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Audience adeptResponse aR6-TSS AC Power Conditioner

"You *Need* A Power Conditioner"

Garrett Hongo

In Oregon where I live, audiophiles I know don't tend to use any power conditioning, believing, rightly or wrongly, that the power we get locally and from the Bonneville grid is superior to the ***dirty*** power we read about folks having in big metro areas. I have mainly done without line conditioning, although I have noticed that grunge and grain creeps into the system periodically during summers, when everyone's running A/C. When that happens, I simply switch from my usual deHavilland KE50A tube monoblocks to a pair of Herron solid-state M1 monos and the problem goes away. In the fall, I switch back to tube amplification. One summer, though, I did try a line conditioner, a power regenerator with a transformer, but I didn't like it as it obviously compromised dynamics and added its own whitish haze to the treble. I sold it. And, up until a few months ago, I'd simply used power distribution without filtering, either from Isoclean, Siltech, or Weizhi, and had been very pleased with my sound.

But a new pair of loudspeakers took up residence in my system recently—the Von Schweikert VR-44 Aktive ($25,000, reviewed in Issue 230). These speakers are much more resolving than my previous reference, the Von Schweikert VR-5 HSE, and challenged many things about my system and approach. I found the new speakers so highly resolving, in fact, that I was able to hear profound changes any time I swapped electronics or sources. Furthermore, they also revealed there was a lot of noise in the power line that manifested itself as high-frequency grit and grain in the audio signal, particularly compromising purity in the upper mids and treble and ruining my enjoyment of violins and choral music. At first, I worried the VR-44 speakers were the problem. Then I noticed that the issues disappeared late at night, when the power tends to be cleaner and more constant. It was then I recalled an old invitation from John McDonald, President of Audience AV. We were at RMAF a few years ago, listening to great sound coming from his demo room. I was praising his audio cables when John said, in that beautifully slight and sonorous Texas drawl of his, "We've got to get you to try our adeptResponse one of these days."

So I called McDonald and, after a brief conversation, we quickly agreed I should try the new adeptResponse6-TSS ($6000) along with the new Audience powerChord Au24 (a $1550 upgrade at 6'). He'd also send along the 6' stock Audience powerChord e (price included) as a reference. As this was late in the fall, there was a high demand for his units, and it took a few weeks for all to arrive, but once they did I immediately put them into the system and the results were remarkable. All the problems with line grunge I was having simply fell away and I could hear speakers and electronics easily singing together without the scrim of noise riding along on the current. In fact, the aR6-TSS so clarified my sound, I could discern things I hadn't before regarding matching electronic equipment for optimum performance, source changes, and the distinct sonic differences that can be made switching through the various upsampling rates available on my Cary 303/300 CD player. The aR6-TSS made a ***serious*** improvement in my listening.

Background

Audience AV has been making a version of the adeptResponse conditioner since the summer of 2005, when the first adeptResponse12 was released. Since then, there have been steady improvements in passive parts that Audience claims have lowered the noise floor, improved soundstaging, and resulted in wider-bandwidth filtration. In 2008, Audience introduced the aR-T, which substituted Auri-T Teflon caps for the Auricaps used in the original units. In 2010, the aR-TS was introduced, featuring

another upgrade in capacitors (to the Auri-TO) and the addition of a ground plane inserted into the unit. Finally, released just this past year in 2012, the aR-TSS (the unit under review) features an optional S-filter that Audience claims lowers noise even further.

In a recent phone interview, I asked Audience engineer Roger Sheker what his goals were in designing the adeptResponse and what, in particular, was special about the aR6-TSS. He said the basic principles were threefold: (1) to have a low-impedance power path of less than 40 milli-ohms to allow current to flow without resistance (the problem with most power conditioners on the market); (2) to use high-quality parts in capacitors, wire, method of assembly, buss bars, and surge protection; and (3) ***not*** to use an IEC, which he considers a poor connection that doesn't ensure complete contact. He said all three contribute to the goal of a low impedance path.

