

Transparent Reference PowerIsolator power conditioner

by Alan Sircom

It's not so long ago that power conditioners were not a 'thing', especially in the UK and many European audio circles. We used to pride ourselves on having 'clean' power, as the juice coming into our homes was not fed through as many local transformers as happens elsewhere on the planet. So, while American manufacturers were developing power conditioners and regenerators for an ever-increasing local audience, many Europeans dismissed the notion as gilding the lily. That all changed as we added an increasing number of switch-mode power supplies into the home, whether they be inside home computers, LCD televisions, or the endless cavalcade of phone chargers left dangling on any nearby power-strip. This not only awoke a whole continent to the need for power products but required a change of thinking on the part of the power conditioner providers: rather than inoculate the system against power evils outside of the home, now the enemy was within.

Power conditioners, until very recently, tended toward one of two compromises. They cleaned up the power and made

the sound more refined and open, but either did so at the expense of dynamic range, or by adding a boat anchor to the music. In other words, 'big and slow' or 'fast and thin'. This is why, despite obvious advantages in the midrange, treble, and soundstaging of a system, and the lowering of the overall noise that a good power conditioner brought to the party, many decided that the price paid elsewhere in the musical presentation was too steep.

Transparent was wisely late to the power conditioner game. It has a four-strong line-up of power conditioners, of which the Reference sits below the two-output Opus and XL models and above the multi-output PowerIsolator. The Reference PowerIsolator comes with eight outlets if you are based in America, seven if in the EU, and only six if you live in the UK. This is because the large UK 13A three pin plug has the advantage of large contact area for the live, neutral, and earth pins, and its design makes it impossible to invert AC polarity, but it takes up more real-estate on the PowerIsolator's back panel... and UK fire safety regulations require anything ▶



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- ▶ that carries a current be fused (power cords included), which adds even more size to the UK three-pin plug.

The Reference PowerIsolator (whatever the socketry at the rear) features a quartet of separate noise-isolated parallel filter banks. It also features power factor correction, and – as a mark of how our industry is changing concerning digital audio – a Gigabit Ethernet isolator with surge protection. Unlike many such boxes that merely use a fuse, the Transparent uses a parallel hydraulic circuit breaker, which suddenly becomes all the more advantageous in UK circles, because our systems often have twice the number of fuses than in other countries because of that additional fire safety requirement for a fuse in every power cord. The amp-heavy, curved, and very dark grey box features extruded aluminium side-bars and cross bracing holding a rigid polymer shell, and – like the contents of the filter boxes in Transparent’s higher-end cables, including the Reference power cords recommended for use with this PowerIsolator – are epoxy-loaded to reduce vibration and resonance, as well as add mass to the overall unit.

We at *Hi-Fi+* have a set terminology – the Transparent product falls into the ‘power conditioner’ category – but it really doesn’t fit here. The clue is in the name; *PowerIsolator*. And isolation is what it does and does very well. It’s a rigid, almost impermeable barrier to stop noise from elsewhere on the power line making it into your audio system, across all frequencies. And when you hear that, you soon discover that other products obsessed with the minutiae of power conditioning might not be looking at the bigger picture. Instead, Transparent adopts the ‘do one thing and do it properly’ approach.

The improvements are substantial, especially on higher-resolution equipment that comes with inherent sensitivity to its surroundings. There’s a strong sense of effortlessness to the sound that is more than just lower noise backgrounds (or, more correctly, the result of low noise backgrounds, adequately executed). This also helps free up the inner detail in a soundstage, while retaining the width and precision of that stereo image. Meanwhile, the overall power and dynamism of the music played is undimmed, freed even, and while this is more about ‘grace’ and ‘space’, it doesn’t interfere with ‘pace’ either.

Adding those two Ethernet connections is a boon. As we inevitably move toward a more networked audio approach, it’s

becoming clear that the network is the single largest cause of power-related noise in a modern system. Unfortunately, unplugging your system from that source of noise also disconnects you from Tidal and Qobuz, so radical surgery is worse than the symptoms of the disease. The Reference PowerIsolator shuts out that network noise, and this has a dramatic effect on the sound of your system... even when the network streamer is not in use. If this were the only barrier the isolator brought to the system, it would be gratefully received, but as it also carries the same isolation to the whole system, it’s a done deal.

There is also a ‘secret menu’ trick with using the Reference PowerIsolator. Although it has six outputs in the UK, only use every alternate one. That way you get a double-dose of isolation and adding a second Reference is a way of building on the first without having to trade in or trade up or a bank of XL or Opus models.

I never got to fly on Concorde, but now I realise that I didn’t really want to break the sound barrier. With the Transparent Reference PowerIsolator in tow, I want more of a sound barrier. I want a solid wall between power and sound... and that’s what the Reference PowerIsolator brings, without any sonic booms or rattled windows, unless you want to create your own. We’ve been used to talking about the best of these power products as ‘benign+’ as in, they improve one aspect of performance while doing nothing too wrong elsewhere. This enhances the performance across the board. The power revolution starts here! +

PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

Transparent Reference PowerIsolator

Price: £4,875

Manufactured by: Transparent

URL: transparentcable.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

URL: absolutesounds.com

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