



# Splendid Isolation...

## Equipment support platforms from Vertex AQ, Stillpoints and Symposium, with a little help from finite elemente and RDC

by Roy Gregory

Isolation and equipment supports are hardly news in the world of hi-fi. The Sound Organisation can probably be credited (blamed?) for starting the whole kerfuffle with the introduction of the Sound Organisation Table, a UK built, light but rigid support designed for the LP12 turntable. As well as raising the spectre of isolation in the collective consciousness of the audio community it also set the precedent for brutally minimalist styling and set your turntable at a height that made ritual prostration a prerequisite for operation.

Since then, we've travelled a long and far from direct route to the present day, where increasingly sophisticated racks offer a variety of solutions to the problem of isolating your expensive hi-fi equipment from pernicious intrusion. Like everything else, this development has gone in phases, but two recent trends are worthy of particular attention. Max Townshend's original Seismic Sink appeared well before its time, but if it was slow to make a real impact on the market, the delay allowed it to grow into a complete range of stands and supports all based around the inherent simplicity of the air isolation principle. You only have to hear the effect of a complete suite of Townshend devices on a system to appreciate just how intrusive external vibration can be. It also brings home

just how limited traditional, lightweight structures are in dealing with it. Hence the more sophisticated offerings from the likes of finite elemente and Audiophile Base. The latest Townshend rack, along with wood-based but otherwise similar (in principle at least) Voodoo design, will feature in the upcoming examination of racks. However, before we get there, there's another issue to examine.

Air isolation (in most cases supporting the equipment on an air 'spring' provided by one or more, small, bicycle inner tubes) deals predominantly with structure borne energy. It's a serious concern. Just consider how much energy your speakers are throwing into the room – and how much of that will find its way back to the system via the walls and floor. And that's before you consider the presence of spurious low-frequency energy from road traffic etc. However, what it doesn't address is the issue of energy generated from within the system itself.

The first serious attempt to address this problem that I'm aware of came from Acappella in Germany, in the shape of a special support platform for the Clearaudio Master Reference turntable. With three, standalone motors and a rigid structure, the issue of vibration from within the unit itself was clearly a serious one. Acappella's solution

was to provide a precision milled interface of aluminium plate, bonded to a succession of different materials designed to lead energy away from the surface and ultimately 'sink' it as heat – and very effective it was too. But, the Master Reference base was simply a development of other platforms they already offered for electronics which used the same structure and, crucially, a set of aluminium spacers to couple it directly to the equipment's chassis. Whilst the three large motors and rigid structure of the Clearaudio Turntable made it an obvious candidate for such treatment, you might well raise an eyebrow at applying it to electronics. Yet the impact of mechanical energy on electrical components is well recognised – hence all those speakers with external crossovers. What we tend to overlook is how much vibrational energy is generated within equipment by transformers, the passing of electrical energy through components, the transmission of mechanical energy along cables and in CD players, the transport mechanism itself. Indeed, digital electronics seem particularly critical in this regard.

Vertex AQ's first Kinabalu platform took the principle a stage further by coupling the chassis of the equipment through a single, steel tripod to ►

▶ a granite sink, once again making that mass an extension of the unit itself; a degree of external isolation was provided by soft feet that spaced the granite from the supporting structure. That brings us up to date and it's time to introduce the newest generation of such devices. Whilst these vary significantly in choice of structure and materials, they all put evacuating internally generated energy at the top of their mission statement. Their sonic impact is not subtle.

### The Symposium Platforms

Hailing from the US, the Symposium platforms are conceptual equivalents to



the original Acappella bases, although very different in structure. Supplied for review are the Svelte Shelf (£260) and the much thicker, heavier and more expensive Ultra Platform (\$465). Starting with the Svelte Shelf, top and bottom plates are made of stainless steel, the top one being noticeably thicker. These are bonded to a rigid, lightweight foam core with "interlayers" of an unspecified glue, creating a five element, constrained layer sandwich 15mm thick. The shelves supplied are 458 x 351mm, which makes them a drop-in replacement for a Target type one shelf, although other sizes including Target type 2 are available



ex-stock, with custom sizing as a last resort. The thin vertical dimension is important in maintaining the space between shelves within racks, and means that you should be able to accommodate the Svelte Shelf within an existing

rack even if it's used in addition to an existing shelf, with or without additional supports (not something that could be said of the Ultra Platform, but we'll get to that).

