The Sonority Design Isolation Platforms

by Roy Gregory

Sonority Design is a young company based in the West Midlands that's quietly causing quite a stir with its range of isolation platforms. Intended originally to improve on the performance of simple MDF or glass shelves, the company now also produce speaker supports intended for use with stands or under floorstanders. Allowing you to elevate an entire system.

Essentially a pair of boards separated by ball bearings captured by shallow cups, don't be fooled by the apparent simplicity of the Sonority platforms. The company was exhaustive (obsessive) in its testing of different materials, dimensions and constructions before finally arriving at the combination you see before you. The boards are actually sheets of phenolic resin matrix, constructed around layers of thin, fibrous material to create a sheet that is rigid and easily machined but also possesses excellent self-damping. Similar to the material employed by Wilson Audio in their high-end speaker cabinets it is an expensive but mechanically impressive option. The base-board is supported on three flat aluminium discs, widely spaced, one to the front, two to the rear. These are mirror imaged by three shallow aluminium cups that match corresponding cups in the top-plate and between which sit three large diameter ceramic ball bearings; both the balls and the surface of the cups meet exacting tolerances to ensure minimum friction and free rolling action between the two layers of the platform. The top surface is graced by three cones that sit directly over the feet, each tipped by a smaller ceramic ball. So far so good, but what does it all mean?

Whilst Sonority were experimenting with all the various materials and configurations, it rapidly became apparent that the problem of isolating the equipment from the outside world was only part of the story. Drawing internal resonance out of the electronics themselves was just as important, hence the upward facing cones designed to bypass the supported unit's feet and couple the chassis directly to the dispersive layers of the platform. The upward facing cones are available in two heights as standard (the taller ones add around £15 to the price of a platform) but any height can be ordered. Sonority were keen to keep the cones as low as possible to minimize the "stack-height" of the platforms, allowing them to fit beneath equipment placed in existing racks and thus keeping them as versatile as possible. The standard cones are perfectly sufficient to bypass the small feet found on the likes of Naim equipment, and Sonority actually manufacture a dedicated platform specifically to replace the glass shelves (and their mounting hardware) in the Naim Fraim. The bigger feet favoured by many ▶

Reproduced from Hi-Fi+ Magazine, Issue 59
www.hifiplus.com

American manufacturers necessitate either taller cones – or you can simply remove the feet from the equipment.

Likewise, although the platforms we received for review employ a standard layout, the upward facing cones can be arranged in any pattern the customer requires. This is important as experience with both Vertex and Stillpoints platforms shows that getting the support points in the right places (generally beneath the mains transformer and then under particularly vulnerable circuitry) makes a huge difference to performance. Using the separate tall cones, each on a square of phenolic resin board, placing them between the equipment and the supporting platform quickly demonstrated the benefits. The other major option is what's termed the Ultra support, which employs the same construction and layout as the standard platform, but with phenolic boards 20mm rather than 12mm thick, raising the overall stack-height from 52mm to 68mm.

Sonority are also more than happy to work with customers when it comes to the precise arrangements required for speaker supports and floor interfaces. I received two options, the first being pairs of small plates, separated by the standard cup and ball arrangement, but this time employing the smaller ceramic bearings. The upper and lower faces of each pair are covered in a rough layer to prevent inadvertent slippage – just as well as they are intended for use between small speakers and their supporting stands. The second configuration is intended for use under floorstanding speakers and employs a pair of the Ultra level boards. The base-board is supported on three aluminum cones tipped with the small diameter ceramic balls. On these sit steel posts with machined cups in their tips, threaded through the board to allow leveling. Three of the larger cup and ball spacers isolate the top-plate and once again, a rough surface finish is supplied to prevent equipment slippage.