Sheker further explained that they'd observed that the design of most line conditioners was actually quite good, but that there were big differences in execution, coming down to choices made in passive parts and power connections. For instance, from the start, after trying dozens of alternatives, Audience chose the well-regarded Hubbel receptacles for the best combination of sound and clamping force. Audience also eschews using the metal oxide varistor (MOV) employed by many other line conditioners to protect against high-voltage transients.

"It absorbs surges all right," McDonald chimed in (this was a three-way phone hookup). "But it's also always in the pathway, storing and releasing energy out of phase, creating distortion, and wearing out over time. Ours doesn't wear out and is not in the pathway ***until*** there is a surge. "

Sheker also pointed out that they rejected the thermal circuit breaker used by so many others because it heats up when there's a transient and creates resistance, which ruins dynamics. Instead, Audience chose a magneto-hydraulic breaker at more than twenty times the wholesale cost as it ***doesn't*** get hot and compromise dynamics.

"It's the same reason we chose passive and not active conditioning," Sheker continued. "An active has to use a transformer, which has high DC resistance, limiting dynamics. There isn't an active conditioner that doesn't limit dynamics."

Through the years, Audience has not only changed the kind of capacitors it uses in the adeptResponse, but also the capacitor leads themselves from standard copper to the current monocrystal. They've changed the way the buss bar is built—from at first being drilled and pieced together to soldering those parts for more direct contact. A big change was adding the ground plane with the aR-T—a big copper plate on the bottom of the unit that is weld-connected in a star-ground configuration. For the TSS, the optional S-filter uses a passive Balun transformer that goes between the input connector and the circuit breaker, lowering noise from the upper audible range to well beyond the audible bandwidth, Sheker said, but resulting in an improved soundstage.

But what about that IEC-business? "It's a sloppy connection," McDonald said. "It doesn't make good contact and was developed for computers, not audio. We chose the Neutrik PowerCon connector that twists and locks in, doesn't vibrate, and can never fall out of the socket, guaranteeing a secure connection and, again, a low impedance path."

Owners of previous adeptResponse models can upgrade their older units. Audience charges $1000 to upgrade from the TS to the TSS. Upgrading from an aR-T to the new TSS is more involved, essentially constituting a rebuild of the unit, adding the ground plane, changing the buss bar from parted pieces to soldered, adding the S-filter, and changing all the capacitors to the TO version that are made with Ohno (monocrystal) leads. It costs $2800 for the 6-outlet version.

Both cables are quite flexible and easier to work with than most power cords, largely because they are made with stranded copper wire.

Description and Installation

The six-outlet aR6-TSS sits at midpoint in the Audience line of power conditioners, between the two-outlet aR2-TSS ($5200) and the twelve-outlet aR12-TSS ($9995). My review unit came in silvery brushed aluminum (black is also available) with a faceplate just slightly bigger than the chassis, featuring understated lettering that said "adeptResponse/High Resolution Power" with a dot of an LED within an oval logo.

Installation and assembly were literally a snap. I plugged in all my power cords, including the one for my Cary CD player, as recommended by the manual—plugs for high-current units closest to the power inlet and plugs for front-end gear farther away. As each of the six outlets is individually filtered and double-filtered from every other outlet, the aR6-TSS is claimed to provide maximum component-to-component isolation. I have to admit, though, that plugging my CD player into the same line (via the aR6-TSS) went against my habit of keeping digital sources on a completely separate line from my other electronics (more about this later). As for the pecking order of plugging the cords for amps closest to the power inlet, McDonald explained this was because the large capacitors that stored energy were situated closest to the Neutrik connecter and that amps, needing that stored power at peaks, worked best connected as close as possible to them. Finally, I plugged the Au24 powerChord into the wall outlet and, once every component was plugged into the aR6-TSS and contacts seated and checked, I flipped the circuit-breaker switch, powering the unit on, whereupon the LED's blue light appeared. I was ready to go.

