

A Hi-Fi Fountain of Youth

Top-quality health and beauty treatments have always been a little expensive

Naturally we're talking about vibrations. It's *always* about vibes whether in music, high fidelity or real life. One should be careful, however, to learn to distinguish if one is dealing with "good" or "bad" vibes.

And it is this distinction that presents a real dilemma for the hi-fi fanatic. After all, what, if I may ask, are good vibrations when it comes to a

piece of hi-fi equipment? Hardnosed metrology engineers consider any variations to the original input signal to be "bad" vibes, since such deviating oscillations are, strictly speaking, distortions. And yet, generous portions of even-numbered distortion values are perceived as pleasant and agreeable, particularly that first harmonic wave of a fundamental oscillation (K2, the "first harmonic"). Sound studios very often work by specifically adding K2 to the original signal in order to polish, enliven and ultimately make the sound of a musical production more pleasing,

while serious music lovers cheerfully and all too often revel in these "good vibrations," many a time without even being aware of them.

Things are a little different when it comes to mechanically optimizing hi-fi equipment. Distinctions can be made between good and bad vibrations here as well; an impression that is underscored by the many different tools available for joining or isolating the equipment (e.g. rubber feet, spikes, wood blocks). On paper at least, the goal among machinists and materialists alike is identical: improved sound through "proper" positioning, dampening, coupling and decoupling. One tries what one can.

Virtually everyone – amateur or professional – who gets seriously involved with mechanical hi-fi optimization for the first time soon discovers how the choice and combination of materials have a vastly greater impact on the resulting sound than they had ever before imagined possible. Normally as the value of a system increases, so too does the willingness to invest greater amounts of time and money into a truly successful optimization effort. This of course brings us to those super-specialists, who have fully dedicated themselves to perfecting every conceivable variety of hi-fi components.

The Japanese Combak Corporation and its chief executive Kazuo Kiuchi clearly rank among the most eminent experts in this field. The scope of his sound perfectionism extends from superb CD productions (Master Music XRCD) and exclusive and proprietary



electronics (Reimyo) all the way to copious tuning products bearing the Harmonix name. For years, Kazuo Kiuchi has not failed in repeatedly delighting – yes, even amazing – me (*image hifi* No. 92 and 98, issues 2/2010 and 2/2011) as he did most recently at the HIGH END 2011 show.

Making a lot of noise is naturally all part of the business, which is why Virgil Warren, whose WQS company markets Harmonix here in Germany, never tires of claiming that “his” products are simply the best there are. My skin just keeps getting thicker from hearing these kinds of statements several times a week. Still, as I already intimated, my experience with Harmonix, both at home and at trade events (the latter at times under the most adventurous of circumstances), is as unequivocal as it is favorable. And I really don’t know exactly why it is this way. The science of metrology reveals very little about the secrets of Harmonix, and Mr. Kiuchi doesn’t either. Instead he enjoys talking about the hidden beauty that is worth uncovering and discovering in the music.

At least this much is known: The decision making process at Harmonix is by no means oriented on the clinical sciences, but rather on the tradition of skilled musical instrument makers, who endeavor to lend the various instruments (in this case hi-fi components) a fully balanced and harmonic sound; the key words here being resonance control and fine tuning.

And lo and behold I can see it: the tortured facial expressions of some of those hardcore hi-fi types who see here

a blatant violation of that time-honored principle of absolute “neutrality.” What else can harmonization be if not a distortion of the original signal? On the other hand, every component has to stand on some sort of base. And who would dare to seriously dispute that the respective underlying support has an influence on the sound reproduction by virtue of its being coupled with the device? So why bother emulating master musical instruments instead of the more sterile operating-room equipment?

There still seems to be a whole range of hyper-activists, who are so crazy about details, details, details, emasculated bass registers, and those “ultra-transparent” and cool technoid sound images, that for them the term harmonization is a foreign word. It’s a shame to think of all the enjoyment going to waste.

But now back to the sonic influence exercised by mechanical “intermediaries” between the housings and the surfaces on which they are placed, and those conventional feet, spikes and so forth. Only when a given component is superbly designed and responds with an appropriate degree of stoicism to supplementary supporting accouterments, will any replacement of its “hooves” be even subtly noticeable, if at all. In this regard, perfected paraphernalia are as rare as three-armed helmsmen; but it’s almost always worth trying.

