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Critical Mass Systems Maxxum Amplifier Stand

Disappearing Act

Robert Harley

In my editorial in Issue 246 (“The Law of Accelerating Returns”) I suggested that the goal of assembling the most realistic-sounding audio system is best realized by investing in products that are demonstrably more transparent and resolving. All too often, audiophiles swap components only to trade one set of colorations for a different, perhaps initially appealing, set of colorations. Years of such “upgrades” don’t bring you closer to musical realism in the long run. It’s better to spend your money on components or accessories that improve the sound without any sonic tradeoffs.

One of the experiences that sparked that thought was listening to the effects of the Critical Mass Systems Maxxum Amplifier Stands in my system. (Another was installing four dedicated AC lines in my listening room—full report to come.) Here was a product that uplifted the system with absolutely zero sonic downside. Even reference-grade electronics and loudspeakers exhibit their own unique sonic signatures; a gain in one sonic

criterion realized by exchanging a component with another is often accompanied by a slight reduction in another musically consonant quality. But with the Maxxum amp stands underneath my power amplifiers, the system’s transparency increased, the soundstage deepened, resolution improved, and dynamic widened. This was true with the Souldution 701 monoblocks, the Constellation Centaur monoblocks, the Constellation Inspiration monoblocks, and the Devialet 200. There was no sonic downside to the Maxxum with any of these amplifiers, which leads me to suggest that investments in these vibration-isolation products deliver a big return in increased realism.

Specifically, moving the power amplifiers from the floor to the Maxxum stands caused the system to disappear more completely. That is, my awareness that I was sitting in front of a pair of loudspeakers was replaced by an impression of the music simply existing in space before me. Although the Maxxum rendered improvements in specific sonic areas that were easily heard and

described, this sense of the sound being more detached from the speakers isn't something that can be instantly pegged.

Perhaps this vanishing act was the cumulative result of all the little things the Maxxum did. First, the Maxxum increased the system's spatial resolution by better revealing the space and bloom around instruments. On the track "Somewhere, Somebody" from Jennifer Warnes' LP *The Hunter*, Warnes' voice is joined mid-way through the track by a male voice that weaves in and around hers. The Maxxum transformed what had been a slight homogenized rendering into two clearly differentiated voices, despite both being panned to the dead-center of the soundstage. The entire presentation moved back slightly, sounding less forward and more lifelike.

The Maxxum stands did this "de-homogenizing" trick with all music, opening up the presentation and providing sharper focus on individual instruments. It was easier to shift my attention between foreground and background instruments, and with that quality came a greater appreciation for the arrangements.

The bottom end improved tonally and dynamically, as well. Bass notes were better defined in pitch, tighter in focus, and more tuneful in pace. It was also easier to hear the attacks of plucked acoustic bass and their decays, which, without the Maxxum stands, were a little blurred. In addition, instruments like Vinnie Colliuta's kick drum on the terrific Jeff Beck album *Performing This Week...Live at Ronnie Scott's* acquired more visceral impact and punch.

Instrumental timbres were noticeably smoother and more relaxed, with less of an artificial edge. The sound just had greater ease and liquidity. Loudspeakers have a character best described as "self-noise"—a kind of chaotic, random chatter underneath the music that obscures very fine detail, slightly softens transients, reduces the sense of deep silence between notes, and muddies timbres. You don't hear self-noise until you hear its absence in a loudspeaker such the Rockport Altair and Magico Q7 that employ heroic enclosure design. The Maxxum amplifier stands seem to do for amplifiers what a robust, resonance-free enclosure does for loudspeakers.

Now, about the stands themselves. The Maxxum amplifier stands are based on the same technology first used in the Maxxum racks that Jonathan Valin uses as his references. An

X-frame of machined aluminum is supported by large spikes on each corner. Spike isn't quite the right word; these are large cylinders made using constrained-layer-damping techniques that taper to a downward-facing point. Small indentations on the top of the X-frame accept tungsten-carbide spheres on which the platform that will support the amplifier rests. The platform is in essence a shelf from the Maxxum rack, which contains a patented vibration-filtering system. Four discs are provided with each stand that fit between the platform and the amplifier's feet. After I had the stands for a few months, Critical Mass Systems' Joe Lavrencik visited to upgrade the stands with a new and improved filtering inside the platform. The difference with the upgrade was subtle, but noticeable.

Because the Maxxum stands are made to order, you can specify the platform size as well as any automotive-paint color. I opted for large units to accommodate even the biggest power amplifiers. Indeed, the massive Soulution 701s barely fit. I can't say enough about the appearance, build-quality, and fit 'n' finish. Obviously no corners are cut in the manufacturing process.

This quality and performance aren't cheap—\$5650 per stand. Nonetheless, I can think of many systems in which an investment in the Maxxum amplifier stands would render a greater performance improvement than in upgrading a piece of electronics. And in a full-blown reference-class system, the Critical Mass Systems amplifier stands are an absolute necessity. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Dimensions: Custom
Color: Any automotive finish
Price: \$5650 each

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