WWW.HIFICRITIC.COM ISSN 1759-7919

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO REVIEW MAGAZINE
Volume 11 / Number 4 October - December 2017 £17 (UK)

MAGICO SPODs
Who would have thought that a set of feet could have such a dramatic effect upon the sound of a high class loudspeaker? Martin Colloms carries out the analysis

CHORD ELECTRONICS MOJO + POLY
Mojo is well established, but its partner Poly is brand new – or maybe it was launched before it was really ready? Harry Harrison investigates

DSD DOWNLOADS
Keith Howard examines what turns out to be a very complex issue, through both measurement and listening

FOCAL SCALA UTOPIA EVO
A true competitor for B&W's 800 D3, the Scala costs a bit more, but that's arguably justified by its performance, as Paul Messenger discovers

ATC SCM50SL
This large ATC stand-mount has been around long enough to be considered a classic. It may not be the height of fashion, but Martin Colloms rates its performance highly.

PASS LABS XP-12 + XA30.8
Kevin Fiske was so impressed by this brand's integrated amplifier, he couldn't resist trying a separate pre-/power – and ended up buying the combo!

MUSIC & MORE

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE
Proac Response D Two, Linn Klimax DS+Katalyst, QED XT25, Rotel RA-1572, NAD C388, Pass Labs XP-12, Pass Labs XA30.8, Chord Electronics Mojo, Chord Electronics Poly, ATC SCM50SL, Magico SPODs, Spendor A4, Focal Scala Utopia Evo

Magico SPOD

MARTIN COLLOMS TRIES MAGICO'S SPOD HEAVY DUTY FLOOR COUPLERS BENEATH HIS S5 IIs

MARTIN COLLOMS

HIFICRITIC RECOMMENDED

Some months back I asked about a set of *SPOD* accessory feet, which were announced in 2016 for Magico's *S-series* loudspeakers. The related, unspiked *MPOD* feet had been supplied for a year or two for their *M-series* of loudspeakers, but Magico does not suggest spiking these high mass enclosures as they could damage floors. There are also *QPOD* devices that operate as vibration controlling supports, for example under audio electronics; I've tried these informally, though without great success, at least under my Naim electronics.

The *SPOD*s are a new design with stronger floor spikes, and are intended for use with lower mass loudspeakers such as Magico's *S-series* (but not including the *S7 II* which is considered too heavy for spikes). My current reference loudspeaker is the Magico *S5 II*, a *HIFICRITIC* stalwart that has given good service in my review system, and are now well run-in after a year or so, during which the speakers have continued to improve in the more subtle aspects of sound quality, including micro-dynamics and transparency. More significant, I am now very familiar with how they behave and sound, including their best placement in the room, optimal toe-in and azimuth (tilt). They come with substantial alloy bases to take spanner-locked spikes, which bear onto large stainless steel discs for polished and tiled floors.

The *MPOD*s, primarily intended for use with *M-series* models are for ultra-heavy speakers and have integral heavy duty stainless steel feet machined as a shallow dome. This design is distinguished by a 'priming pin', which is removed after installation to free the internal components for correct operation. The *SPOD* is designed for the relatively lighter *S-series* of speakers. It uses adjustable floor spikes as before, retaining the existing stainless steel discs. New, shorter and stronger threaded spikes are provided.

Note that these revised support interfaces promise an important upgrade for the *S-series* of loudspeaker systems, and in particular, for the original versions of the *S3* and *S1* which use stabilising outriggers of relatively lightweight construction. These floor support systems had just been revised to advantage in the *MkII* versions of the *S1* and *S3*.

The good news is that *SPOD*s can now be ordered complete with revised and improved floor coupling outriggers for the earlier versions of those loudspeakers, at an extra £220 for the stereo set; a sound quality bonus is likely. (The original version of the Magico *S3* was reviewed in *Vol8 No3*)

Our review *SPOD*s were requested back in March 2017, but after some initial supply delay other projects intervened, so we missed out on the necessary quiet period that had been set aside for their careful installation and controlled comparative evaluation. With such products the listener really needs to settle down in order to explore effects that might well be rather subtle. Moreover, on these occasions, such interface devices might well take as much as they give, such as deeper imaging but softer bass. It is always wise to take them seriously, so I decided to assess

them as if they represented a new version of the loudspeaker concerned.

