

hi-fi+



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Music Works

# A Systematic Solution...

## Cairn, Sugden and Focal get the works from AudioWorks

by Steve Dickinson

I'll declare an interest, here. The AudioWorks is my 'local' hi-fi dealer. Not, strictly, my nearest, but the one I go to when I need something, or just fancy a coffee and some shop-talk. As a *Plus* neophyte a few years ago, RG introduced me to Larry Ogden, founder/owner, at a Manchester show with a cryptic "I think you'll find their approach interesting": and very instructive, as it happens. Larry and his colleague Ed Needham are single-minded in their requirements for good hi-fi. There is but one underlying philosophy, a constant search for better musical communication. To that end they choose their brands with care and a rigorous audition; if you walk into The AudioWorks with a shortlist based on 5-star magazine reviews you might quickly walk out again disappointed (and not a little non-plussed), but if you linger a little and place your trust in their judgement, you might just walk out with something as amazing as it was unexpected.

Their preferred choice of high-end hardware is uncompromisingly small but eclectic: DCS, Spectral, Accuphase, Avalon, Focal, Cairn, Peak Consult, Electrocompaniet, err, apart from some similarly esoteric vinyl-playing stuff, that's about it. The budget-conscious will be offered Creek, Sugden and more Focal, or perhaps Monitor Audio – and entry-level is similarly restricted to a scattering of hand-picked brands, principally Onkyo and Harman Kardon. I do wonder if other dealers pick up trade from AudioWorks

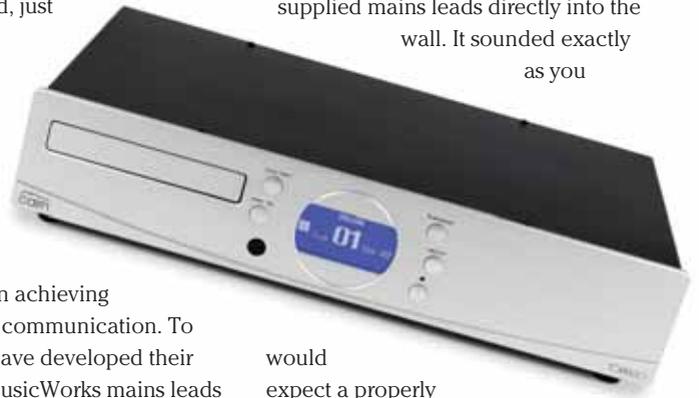
prospects, purely because they carry more of the brands people expect to see. Larry is philosophical about this; in his eyes his customers enjoy music and he is a facilitator not a businessman. The argument is persuasive – there's precious little selling, the music sells itself – and it seems to work; Larry's clientele is fiercely loyal.

But actually, it's more than that. The guys at The AudioWorks have discovered, just as RG and most of us at *Plus Towers* have discovered, the absolutely crucial role mains, cables and supports have in achieving proper musical communication. To that end, they have developed their own range of MusicWorks mains leads and distribution blocks and introduced some rather sophisticated support systems which originally started with improvements to the Quadraspire range, but which have now reached a level whose results are far from subtle. The reason for my visit today, apart from drinking my own weight in Larry's rather good coffee, is to see their approach in action, and hear for myself what they have achieved.

We start with one of their typical recommended systems. A Cairn Tornado CD player, Sugden A21a integrated amp, and Focal 806V loudspeakers. Interconnects are Chord

Chrysalis, speaker cabling Chord Rumour: all-in, a carry-away price of about £2850 for the boxes, perhaps £200 more for the cables. This is not entry-level; it's a properly sorted system that implies a certain level of musical commitment from the purchaser, who then has a right to expect a decent-sounding system in return. We sat it on a Quadraspire rack, with attractive cherry-wood shelves, and plugged the supplied mains leads directly into the wall. It sounded exactly

as you



would expect a properly thought-through system from a reputable dealer to sound, absolutely fine. I'd be happy to take it home, or recommend the combination to a friend, but...

Larry's experience mirrors what we have been finding: address the mains, system, supports and signal cabling, and reap the benefits. We added the £600 MusicWorks ReFlex 6-way mains block, leaving everything else alone, and went back to the music. Tighter, more tuneful bass and better timing gave an improved sense of musical flow, but it wasn't just the bottom end that improved; there was more feeling ▶

▶ of life, a suggestion of vibrancy missing from the vanilla setup. Nina Simone was perkier, the Tord Gustavsen Trio had more tension and a sense of poise that had been absent previously. Nor were we micro-analysing these effects. If you can appreciate the benefits of hi-fi separates at all, you'd easily hear this.

