



IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius

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POWER PLAY

Anyone wanting good sound has to keep an eye on every stop along the signal chain. And what is the first stop? The power outlet. But is starting off here really worth it? We will hear.

By Jochen Reinecke Photos: Ingo Schulz, Cai Brockmann



Can it be a sign of old age already? If someone had told me twenty years ago that I would one day write a piece about a mains filter – I would have laughed as I hurried off on my way. But when editor in chief Cai Brockmann approached me with one of his infamous, bimonthly cold calls to review a new test object, I accepted without hesitation. "Give it to me", was my ecstatic response.

It's bound to happen to every hifi nut eventually. You start saving early on and carefully assemble your loudspeakers and all kinds of components, usually replacing them one by one over several stages, until one day you can finally call the provisional hifi system your own. Then comes the initial fine-tuning. You invest in the acoustics of the living space (you'll also experience your first relationship upheavals in this phase at the latest), experiment with different loudspeaker arrangements, spikes, equipment platforms and support feet, all kinds of LF cables and much more. Most people call it quits at some point, but not everyone.

Some take the shortcut right to hardcore esoterism, investing in "informed" granite slabs, mystical blue electrosmog remediation lights, drawing with black marker around the edges of their CDs, putting up "activated" stickers on their windows, waving expensive magic wands over their cables before listening, and hanging bell-like resonators in the room (this usually marks the official start of the separation, including maintenance payments). Others remain at least pro forma on the science-based path and invest in costly power cables – or in a mains filter, the purchase price for which one could easily buy a record player and have something that could be called useful. This piece of equipment is exactly what I now have at my home. How could it come to this?

Very easily – in the past ten years, I have found (and I needed to, at times reluctantly) that astonishing things tend to happen in the hifi segment. Some tuning measures, though they may sound esoteric, actually do make an audible, reproducible sound improvement. And by the way, many don't – that is worth emphasizing once again at this

junction. It became clear to me that mains current is anything but "clean" (i.e. except for a flawless sine with a constant mean amplitude, it supplies no further harmonics), when a knowledgeable master electrician once lent me an amusing device that allowed me to hear the background noises floating around in the mains current. Sort of like an amplifier for sound coming from the power outlet with a steep notch filter at 50 Hz. Holy smokes! The things you could hear – a hearty burp when the refrigerator started up, a shrill hissing and buzzing when using the dimmer on my halogen ceiling light, a strange creaking when turning on my laser printer – combined with lovely, intermittent musical interference from the radio and waves from the Tempelhof airport that used to reach all the way to Schöneberg.

And since alternating current is by definition foreign when it comes to operating hifi components, all of the transformers, switching power supplies and such built into the components are simply

a crutch. As a consequence, some manufacturers of ultra-premium hifi equipment turn to battery power, as this is the only way to truly deliver "pure" raw power material. If you then consider that what ultimately resounds from our loudspeaker is simply rectified, strained, stabilized current, onto which the music is modulated with considerable effort, it follows that one needs to begin right at the front of the signal chain – right at this very current – in order to achieve maximal sound quality.

This is exactly what the products from IsoTek do. This manufacturer has dedicated itself wholeheartedly to the issue of "clean power". The product portfolio primarily encompasses power cables of the highest quality (and price categories) as well as active and passive mains filters. I have received the IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius – a mains filter with six outlet sockets, which could easily pass as the output stage when viewed from the front. Supplying power is the affordable power cable EVO Premier from the same the company; it not only goes well with the



Interview with Keith Martin, IsoTek



Keith, this device looks like a sophisticated output stage – but it's actually a mains filter. Is that really necessary?

Well, the time and effort we at IsoTek have put into mains filtering is considerable – it might be unparalleled. For example, the EVO3 Aquarius features six filter sockets in the back; inside, each one of them has its own current path which is isolated from the others

– to my knowledge, no other company is doing this. It's actually like an extremely complex power strip in which the connected devices cannot interfere with one another. That's the reason we can't really make it much smaller. And we gave it a "classic" design, which allows it be integrated in existing high-end systems as easily as possible.

But why should I add a mains filter to my expensive system in the first place? Doesn't the music lose some of its dynamism?

That criticism comes up often, but that's not the case with

IsoTek. We pay meticulous attention to filtering out only the disruptive elements in the current and to maintaining the full dynamics of the music recording. In fact, we can demonstrate the effect of the mains filter with this device here (*he presents a mains noise analyzer*). It allows all of the mains interference signals to be heard as actual sounds (*he demonstrates the difference between "with" and "without"*).

