Bad Vibrations

WBT's structure-borne sound attenuators cope with adverse vibrations even at the loudspeaker terminals.

Recently a well-known American hi-fi institution expressed his amazement about the specialisation of our branch. It's true, only a few hi-fi or high-end manufacturers offer indeed all elements of a chain. But why should they? Specialisation does have its good sense. Who builds good loudspeakers, is not naturally a good rack builder on the same level.

Which brings us back to the ever controverse question regarding the accessories. In this field of high-end culture, tinkerers have always played an important part, certainly also freaks and eccentrics. Among the sceptics the latter have not necessarily always inspired trust. But one can also ground the project of wresting even the last bit of refinement from highly sensitive systems on a solid scientific fundament. Nothing else, meaning a specialisation on a physical basis and on the highest level of craftsmanship, is what WBT has been doing for more than thirty years. Since that time Wolfgang B. Thörner has shown the entire hi-fi world how essential pushfits are just as well to the sound experience. Since then countless loudspeaker, equipment and cable makers have depended on the sockets, plugs and terminals from Essen. The Nextgen revolution of 2003, the introduction of low-mass and low eddy-current connections, had only strengthened this position.

Thörner is utterly convinced that there are no trivialities in the field of sound reproduction. Pushfits are interfaces, i. e. weak points, and thus the frequently invoked and yet too seldom tackled weakest links in the chain. Now he has spotted the loudspeaker terminal as a particularly delicate link. Speaker cables do vibrate – of this fact I was recently convinced by a test of cable supports. They pass on their vibrations to the contact area, where already annoying structure-borne and airborne soundwaves arrive and a possibly vibrating speaker cabinet might cause other interferences. At the terminals the unavoidable contact resistance will attenuate the signal also electrically. Hence loudspeaker terminals vibrate, and the less they do it, the smaller the resulting distortions will be.

Here we are in a chicken-and-egg situation. From an electrical point of view a connection as tight as possible between plug and binding post, or between cable and speaker respectively, would be desirable. It lowers the contact resistance. However, a strong fit also favours me-

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chanical vibrations. WBT now offers a solution to this problem, too. It is called structure-borne sound attenuator and comprises first of all a mounting plate together with a counterplate for the speaker terminal. It keeps the contact elements, here in particular the binding posts, in a firm grip. At the same time a decoupling frame made of a synthetic, mechanically soft rubber provides an efficient damping. Furthermore, various spacer rings enable an adjustment to the respective cabinet wall thickness.

So is there still room for improvement here as well? I am curious about a comparison. For this purpose WBT has placed the custom-modified Classic Compact from Audio Physic (1,700 euros, pictured below) at my disposal. In cooperation with chief designer Manfred Diestertich, the two-way loudspeaker has been equipped with a terminal which offers three pairs of binding posts. Right on top we have the »classic« WBT-0763 binding posts made of solid brass. Below comes a second pair, this time a Nextgen, the WBT-0708 made of gold-plated copper. Finally, in the lowest position, we have the same binding posts, but this time mounted onto the WBT-0718 structure-borne sound attenuator which is to be reviewed here.

How exciting! On this test speaker you can quasi relive thirty years of hi-fi history in one go. Of course, it must warm up first, and my ears want to get used to the unfamiliar transducers, too. Which isn't a difficult task. In my listening room, at the classic binding posts, they notice pretty soon an airy sound image that detaches itself in an ideal way from the cabinet. Although it's actually too big for compact speakers, it sounds impeccable. But here it's about the connectors. As was to be expected, replugging to the Nextgen posts produces a more precisely graduated sound image which reveals no loss of atmosphere, either. What more could the structure-borne sound attenuation possibly improve? Immediately the notes come with even greater contour sharpness, orchestra tutti show enhanced precision, and I experience subtle decay phases in a more plastical manner and therefore the music in a more involving way. Not enough that the sounds gain both in colour and body; also the breaks are sort of vibrating along, seemingly ready to confirm the much-cited word that the actual music takes place between the notes.

And then I plug back to position one. What a loss! As if you were listening over a different speaker. Without Nextgen and no structure-borne sound attenuation, the bass and fundamental range are lacking colour and fine detail. Timbres and transients of double basses, bassoons, tympani, previously clearly differentiated from each other, now want to mingle. The entire tonal spectrum appears to be narrower, rhythmically the music plays less to the point.

I had expected an improvement, after all we know WBT. But not such a clear one! With the attenuators the loudspeaker conveys more room depth, more colour, more tranquility and, in total, more music. Loudspeaker manufacturers should be obliged to incorporate them into their technical specifications. With the attenuators the Audio Physic costs a premium of merely 100 euros. Listeners who are good with their hands and want to upgrade their speaker terminals with the new WBT mounting plate (61.85 euros, suggested German retail price including 19% VAT), a pair of Nextgen binding posts (48.70 euros) plus the attenuators (20.50 euros) need to pay about 130 euros (WBT, +49 2054 / 87552-0, www.wbt.de). The sonic gain exceeds the expense by far. *Uwe Steiner* ■

A full system for perfect speaker contact: WBT terminals with structure-borne sound attenuation.