I've used the Sonority platforms under a huge variety of equipment and over a considerable period of time, but the thing that has really impressed me is the utter consistency of the results. Almost irrespective of the equipment in question, you know almost exactly what to expect: a blacker background leading to better separation, crisper dynamics, a more natural sense of pace and flow. Bass is tighter and deeper, although not weightier, leading to a quicker sound with an increased sense of momentum. Employing the Ultra platform does add weight and stability and this is where some will demur. PRATs will point at a perceived loss of drive and speed, but for me the effect is actually completely the opposite. The Ultra platform doesn't add padding; it subtly shifts the centre of each note's gravity, producing greater top to bottom linearity, a more natural sense of tonality and harmonic development. As a result, pace and phrasing is far more natural, taking on an unforced poise and a greater impression of the precise gaps between notes, the care with which musicians place them. Just listen to solo piano and you'll see what I mean. The Ultra platform delivers a larger and more complex instrument, more shape to musical phrases and lines, better definition when it comes to each note's weight and spacing.

But with only one Ultra platform on hand, where to place it? The answer is under the amplifier, or better still, under the power supply if you are using one. The impact under the ECI-5 was far more significant than under the ECC-1 CD player, but even that paled into insignificance once I placed it under the Elbrus power conditioner feeding the two Electrocompaniet units. In fact, the reason for this is entirely logical. If a large part of what the Sonority platforms are doing is down to absorbing the internal vibration generated within the equipment itself, start by putting your most effective platform under the thing with the biggest transformer in it. I hesitate to guarantee success, but the exceptions will be few and far between.

But the Sonority platforms really come into their own once you put the speaker supports into the

Reproduced from Hi-Fi+ Magazine, Issue 59
www.hifiplus.com

system. With speakers suitably elevated the sound steps away from the cabinets, in the process, stepping away from the system as a whole. The music has a far more holistic quality, the intrusion of the system, those effects that let you hear it working, is dramatically reduced. As a result the music speaks with a clearer, a more immediate and more intimate voice, the performance floating in its own space rather than anchored to the floor between the speakers. It's an effect you'll hear quite vividly on live recordings like the TVZ or Nanci Griffith's One Fair Summer Evening, where the recording brings its own environment with it.

A lot of this has to do with the way the Sonority platforms clean up the bass. They put edges on the notes and space them much more clearly, setting out the rhythm and pattern of the music as played by the musicians (rather than the system). Texture is improved as a result of the extra transparency and definition, but that's not really the Sonorities' greatest strength. They'll never match the likes of the High Res Kinibalu or SRA platforms when it comes to harmonic identity and development. Instead they're much more concerned with the structure of the piece and dynamic discrimination. It's a character that in part betrays their origins and association with Naim electronics, but they are far more capable than such a narrow application suggests. Whilst their low stack height and low cones make them well-suited to that application, simply add the taller cones and they'll deliver excellent results under all manner of equipment, including the likes of the Audio Research CD7, where the Ultra platform succeeded in significantly tightening the bass, instilling a welcome sense of urgency where appropriate. The speaker platforms are particularly effective when used in conjunction with fully floated electronics, making Sonority one of the few ranges that offer a coherent solution to total system support (the other being Stillpoints with the use of component stands under speakers). Many will consider the speaker platforms something of a luxury. That's a big mistake. After all, you don't see the whole picture until the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle is in place, a maxim that applies with a vengeance whether you are talking about Sonority, Vertex AQ or Stillpoints. It's almost as if the last piece is what finally unlocks the full potential of all the rest. Sonority platforms might look simple but the materials are of excellent quality, exhaustively selected and the elements are meticulously manufactured. The designs are more carefully considered than they might appear and the company is more than willing to work with customers to extend the performance benefits still further. In common with the other products mentioned above they tackle both sides of the mechanical interference problem, and do so extremely effectively, placing them in a select group capable of really delivering your system's potential.

Prices –

Standard Platform: £650
Ultra Platform: £995
Pair of Speaker Platforms: £1125

Manufacturer:
Sonority Design Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1384 79965
Net. www.sonoritydesign.co.uk

Reproduced from Hi-Fi+ Magazine, Issue 59
www.hifiplus.com