

TONEAudio.

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Shunyata Mondatta:

By Marc Phillips

For nearly a decade now, I've been preaching some basic tenets concerning the enjoyment of vinyl. If you've been following along for that long, you'll know the first two by heart. First, you must take good care of your records, which usually means the purchase of a record cleaning machine. And second, you probably need to spend a pretty fair amount of change on a decent turntable before you will achieve a higher level of musicality that eclipses most budget CD players. While that number has fluctuated over the last few years, in the year 2007, I still stick by my original statement.



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Then, a few years ago, I introduced the idea of valve amplification as being an important part of the enjoyment of vinyl. My reasoning was that all of the things that brought you to the analog fold could be enhanced through the use of tubes, such as warmth and that organic and natural feel that eludes so much transistorized amplification and digitized sources.

And the overall response to these edicts has been overwhelmingly positive over the years. But my work here is far from over. Once you've re-entered the vinyl fold, and have fallen in love with the sound of tubes, there's still some work to do. Sure, you can address some of the problems in your listening room, which is perhaps the single most important variable in achieving good sound. (As we speak, I am experimenting endlessly with room treatment.) But for now, we're going straight to the wall, so to speak.

Yes, I'm talking about power cords and conditioners.

Watch out for the last step...it's a doozy!

For the last six months, I've been using a wide complement of Shunyata Research power cords, all plugged into their Guardian 6 conditioner. And I do hear differences. I'm not talking about a subtle shift in dynamics, or a slightly lower noise floor. I'm talking about things like a major reduction of hum in my phono stages, or the fact that I no longer pick up my neighbor's cell phone calls on my highly-sensitive Zu Audio Druids.

For instance, I go through a lot of light bulbs.

Part of me says that this is because I always cheap out on said bulbs. But the other part of me suspects that it's because of the wiring in my house is old, and probably hasn't been updated since the place was built in 1954. If you also share this dilemma, that's good reason number one to buy a line conditioner and upgraded power cords. I also spent the majority of this past year using low-powered SET amplifiers with very small power supplies, which are very susceptible to power spikes and surges. My 101dB Zu Druids are ruthlessly revealing, especially when you crank up the volume. If you own very efficient speakers (anything over 92 or 93 dB sensitive) paired with low-powered amplifiers, you owe it to yourself to try power conditioning and upgraded power cords.

As I delved into the world of power conditioners and upgraded power cords to attack these more practical matters, I started to notice the subtle yet noticeable sonic improvements these products made in the overall sound.

While the Shunyata gear was able to tame most of these anomalies, it also helped to turn my system into a much more quiet and revealing one, which has to be a priority when listening to LPs.

I know that a lot of people in the audio world shun upgraded power cords and line conditioning. And while I'm certainly used to being called an audio tweeker, I'm actually anything but. I'm usually pretty conservative when it comes to audio accessories, but for me this is a solution to a number of problems. Remember years ago, people thought speaker cables and interconnects were snake oil until everyone started listening too. *(continued)*

I can hear for miles and miles...

The argument I hear most frequently is that the current has managed to travel for miles and miles from the power station to your house, so what difference could the last few feet make? This makes perfect sense when discussing whether throwing a single upgraded power cord into your system will make a difference (it may or may not, depending upon your system). But that argument takes the line conditioner out of the equation. And while many power conditioners do not actually regulate power, most do contain some kind of filtering system to help level out voltage peaks. As cool as those giant power cords look behind your rack, you really don't get the one-two punch without a good line conditioner; it's a systemic approach.

Once you have line conditioning, however, these upgraded power cords certainly do a better job of preserving the quality of current that runs through your system. RMI and EFI is certainly reduced; I no longer get to hear my neighbors gossip about me through my system late at night. The effect that you hear when auditioning these products will depend on your power grid, system and ears.

Even a big bucks power cord may not make a difference if it's the only thing you do. Shunyata claims that, you're better off buying five \$100 power cords than one \$500 cord. However, I always suggest experimentation. If you are only going to buy one power cord to start down this path, try your power amp first because that will usually make the largest current demand, but you never know, plugging it into the CD player or your phono preamplifier might make the biggest difference! I heard noticeable improvements in my system with each component.

Trussst in me...

I was able to play with a variety of Shunyata power cords over the course of the last few months, ranging from the Taipan Helix, part of their PowerSnakes line (yes, it does look serpentine), to the much more modest Venom (which is that aforementioned \$100 power cord that you can put everywhere). I was also treated to a variety of Copperhead and Diamond-back cords, which fall somewhere in the middle of Shunyata's product line.

I mated the substantial Taipan Helix cords with the power amplifier (with the 20-amp Helix linking the Guardian 6 power conditioner to the wall).

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My suggestion to those of you with high powered amplifiers is to move up to one of Shunyata's flagship products. SET and modest integrated users, this one's all you need!

I then worked down the chain, using the Copperheads and Diamondbacks with preamps, phono preamps and headphone amps. Thanks to the beefy power supply in my Naim CDX2 CD player, the Venom was all I required there.

A brief chat with the folks at Shunyata confirmed that my intuition was right, that placing the best cords closer to the wall was the correct strategy. In other words, if you have a variety of power cords like I did, you should put the most effective cord between the power conditioner and the wall, and then move onto the power amp and preamp. I then compared the 20-amp Taipan Helix to the less expensive 20-amp Copperhead from the wall to the Guardian 6. Any doubts I had to the effectiveness of adding the Guardian and associated power cords evaporated when I went back to my simple hospital-grade outlet strip; all that noise and distortion came flooding back like a bad memory.

I did use the Guardian 6 line conditioner on its own, using all of the stock power cords that came with my equipment. This managed to eliminate some hum and keep the system quieter but was not as effective as using it with the upgraded power cords. During more spirited listening sessions the Guardian by itself offered up a presentation that was not as grain free as it was with them. Again I was reminded that you need both power conditioning and upgraded power cords to get the maximum effect. The only shortcoming I found with the Guardian 6 was with larger power amplifiers. This is definitely an entry level power conditioner that doesn't have as much capability as the top of the line Hydra products. When using the Guardian with Conrad Johnson's new ET250 (250 watts per channel) and my Gibbon 8's I could definitely hear some loss of

dynamics, compared to my Running Springs Jaco.

My suggestion to those of you with high powered amplifiers is to move up to one of Shunyata's flagship products. SET and modest integrated users, this one's all you need!

At a reasonable \$750, the Guardian 6 is a very affordable way to really discover the benefits of line conditioning. The Guardian 2 and Guardian 4 offer the same technology at a lower price, albeit with fewer outlets.

Quiet, Please!

The Shunyata gear delivered what it promised, yielding tangible sonic advantages. If you are one of those people who balk at the very idea of expensive power cords and line conditioning, I can only lead you to the water, I can't make you drink. You have to listen for yourself.

A year ago, I was a little skeptical about these devices too, but after living with them for quiet some time now, I'm reluctant to send them back. And while I firmly believe that battery-powered components will be the wave of the future, for now we need line conditioning and power cords like the Shunyata gear to clean up our power, and to make our enjoyment of vinyl as quiet as possible.

Yes I was late to the party when it came to power conditioners and upgraded power cords. But the world, electrically speaking, is becoming a noisier place, and I now view good power management as critical as component choice. And I'm very enthusiastic about Shunyata's approach and look forward to investigating their approach to interconnects as well. Stay tuned. ●