



Schus...

Acouplex Plug Schus – the accessory you never knew you needed!

by Roy Gregory

I'm already a big fan of Acouplex, the Acrylic/ PEEK composite material that The Music Works (in Manchester, UK) makes into shelves or cones to support hi-fi components. But those ever-questioning enthusiasts have been looking at other applications, with some encouraging results. Given the company's history (it all started with power strips and power cords) complete AC distribution blocks are an obvious development. Washers to replace steel or Teflon items, normally between spikes and speakers or their outriggers, is another place that's proved beneficial. A whole range of bits and pieces for the LPI2 is under audition. But plates that fit between your AC plugs and their sockets is a rather more surprising success.

Before you get too excited there's one significant caveat here: the plates only work on UK 13A or Schuko plugs. The combination of the flush mount sockets and short pins on US AC connectors rules them out, the thickness of the plate impairing already dubious mechanical security to too great a degree. The long, rectangular pins on UK plugs overcome that problem, but the plates really come into their own on Schuko

connectors, with their combination of long pins and deeply recessed sockets ensuring a really secure fit. The Schuko version, dubbed perhaps not surprisingly, the Plug Schu, is nothing more than an Acouplex disc, 3mm thick, slightly oval, with a pair of holes drilled through it. Mounting it is as easy as slipping it over the pins on your Schuko plug, where it sits snugly against the plug body. Re-insert the plug into its socket (being careful to maintain correct polarity) and you are good to go.

The price of this outwardly simple device? £40 for the Schuko version, which might seem a lot until you consider that it's made from Acouplex, an audio dedicated material that itself first needs manufacturing. The UK 13A version is currently being updated, moving away from rectangular pin slots to simple round holes to ease manufacturing and reduce the price. Even so, its larger size makes it slightly more expensive, probably around £55 (with both prices including 20% sales tax that you can deduct if you are buying from outside the UK).

When I first received the Schus, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. £40 pounds a pop seemed pretty



►► pricey for what amounts to a plastic beer token with a couple of holes through it. But then, I wasn't expecting the sonic and musical impact they had.

I started out by placing a single Schu between the wall socket and the power cord feeding the distribution block. Sitting down to listen was one of those, "Really?" moments... One of those changes where you feel an immediate need to reverse the 'upgrade' to check if it actually did what you just heard, or whether you are imagining it. But sure enough – repeated ABA comparisons simply underlined that this apparently simple, inert and nondescript bit of 'plastic' was having an impact that wasn't just clearly audible, it cut straight to the core of the musical presentation.

Deutsche Grammophon recently released Maurizio Pollini's final recording, one he shares with his son Daniele. Perhaps not surprisingly, it's an all Schubert programme, including the *Fantasia in F minor* for four hands (Schubert, DGG 486 6398). It's a beautiful and poignant disc: just how beautiful and poignant I hadn't fully appreciated pre-Schu. What this unassuming little device does is capture or heighten the sense of human agency in a recording, not just the sense that it's the music is the product of people playing instruments, but the sense that they are actually trying to communicate something by doing it.

You can reduce the Schu's impact to a laundry list of sonic affects: in increased sense of transparency and immediacy, focussed energy, musical articulation and flow. Phrasing is far more apparent, as is the rise and fall through those phrases. Pauses become laden with meaning, the weight and accent on a note becomes both more obvious, but also more clearly defined

relative to the note that follows. If you know Pollini's playing and you apply those sonic qualities to it, it's readily apparent just how profound an impact they'll have on the performance. The result is at once more relaxed and more purposeful, less forced and more considered. They release a grace and articulation in the playing which underlines just why Pollini occupied such a preeminent position amongst contemporary pianists – but also why he almost always performed solo. I never understood why his concerts offered a

'pot-luck' approach to the programme – a "turn up and see what he plays" arrangement that's so completely at odds with current notions of concert and performer promotion. But playing what you feel like in the moment makes perfect sense when you play with this much feeling.



If the Pollini disc is a revelation, the Schus perform similar magic with other artists and musical genres. Patti Smith's cover of 'After The Gold Rush' (Banga, Sony/Columbia 88697222172) offers an obvious next step, with its sparse piano/guitar arrangement and exposed vocal. Once again, the Schus (by now I'm using them throughout the system) invest the performance with an almost ghostly presence and dimensionality. The rise and fall in the piano part is poised and sculpted, but it's the precisely measured vocal that really comes to life, with a natural diction and enunciation that is strikingly direct and communicative. The children's voices that comprise the finale, gain not just identity and separation, but a particular poignance too. Once again, the message is front and centre, pushed there by the music.