The Symposium shelves are intended for use with couplers that connect them directly to the supported unit's chassis. In their most basic form these consist of milled aluminium blocks, although Symposium also offer a range of ball-bearing based devices. The simplest of these is the Rollerblock Jr (£180 for three), two discs of aluminium around 15mm thick, each with a shallow, hemispherical section machined out of the top surface. These are top and tailed around a tungsten carbide ball to

provide a single point contact path which simultaneously allows lateral movement of the supported unit in order to avoid the impact of airborne low-frequency energy. More sophisticated still

are the Series 2+ Rollerblocks (£330 for three), rectangular structures that employ a similarly dished upper surface to that described above, but this time polished to a mirror finish. The ball that sits in the dish is intended to contact the supported unit directly, but for situations where the under-surface is uneven or inappropriate, Symposium supply a set of interface plates machined from thin stainless steel and also polished to a mirror finish. The underside of the block is machined out in a matrix pattern, the resulting voids being filled with a foam compound that helps control resonance within the block itself. The shelves should always be used with one of the above coupling systems to bypass the original rubber feet fitted to most equipment. Where hard feet are used, it's still worth experimenting with the couplers as their precise positioning under the equipment in question can still have



a profound effect on the sonic performance. The Ultra Platform is just like a Svelte Shelf writ large – in every sense. The (much thicker) stainless steel skins are bonded to what

▶ appear to be substantial MDF slabs which are then bonded to a layered foam core a full 37mm thick. This is so deep that, being relatively soft, it's actually vulnerable to damage, so it's protected by a textured laminate skin. (Fortunately, gouges in the foam shouldn't affect the performance of either this or the Svelte Shelf, although they will affect the appearance.) The end result is a nine-layer sandwich (including adhesives) a massive 90mm thick. No dropping that into your Target rack then!

Both the symposium platforms are incredibly dead to the touch yet easy to handle, being reasonably heavy but nowhere near the extreme represented by the Vertex slab. The manufacturer does recommend maximum loadings, but with a limit of 14kg on a standard Svelte Shelf when supported in each corner, they're not too restrictive; if in doubt simply check. They also strongly recommend their application under speakers, but that's another story for another day.

### The Vertex AQ Super Kinabalu

The Super Kinabalu (\$600) is an outgrowth and addition to the original design. It uses the same arrangement of complex steel tripod (a picture is worth a thousand words) and rubber tipped aluminium cones to elevate the equipment off of its feet while providing a single exit path for internal energy. The Tripod itself has evolved slightly from the original design, first getting taller, and then changing to a sonically superior alloy. The one that comes with the Super Kinabalu is identical

to the standard item, as are the four rubber pads that space the slab from its support. So, what makes this Kinabalu super? The answer is on the underside



of the granite slab, where a labyrinth layer has been added to further aid its dissipation of unwanted energy. The added depth and the junction of the two layers have necessitated the introduction of a wooden surround which also makes the whole look rather less industrial. Vertex AQ are also working on a rack which will



consist of a series of frames into which Super Kinabalu slabs can be dropped (carefully, one hopes!). Delivery is as yet unannounced but should be imminent by the time you read this.

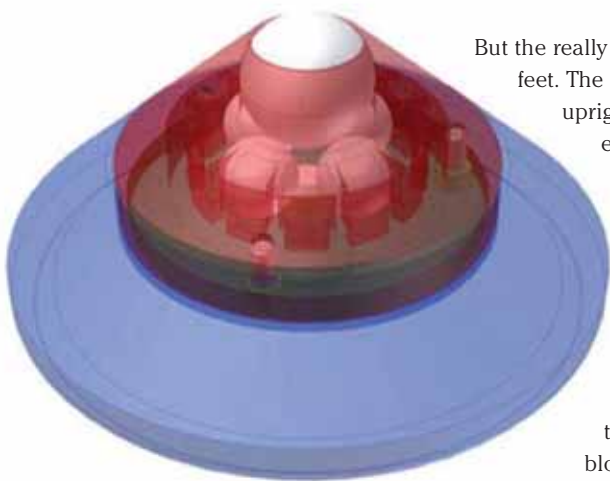
### The Stillpoints modular support system

The easiest way to understand the Stillpoints is to start with their original cone, as seen in the cutaway diagram (see over - these cost £225 for three).

A large diameter ceramic ball rests atop a quintet of similar but smaller balls which are retained within a flexible cradle. Vertical vibrational energy entering the top ball causes the lower balls to spread flexing the cradle to dissipate that energy while still maintaining a rigid contact

path to the supported unit. The stainless steel base plate works in reverse, taking energy from the supporting shelf and feeding it into the flexible element where, once again, it's absorbed. It's an elegant solution that has spawned a family of associated components. Risers (\$75 for three) are conical aluminium extensions to the Stillpoint cone whose threaded central post engage the hole in the base of the cone, enabling it to be adjusted for height and levelling. There are also

Inverse Risers (\$75 for three) that act as cups if the cone is pointing down. In this instance the cone can be threaded onto a stud (in the underside of a speaker cabinet, for instance) or used in conjunction with a Riser. I had no separate Inverse Risers to hand, but it occurs to me that one of their essential functions is to anchor equipment in place. The ball that forms the tip of the cone rolls extremely freely, as does whatever you place on top of it! All Stillpoints components are available in sets ▶



▶ of three or four and each cone has a weight limit of 45kg.

