly.

The Au24 powerChord makes even better use of the aR12-TS core contributions, and adds another dimension of musicality and enjoyment to this foundation. The difference between the two power cords is considerable, and for systems capable of resolving these significant improvements, the Au24 is definitely the way to go.

Nicholas Bedworth

Pricing

Price: \$8995 with powerChord e;
\$10,545 with Au24 powerChord

Company information

Company Web site: www.audience-av.com

Address: Audience, 120 N. Pacific Street,
K-9, San Marcos, CA 92069

Phone: (800) 565-4390

General specifications

Current/voltage: 15 A or 20 A; 120, 220-240 V

Outlets: 12 Hubbell audio-grade

Satellite/Cable TV connectors: threaded coaxial F type

Dimensions: 17" W x 5.25" H x 11.4" D (43 cm x 13.5 cm x 29 cm)

Weight: 16.4 lbs/7.45 kg including power cable

Review system details

Sources: Antelope Gold DAC with Voltikus power supply; MSB Technology Universal Media Transport, MSB Technology Signature Platinum DAC IV, Weiss DAC 202; Audiophile1 USB-S/PDIF transport-processor; Toshiba Qosmio laptop; HP HDX 18 laptop; Seagate 1.5 TB external digital media storage.

House clock: Grimm Audio CC-1 word clock.

Amplifiers: GTE Audio Trinity monoblocks; Technical Brain TBP-Zero version 2 monoblocks, Pass XA 200.5 monoblocks.

Speakers: Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha W/P.

Software: J. River Media Player 15.

Cables: AudioQuest Wildwood single bi-wire speaker cables; AudioQuest Sky, Silent Source Audio Music Reference analogue interconnects; WireWorld Cable Platinum Starlight, WireWorld Cable Gold Starlight, AudioQuest Eagle Eye, AudioQuest Raven S/PDIF and AES/EBU digital interconnects; WireWorld Cable Starlight, AudioQuest Carbon USB cables.

Room 1: 18' deep, 12' wide, 8' to 11' ceiling