

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

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ESP (Essential Sound Products) Power Cords and Power Distributor

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"I actually heard someone suggest that electricity generated from hydro sources is superior for sound reproduction purposes to coal, oil and nuclear generation, in much the same way 'cane' sugar is supposedly superior to 'beet' sugar. I just asked about whether he was taking his medication according to the directions."

Over the years my experiences with "black box" add-ons have been uniformly negative. Whatever they were designed to do, if they managed to do it, they nearly always exacted a price I couldn't abide. This applies more or less equally to equalizers, enhancers, jitter-reduction, auto-correlation, noise reduction, and power *conditioning*. Besides, in the case of passive power conditioning, what possible proportional benefits can there be to a few feet of esoteric material grafted onto the end of whatever your local power company runs to your dwelling?

It makes sense to me to have dedicated power runs to a serious audio system, trying to control the electrical junk every home generates. Careful attention to connections, correct phase and heavy, shielded leads are also rational choices for the serious audiophile, but spending several hundred dollars each for power chords? Come on! No wonder real people shake their heads in wonderment at the excesses of the hobby. Even manufacturers cast a baleful eye at after-market cords, sternly warning customers that such unnecessary frippery will have "unpredictable" effects on the sound of the equipment, and by inference, suggesting that this is not a good thing.

While I am a skeptic, I am not indifferent to the counsel of people whose judgment and ears I trust, even when I suspect they may have left the collective reality we are supposed to occasionally share. So, after several suggestions from various sources that I should put my resistance aside long enough to give after market power cords a shot ... I did.

After a fair amount of checking around, I decided on the Essential Sound Products (E.S.P.) line. I was intrigued by the fact they offered a passive power distributor strip specifically designed to work with their power cords. If the distributor strip is effective, there are some advantages in not having to mess about with putting in enough outlets to power a large system. With the power strip, one wall outlet gives you eight, phase correct plugs, enough for most systems. Simpler is almost always better, I say.

Product Description

E.S.P. sent me cords for my power amp (2), pre-amps (2) and DAC (unfortunately my transport and turntable have captive leads) and the eight-outlet power distributor strip. Fit, finish and materials were pretty much what I expected, heavy ... stiff and serious looking. Attractive, in a completely utilitarian manner.

The Essence Power Distributor strip is big and heavy as hell. It is constructed of thick, anti-resonant aluminum with non-parallel internal surfaces and significant amounts of damping materials to control internal resonance. The eight outlets are hospital grade, with isolated grounding. The grounding is constructed from a single, solid brass stamping. The manufacturer insists this is important for noise control. Internal wiring is multi-conductor and designed to "perfectly compliment" the power cord products.

E.S.P. products feature a proprietary, multi-conductor geometry, heavy shielding and proprietary connector components and terminators. The manufacturer claims this results in low impedance and contact resistance.

Getting Plugged In

Fighting the impulse to pull all the stock stuff out in one fell swoop, I elected to approach the listening process in as systematic a manner as possible. E.S.P. suggests that their products need about fifty hours of play time to fully break in. I have to admit I found that admonishment amusing. But hey, I certainly have heard the break-in process in wires, so why not AC cords?

I decided to work my way back from the power amp. Yanking the stock Beldens from the BAT VK-500, I went to work.

Occasionally, I have this Tim Taylor fantasy about picking up a second BAT VK-500 power amplifier (250 watts into 8 ohms) and either vertically bi-amping the Concert Grands or sending both amps back to the factory for conversion into the VK-1000 mono blocks. MORE POWER! It's a fantasy. Let's see, I would have to buy another amp, fund the shipping and conversion process for both amps, spring for another big slab of granite and another Black Diamond Shelf and cones, watch the power meter whir at 600+ watts of power consumption at idle and, after all, the Grands are pretty efficient ... Surely there are better ways to spend money? But hey, Steve ... Victor, don't let that dissuade you if you want to make me an offer I can't refuse ...

The Power Cords

Waiting for the VK-500's short turn-on cycle to finish, truthfully I wasn't really expecting much. I began with a familiar, just-played recording, and the same volume setting from moments ago. Quick like a bunny ... shut it down, replace the cords, power up and here we go!

What did I get? A *phantom second amp*. Massive grunt in the low base, a sense of absolute dynamic ease and an insouciant invitation to crank it up! The closest parallel I can offer is the effect turbocharging can have on a normally aspirated automobile. As with a new turbo, things were a bit stiff and tight, but this disappeared with break-in.

This is particularly remarkable in that I have typically found any add-on power thingies to restrict and constrict large power amps. Not here. It was as though the big VK-500 had rid itself of a partial airway obstruction, took a deep breath and came into full voice.

Break-in changes were quite apparent, with the sound becoming increasingly more open, smooth and refined. I had expressed some concern to Ye Olde Editor about a slight mid-bass hump that I had attributed to room acoustics. David suggested I might find resolution with changing out the stock power cords. Mr. Robinson knows his stuff. I got no further than the power amp cords before the mid-bass "problem" was gone. The very slight "tubbiness" was completely ameliorated.

So ... just replacing the power amp cords resulted in a considerable increase in perceived available power, much better deep bass and a smoothing of the apparent mid-bass hump, and greater overall resolution and smoothness ... not bad, and lots to go yet.

Next step was the BAT VK-5i line stage. Differences were more subtle and mostly in the areas of micro dynamics and openness. I especially appreciated the increased tonal richness and improved noise floor, with significantly longer decay-to-silence cymbal sound.