But what we have here is the Component Stand, perhaps the most advanced application of the technique short of the ESS system rack. The stand consists of milled aluminium legs (three or four to choice, \$395 or \$490 respectively) that are clamped into a central, stainless steel hub which allows them to be spread at any desired angle and then locked in place. Slots in the upper edges of the legs carry sliding inserts with threaded studs that run through them and lock them into the desired position. Each leg is supplied with a delrin disc that screws onto the stud to support equipment, but this “mini inverse-riser” (it’s scooped out on its upper surface) can be replaced with a Stillpoint cone. The combination of adjustable leg positions and sliding supports should mean that just about any equipment can be securely coupled to the stand, irrespective of vents or screw-heads in its base plate.

But the really clever part is in the feet. The apparently solid upright at the end of each leg is actually hollow. Inside it, a flexible ring retains five tiny ceramic balls which are forced apart by a stainless steel cone machined into the top of the foot block that closes the cavity. This is held in place

by a pair of allen bolts, securely but not too tightly. A threaded stud then supports the delrin foot, another mini inverse-riser.

It’s a beautiful example of precision engineering but you’ll need a 7/64 allen key if you want to get inside. The whole assembly is around 100mm high in standard form, while each leg turns on a 250mm radius. This versatile stand can be used under electronics or speakers to equally good effect, although once again, it’s the former we’ll be concentrating on. Note however, that the curved undersurface of the stand’s feet will



also interface with a Stillpoint cone, with or without Riser. Although the illustrations that accompany the stand only show the Stillpoint cones in the upper position, this lower option is a valid alternative that

avoids the single biggest practical criticism that I have of this set-up. I started by using the stand in its three-legged configuration, with and without Stillpoint cones above. Later I tried four legs and cones below to see what difference, if any, resulted.

### The Listening

I used the various platforms and couplers in the context of two different support environments: atop a finite elemente Pagode HD03 Master Reference rack with its own, sophisticated protection against external sources of vibrational energy,



and in conjunction with a standard welded steel rack with glass shelves from Soundstyle, representative of a more generally applicable situation. In the first case I wanted to limit the effect of the supports as much as possible to their impact on the internal energy within the systems. In the second I wanted to see whether it was eclipsed by the external energy that isn’t blocked in a conventional situation. At this point I limited the listening to products with conventional chassis construction. The other obvious ▶

► application, turntables (and especially those with standalone motors) are addressed as a separate issue simply because whereas the Symposium shelves might well work as supplied, the Stillpoints stand and Vertex Super Kinabalu won't, opening a whole can of worms as regards what is interfaced and how. Of course, with each separate design the number and shape of the worms changes, just to keep things interesting.

I used the various supports under two CD players (The Wadia 861SE with its heavy, bolted construction, and the far more conventional Sugden CD21) and a range of amplification (pre-amps from Tom Evans, Hovland and Herron, the Hovland RADIA solid-state and a KR Audio Antares KA320 valve power amps). In all cases care was taken to ensure that the support was the only variable introduced at any one time – not as simple as it at first sounds.

It quickly became apparent that the precise positioning of the couplers was critical to the performance of the various supports. Moving one coupler by a few centimetres would in some cases be the difference between a very positive and a slightly negative result. So, in swapping supports or changing from one type of coupler to another, it was critical to accurately recreate the precise geometry of the interface. Further, although the optimum position for the various Symposium couplers was always the same, and matched the position for the Stillpoints stand, the Kinabalu's optimum position was generally completely different, often almost a mirror image. Add to that the fact that both the Stillpoints cones and the Series 2+ Rollerblocks allow the unit to roll relative to the support plane and precise placement becomes more than just a case of putting the unit down in the right

place. Lighter equipment like the Groove and Vibe both required considerable attention to cable dressing to ensure that they actually stayed exactly where you put them, and even moderately heavy units required some attention in this regard. The RADIA had to have its tightly curled mains lead completely rerouted before it would play ball with the Stillpoints stand.