Listening

On recommendation from John McDonald, I kept the aR6-TSS powered on constantly and spent about a week burning it in and not taking any notes but just playing through a variety of CDs of all genres. On first impression, there was a noticeable big gain in clarity and organicism, perhaps due to the monocrystal wire used throughout the unit, orchestral violins in particular sounding more natural. But, on subsequent days, I heard that dreaded treble grittiness in the violins of another orchestral CD, or a whitish sound in the treble, or occasional episodes of dynamic compression. The unit did indeed need burning in. After about sixty hours in use, I could tell it was settling down, noticing a marked reduction in the day-to-day sonic variation in the system. In fact, what had vexed me no end before—that intermittent grit and grunge in my system sound popping up on every odd day—no longer seemed to be a problem. That small yet dire tinge of stress I'd been feeling because of the line noise was completely

gone. To me, this was a very big deal, as, after about a week of the aR6-TSS being in the system, I never had any more of those periodic days of awful sound coming from my system. It just never happened again. The aR6-TSS had banished the nasties!

Sometime after everything had settled down, I put on a CD of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor played by Ivan Moravec with the Academy of St. Martin in-the-Fields, directed by Neville Marriner [hänssler], and what I heard was very promising. The most immediate difference was string sound, which sounded much smoother. There was more detail, more sweetness, more mellowness. The aR6-TSS made a very musical difference. Orchestral violins were open and resolved and, on piano, the nuances of Ivan Moravec's pedaling were much more noticeable. I concluded the aR6-TSS had lowered the noise floor. Individual piano notes sounded a touch more incisive on attack, bloomed more palpably in sustain, and seemed to float in the air, lingering longer in decay. The soundstage was noticeably bigger and deeper and the overall presentation was sweeter, prettier! Bass was deeper and more articulate, tighter, and more focused. There were deeper orchestral space and spatial cues in the string notes too. But, though I was starting to feel quite taken with the aR6-TSS, I was not yet completely convinced. The presentation definitely sounded more organic and less electronic, but I also worried the Audience conditioner took some juice away, extracting some measure of verve and jump from the overall presentation.

Putting aside my focus on classical strings for the moment, I started listening to some jazz CDs too, and the aR6-TSS did spectacularly good things. On James Carter's ***Chasin' the Gypsy*** [Atlantic], his homage to French guitarist Django Reinhardt, although I'd heard it before, that bass drum strike at the beginning of the first track was somewhat startling. The drum note was full of skin and harmonics, tactile and supremely present, then it reverberated and started dying away, its passing punctuated by a snare roll and the pattering of castanets. When Carter's dark and blatty bass sax took up the recognizable theme of Reinhardt's "Nuages," all was as sinuous and sublime as an anaconda flowing over the branches and trunk of a rainforest tree. Across the soundstage, an accordion wheezed melodically, suspended bells were deftly struck, an acoustic guitar was being rapidly plucked, each string distinct in attack and decay, and a beaded gourd rattled softly as a rainstick behind it all. The standup bass was tight, played deftly, notes distinct but flowing in an infectious tango rhythm. A purer silence in the background made the birth and departure of each sonic event seem more properly timed and clearly presented. There was a fabulous ***depth*** to the stage, a palpable sonic imaging of each instrument and the feeling of real space around them, particularly around Carter's bass sax as it dug into its lowest registers. I'll risk saying it was evident that what I was hearing was transparency to the source.

Clarity of imaging, a large soundstage of real depth, and the rhythmic presentation of a complex sonic tapestry of multiple acoustic instruments were all also evident on vinyl playback. On the Grateful Dead's "Ripple" from the classic ***American Beauty*** LP [Warner Brothers], I heard, without any sharp transients marring the very natural presentation, a gorgeously articulate string-band-style interplay among a mandolin playing lead, multiple guitars in accompaniment, an electric bass, and drums. The soundstage was huge and very tall, the instrumental images stable within it. Though I thought the vocal imaging outsized, the clean, airy harmonies among those voices told me that the timing was perfect.