The effect of The Essence power cord on the BAT VK-P5 phono stage was impressive. Specifically, a very small amount of "grain" I had not been aware of consciously disappeared. I did several trials with this, swapping the cords as rapidly as possible. Unmistakable improvement and very pleasant.

The stage-two Timbre DAC is a real winner on its own merits, and to be frank I did not notice a great deal of difference from the stock cord.

Bottom line on the cords? Go for the power amp first, and you may not choose to go further. This is a killer power amp tweak, and I am not the only one to assert this. Want more? Go for the line stage and phono stages. I regret I didn't get to try a transport or table, but we got what we got.

The Essence Power Distributor Strip

Finally, after all the cords were added sequentially and broken in, I put the power distributor strip into service with all of the components (even those with captive cords) save the power amp (different location, different circuit). Then it got weird.

My first reaction was that something was *missing*, as though the overall sound had suddenly become more "simple." At first, I tried to mentally categorize what I was hearing (or rather, not hearing) according to the typical light/dark, open/closed, and tonal balance descriptions, but this proved to be fruitless. There was no emphasis or diminution in any part of the audible spectrum. The highs were just as high and the lows were, if any thing, even lower, but something was *missing* ... and then, only after a fair amount of time I realized what it was ... *noise*.

In the process of redoing our newly acquired old house, we have tried to keep intact as many of the period aspects of the house as we can. The ancient wood floors have taken on a patina that is part age and oxidation, and part damage and wear. Our goal was to retain the age while fixing as much of the obvious damage as possible and improving serviceability. We discovered as we stripped and cleaned, that what originally seemed to be *seamlessly joined* floors were only *seamless* because the cracks were filled with decades of dirt, wax and gunk. Remove the crap, the "noise"... and suddenly there are holes that weren't there before. Disconcerting.

Back to The Essence Power Distributor strip. What had been seamless sound from my system now became discrete instruments and separate sounds, without the filler that has apparently always been there.

One of the allegations about hard-core vinyl and tube lovers is that they have grown accustomed to the noise artifacts and distortion inherent to tubes and vinyl and now object to their absence or resolution. I don't know if I agree with this assertion or not. However, I must say it

took me some time to get used to the effects of the distributor strip. In all candor, as the break-in period ticked by, consciously I intended to remove the strip. I figured that it was probably "too much of a good thing" and that I had simply "overtreated" the system. This is not a new phenomenon to me. I have always been an advocate of, "if a little is good, a lot more will be wonderful." Dutifully waiting until the strip had seen at least fifty hours, I pulled it out of service and plugged the Essence cords back into the wall, figuring I had found the appropriate level of treatment for my specific system.

Whoeeee! The brain learns...and knows what it likes, even if we don't always get it. It took me all of five minutes to realize that my brain LIKES less noise, even if I wasn't initially sure at a conscious level. I did several more swaps to make sure. With The Essence Power Distributor strip in place, my system doesn't sound like typical HIFI ... it sounds ... *right*. *There is* this simple, liquid coherency. It may not suit the dramatic, who need the splashy sizzle of HIFI, but it wraps around me like an enveloping ... oops, this is WAY too Freudian to finish!

I need to make this point very clearly; this is not a matter of *preference*. Once I heard my system with the E.S.P. products in place it simply sounds "wrong" without them, not less good, **wrong**.

Summary

Essential Sound Products gets my "truth in advertising award." In their literature they state their products will result in improved dynamics, extended range, greater focus and *greater* resolution ... *all* with no discernable negative effects. This is exactly true. For a fraction of some competing products, you get exactly what they promise.

What more needs to be said? Highly recommended.

The Essence Power Cords, \$499.00 (2 meters, with standard IEC connector)

The Essence Power Distributor, \$995.00 (with standard 2 meter cord)

Update: Since finishing the review on the Essence products, I have received the lower priced A/V Power-Flow Pro (power cords and distributor strip). The PRO two meter cords sell for \$299.00, the standard cord for \$149.00 and the distributor strip for \$499.00. I have been using them in a series of components in a smaller secondary system I am putting together for review. Far from being "budget" versions of The Essence, these products fare extremely well on their own merit, and should be of great interest for Home Theater aficionados. More later when I begin the series on smaller and secondary systems.

Further Update: I recently found a package on my front step containing the new BAT VK-50 SE line stage preamplifier (\$7,500). All I can say for now is that a very nice Canadian man will soon be taking receipt of my VK-5i. REVIEW TO COME!

Associated Equipment

Digital Front End:

Transport: Teac VRDS 20

DAC: Timbre TT-1 (with Stage Two upgrade)

Analog Front End: Wilson Benesch Full Circle Table (.05 Arm, and Ply MC cartridge)

Amplification: Balanced Audio Technology (BAT) VK-5i and VK-50 SE (review forthcoming) line stage preamplifiers. BAT VK-P5 phono stage pre-amplifier (with NOS Amperex 7308's and RCA 6SN7's)

Speakers: Esoteric Speaker Products (ESP) Concert Grand Signatures (all upgrades and specific modifications)

Interconnects and Accessories: E.S.P. The Essence power cords and Power Distributor strip. Liberal use of Black Diamond products (The Shelf for the Source, Those Things, Round Things, Cones, etc.) Deluxe Justarack, Seismic Sink, ACS tube and flat traps, and small flags, Jena Labs Speaker wire.