Design of the *SPOD* involves several different materials. A stainless steel bolt is thread-locked onto the upper cylindrical boss, made of a hard-coated aluminium alloy. Below a ductile copper interlayer appears, and then a black finished aluminium cone section, and finally the short, locking, stainless steel floor spike. The whole assembly operates under a state of high compression once in position and loaded. Such a method for absorbing vibration energy is known as constrained layer damping (CLD), where unwanted mechanical vibration movements are harmlessly converted into heat, ideally without additional frequency dependent resonance.

The *SPOD* design aim is to make the entire assembly devoid of self-resonance, and without significant displacement once installed, yet usefully absorb and terminate broad-band audio frequency vibration arriving at the mechanical interfaces. This energy traffic is two-way: primarily from the loudspeakers to the floor, but the device also needs to take account of structural vibrations running back to the loudspeaker.

Loudspeaker enclosures will always suffer vibration, even if they are infinitely rigid and not undergoing significant structural bending resonances. Driver diaphragm masses are being accelerated and decelerated, and mechanical reaction forces are an inevitable consequence. Coupled to the floor and thence to the rest of the room structure, some audio vibration is then conducted from the speaker to the environment and is re-radiated. These signals will blur and colour the overall sound quality, and will do so in a different way from the usual reflections in the room space.

Coupled vibration sets up a longer term noise floor, delayed and partly decorrelated with the music signal, but nevertheless impairing the dynamic range, and blurring subtle information audible in deep musical decays. With such unwanted coupling the rendering of upper frequency components may be less dynamically expressive and also may sound less transparent, while the lower frequencies may show a blurring kind of hangover, adding unwanted colour, with a resulting impediment to bass tune and rhythm lines.

If such an interface vibration control device includes a component of elasticity (a form of spring), then at lower frequencies the substantial speaker mass may well resonate with it, adding a dominant coloration at and near that coupled frequency, and also potentially reducing stereo image focus due to micro movements of the loudspeakers.

Before commencing the evaluation I made sure that the whole audio system was up to scratch. All spikes were tightened and aligned on my hardwood over concrete floor, all cables dressed, power lines not crossed over. I then took stock of the sound quality of the system with a number of familiar tracks, keeping careful notes.

With a suitable steel block temporarily wedged underneath that massive *S5 II* alloy baseplate I was able to tilt the speakers sufficiently to exchange the standard factory spikes for the *SPOD*s, having previously stabilised the locations of the discs on the polished floor with heavy duty adhesive tape. (You do not want 100kg, of tall alloy loudspeaker sliding away from you as you fit the new spikes!)

After installation I took great care to check the toe-in, alignment and azimuth of the loudspeaker pair, and waited long enough to get my breath back and my heart rate to return to normal before commencing listening. The results were so surprising that it took a week before I felt that I fully understood the overall effect and could then describe it in detail.

Sound Quality

The system sounded pretty good before I started, and quite frankly I was more than a little sceptical about the possible result. So many such devices may alter the sound and begin to convince, but with more extended reflection are often found to subtract as much performance as they add.

However, I was not prepared for the degree of change wrought by the *SPOD*s, and at first it was enough to sow seeds of doubt: surely the sound quality should not be that different? First impressions were of a leaner tonal balance, with less upper bass and lower midrange, leading to a mild change in mid timbre; the upper midrange appeared to be slightly hollowed out. The new sound was bolder and more positive, yet less projected in the soundstage. I was even minded to move the loudspeakers!

By comparison, the previous condition was considered thicker textured and more congested. Conversely, would the new arrangement turn out to sound too thin and lightweight? A natural tonal balance is really important for establishing a sense of neutral presence and perspective, and is also a key element in attaining convincing and satisfying stereo image space. And of course there is rather more to sound quality than a natural timbre.

Two dominant factors were evident right away. The upper bass was now playing with greater harmonic character, definition and tunefulness, while the lower mid was comparatively less congested and

relatively less prominent. Singing voices and small drums both benefitted immediately from the change, were rendered more articulately, and were also more precisely positioned in the soundstage.

Next, the soundstage itself caught my attention, sounding rather like I had swapped to a new and significantly improved speaker cable. The stereo image was obviously deeper than before, with clearly improved transparency and better localisation, and was benefitting the whole audible frequency range. The stereo image was also now better arranged, with more even depth layering. It also unexpectedly showed significantly greater stage width. I ascribe this overall improvement to a reduction of the predominantly monaural 'mixed-together' vibration-related audible noise from the loudspeaker pair.