Multiple Schu's definitely generate a cumulative effect, adding additional range and power to the



►► musical impact. But as is often the case, at first it seems like each additional Schu offers a smaller incremental improvement over the one before: right up to the point where you put the last one in the system. That's when the whole performance seems to fall into focus, all of the benefits seamlessly combined into a single sonic and emotional whole. Looking at the product generating this improvement in musical performance, it's hard to credit. Fortunately, you don't need to take my word for it. The Schus are not only a completely reversible mod (so that you can suck them and see with impunity) but they are so cheap – at least in audiophile



suggest that a CD player, DAC or single-box pre-amp is a good place to start (it's easier to power down a single unit than a whole system). First step is to switch the unit off. Leave it for 30-seconds and then turn it back on before listening to establish a performance base-line. That way, you take cycling the power out of the equation.

Powering down the unit and installing the Schu is quick and simple: Re-start and re-listen.

terms – as to be considered a trivial (and recoverable!) expense.

That's important, because I have absolutely no idea how or why they do what they so clearly do. They bring a whole new meaning to the term 'willing suspension of disbelief'. On any rational level, there is no explanation as to why they do anything at all, let alone make the genuinely significant difference that they do. We can think in terms of damping mechanical energy on the AC line, or damping the structure of the AC plug itself, but there's a massive logical disconnect between that and the end results achieved. Personally, that doesn't worry me. I just put the Schus in the same box as all the other things to do with audio that clearly are, but can't be explained. The beauty in this case is that the option to try is so simple, even if I would suggest a couple of niceties to consider...

Firstly, and assuming that you start with a single Schu, decide where you are going to deploy it. I'd

The results should be obvious, but don't be surprised if, like me, you find yourself repeating the exercise, just to be sure...

But more experience with the Schus has added an extra wrinkle: the damned things are directional! Switching the orientation of the Schu (which surface faces the plug and which the socket) is clearly simple. What's not so simple is keeping track of which way round is which, especially if you fumble the swap and drop the Schu. The answer is, that once you've decided the device is worthwhile, you need to mark one side of the Schu before starting the process of establishing directionality. A temporary mark is good if you expect to retain your right of return, but also allows you to add a permanent mark once you've established which way round the pesky little blighter prefers to sit. I use a red Sharpie (having a natural aversion to the carbon ►►

►► compounds so often used in black inks) but that's really getting OCD about things.

Get your Schus on the right feet – or at least facing the right way – and you should experience a significant benefit in terms of immediacy, transparency, detail and focus. Reversed, the sound will generally be smoother and more rounded, but also offer less attack and dynamic discrimination. Of course, there's half a chance that you may have had them the right way round to start with, but checking on a Schu-by-Schu basis is definitely worthwhile.

The Acouplex Schus have quickly become an essential part of my system set up and optimisation process, another indispensable tool in that box of rag-tag bits and pieces that accompanies me everywhere. So far they have never failed to deliver, astonishing and delighting at every turn. For the audiophile who has everything I can think of no better Christmas present: hours of endless tinkering and a better sounding system to boot. For the audiophile who is still on the journey, this is the equivalent of snagging a lift – in a very nice car – that stops for lunch and the driver picks up the tab.

Once tried, there's no going back. I even tried one on the sub-€400, all-singing all-dancing WiiM Amp and that's staying put too! The Acouplex Schu is as simple

as it is incredibly cost effective. The only real challenge is coming to terms with the fact that something this apparently simple can be so cost effective. Alternatively, you can accept that somethings are just nuts and simply enjoy the results.



Manufacturer:

MusicWorks
The AudioWorks Ltd
14 Stockport Road
Cheadle
Cheshire
SK8 2AA - UK
Tel.: +44 (0)161 428 7887
www.theaudioworks.co.uk
www.musicworks-hifi.com

Prices and availability

Acouplex Schu (Schuko version)	£40 ea.
Acouplex Schu (UK I 3A version)	c. £55 ea.