Replacing the supplied kettle-leads with a pair of MusicWorks IEC+ mains leads (£100 each) repeated the trick: further improvements to the bass and timing, with an undeniable clean-up at the top end as a side-benefit. Now, those tiny micro-dynamic changes, the pulse that pushes a piece of music along, that tells you you're listening to a real person playing an instrument with skill and subtlety, were presented in a natural, entirely un-contrived way. It was like listening to a decent tribute band being shouldered off the stage and replaced by the real thing. Now it was possible to hear that when a musician played just off the beat he was clearly doing so deliberately, not because his timing was duff; Pete Rodriguez' 'I Like It Like That' a bouncy, cheeky Latin number, really brought out the sense of fun. Party time! But it's not just about bounce and life. Adding a £150 Siltech Paris interconnect fleshed out many of the aspects I look for in a decent system. Kate Rusby's voice was simply more gorgeous, with better timbre and more fully rounded. Guitars had more attack, more of a leading edge to notes but also more depth of decay. Add these tonal colour benefits to the previous improvements and the system was really starting to come alive.

But, there's a problem starting to emerge. There's a bloom, an edge, that wasn't apparent before we started messing. Larry's view is that each improvement to the system allows more musical energy into the room, which is generally a Good Thing (it's what we're paying for, remember?) but unless you can manage that energy properly, there will come a point where what

should be an improvement may actually make things worse. This is where the experience and advice of somebody like Larry is essential. I find myself wondering how many disappointed music lovers have convinced themselves that mains leads, interconnects or supports don't improve matters, but simply change them, because their last cable upgrade enhanced one aspect of performance, but made obvious a flaw somewhere else in the system. In this case, my first thought was that we were starting to get problems from the room. Larry gave me a look, a sort of 'you'd think so, wouldn't you?' look...

"It's the table."

We duly removed the Quadraspire wood and aluminium rack, and replaced it with about £600-worth of Quadraspire Acrylic Reference table. Larry and his colleagues have championed the use of acrylic materials in system supports for some time now. Their MusicWorks operation is behind the entire Quadraspire acrylic range, from the Reference Table, through the much-lauded QX600 speaker stands, to the dinky little QX Silencer equipment feet and the MusicWorks Reflex mains block – which is also made from acrylic. In some ways it's a wonder material, sonically-speaking. Very stable, very strong and very inert, tap it and you get a dull thud; its self-damping properties are quite remarkable and it is this which makes it so amenable to use in hi-fi system supports. Whilst it definitely has a character, careful shaping and construction can minimize it, while its physical characteristics mean that musical energy doesn't easily find its way back into the equipment, so microphony becomes much less of an issue. It also looks pretty cool, which helps.

With the acrylic-shelved table in place, immediately there's less congestion, less boom; bass definition and overall timing have again moved up a significant notch: Kate Bush's 'Jig of Life' really lives up to its name - here were musicians playing for their lives, or so it seemed. I found this part of the exercise particularly illuminating. Problems I'd previously have associated with room modes simply went away. Larry's view is that actual airborne vibrational energy is much the lesser part of microphony. To prove the point, the system was now on a support which was sitting a metre closer to (and more in the firing line of) one of the loudspeakers



where the previous table had been set somewhat further away. That previous table, remember, was not just some generic coffee table, but a well-regarded audiophile support platform.

Now we'd got that bit sorted, we revisited the mains, substituting the MusicWorks IEC+ mains leads with MusicWorks ReCoil mains leads. At £200 apiece, they are twice the price of the entry-level MusicWorks leads, but still fairly inexpensive, as these things go. We immediately noticed a lift in the sense of airiness and better delineation of the musical components, amounting to an even more palpable sense of living players working in a musical space, which all serves to underline Larry's view that you have to spend time and effort on getting these fundamentals as well-sorted as your budget will allow, or you're not really hearing what your ▶

▶ system can deliver, given half a chance. But, and this is crucial, you need to take a structured approach. Every change we'd made to the system so far had been deliberately chosen to improve matters, or address a problem shown up by the previous improvement. This is by no means a random upgrade path. If we'd changed to the better mains leads before we changed the table, the support problems would have been even more obvious.

