



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Audience adeptResponse aR8 power conditioner

by Alan Sircom

**O**h dear. This product marks my transition to the Dark Side. I've joined the ranks of the audiophools now, and the problem is... I just don't care. I'm listening to, and thoroughly enjoying, the sound of music played through the Audience adeptResponse aR8 power conditioner, and that's me marked for the rubber room by hi-fi's pragmatist quarter.

Audience is the brainchild of John McDonald and the late Richard Smith (who's soldering iron has now been passed on to designer Roger Sheker). The Californian company made its name with high-res Auricap capacitors, but is also known for its cables, power conditioners and 'auric illuminator' disc treatment (it also makes loudspeakers, and an amp system is waiting in the wings). Although some of its products have a distinctly left-field stance, Audience is considered one of the good guys delivering an honest product, born out of actually wanting things to sound better. And John McDonald is reputed to have some of the best ears in the business.

The adeptResponse aR8 conditioner is built in a very robust box (in business-like matt black or almost Jeff Rowland-like brushed silver). We 240V UK types get two versions; the four socket aR4 (at a cool £1,999) and the eight-socket aR8 (for a grand more). Both are designed to sit in a conventional hi-fi rack, but the bigger aR8 comes with a big magnetic power breaker throw switch and a red voltage LED read-out on the front panel. The smaller one just has the carved logo. If you are prepared to put up with Schuko sockets (as in not the three-pin 13A sockets used in the UK), the two boxes accept six (aR6) and a dozen (aR12) components respectively. Both come with a six foot length of the company's powerChord e mains lead as standard; the downside is this is terminated with a Neutrik PowerCon socket at the conditioner end, so comparisons are difficult to say the least.

The conditioner is designed to strike at what Audience feels are the three biggest problems with power as it reaches your system; power factor correction, filtering and transient suppression. Isolation is also a key issue that's addressed in the aR8. Power factor correction means the aR8 tries to bring the mains current and voltage into phase, which means better power transfer.

Transient suppression is an interesting aside. Dynamics in most power conditioners are actually held back by the use of a metal oxide varistor as a clamp, grounding high voltage transients. Problem with MOV devices is they are said to degrade and act more like a capacitor, and a noisy one at that. The adeptResponse design features a unique (and highly proprietary) no-wear system instead, so one audible distortion is effectively eliminated. The filtering mechanism used by Audience is also proprietary, but it filters each output and double filters the outputs from one another to help isolate them.

Open the aR8 up and inside is the grand master of passive conditioning packages. As you might expect, the aR8 is packed with the company's Auricap capacitors inside. There's some cryo-treatment, too. These components are specially designed to produce no significant series resistance, and thus a low impedance path to the electronics. A special hot rodded version is available in the US, which replaces the standard caps ▶

with Audience's Teflon designs, at pretty much double the cost. Rumour has it, the aR12T raises the bar still further. If so, it must be something truly magical, because the standard aR8/aR12 is one of the most significant upgrades you can make. But only after a lengthy run-in.

Dropping into Gloria Gaynor mode for a moment, at first I was afraid. I was petrified. Kept thinking why do people love this piece of crap that's by my side. But then it spent so many hours just running in to prove me wrong. It grew strong. And we learned how to get along.

Enough with the disco paraphrasing. It sounds OK at first (even if 'crap' scans better) but transforms significantly over the next 100 hours or more. In fairness, I don't know whether this is a slow improvement or major change somewhere along the continuum, as I was out at shows for almost the whole run-in period. I just heard something sounding OK one day, went away, came back to find the same thing sound remarkable. This is capacitor conditioning. Remove the aR8 from the juice for a few days, discharge those caps and you are back where you started, apparently.

The great thing about the Audience aR8 is that once you get past those first hours, it makes a big and obvious change. That can lead to absurd reviewer-only systems that no-one in reality would ever consider – who else would use a £3,000 power conditioner to healthy up a £350 Cambridge Azur 650A amplifier? – but it means the aR8 is one of the most immediately understandable mains conditioners out there. Valve amps? No worries. Apparently, Audience is one of the few mains conditioner purveyors that even gains friends among the Naim fraternity (in the US at least), which is high praise indeed. And yes, because of its passive nature, you can use it with a bunch of other power products if you want.