It is true that no hi-fi components actually *need* extra feet to unpack music signals. Most devices – excluding record players – will also work when leaned vertically against a tile wall or buried deep within the shaggy pile of a flokati... somehow or another

. For simplicity’s sake I assume that you, dear readers, have carefully arranged and set up all of your stereo components so that they are nice and sturdy, and that you’ve done what you can to ensure the (as yet) best-possible sound reproduction. In my case, the subjects rest on that ingenious equipment support called *The Bench* from LignoLab and are perfectly isolated from the floor, while the analog drives take their places like soloists on the LignoLab TT100. So far, so good. What’s next?

Now comes Harmonix with their TU-666M tuning feet, whereby the M stands for “Million” and is not indicative of the price, but refers instead to its standing within the brand’s reference league. Here everything is somewhat finer and better, and in this particular case a modest 15 percent more expensive: you’ll have to expend 1,150 euros for a “million” of this set of four.

That’s a pretty penny for a quartet of wood and metal sandwiches, each weighing 400 grams. Nevertheless, the 666-ers are well worth the money: They successively replace the rubber feet that come standard on the CD drive and D/A converter (Audio Note CDT-3 and DAC-3), along with those on the integrated amplifier (darTZeel) and the Exklusiv P7 preamplifier, and evince a comparable acoustical effect from each of these test subjects.

A classic example of this is provided by a selection from the Manger CD entitled *Music from Another Star*. On track 11 is a Livingston Taylor interpretation of Stevie Wonder’s “Isn’t She Lovely.” His melodic whistling, the delicate

acoustic guitars, the double-bass, and even the scant percussion appear before me in a manner that is more compact, while at the same time clearer, and simply “more genuine” thanks to those TU-666Ms. All the instruments and even Taylor’s soft voice have clearer contours and a more precision focus. The now better illuminated space, despite being of the same width, reveals greater depth and separation – an astonishing gain in structure, definition and three-dimensional soundstage, which incredibly enough emerges without making compromises elsewhere. Both the internal dynamics and the “black” (stillness) benefit from using the TU-666Ms. Even the more reserved selections, which might otherwise bore me, now cast me under their spell. Yes indeed, the TU-666M brings about not a mere change, but a distinct improvement – in every way!

And this audible rejuvenation transcends musical genre. “Dance or Die” by Janelle Monáe is where hyper-nervous funk grooves touch shoulders with coolness á la Grace Jones within a “modern” sound architecture. Slip up here and you’ll quickly get lost. The base and root notes thrive with the 666-ers, and the richly played, fast and spirited bass drum dovetails much better with the Fender electric bass guitar. These tuning feet improve harmony, contour and speed. A real kick, considering that the sibilants and sundry high frequencies are now incorporated both seamlessly and more naturally.

Similar results were obtained with Mendelssohn’s concerto for violin, piano and strings in D minor recorded by the Concerto Köln with Rainer Kussmaul (violin) and Andreas Staier (piano): Space, instrument groups, and soloists join together much more harmoniously, and even that somewhat too large a grand piano seems better integrated thanks to the TU-666Ms.



Double wood and metal sandwich: The TU-666M has a threaded base that can be turned for fine height adjustment.

A few days later my son got in on the listening test. Without the author exerting any influence, he found that the bass and snare drums on “Girls Got Rhythm” (his favorite AC/DC tune at the moment) “no longer sounded so muted, but plainly better.” Good boy!

As a kind of reward we then put on the brand new CD *Spirit of Spagyrik* by Mars & The Orbiters. Here again the TU-666M tuning feet throw open all the acoustical windows, tear the virtual curtains aside and simply let more music through. The drums are more powerful and precise, the basses are bassier, the guitars more orderly and richer in color, and voices altogether more immediate.

It’s as if all the various energies of a recording are more closely bundled. So how can I be so sure about this? Well, I was actively involved in this disc...

The Harmonix TU-666M is for sure not a steal, but it is absolutely worth the investment. These tuning feet have a positive impact in every respect – and will naturally fit perfectly beneath whatever new components hit the market.

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Harmonix TU-666 M Tuning Feet

Style: Chromed-plated metal with dark wood **Special Feature:** Threaded base for height adjustment **Dimensions (Ø/H):** 50/33 (max. 38) mm **Weight:** 380 g
Weight Limit: max. 80 kg **Warranty:** 2 years **Price per Set of 4:** 1,150 euros

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