One thing that becomes very clear very quickly is that if you are interested in this approach to energy management within your system (and you should be) then there are a couple of



practical considerations when it comes to assessing these products in your own system. First, and most obvious is that two pairs of hands make life an awful lot easier. I spent a lot of time struggling on my own; don't do it! Around about the occasion I nearly dropped my Wadia for the third time I realised I needed help with this one. I was right, and those extra hands made all the difference, especially when it came to getting the various bits in exactly the right place to start with – and then duplicating that position through the various

exchanges. Secondly, all of these supports can have a significant effect on the low frequency energy spectrum of your system, in some cases necessitating significant adjustments to the position of your speakers in the room. I listened mainly through the Nola Pegasus, a complex, four box, full-range system which demands extremely precise placement to optimise bass performance. In truth, with lesser speakers it's just as important, you just don't hear it as clearly. If you don't take the trouble to attend to this then the very real benefits that you'll hear in terms of focus, clarity and detail retrieval will be offset by disjointed, lean or overblown bass.

In the worst-case scenario, using the Stillpoints stand beneath the Sugden CD21, I had to move the speakers back a full two inches to restore the correct balance and weight distribution.

The end result was a dramatic advance over the unsupported player, but without moving the speakers the significant benefits would have been totally undermined by the impossibly lean overall balance. This isn't simply a case of chucking a platform and a few bits underneath one or two components and seeing what happens. The changes are musically more fundamental than that and demand the appropriate care and application if you are going to really realise the benefits. ►

► **CD Players and solid-state electronics**

The first thing to make clear is that the changes wrought by the various platforms are all of a type, differing only by detail and degree rather than in the nature of their effect. Use any of these devices and once you get the various bits in the right place (including your speakers) and you should hear improvements in the clarity and stability of the sonic picture, the detail and dynamic range, the pitch definition and separation of instruments, particularly in the bass (which is why speaker positioning becomes so much more critical – as discussed in my column in this issue). Which is not to say that the various platforms sound the same.

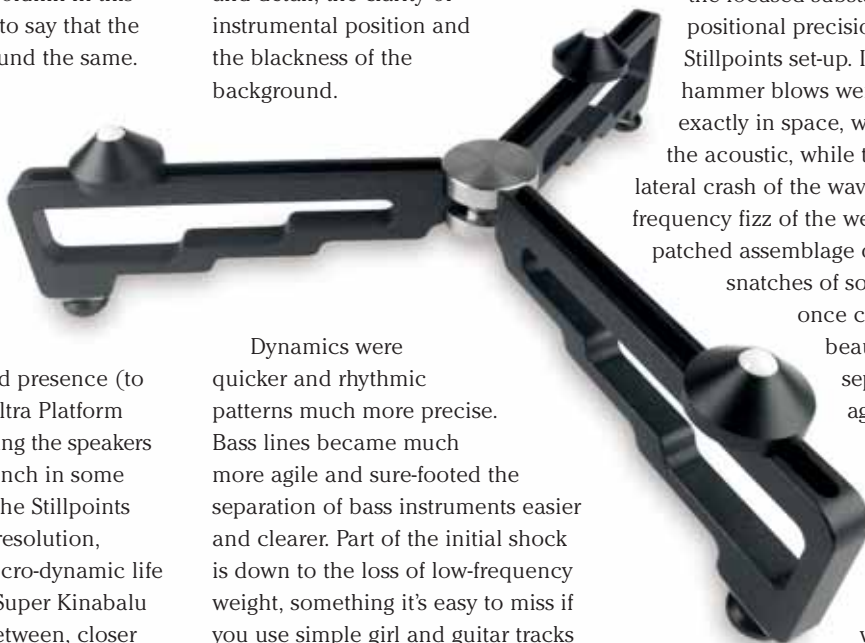
Within the general area of clarity and resolution, each has its own particular flavour. The Symposium products tend to err in favour of momentum, flow and presence (to the extent that the Ultra Platform actually had me pulling the speakers forwards by half an inch in some instances) whereas the Stillpoints are all about focus, resolution, transparency and micro-dynamic life and definition. The Super Kinabalu sits somewhere in between, closer to the Symposiums but its precise position dictated as much by the product supported as anything else.

The biggest spread of results was obtained with the Sugden CD player, perhaps reflecting its relatively flimsy construction compared to the likes of the Wadia or Hovland products.

In these more expensive units you expect the designer to pay more attention to the overall rigidity of the chassis, the isolation of the internal circuitry etc. With tighter design budgets such niceties are often

overlooked out of cost imposed necessity.

Let's start with the Stillpoints stand in its basic form. With the legs and mini-inverse risers carefully arranged, one beneath the transformer, one beneath the transport and the other behind and slightly inboard of the output terminals, the effect was somewhat awkward in appearance (there's no escaping the spidery, slightly stilted look of the Stillpoints stand). However, this arrangement definitely delivered the sonic goods so I stuck with it. But sonically there was no ignoring the drastic impact on the system's transparency and detail, the clarity of instrumental position and the blackness of the background.



