

System hierarchy – a little common sense

A recent article in The Absolute Sound magazine was on the subject of system hierarchy - which components in the playback system matter most and which the least (Playback Systems: What Matters Most? - The Absolute Sound issue 151).

The round table discussion participants consisted of four senior representatives from the magazine (head honcho Harry Pearson, editor-in-chief Robert Harley, editor Wayne Garcia and associate editor Jonathan Valin), David Wilson of Wilson Audio and Ivor Tiefenbrun of Linn Products.

The discussion was fairly entertaining and it became clear that there was no definitive answer, except possibly in the opinion of one participant. The four people from the magazine basically took the view that some kind of balance was needed and that each component had to be reasonably good. Elsewhere a certain cynical attitude has been expressed at the fact that David Wilson (who manufactures the System 7, Grand Slamm, etc) considered loudspeakers to be the most important component and that Ivor Tiefenbrun (of LP12 and CD12 fame) was convinced that the front end was what mattered most.

Entertaining as it may be to take a cynical attitude, it is not my intention to pursue that line, but it does occur to me that certain points raised during the discussion could do with further comment.

In answer to the question “which sounds better – a \$1,500 Linn cd player combined with a high quality \$12,000 pair of loudspeakers or a \$12,000 Linn cd player combined with a high quality \$1,500 pair of loudspeakers?”, Ivor was adamant that the latter was better - “There’s no doubt about it”. There is a good point to be made here, but I believe that Ivor is wrong or, at the very least, extremely misleading.

First there is the whole, question of what “better” means. I am far from convinced that Ivor’s “accuracy” is the sole key to what is better. It is important, but so are other items and there is also the question as to what “accurate” means, as was pointed out by Jonathan Valin during the round table discussion. Unfortunately it would appear to be very difficult to get round the subjective nature of peoples’ opinions. As an aside, at this point I would reassure readers that this article is not going to continue with questioning definitions until we end up with the “it depends what ‘is’ means” approach of Bill Clinton.

Ivor could, perhaps, be accused of a certain understandable degree of overenthusiastic belief in his own products. The \$1,500 Linn Classic cd / amplifier combination was described by Ivor as “...a very good front end. And there are many front ends that cost five or ten times as much and don’t sound as good”. Well, that is Ivor’s opinion but, although it is true that one can put together a system that sounds terrible no matter how expensive, I think that most reasonably open-minded people would think that Ivor’s comment, off the cuff as it may have been, was more than a little over the top. I could equally point out that, although certain highly respected opinion formers consider that the Linn CD12 is an astonishing piece of equipment and the best cd player they have ever heard, I know of at least one person, familiar with expensive cd players and hi-fi equipment generally and with no particular axe to grind, who described the CD12 to me in somewhat unflattering terms (this person is even less restrained in expressing his opinions than Ivor, but good taste means I shall refrain from giving his precise comments). I have no opinion one way or the other regarding Linn cd players as, with the possible exception of the LP12, I have not spent any meaningful time with Linn equipment.

The subjective nature of peoples’ opinions is clearly a difficult item to factor into deciding how good or bad a piece of equipment is. Nevertheless, if we put aside for the moment the merits of one person’s opinions or another’s, it is clear to me that Ivor has extended his argument regarding the primacy of the front end to an extreme where it is no longer sensible. A \$1,500 pair of loudspeakers is only just about capable of being used with an expensive cd player, in the sense of being able to get some appreciation of the better quality of the cd player. Can a \$1,500 pair of loudspeakers distinguish significantly between, say, a \$12,000 cd player and an \$11,000 cd player? In my experience, rather than buy a \$12,000 cd player it would be far better to buy an \$11,000 cd player and spend the extra \$1,000 on the loudspeakers, since the gain in what the loudspeakers are capable of reproducing is large compared to the very small, or possibly non-existent, gain in the quality of the cd player.

Ivor’s position becomes more tenable if we qualify it by insisting on a higher minimum level of quality for the loudspeakers – indeed it is clear that Ivor himself must believe that a minimum level of quality applies. Unfortunately we then have the problem of deciding where to set this minimum.

My own view is pretty much along the same lines as that of the participants from The Absolute Sound – “it depends”. You cannot definitively say how to apportion the budget between the different items of equipment and different people will prefer different results.

The whole situation is complicated by a far more significant point, which relates to value for money. Ivor raised one very good point, which was also touched on elsewhere in the roundtable discussion – that the quality of a piece of equipment is not necessarily reflected in the price. Too right! Some less expensive items are indeed better than other more expensive items (and let’s not get too worked up by what we mean by “better”). Indeed, this point makes a bit of a mockery of expecting a \$12,000 cd player to be better necessarily than one costing \$11,000.

I consider the subject of value for money to be extremely important, but unfortunately it is rarely touched upon in the hi-fi press. See “Value for money” for more thoughts on this subject.