A Siltech Classic 330i interconnect, at about \$600, replaced the Siltech Paris and brought with it a richer, more fulsome sound while also reducing sibilance. We're tinkering a little now, the previous interconnect was still performing strongly but Larry wanted to show me that there was still more performance to wring from the system. I was starting to feel that, perhaps, the \$500 Focal loudspeakers were approaching the limits of their capabilities. Interestingly, my suggestion to upgrade the loudspeaker cable to, \$70 per metre, Siltech London didn't bring about the results I expected. We got the anticipated improvements in tonal colour and general richness, but we lost a

significant amount of drive and push, a drier bass balance sapped some power and impact from the music. Not a positive outcome at all, and indicative of the fact

that price is not necessarily the most significant criterion for performance.

So far, then, we've spent a little over \$2000 on upgrades to a \$2850 system, we haven't changed the boxes one iota – and it is absolutely singing its heart out. Readers of a nervous disposition might wish to take a break at this point, because this is where it starts to get weird. If you contribute to any of the internet forums, gather yourself some bile and fire up the computer.

Larry brought out an acrylic support shelf they have developed as a drop-in replacement to the conventional Quadraspire acrylic shelf, the only difference being the shape. It is made from the same gauge of acrylic with the same machining detail for the uprights, and the same overall external dimensions. But instead of the Quadraspire's spreadeagled-man-in-a-duvet-cover shape, this MusicWorks shelf is, well, guitar shaped. The familiar figure-8 double-bubble of an acoustic guitar sound box rendered in flat, transparent acrylic. It's even got the hole in the middle, albeit a rather larger one. We put it on the rack, in place of the top shelf and put some more music on.

While we cleared up the coffee I'd just sprayed on the wall of the listening room, I asked Larry how he could explain such a profound difference. He's honest enough to admit that they have no hard scientific measurements to explain their results, just a feeling that perhaps the shape of the shelves, particularly the straight lines and tight corners, was influencing the sound, which led to some experimentation.

The guitar shape emerged as a strong performer so some very careful listening tests refined the design to the miracle of unexpectedness I'd just witnessed. This was an improvement on a par with the mains upgrades, the whole matter

of musical communication was simply elevated another, significant, notch. The character of ▶



**Equipment used:**

- Cairn Tornado CD: \$950
- Sugden A21aL Series 2 integrated amplifier: £1,400
- Focal Chorus 806V standmount loudspeakers: \$499
- Siltech Paris Interconnect: £155
- Siltech Classic 330i interconnect: \$610
- MusicWorks ReFlex 6 way mains block: £595
- MusicWorks IEC+ Mains Lead: \$100
- MusicWorks ReCoil IEC Lead: \$200
- Quadraspire QX600 acrylic loudspeaker stands: \$250
- Quadraspire Acrylic Reference 3 tier rack (2 decoupled shelves): \$565
- MusicWorks Acrylic shelf upgrade: \$130
- MusicWorks Revo 3-tier equipment rack: \$1250
- MIT AVT 3 Loudspeaker cable (4.5m pair): \$420
- MIT AVT 1 Loudspeaker cable (4.5m pair): \$700
- MIT AVT MA interconnect (1 metre): \$765

▶ the change was a little different, I noticed an improvement in treble energy, tunefulness and attack whereas addressing the mains seems to work more on bass and timing. But again, the overall effect was simply one of closer rapport with the performer, and it was hard to accept that this was down to the substitution of one shelf. I can't explain it, but I heard it and it was, as mathematicians would say, 'non-trivial'. It turns out, however, that these upgrade shelves are but a waypoint on the journey.