Wow, I didn't expect such a drastic difference ...

Yes, it is quite amazing to see what a clean current can do. It's no wonder that a premium hifi system will show its appreciation with a substantially better performance.

So an electric current that is as "good" as possible is essential for the listening experience?

If I may offer an analogy: No one would think of filling their fancy sports car with inferior gasoline. So why should I expect my premium system to run on contaminated power?

A good comparison, Keith. Thank you for our talk.



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» Aquarius, on the practical side, it is also included in the price.

I have the ideal working conditions and challenges to offer the British double pack: Last August I moved into a new apartment; downstairs, a snack bar is located on the first floor. Apparently, their massive pizza oven packs a heavy load: In the evening when their business is booming, my power is so compromised that even my living room lamp slightly flickers. Things calm down again at 11:00 pm sharp, when the place closes. And now we – finally – have the reason that I wanted this device for a test. Get it?

What does the EVO3 Aquarius do?

On the one hand, it filters out all of the harmonics and interferences from the incoming mains current. It can reduce the types of interference described above – also called RFI by electrical engineers – by up to 60 dB, for instance. On the other hand, it ensures that the interferences generated by the hifi chain itself are eliminated to the greatest extent possible. During rectification and straining of the supply voltages, the power supply units of the components distribute the harmonic impulses "back" into the mains. In other words, a battle on two fronts.

1 Clear the ring: Six outlets are ready and waiting for power-hungry components

2 Could be an output stage but isn't: pleasingly minimal, yet premium-quality and substantial design.

The good news: It actually works, especially for me at home. I deliberately scheduled my test sessions during the times in which the power in my apartment was noticeably strained. And as soon as the EVO3 Aquarius came into the game, the improvement in my chain's performance was astonishingly clear. My CD player is an Audiolab 8200CDQ. Its digital signal is led by coax into the BMC PureDac and symmetrically converted via XLR to the Abacus Ampollo output stage. From there, it goes to my reference loudspeakers, the Neat Acoustics Momentum 4i and the Tannoy Turnberry Gold Reference.

But what exactly happens as the EVO3 Aquarius performs its duties? I observed noticeable improvements in three areas. The most significant effect can be seen in the spatial representation. With the EVO3 Aquarius in the loop, there are considerable enhancements. Sound sources can be more precisely located, seem firmly anchored in their position, and are perceived to go a half meter further in depth and fan out more extensively in breadth. This positive effect can be seen in all musical genres and styles. Orchestras have a more precise depth gradation, mixed voices sound considerably more convincing, even chamber music is more enjoyable, especially when produced in such a manner that the space in which it is recorded is "alive" with the music. Hall sounds more natural, refined – it even seems possible to actually imagine the qualities and nature of the place it was recorded (cool, warm, woodsy, etc.). In Mogwai's song "Take Me Somewhere Nice", for instance, the second guitar after the intro is perceived to be coming from one meter to the right of the right loudspeaker. When the drums come in, it almost seems possible to visualize the room in which the microphone is set.

In terms of high-frequency representation, my chain can deliver considerably more with the EVO3 Aquarius as well. This is especially true when it comes to drums and percussion instruments: Cymbal, rattler, shaker, sizzler – they all sound remarkably more detailed, and it's easier to differentiate them from one another in their timbre – even the cowbell sounds positively more metallic, more bell-like.

Last but not least, there is also a bit more to enjoy in terms of bass. Obviously, the mains filter can't provide any tonal modifications (that would be questionable from an electrical point of view, and you'd also have to worry about the mental state of the reviewer if he said it could). But the impulses seem to me to be crisper and more refined. This can be heard beautifully in Linton Kwesi Johnsons "Reggae Sounds": The bass drum appears to have a more immediate effect, the bass lines sound groovier and purified.

In short: The IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius is worth its salt in every respect. It enhances the system with an undoubtedly audible upgrade, while giving its owner the good feeling of not having purchased it based on esoteric nonsense but on an immaculate design that can be relied upon. Pure genius!

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IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius

Mains filter

Input: Mains inlet (C19 IEC)

Outlets: 6 mains outlets (2 x 16 A, 4 x 5 A)

Mains voltage: 100-240 V.

Total available power: 3680 W

Total transient power: 18400 W.

Delivery contents: IsoTek EVO Premier power cable (unit price: € 99)

Finish: Silver or black

Dimensions (W/H/D): 44,4/85/30,5 cm

Weight: 9 kg

Warranty period: 2 years

Price: € 1395

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