The overall sonic character was rather more relaxed and free flowing, less 'edge of the seat'. Furthermore, the audibly larger and more spacious soundscapes were imbued with improved texture and detail, revealing more of the innate and detailed spaciousness of familiar favourite recordings. Without doubt the *S5II* loudspeaker was now more transparent than before, better able to resolve micro detail in recordings, and vocals were more clearly enunciated. With a touch of follow up 'fine tuning' of loudspeaker angle and azimuth, much of the original tonal balance and stereo presentation was restored, along with those important and valued improvements described above.

At lower sound levels I also observed that there was now significantly greater clarity, and reduced aural fatigue (a factor that is very low with this system anyway). Also the useable dynamic range was significantly improved, as if the power amplifier had more headroom and could play more loudly. These psychoacoustic effects were quite fascinating. I enjoyed the improved quality in bass and drum section tune-playing, which was most rewarding, particularly with complex jazz tracks, such as those featuring Manu Katché. (Many loudspeaker systems colour and mask drum transients such that you hear the percussive impact but are less aware of the pitch and character of the drum note.)

With some systems Jan Gabarek's soprano sax can wail rather too much at high sound levels. This aspect is now brought into better perspective with the new Magico supports. Another quality I have noted previously in review assessments concerns vibrato, an important quality that adds much richness and power to musicianship, but which some audio systems can dilute and even mask in instrumental performances. These *SPOD* floor interfaces helped bring out vibrato well, a positive sign.

This could well be due to the better behaved, less resonant, and better damped coupling between the operating loudspeaker and the floor. I have heard lesser improvements of this kind generated by quite costly power amplifier upgrades.

However, I must also comment that I and some listeners have noted that, notwithstanding the considerable overall quality improvements noted above, there was also some loss in musical rhythm and timing. This will likely be more noticeable with a predominately Naim electronics based system such as mine, than perhaps with many, otherwise well regarded, audiophile arrangements.

Unfortunately this well made energy control product could not be tested on the conventional suspended wood floor alternative, and I cannot predict the outcome with this common and widespread arrangement. My less than 100% rhythm finding may be an unforeseen issue resulting from that rigid and high mass concrete-based floor which is a structural feature of my listening room. However, I remain amazed by the sheer degree of change in sound quality that is possible from such a device with these massive and well regarded loudspeakers.

Conclusions

I am routinely sceptical of many 'go-faster' mechanical control devices, often offered at high prices and frequently with incomplete benefits. While I do think that the *SPOD*s are costly and could rather warp our perception of value, in the context of the *S5 II* at least (currently listed at c£50,000/pair in the UK), the *SPOD*s do provide a massive improvement in most areas, including stereo image focus and scale, and have significantly greater transparency. I for one am disappointed to forgo such benefits, but in my room the sense of musical timing just did not quite work out. For Magico enthusiasts I rate these as a recommended upgrade component for compatible combinations of loudspeakers, systems and floor constructions. I'd particularly recommend them for the original *S1* and *S3* models, thanks due to the improved outriggers supplied with appropriate versions of the *SPOD*s.

Magico SPOD stereo footer sets. (packs of 6 or 8 required depending on the model)

1. *SPOD 8*: SRP £2,990 for direct installation on *S1 II, S3 II, S5 II, V2, V3, Q1, Q3* and *Q5* loudspeakers

2. *SPOD 8 PLUS*: SRP £3,195 for direct installation on *S1*, including new improved outriggers

3. *SPOD 6*: SRP £2,245 for direct installation on original *S5*

(There is also a version of the *QPOD* for the *S7 II*)

The Review System

Constellation *Inspiration 1.0*, Townshend *Allegri* control units; Naim *NAP 500 DR* power amplifier; Linn *LP12* vinyl player with *Keel* chassis and *Radikal* motor control, Naim *Aro* arm, Lyra *Delos* Cartridge, Naim *SuperLine* phono pre-amp; Naim *UnitiServe* network server and S/PDIF source; Linn Klimax *Katalyst* streamer-DAC; Naim *NDS* streamer-DAC with *555 PS(DR)*; Wilson Audio *Sabrina, Yvette*, Magico *S-5II,* Quad *ESL63*, BBC *LS3/5a* (15ohm) speakers; Naim *FRAIM* racks; Transparent XL *MM2*, Crystal *Ultra Diamond* and Naim *NAC A5* speaker cables, Naim *Super Lumina,* Transparent *MM2* and Van Den Hul *Carbon TFU* interconnect cables.

Contact:
Absolute Sounds
www,absolutesounds.com
Tel: 0208 971 3909