Dynamics were quicker and rhythmic patterns much more precise. Bass lines became much more agile and sure-footed the separation of bass instruments easier and clearer. Part of the initial shock is down to the loss of low-frequency weight, something it's easy to miss if you use simple guitar tracks for your listening, although the effect is there in a loss of flow and line in melodies, phrasing in vocals. You might well marvel at the extra focus and clarity and think you're hearing edges that weren't there before. Adjust your speaker positioning and you'll realise that you are indeed hearing those edges but that the ease and beauty in the melodic line is actually still intact. Likewise, the tonal coldness that can be associated with ceramics will disappear once the speakers have been repositioned.

Adding the Stillpoints cones to the Component Stand made a significant difference, delivering further benefits in terms of separation and detail but also weight, substance and presence too, requiring a forward shift of the speakers by an inch. The added attack and bite was achieved without any hardness or glare, while the added energy at low frequencies produced a more even and relaxed quality, removing a hint of insistence that crept in with the stand alone. Playing the opening sequence of Jackie Leven's 'Defending Ancient Springs' with its cavernous soundstage and shipyard sounds really brought out

the focused substance and positional precision of the Stillpoints set-up. Individual hammer blows were located exactly in space, way back in the acoustic, while the complex lateral crash of the waves, the high-frequency fizz of the welder and the patched assemblage of voices and snatches of song were at once coherent yet beautifully separated. The aggressive fuzz of the opening guitar riff had real impact and presence, while the catchy, almost hypnotic pattern of the bass line was wonderfully mobile and fluid, each note anchored in pitch and time yet with its leading edge, texture and decay giving it a flare of life, the line an inner momentum.

With two types of platform and a choice of three different couplers, the Symposiums were always going to present a challenge. Of course, as soon as I realised that the positioning of the couplers was the same as

► for the Stillpoints that made things a lot easier...

Starting with the Svelte Shelf placed directly onto the shelf of the Pagode rack and using the solid aluminium coupling blocks, it was obvious that whilst the benefits in clarity and separation were clear, they weren't even close to those delivered by the (much more expensive) Stillpoints set-up. However, the overall coherence and integration, the sense of musical flow, was excellent, with no thinning of the sound through the mid. Bass was if anything a little fuller, necessitating a short shift forward of the speakers if it wasn't to get out of control. Music took on an easier, more relaxed quality which made for inviting and engaging listening.

Substituting the Rollerblock Jrs for the aluminium couplers created a cleaner and more immediate sound, which with improved momentum and pace created a nice sense of intimacy. There was more energy and presence, but none of the forced quickening that comes with curtailed notes and stripped harmonics. Instead there was a natural sense of ebb and flow to phrasing, while music really breathed. Moving up again to the Rollerblock Series 2+ couplers introduced another layer of detail and textural resolution, really bringing voices to life and better separation between instruments. The increase in dynamic discrimination and leading edge definition delivered further improvements in terms of rhythmic shape and subtlety.

The final step was to repeat the process with the Ultra Platform, a switch that Demonstrated similar shades of difference between the various couplers but made them far more obvious. It also generated significantly greater scale, separation and overall weight to the music as a whole. Indeed, the Ultra Platform demanded a full inch of forward movement from the speakers – a very

significant degree of adjustment with such a wide-bandwidth design. The end result was wonderfully relaxed and naturally expressive, voices in particular revelling in the rich tonality and presence of the presentation. I'm not sure I can really recommend the aluminium couplers with the Ultra Platform; the subtlety and resolution offered by the Series 2+ Rollerblocks being its natural foil. Even the Jrs represent false economy in this instance.

The Super Kinabalu represents a significant step up from the performance of the standard version, larger than the \$200 difference in price would suggest. It delivers a level of detail, resolution and textural insight that leaves the otherwise impressive original sounding rather clumsy and mechanical. With the Sugden CD player, I achieved the best results with the tripod placed below the transformer, the rubber-tipped cones in a similar layout to the other couplers, but an inch or two inboard. Yes, you do hear the difference. The sonic impact of the super Kinabalu is immediately obvious. Whilst you don't get the inky black transparency of the Stillpoints stand and cones combination, there's a silence behind the music and a sense of individual colour to voices and instruments that's instantly recognisable. Again, leading edges aren't as obvious as with the Stillpoints but there's a sense of emphatic purpose to proceedings which gives the music quite a different character and presence to the relaxed intimacy and natural presentation of the top Symposium set-up. Bass is deeper, with much better shape to notes, but of all the combinations required the least adjustment from the speakers – half an inch back was quite sufficient. In many ways, not least the security and stability of the equipment sat on top of it, this is the easiest and most

practical of these options. Overall height is manageable, with only the Svelte Shelf offering slimmer dimensions (and a slimmer performance). Kit stays where you put it and the appearance is less perched than the Stillpoints stand.