Throughout my listening, I did wonder about the conditioner's effect on dynamics. It was clear the system made huge gains in midrange smoothness, treble and bass extension and clarity, soundstaging, timing, and noise. But, from the start, I thought I'd heard a slight loss of punch and musical weight at times, particularly on orchestral crescendi. To test this, I pulled the CD player's power cord (a Siltech SPX-800) out of the aR6-TSS and plugged it directly into the wall outlet of a dedicated line separate from where the conditioner got its juice. This was my longstanding practice anyway, keeping digital sources on a different line from other electronics. Going back to the same Mozart Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor performed by Moravec with the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, I now heard starker dynamic contrasts, more punch in the timpani strikes and more emphatic swells in orchestral tuttis. Piano notes were still sweet and clear, but ***forte*** keystrokes and bass notes gained impact and suddenness. On the downside, violins sounded glassy in accompaniment and the

SPECS & PRICING

Current/voltage: 15A or 20A/120V, 220V, 230V, 240V
Power outlets: Six Hubbell high-conductivity power receptacles
Dimensions: 10.5" x 4.75" x 8.25"
Weight: 11.1 lbs.
Price: $6000 (6' powerChord e included); PowerChord Au24, $1500/6' (upcharge)

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
Analog sources: TW-Acustic Raven Two turntable, TW-Acustic Raven 10.5 tonearm with Zyx Airy 3 cartridge (0.24mV), Ortofon RS-309D tonearm with Ortofon 90th Anniversary SPU (0.3mV), Ortofon Cadenza Mono (0.45mV), and Ortofon Mono CG 25 DI MKII (1.5mV)
Digital sources: Cary 303/300 CD player, Apple iMac with Eximus DP1 USB DAC
Preamplifiers: deHavilland Mercury 3; Herron VTPH-2 phono stage; Music First step up
Power amplifiers: deHavilland KE50A monoblocks
Speakers: Von Schweikert Audio VR-44 Aktive
Speaker cables: Siltech 330L, 330L jumpers; Audience Au24e with Au24 jumpers
RCA Interconnects: Siltech 330i, Audience Au24e, Auditorium 23
USB cable: Wireworld Silver Starlight
Power cords: Siltech Ruby Hill II, Siltech SPX-800, Cardas Golden Reference, Harmonix XDC Studio Master, Silent Source Signature
Power conditioner: Siltech Octopus Signature 8 with 20A Siltech Ruby Hill II power cord
Accessories: Box Furniture S5S five-shelf rack in sapele, HRS damping plates, edenSound FatBoy dampers, Winds VTF gauge

fine inner details of performance, particularly the coordinated swells of vibrato, were obscured. And the entirety of the music seemed stripped of its natural overtones, its harmonic richness, dynamic shifts sounding more Spartan than Apollonian.

The conditioner's effects on my analog chain were also somewhat ambiguous, especially on rock and R&B. With my Herron phonostage's power cord, a Silent Source Signature, plugged into the aR6-TSS, I played ***Otis Redding In Person at the Whiskey a Go-Go*** [Sundazed]. The horn section on "I Can't Turn You Loose" had a punchy thunk in repeated choruses of the same riff, punctuating and pushing the driving beat, accentuating Redding's soulful and rhythmic bluesy hollers. But on "Mr. Pitiful," I felt that Redding's hoarse baritone voice sounded more gut-thunking with the phonostage's power cord plugged directly into the wall. And, absent the Audience conditioner's effects, horns were a touch more forward, the midrange generally had more presence, and the music sounded fuller and energized the room more. Though very close with it, I thought PRaT seemed a touch more immediate without the ar6-TSS in line.

On balance, however, I much preferred the sound of my audio system with the Audience aR6-TSS in it than without. For me, the real test of a system is how it plays large choral ensembles with full orchestral accompaniment. In this kind of music, there are big demands on power amps and the timing of all components as they try to work together, stressing their resolving capabilities and overall sense of spaciousness, their abilities to create a bloom of sound while maintaining musical coherence. I've made myself very unpopular at audio shows traipsing around with my demo CDs of ***Mozart's Mass in C*** and ***Requiem***. These choral warhorses have crushed many a megabucks system, solid-state or tube.