Their latest MusicWorks support table, dubbed ReVo, takes the figure of eight shape and puts it on its side, forming the uprights rather than the shelves. Clever design has eliminated metallic componentry, the ReVo is all-acrylic. It is also, perhaps, as significant an upgrade as all that had gone before. A layer of hash simply disappears, something Larry attributes to the removal of the last traces of metallic ringing. Suddenly, there is no question of the loudspeakers' ability to cope with the extra energy in the system. Dynamics are improved, the music is bathed in clarity and an inner lucidity, as if the band have decided that, perhaps, it might be a neat idea to face

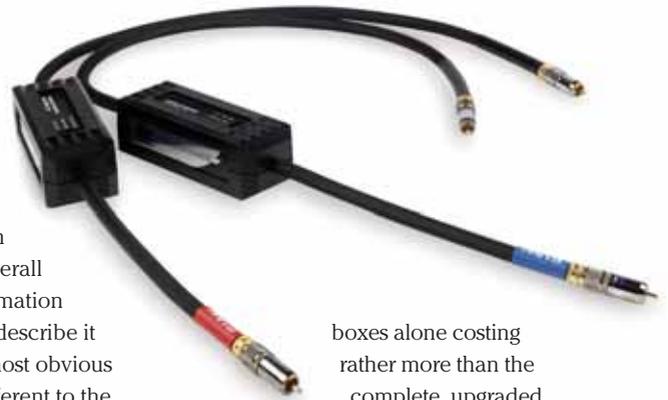
the audience during the gig. I have to remind myself that these are pretty modest (if well-chosen) components.

Now we can revisit the signal cabling. Out goes the Chord Rumour and Siltech, in comes MIT. Space doesn't permit a detailed analysis of the effect, but there is an undeniable and major shifting of gears at this point. Just as Nordost puts more treble energy into your system (sometimes

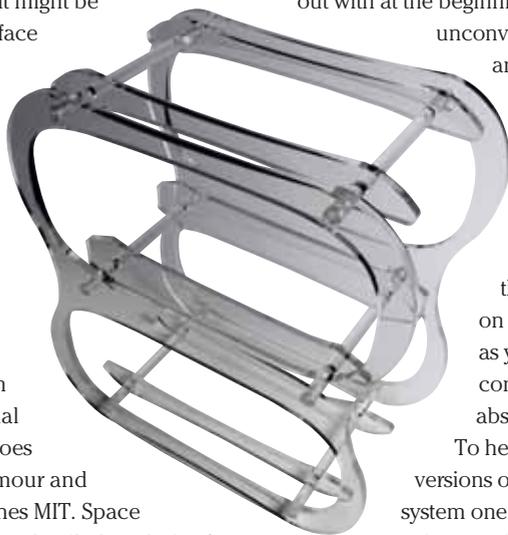
telling you things you might prefer not to know about your components), so MIT has a significant effect on the tonal-balance and overall level of energy and information being delivered. I might describe it as anti-Nordost, for the most obvious effects are somewhat different to the fast, light and airy Nordost sound, leaning more towards drive, dynamics and weight. As one who uses Nordost at home, this requires a period of readjustment but if you're still with me at this point, then please believe me when I say that Larry's choice of MIT cabling appears to be the perfect accompaniment to all that has gone before. We tried AVT3 loudspeaker cable, at about \$420 for a 4.5m pair, and moved up to AVT1 at about £700 for the same length, together with AVT MA interconnect at about £765 for a 1m pair. There is absolutely no question that the more expensive cables were easily justified, even in this modestly-priced system.

Remember, we're still using the original equipment we started out with at the beginning. It's an unconventional route and one most 'box-shifters' would abhor. Many would say that spending the same again on ancillaries as you did on componentry, is absurd. I disagree.

To hear the two versions of the same system one after the other is quite astonishing. To realise the full capabilities of one's equipment is, surely, a sensible goal. Just for fun, we set up a more expensive CD player and amplifier system (the



boxes alone costing rather more than the complete, upgraded system we'd been working with) using their original mains leads and set them up using the interconnects and table we'd now discarded. Using the same loudspeakers, this usually fabulous combination sounded excellent, as expected, but in terms of sheer musical communication, the system we'd worked-up all morning was now significantly ahead. I won't name the components we did this with, partly because it's not their fault, partly because they in turn respond even more strongly to this sort of diligent setup treatment, but mostly because the approach seems to work at any level, particularly the high-end. This is not a cure-all: the shortcomings of the original components are not eliminated by this process, the CD player still sounds grainy and grey compared to a decent high-end player, and the Sugden amp will only take you so far, compared to a serious high-end unit, but it is suddenly very apparent that these modest boxes have capabilities many users simply don't get to exploit. Imagine, then, what you get when you take this approach with some seriously good components. Larry and his team's unconventional approach sure does get results. ▶+



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