Watt’s up?

If you’re looking for a performance boost without the box swapping risks, Ed Selley thinks IsoTek could have just the solution.

The business of upgrading a system that has a synergy between components can be a slightly fraught experience. Even when you stay with the same manufacturers, the arrival of a new product can throw a previously happy relationship between existing products out of line. This can then demand further updates to cure and demand further updates to cure and leave you unhappy in some instances, leave you without the box swapping risks, and can handle some distinctly high-end equipment. These functions are cut down in the Sigmas, but when you take into account what the Sigmas can do, this is more a reflection that the Titan and Nova are determinedly over specified than any sense of cost cutting in the Sigmas. As such, the Sigmas is fitted with six mains sockets. Two of these are intended for high-voltage applications such as power amplifiers, while the other four cater for source equipment.

The figures are certainly impressive, but there is so much more than just brute force to the design. Perhaps the most important aspect of the Sigmas – and certainly one that matters to the overall performance – is that it is made up of six individual filters. There is no connecting wiring between the sockets and each one has a dedicated filter network. This means that even if you have a component with some decidedly dubious behavioural characteristics connected to the IsoTek, those characteristics shouldn’t have an adverse effect on anything else. Internally, it is wired with high-purity copper wiring while the circuit boards make use of gold-plated copper connectors for optimal signal transfer.

This attention to detail extends to the outside of the product, too. The Sigmas is finished to a standard that is extremely good even at the asking price. The cownork is solid, exactly assembled and – as much as a power conditioner ever can be considered attractive – aesthetically pleasing with a clean and uncluttered appearance. The only slightly discordant note is the display that will either show watts being supplied or the total percentage of total power that the Sigmas is delivering. This is clear and easy to read, but also extremely bright. With the lights off in the listening room, the effect brings to mind an alien abduction and while it can be switched off, it can’t be dimmed which is a little irritating, but not the end of the world.

This is perhaps the only design curiosity in an otherwise very well thought out product. As someone that has used an Evo 3 Aquarius for some time now, one of the most useful revelations to the Sigmas is that the mains sockets are now at a 45° angle, which makes the ‘flow’ of cables out the back much easier than the 12 o’clock arrangement of the Aquarius and makes the installation of the Sigmas simplicity itself.

One of the more unusual aspects of the Sigmas is that the improvements aren’t used, and removes almost any sense of ’digital’ to the presentation. This ease of installation means that the performance of the system in question – a Naim Supernait 2 integrated amp, ND5 XS streamer with XPS XS power supply, Arcam airDAC and Michael Gyrodoc with Avid Pellar Phono stage – goes in with minimal fuss. Given the care IsoTek has lavished on its power supplies, particularly the external ones, I am interested to see how the IsoTek can bring to a system of this nature.

Sound quality

The good news is that the impressive technical specification of the Sigmas translates into performance gains and the really good news is that none of these gains change the basic character of the system. The Naim electronics keep their powerful, slightly dark presentation and the excellent detail retrieval takes another step forward as noise levels that were already low simply drop away to nothing. The bass response was never an area I felt short changed in, but now it has a little extra speed and agility over and above what it had before. Soundstage is not a concern of the Naim sound, but the Sigmas manages to create a sense of space in the performance that opens the presentation out without losing the sense of focus and drive that the system excels at. The effect is uncannily like the strangeness of Berocca vitamin tablets – my system, but on a really good day.

One of the more unusual aspects of the Sigmas is that the improvements don’t seem to negate the effects of other power products. When connected directly to the IsoTek, the ND5 XS streamer is unquestionably better than when hooked up to the mains, but connecting the XPS XS streamer with Naim power supply back in seems to bring all the benefits that it does when the Sigmas isn’t used, and removes almost any sense of ’digital’ to the presentation. This does mean that if you are unhappy with an aspect of your


Q&A

Keith Martin
General manager, IsoTek Systems

ES: Is there a cut-off rule of thumb for best use of the high voltage outputs over the low voltage ones?

KM: The question of high current and medium current isn’t just power consumption, it is how that power is consumed. For example a plasma will draw continuous current, thus the circuit would be different to that of a power amp (not class A), which needs to gulp current when the music is dynamic. So it’s also a question of high-current and low impedance.

The medium-current side of the Sigmas auto adjusts to the load, so if you were to place a CD player (30W typical) next to a projector (300W typical) the circuit would auto adjust to give the best filter environment.

Is there a system price point where you would recommend the Sigmas over the Aquarius and Solus?

This is always a contentious question. We say between 10-20% of a system’s value, however in some demos we’ve put in power conditioning systems costing double that of the system’s value, and the system sounds more than twice as good!

But we’d say you’re probably getting 80% of system potential without considering a good, properly designed (for purpose – for audio usage) power cleaning solution. It’s similar to purchasing a sports car and not thinking about the road on which you drive it. Logic states driving it on grass won’t be as good as flat tarmac!

With the changes to what we connect to the mains, are there best practice principles to follow?

The basic problems of common mode, and differential mode noise are always there. We have increased challenges by the increased use of Class D power supplies that disrupt the mains more (differential mode). The use of more and more electrical appliances in our homes. The use of wi-fi in our homes (common mode), some companies offer products to boost wi-fi signal by turning your ring main into a giant aerial – nice for common mode and RFI. Products will be released to deal with this, which will be backwards compatible with existing IsoTek systems.