Switching source to the Wadia confirmed the basic findings but also revealed a few interesting facts. The most obvious conclusion was that the Sugden, even optimally supported, still fell well short of the Wadia's performance. However, the various platforms still delivered significant benefits in the context of the more expensive machine. Given the cost differential they are actually appear more cost effective in this context, yet the improvements wrought in the musical validity and entertainment value of the Sugden are hard to argue with at the price. Nevertheless, the results with the Wadia were far more predictable as well as revealing even wider performance gaps between the various coupling options. So much so that only the best combinations would really be seriously considered, the others constituting a bad case of penny pinching spoiling the ship...

I actually started by trying the Wadia directly sat on its own spiked feet atop the Symposium Ultra Platform. The results were far from great, with woolly, overblown bass and muted dynamics. Even the aluminium couplers represented a significant improvement, underlining the vital nature of the coupling itself. Needless to say, the various Rollerblocks were each significantly better still, the gap between the Jrs and the Series 2+ models widening dramatically. Likewise, the cones became a mandatory fit for the Stillpoints stand – although I'd have valued the security offered by a set of Inverse Risers. And for the first time the Super Kinabalu exhibited its inversion of the coupler ►



▶ footprint, it preferring its tripod beneath the left hand side of the player, the other platforms preferring two contact points on that side. It was to become a familiar theme with other electronics.

Whilst the general character of each platform's contribution remained consistent across both CD players, the results with the 861SE were, as noted, more predictable and consistent, probably reflecting its more massive and rigid structure. However, the benefits were, if anything, even greater. With more mass and more energy (as well as more performance) to play with, the platforms really came into their own. The Stillpoints stand in particular, lifted the sound away from the speakers in a way that I've only previously achieved with vinyl. Compared to both the Kinabalu and the Symposium Ultra/2+ combination, the player standing straight on the rack sounded flat and grey, lacking in life and presence. The Stillpoint set-up added extra dynamic expression and discrimination to the mix, along with the expected boost in transparency and separation.

Turning now to solid-state electronics, the results were again surprisingly similar. I'd expected more from the CD players because of their internal moving parts. Apparently, the extra cables connected to amplifiers, and the energy they transmit, makes up for the lack, so that the energy sinks are very nearly as effective in this instance too, even under the Vibe with its external power supply. However, there was one major difference between CD players and amplification and it lay in the effect of the various couplers. Whereas under the digital electronics, improving the coupling increased detail and separation, definition and the shape of notes, under the amps it was the timing that benefited. Rhythmic coherence and subtlety, integration and integrity all took

giant steps forward, making music more dramatic, more engaging and (where appropriate) more infectious. The other difference was that the Svelte Shelf narrowed the gap between itself and the more expensive options. It's tempting to surmise that the energy spectrum emitted by the amps is narrower and more easily handled than that from the CD players, but that is only speculation. I also noted no significant difference in the magnitude of the benefits accruing under power amps as opposed to line-stages, which surprised me. The positives seemed to be consistent and cumulative, the more so if the same units were used under all the different components. Not surprisingly, the Symposium platforms could be successfully mixed, but mixing say the Symposium and the Stillpoints whilst possible could be unpredictable; using the component stand beneath the HP100 and the Ultra/2+ pairing under the RADIA wasn't pretty, with a weird, hollow tonality and detached, lumpy bass resulting. Like I said, suck it and see. Interestingly, the imperturbably even-tempered Super Kinabalu was happy to play with anyone, but I'll come back to that later.

### Valve electronics

With their large (generally) frame type transformers and high mass, their hard-wired construction and microphony issues, you might well assume that tube amplification would be the ultimate application for these platforms – and in many ways you'd be right. As effective as they were beneath solid-state amplification, they were even more impressive (and fussy) with valves. Once again there were significant gains in detail and clarity with all these supports, and once again their basic character remained consistent. However, whilst the gains were far from subtle, they could be matched by equally obvious

downsides. Both the Symposium set-ups and the Super Kinabalu needed careful placement of their couplers if the bass and the timing of the music were to remain intact. Get them in the wrong place and all that clarity and information just underlines how drastically the temporal structure and low-frequency coherence have been disturbed. Once again, the Kinabalu reversed the footprint preferred with the Symposiums. But it was the Stillpoints Component Stand that delivered the most remarkable result.

With three legs and Stillpoints cones in place, using the stands under both pre and power amps produced an astonishing sound, remarkable for the transparency, detail and black background from the mid on up, the congestion, thickening and opacity of the one note bass down below. I was so astonished that I spent considerable time shifting leg angles and coupler placement, removing and replacing the Stillpoints, repeating steps to ensure that I really was hearing this. Well – I was, and all my changes resulted in changes but failed to alter the overall effect. Until, that is, I added the fourth legs: Suddenly sanity was restored. Now why that extra leg should make such a difference I really can't say, but its superiority under valve equipment was totally consistent, irrespective of pre or power, brand or function.

