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Cables & Accessories

When you have successfully assembled an audio system composed of the best components you can afford (or justify) you can fine-tune that system with accessories to achieve all the performance capability from your investment. You'll want to be extremely careful when venturing into this potential minefield. Some accessories have a small positive effect on sound quality and can be added to an otherwise completed system to squeeze out that last bit of performance. Some

Accessories are among the most heavily promoted products in audio. They are also among the most profitable for manufacturers and retailers. They seldom perform as well as advertised and often make the sound worse, or simply different, rather than better. With religious fervor people keep buying accessories and hoping they will somehow turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. Read my lips folks: it ain't gonna happen. If you get an audible improvement, and that's a big if, that



accessories are simply frauds that offer only psychological performance enhancements. Some accessories actually have a negative impact on sound quality.

improvement will be subtle. If you have assembled a high-resolution system that subtle difference may be worth the effort and expense. If your basic system still needs improvement,

accessories are a waste of money. Accessorizing a system to add compensatory colorations is a big mistake.

When choosing between a power line conditioner for use with your old amplifier or upgrading to a better amplifier, choose the better amplifier. In fact that's pretty much an axiom. A component upgrade will almost always provide more improvement than a "performance enhancing" accessory. (The exception is in the rare instance when the accessory solves an actual problem.)

If one of your components is flawed, replace it. Don't try to reduce or compensate for the flaw with an accessory. If you start stacking one coloration on top of another you'll become hopelessly mired in a maze of aberrations from which you'll probably never emerge.

“Some accessories actually have a negative impact on sound quality.”

Don't take anybody's word for it. Make the salesman prove that his magic moon puck improves the sound of his demonstration system and make sure he'll take it back if it fails to work in your home. Compare the sound of your own audio system with and without the accessory under consideration. The information in this **Journal** will show you how to make valid comparisons and help you make informed decisions.

Gauging the effect of accessories

There is a simple method for evaluating the efficacy of an accessory and I'll show you how to do it. You should never buy anything without proving to yourself that it has a positive influence on sound quality and if everybody did this, many accessory manufacturers would vanish from the industry (as they should). You can weed out many frauds in the dealer's showroom by listening to his demonstration system but the final test should be in your system in your home.

Measuring the effect of accessories

I can hear things I can't measure—yet. That doesn't mean

these characteristics can't be measured, it just means that I don't know how. Many accessories that aren't in the signal path fall into this classification and so do most cables, which *are* in the signal path. Don't ignore things we don't yet fully understand. If you can hear it, it matters!

After an objectively accurate and subjectively pleasing system has been assembled it can be fine-tuned with accessories. When discussing components that are not in the signal path—and even some that are—measurements can be inadequate tools for evaluation. When something's going on that is clearly audible but is not indicated by our measurements, that doesn't mean measurements are worthless. It simply means that in certain areas we can't rely as much on measured performance.

If a component is hopelessly wrong, measurements will probably alert us but if a large group of components all have acceptable measured performance, then only listening will allow us to choose. That's probably because less work has been done to identify characteristics that some refuse to believe exist. If you measure the DC resistance, capacitive reactance and inductive reactance of most cables, for instance, you'll find little difference. If you compare them in a bypass test you'll discover amazing sonic variations. I'll show you how.

If you believe that the three parameters of DC resistance, inductive reactance and capacitive reactance completely define audio cables, you're wrong and I'll show you how to prove that to yourself. If you believe that a power line filter that can be proven to remove hash from an AC line will necessarily improve the sound of an audio system, you're wrong and I'll try to show you how to prove that to yourself, too.

If you believe that vibration can't affect a solid-state component with virtually no internal wiring... Well we're getting ahead of ourselves here. This **Journal** won't answer all your questions about accessories but it will get you started on your own listening experiments. When you listen and compare you'll save lots of money that you might have spent on worthless accessories, but don't throw the baby out with the bath water. Some accessories really work and some are realistically priced. And some, like high-quality cables, are indispensable. **APJ**