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54.99 ISSN 1465-5950



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JANUARY 2013 • 95

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FEATURE

Standing Firm – the tables

By Alan Sircom



Over the course of 2013, we shall be looking at the aspects surrounding audio, as well as audio itself. We will be investigating a variety of different kinds of acoustic coupling, decoupling and uncoupling systems to bring your equipment to life. We will also be investigating the importance of room treatments of all kinds, because improving the performance of the room can significantly enhance the performance of the system in that room. We will also see how these important elements can be tied together to make a good sound great.

As ever with audiophilia, we will start back-to-front; although room acoustic treatment will produce the largest changes to the sound of a system, generally the treatment itself is best approached on a case-by-case basis; although there are some broad topics that can be described, the topic itself needs some understanding of the mathematics and physics involved, and this will be better sidled up to than ran into headlong. So, we start instead with what keeps the equipment in place.

There are almost as many concepts behind equipment supports as there are pieces of equipment to support. The days of everything defaulting to the 'light, but rigid' shelf are behind us; we now have mass-loading, decoupling, tables as low and high-pass filters, cones, cups, air bladders, squidgy hockey pucks, blocks of wood, rollers and more. There are resonance controllers, resonance absorbers, resonance channels, non-magnetic supports and even magnetic field introduction agencies. These devices can be made out of grass, tree, glass, plastic, rubber or unobtainium. Each one has its ardent supporters; each one has its febrile detractors. And there are those who reject all of this and go to Ikea.

Put another way, there are three kinds of equipment supports; those that just provide support, those that do something for the sound, and those that do the wrong kind of something. Our task as reviewers is to discover whether the last is actually worse than the first and whether it is a universal 'bad' or simply doing the right things to the wrong products.

We'll start this survey with what seems like the new kid in town, but one that's been causing a stir in more traditional high-end circles on the QT for some time; Artesania Audio Esoteric, from Spain.

Artesania's goal is to rid any component on one of its products from the risk of vibration, either from the surroundings or from other components in the signal path. And in some respects, the stand is also designed to prevent products from themselves. When used correctly, each 'shelf' (actually articulated steel arms) can be individually adjusted for the optimum height and a device rests on four neoprene and nylon feet, resting on upturned spikes in an adjustable frame that itself hangs from nylon bushes and is prevented from moving by neoprene coated screw heads at the bottom of the stand. In essence, each component on the Artesania is a decoupled device sitting on a decoupled platform inside a decoupled frame. Optional glass shelves fit on the neoprene/nylon isolation feet, and there is a large triple-dampened glass shelf, sitting on spikes and isolated by neoprene and nylon pads.

Finally, each component on the stand gets its own damper (which looks like a large-spool Super-8 film can) that sits as close to the centre of that device's top plate, and the whole stand sits on large neoprene and polyamide feet.

With careful measurement of each component needed to find the right places to seat the isolation feet, precise adjustment of each component's position in a three-dimensional space and just an all-round level of care and attention required to install and set-up the system, swapping over from an existing table to the Artesania is no 20 second swap-over. It's more like a careful two-man operation. The more free space around the stand the better. Nevertheless, it is possible to move from one stand to another in reasonably short order, and we compared the Artesania to the Finite Elemente Pagode Master Reference stand, a very popular choice round these parts. We concentrated mostly on devices that would naturally benefit from a change in stand – such as CD transports and valve DACs, where stray vibration could

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create potentially audible differences in performance – but also went to the other extreme, swapping a solid-state power supply from table to table. This last should elicit no change whatsoever in theory, being both notionally impervious to microphony (no valves) and lacking any active circuitry directly in the signal chain.

Moving from stand to stand did significantly change the sound quality of the system. There was more going on. A lot more. The F-E stand has been highly praised time and again for its musical structure and harmonic richness, but the Artesania takes those musical aspects and runs with them. Music sounded bigger, better recorded, you could hear more into the recording and the frequency extremes were as effortless and natural as the mid-band. It's worth remembering this wasn't playing through a mediocre system that was already running at half-mast. This was a state of the art system ending in full range loudspeakers that was already sounding pretty damn good on the F-E stand and sounded a good deal better when component after component moved over to the Artesania.

I suppose the easiest way of considering this is the F-E stand has a distinct sound it imparts upon the products that sit upon it. It's a slightly dark, very musical presentation. The Artesania doesn't do this at all. It strives to limit the sound of the table, instead relying on the sound of the components in the system to deliver the sonic goods. And that can make good things sound truly remarkable. When the best of the best sits on the Artesania, they raise their game. Even – and I have no idea why this should be – when moving the power ▶

▶ supply of a two-box CD-transport from one stand to the other. Spinning discs, tubes... I get; getting the rest of the world out of the equation can give these items the chance to give their best, and when dealing with thoroughbreds, they need thoroughbred care and feeding. But a power supply??

Two interesting observations drop out of this. First, unlike many of the 'top table' contenders, this is a revolution, but not a coup. The Artesania 'sound' (more accurately 'absence of sound') is an addictive one, but it doesn't enforce other components to change to Artesania at a stroke. Yes, if all your ducks are in a row, so things get ever better (the improvements wrought by a power supply demonstrate that), but if in the transition to an all-Artesania system, you mix and match, the sound does not get worse, before it gets better.

Next, the Artesania might be a double-edged sword. By relying on the performance of the equipment and the equipment alone – something many equipment manufacturers talk about, but in reality few actually achieve – some components might not be as wonderful as their marketing claims.

Aside from the weight involved, building a 19" rack within a larger, rigid frame means – platform for platform – the Artesania support system is physically bigger than most. And although its dark grey or green uprights, its chrome, optional glass and white nylon bushes are not a problem for those fortunate enough to listen in their own dedicated man-caves, but might be a harder sell for those who share their listening space with family members.

It's also a demanding installation, requiring two people to extract, place and position the stand, and not just because it weighs close to 150kg all up for the biggest option. A nine-minute YouTube instructional video shows how to install the stand and it's not PR guff and filler. Have a space allocated in advance, a lot of room to unpack and build and a good day getting everything in place. If you have the system that can benefit from such an exercise though, it's more than worth it.

I've come to the conclusion that there is actually an easy – albeit totally arbitrary – price multiplier when it comes to 'proper'

supports; Spend no less than the price of the cheapest electronic product in your system, and spend no more than the average price of the products in your system, on the rack. If you view those two poles (the price of the cheapest component, and the average price of all the components) as your lower and upper limits, you'll likely find a support system that works well for your components.

And that's certainly the case with the Artesania. While it might transform the sound of an entry level electronics, this is functionally untenable for most people. On the other hand, for someone with a good Audio Research Reference system for example, the Artesania represents an excellent and obvious upgrade. It works! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Artesania Audio Esoteric equipment support

Prices: From £6,500

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