The usual mains effect of lowering the noise floor is in full effect, but without the dynamic compression or softening of transients that accompanies most mains conditioners. In fact, instead of compromising these two key elements of the sound, in many cases, it improves them. A lot.

This is at once a subtle change and an obvious change; that sounds contrary, but it's the only way I can describe what happens here. The subtle change is the way it gets all your audio ducks in a row, making the sound more dynamic, more encompassing, filling out the bass notes and the image depth, making the coherence between instruments and

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the phrasing of those individual instruments stand together well, giving the sound a sense of organic flow, increasing detail, lowering coloration and all the rest. The obvious change is it does this so powerfully, that you feel like your system has been running at half-power prior to inserting the aR8.

What happens next is surprising. It makes the sound as if the amp and speakers were upgraded. Sibilant, spitchy vocals and too-splashy cymbal sounds are given special treatment, opening up unheard levels of detail and articulation (my German is extremely limited – I can ask for directions to bar, brothel and hospital and not much else ▶



► – but I found myself following along to Rammstein as if I'd just spent a month under a fraulein). This happened almost regardless of musical genre; it brought you closer to Miles Davis' mute, conveyed Ashkenazy's virtuosity when playing Mozart with more verve and made Ray LaMontagne's breathing patterns all the more noticeable (and yet, not uncomfortably so). It also stops you considering music as background; this makes you play more music at a single sitting and focuses your attention on the music playing, not the shopping list, the state of shoe design in the 21st Century or whether QPR deserved to win last week. All that from a power product... surprising!

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The acid test of a product in many cases is what happens to your system when it is removed. Here, the aR8 proved its mettle and showed what it was really doing. The sound became less seamless and less dynamic. Transients were blunted, and the bass line was significantly less timely. Vocals may have been more distinct and extended and separate from the backline, but this robbed the sound of its 'PRaT'. Albums returned to being just a motley collection of tracks, instead of being a distinct whole that you wanted to play from end to end. That underpinning threat level of Slipknot was lost, too. You get a handle on why the Naim guys approve of the Audience when you plug it back in; it's more rhythmically cogent and, although not every Naim-ite is a headbanger, the aR8 unlocks more of the volume dial without removing the smile factor in the process.

No product is perfect, but the aR8 gets damn close. On very high-res and exceptionally neutral equipment, the sound took on a mild boost in the lower part of a tenor's register, while the bat-eared part of the treble was smoothed off and rounded down. But on most products it improved audio across the board – from the insanely cheap, to the sort of products likely well-matched to a conditioner of this magnitude and on up to the insanely expensive. The level of improvement in most cases was good enough to make you draw breath.

It's strange; if a change this large is laid at the door of a CD player, preamp or power amp, few quibble. Even saying changing the interconnect cables produced this big a difference might be accepted with scant question, but to attribute these sort of improvements to a power product is always viewed quizzically. The fact remains that the Audience adeptResponse aR8 makes a big, important difference to the sound, every bit in line with three-grand upgrades to electronics further up the food chain. So, set aside your preconceptions and prejudices and listen. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Audience adeptResponse aR8 power conditioner

**Current/Voltage:** 15A or 20A/120V, 220V, 230V, 240V

**Power Outlets:** eight high conductivity power receptacles

**Satellite/Cable TV:** Ground loop isolation transformer for hum reduction

**Indicator:** Front panel digital LED incoming voltage readout

**Chassis:** Heavy duty, rack-mountable

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 48.3x12.7x22.9cm

**Weight:** 7.45kg including powerChord

**Finish:** Grained and satin anodized aluminium Silver or Black

**Price:** £2,999

**Manufactured by**

Audience

URL: [www.audience-av.com](http://www.audience-av.com)

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