The moral of these stories is quite clear: use these supports with valve equipment and you can expect a major benefit – providing you take the time and trouble to get it right. That will take a little experimentation and some patience. Just don't take the results for granted. Even the four legs on the Stillpoints stand might well alter in a different context.

### Ringling the changes

The four-legged experience with the valve electronics had me reaching once again for the Wadia, hoping ▶

► for further improvements here too. I was to be disappointed. Despite extensive trials and considerable inventiveness when it came to coupler placement, the big CD player simply refused to cooperate.



The fourth leg had it sounding fuller, warmer and lazier, lacking the snap, pace and drive that three point contact delivered. Whilst this may well be a one-off result, I was able to verify it with the Sugden. So, suck it and see seems to be the order of the day. Certainly, valve electronics are the only instance in which four has proved to be better than three when it comes to interfacing with the Pagode stand.

I also took the opportunity to reinvestigate the placement of additional Stillpoints cones, in an effort to get around the “equipment on ice” effect of the Ceramic balls in direct contact with the unit. Reinstalling the Mini Inverse-Risers above the stand, I replaced it under the equipment, supported on a set of Stillpoints and Risers in the lower position. Sadly, whilst this is certainly more secure, it's also even more spindly and greedy when it comes to vertical space. Nor was I as impressed with the results. Under the CD player it went some way towards duplicating the effect of adding the fourth leg. Warmer and weightier, arguably smoother

and more comfortable, I'll take the definition and pace, transparency and immediacy of the cones in the upper position every time thanks.

### Making steel real

Having got a good grip on what these supports do when used in conjunction

with a stand that provides sophisticated isolation from the outside world, it was time to get real and see how they work with the kind of steel and glass construction that became so popular a few years ago. Undeniably pretty to look at, the sonic results of these creations can be pretty hideous. Soundstyle produced one of the better versions (in both regards) and I turned to the one I still have knocking around in order to get a handle on reality.

Once again the various platforms exhibited their dominant characters, however, the details of their application changed significantly. Now, using Risers and Stillpoints beneath the component stand was definitely preferable, essential to achieving proper weight and power at the bottom end whilst also improving overall timing and banishing a persistent glare from the upper-mid. The problem is that in this context the cost of the Stillpoints components is such that the purchaser

would be better off looking for a much better basic rack.

The same really applies to the more expensive Symposium offerings and the Super Kinabalu although here the cost equation is closer. Given the need for a pair of platforms and an existing rack that has achieved a measure of domestic harmony, the cost is well worth considering. However, each extra layer makes it a less viable proposition.

In use, the Super Kinabalu delivered its by now expected sense of weight, power and inherent balance, the musical substance a stark contrast to the thinned out upper-mid and glassy tonality of the standard rack. I used the Kinabalu with its four rubber feet placed straight onto the glass with superb results, especially when it came to presence and dynamic range. But this wasn't just about wham-bam results.



The Soundstyle rack imposed a mechanical quality to rhythms and a rather clumsy sense of dynamic discrimination, almost as if it only had so many levels to select from. Installing the Kinabalu introduced significant subtlety to rhythmic patterns and shape to melodies, transforming the sense of Coltrane's 'My Favourite Things' and revelling in the complex patterns and interplay between 'trane's sax and McCoy Tyner's wonderfully convoluted piano lines. In this context, the Vertex platform

► underlined just how seriously we should take mechanical isolation and the impact of spurious mechanical energy.

The Symposiums worked better in place of the glass shelves, standing directly on the little rubber feet that locate the standard items. Once again, the cost equation stands against the Ultra/2+ combination, but the Svelte shelf is another matter altogether. Priced at just £410 for a pair of shelves without couplers, they offer a really cost effective as well as visually attractive option. Add a set of serious couplers, like the Rollerblock Series 2+s, and the performance is excellent in this context. The added weight and presence deliver just what's required, along with significantly more natural separation, timing and tonality, completely banishing the glassy tendency of the rack in standard guise. The rhythmic expression is smoother and less accomplished than the Super Kinabalu 's but still much better than the standard rack. This is down to a slight loss of power and dynamic definition compared to the more expensive Vertex option, or indeed, the Ultra platform.

