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Tony Bolton

One of the great pleasures of this job is exploring just how good sound reproduction can get and the myriad of different ways that we have found of improving different aspects of it. Unfortunately there is also the drawback that when some thing that is spectacularly good comes along, there is the inevitable return to normality afterwards and getting used to that product not being in situ.

Now, I am normally pretty good at readjusting my ears to how my systems normally sound, even after some quite substantial upgrades have passed through my hands. A case in point being the Ortofon Anna cartridge that I reviewed a year or two back. It out-performed every cartridge that I have had in the house by quite a noticeable amount, but I still found that within a week or so of its departure my ears had readjusted and normal listening practice had resumed.

Occasionally, the change is so substantial that there is no going back, and regular readers may well recall that earlier this year I found that I couldn't live with the sound of my upstairs system with the Isotek Sigma G2 back in place and ended up replacing it with the new EVO 3 version.

Well, since then I have had the same problem twice over. The first occasion being caused by Isotek again, this time with the EVO 3 Titan. Try as I might over the weeks following its departure from Bolton Towers I was still dissatisfied with the sound from the downstairs system. I found that I was missing the bottom end weight and speed, the extra mid band definition and the whole layer of musical magic that the EVO 3 unit imparted to the sound of this system.

I then compounded the problem

by reviewing the Tellurium Q Black Diamond speaker cable. Up to this point I had not found any cable over the last decade that had outperformed the Philosophy Cables loom that had been in situ. Until now.

Again, I tried living without it but found that I was just missing so many aspects of the sound that the Tellurium Q cables brought out in the system that I found myself not playing music for pleasure anywhere near as much as usual.

After several months of this niggling 'something isn't quite right' feeling, I finally accepted the inevitable and over the last few weeks I am pleased to say that there have been two upgrades to the downstairs system. The Philosophy loom has been replaced with Tellurium Q Black Diamond speaker cable and the Isotek Titan that feeds power to the entire set up has been upgraded to EVO 3 specification. The result has been a spectacular improvement in the performance of the setup and I am back to enjoying the music for the music's sake, rather than sitting here thinking 'that was very nice but...'

There are also a few other areas of the sound of my systems that are going to be adjusted over the Christmas holidays. You may remember that I brought my Linn Ittok LVV arm out of semi retirement and refitted it to the Sondek some months ago. In the meantime the SME M2-9R that had been gracing the Sondek was fitted to the Clearaudio Master Solution. This arrangement has proven most useful, since it has suited me recently to have an arm on that deck that had easily interchangeable headshells, both from the professional point of view and also allowing me to have a play with various older cartridges that have been wandering through my world of

late.

It has also been interesting getting to know the Ittok again, since the Sondek has altered somewhat since it was last in use. The LPI2 now boasts the Funk Firm K Drive DC power supply and motor, as well as the Vinyl Passion subchassis. The top plate is also an after-market edition, being the Khan from Tiger Paw.

All of this adds up to a deck that has the well known LPI2 bass bloom removed but maintains the deck's ability to play a merry tune. What it has also shown up is the upper mid-band glare that is a known aspect of the Ittok sound, and I am finding this increasingly difficult to live with. Especially since the bass is so much flatter and cleaner, it just throws the upper mid issues into greater prominence.

I have my suspicions that the internal wiring may be, at least partially, responsible for this, since there was an improvement in the tonal balance of the sound when I fitted the LW-6N headshell cables from Ortofon. However since there is no money currently available for a rewire and I am missing the ability to change cartridges and headshells easily on that system, I am planning to put the Ittok back in its box for a while and put the SME M2-9R back onto the LPI2.

Apart from practical considerations, I am finding that I really do prefer the sound of it to the Ittok. It is less demanding of my attention and seems to take more of a background role in the sonic presentation, rather than stamping its mark on things.

I am pretty sure that this will restore my audio equilibrium and allow me to get on with the all-important task of enjoying the music, rather than being aware of the sound the system and how it is affecting the presentation of the music. ●