My own home system is put together expressly to meet the challenges I cite above—the deHavilland KE50A tube monoblocks, though only rated at 45W of output, nonetheless have a secondary stage of output (its design incorporates an interstage transformer in addition to the power and output transformers) that sustains power through increasingly demanding passages such as required with choral/orchestral music with operatic soloists. On the CD of the Bach Society of the Netherlands performance of Mozart's ***Requiem*** [Channel Classics], what you can hear, when the system is optimized, is the rendering of multiple thematic lines—men's voices, women's, strings, woodwinds, brass, and horns—with deftness and aplomb, giving each its particular definition and timbral character, the voices remaining open and clear throughout every crescendo. For example, there was a moment during ***Lacrimosa***, the eighth movement, when I heard a stunning billowing of voices in the shape of one of Joseph Stella's Moebius strip sculptures. The face of the choral wave of sound moved in a kind of elliptical, figure-eight pattern across the front of the soundstage, surging from the sopranos down through the altos and then sweeping up through the basses to the tenors, then spuming back again—all in an instant. It was imaging at its astonishing best to me—not a mere holographic presentation of sound coming from a stable image of an instrument in space, but the dynamic movement of a splash of theme moving in the span of seconds across the face of the entire choir as depicted in the soundstage. It's the way music actually makes its swift passage through an orchestra or choir—a theme sometimes taken up in a kind of semaphoric sequence as the singers or musicians sound their musical contributions. That my system, with the Audience aR6-TSS in it, could render this magical thing demonstrated that its contributions benefitting resolution and timing were more than considerable.

I also tried the aR6-TSS with the stock powerChord e instead of the Au24 powerChord and, in general, the system lost a smidge of intensity. On "Nuages" from James Carter's ***Chasin' the Gypsy,*** things became a touch muted by comparison, the saturation of tonal colors in the instruments a shade less intense and imaging within the soundstage slightly more diffuse. It wasn't a ***big*** difference—the overall character of the presentation was very much the same, just not quite as dramatic or vivid. Both cables are quite flexible and easier to work with than most power cords, though the Au24, being of stranded copper, is much more so. If it's within your budget, I highly recommend you spring for the upgrade to the Au24 powerChord. Or, you might start with the stock "e" cord and upgrade to the Au24 later. It's worth it.

Conclusion

In the end, I found that I simply could not do without the salutary effects of the aR6-TSS and Au24 powerChord on most of my music, on the entirety of my system. The benefits far outweighed any slight downside. With all my components plugged into the Audience conditioner, violins were unfailingly silkier, voices and instruments emerged from a blacker sonic background with more nuance and dimension to them, soundstaging was grander, and imaging and spatial cues startling. The ar6-TSS contributed a remarkable refinement and brought real precision to my system.

If you're in the market for line conditioning, I think you ought to take a serious look at this one. There can be differences in performance depending on the system and the nature of the power in your own region, but, for me, it was a no-brainer. Like TAS editor Robert Harley once said to me, "You ***need*** a power conditioner." I have one now. It's the Audience aR6-TSS. tas

Robert Harley on the aR6-TSS

I've been using the aR6-TSS in my system and largely agree with Garrett's findings. The unit significantly lowers the noise floor, which in turn leads to increased resolution of very fine detail. This resolution increase is heard as more vivid timbres and density of tone color. Fine transient information is also better portrayed; listen to brushes on snare drum, for example. With the aR6-TSS there's just a greater impression of the mechanism by which the sound is made. The increased smoothness and reduction in glare that Garrett noted is, in my view, alone worth the price of admission. I don't hear any reduction in dynamics with the aR6-TSS. In fact, the lower noise floor fosters the impression of greater dynamic range; the silences are quieter and the background blacker, making transients seem as if they are delivered more quickly and with greater impact.