However, at this point let me invite the ire of not one but two manufacturers simultaneously, by suggesting a hybrid option. Rather than using the Rollerblocks with the Svelte Shelves, try the Vertex tripod and cones. They are available separately in two heights (35mm as shown here and costing £245/set, or 19mm – which occasionally necessitate the removal of equipment feet – for £195-50/set) and work an absolute treat with the

Symposium shelves. Not only do you get the lowest stack height of any combination, but the Vertex couplers offer far greater security for your equipment\*, which stays well and truly where it's placed. But the kicker is that they sound better too. Assuming all normal provisos regarding positioning etc the Vertex couplers bring



added shape and dynamic range, pitch definition and agility to the bottom end, without compromising much in terms of detail and separation across the rest of the range. Indeed, you could argue that their information delivery is simply better integrated, resulting in the added presence and musical purpose that comes with their inclusion. For owners of basic racks, this is a potentially winning combination.

### The cheapskate option?

Being as how we're discussing supporting individual components as opposed to systems here, and even concentrating on your primary chain, this is never going to be a cheap option, even using the Svelte shelves and Vertex couplers. Supposing just a CD player and integrated amp, that's still going to run out at around £800 –

which is hardly small beer, even though the benefits will more than justify the spend. Being mean by nature, I had to wonder if it was possible to duplicate the performance of the items under test using cheaper and simpler options but applying them in the same way.

A quick scout around the house turned up a selection of different cones and isolation pucks, bread boards and support platforms.

Now, whilst I've got more such things than most, I reckon there's barely an audiophile house in the country without a few spare Tip-toes or the like lying around. Assembling my booty into pairs of de-couplers and matching them to the various cones and other rigid coupling devices, I set about listening to the various combinations in search of audio cast-off heaven. Did I find it? Not exactly – but I got someway there...

What quickly became obvious was that there's no substitute for a proper platform. RDC shelves and slabs, a rather nice maple block from ERAudio, Torlyte and various layers of MDF (with and without soft interfacing in between) all came and went. Whilst some, notably the ERAudio slab and the RDC shelves managed to mimic the mid-band pace and separation of the Svelte Shelf, their bass was all over the place; overweight, over played and (worst of all) as it rumbled across the floor, over here. Lacking any sort of pitch definition or edges to notes, this was a definite non-starter.

However, when it came to couplers I had significantly more joy. I did try sets of three identical rigid elements, but the two soft/one hard combo ►

\* And yes, I realise that horizontal freedom of movement is a design intention of the Rollerblocks, but that's not what I'm referring to when I complain about security. The trouble is that the drag of cables and the like actually pulls the bearings off centre, which impedes their performance anyhow, as well as looking damned untidy. Horizontal movement I can handle, having lived with air suspension: Permanently displaced equipment that won't stay where it's put – that's another matter.

► was better every time. I had great results from both Ringmat cork domes and also RDC RDP-type trampoline feet, used in conjunction with either an RDC type 5 cone or a finite element Cerapuc or Ceraball foot as the rigid coupling element. Whilst neither combination could quite match the presence, transparency and silent background of the Vertex components, they got surprisingly close and gave nothing away when it came to pitch definition and



arm and a leg. RDC 5 cones are \$20 for four, and Ringmat Domes are about the same, meaning that you can get enough couplers for four units for around \$60. Which makes this a far more reasonable proposition. Cerapucs and Ceraballs cost a little more and deliver more detail and greater transparency, the extra cost of the 'pucs delivering extra weight and control at the bottom end.

But the real lesson here is suck it and see. Buy the shelves first and play with couplers – a few steel cones or RDC 5s with trimmed down wine corks is a surprisingly effective starting point.



Bespoke couplers from Symposium or Vertex can be added

later, when cost allows (and the thirst for a further upgrade demands).

### Parting thoughts...

What these experiences, many and various, suggest is that this energy sink approach to equipment support is one that you should take extremely

seriously. Rather than representing an alternative to more established approaches, this represents an additional level of signal isolation to be used in conjunction with existing measures. The Super Kinabalu and Symposium Ultra platform deliver astonishing results once optimised, while the Stillpoints components have become a permanent and invaluable fixture in my system. Undeniably expensive though these support solutions are, their sonic and musical impact certainly justifies the cost when considered against the price of the equipment they're supporting.

But the best thing is that we're ploughing virgin territory here. Most equipment stands, indeed – most equipment designers, have paid little or no attention to this important aspect of performance. As such, even relatively ad hoc arrangements of the type I've just described can deliver surprisingly impressive results. Yes, you have to experiment with the components and yes, you have to experiment with the precise placement of the couplers, but it's worth the effort. You also have to pay attention to the amount of vertical space available when considering the options. My advice; investigate sooner rather than later. ►+

separation at low frequencies, timing, rhythmic subtlety and tonal colour. In fact, the results were pretty darned good. Likewise, the steel cones that are supplied with the ERAudio slabs and various other anonymous examples were still worthwhile used in the rigid coupling role, although aluminium cones were notably less successful. But the best thing of all is that even if you purchase these pieces new, they won't cost an