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X-DC SM
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The Missing Link

Clearly there is no limit to the number of different opinions to be had about the influence and importance of power cords. With the design and introduction of the X-DC SM Million Maestro to mark his Harmonix company's 20th anniversary, Kazuo Kiuchi has put an end to most of the debate and yet raised some new questions: How expensive should, and how costly must, a power cord really be?

Back in 1981 the guitarist and innovator of electronic sound manipulation, Manuel Göttsching, stepped into his studio and recorded a solo session in one single take. A rhythmic and repetitive sequencer pulse, chords on the analog synthesizer along with guitar cascades, sharply pointed beats, and subtle variations in rhythm and sound – all quite removed from that experimental rock of his earlier years with Ash Ra Tempel and Klaus Schulze. It was not until 1984 that the recording was released as a one-hour work on an LP dubbed E2-E4 under the label of his musician friend Schulze. At that time, no one could imagine just how extraordinary Göttsching's achievement and prescience were in being – as if merely in passing – so many years ahead of their time in terms of how music would evolve. With this stroke of genius he influenced post-wave bands just as he conquered the dance clubs with the remix release. The big Detroit techno artists swore by that album, and the trance community drew inspiration from it. As a result, he was all but worshipped throughout the world, even in Japan. By virtue of his warm and amenable tone, he managed to make listeners more sensitive and receptive to the flow of the finest variations – and in a length found for the first time outside the modern classical and minimal music.

In a certain way, the great designer Kiuchi-san reminds me of that celebrated guitarist and master of electronics, Göttsching, in that he too influenced and made his mark in musical history with a few, yet pivotal, ideas and inspirations. At the beginning, the only real recognition this Japanese mastermind garnered with his Harmonix products was among groups of closely knit fans. Even so, the respect for his revolutionary concept grew continuously and in retrospect, as was the case with Göttsching, had an extraordinarily incisive impact. He took a fundamental idea, namely that of tuning and harmonizing resonances, and placed it above those traditional notions about the way (attenuating and dissipative) that tuning feet and other accessories should be engineered. And yet he is certainly not one to attempt to impress the market (and his audience) with superficial effects: First and foremost, it must always sound harmonized, natural, and richly colored as it unveils subtle details. At any rate, he has been coming out with one outstanding product after



Power Cord Harmonix X-DC SM Million Maestro Series

another under the Harmonix brand for a good two decades – all sound-enhancing accessories that nearly always result in significant to dramatic improvements in your listening experience. Meanwhile, he also manufactures magnificent equipment under the Reimyo name, his most-recent being the KAP-777, a truly superb solid-state stereo power amplifier. Over the years and across the globe he continues earning more and more recognition; only Germany seems to constantly lag behind somewhat. Perhaps Germany is too much the land of engineers and traditionally the kind of place where the fruits of ingenuity must first be understood, before they can be relished. Be that as it may, Kazuo Kiuchi has never disclosed how he produces so beneficial an impact in terms of sound. I suppose elsewhere people are more pragmatic: whoever can make it sound better is right.

But still ... still I let this new power cord that Kazuo Kiuchi designed for his 20th anniversary go untested. To me, last year's advertised price of 13,500 euros seemed just too crazy for a cord of one-and-a-half-meter length. But in hindsight, my decision was wrong. After all, *image hifi* is the magazine for the state

of the art in high-end audio, so the price tag should not be a disqualifier; instead the sound quality must play the deciding role. And so, if by using it, a vastly more expensive system sounds much better, then those who are interested can decide for themselves if they'd rather focus on the price or the overall outcome. Nevertheless, everything turned out well, especially since the previously over-valued yen is momentarily trading at a much more favorable exchange rate, and the Harmonix X-DC SM Million Maestro can now be had for the bargain price of 8,900 euros ... irony aside, that's still one-third less than a year ago.

So how does it sound, this capstone of power-cord engineering in whose research and development Kiuchi-san invested five years? Well, first I used it to run the Jadis JA80 mono amplifiers. And to do so, I unplugged the Aural Symphonics Magic Gem v2t, which until then had served me as the most balanced, musical and universal of power cords. I was hoping that the Harmonix would be at least a tiny bit better, in which case I could find satisfaction by as a minimum being within a comparable range of quality. Now spinning on the turntable is *Amygdala* by DJ Koze, which in my mind is the finest and best-recorded pop and house album of 2013 (Pampa LP007, 2LP). And indeed, the music does suddenly play at the forefront of a blacker, more tranquil background, thus unfolding with greater richness and body. In "Magical Boy" the spatial distance between the voice of Dani Siciliano and that of Matthew Dear slightly to the right and behind it is surprisingly apparent, the saxophone plays with more room surrounding it so that the space its sound occupies is better marked. The digital piano not only develops more force in the lower frequencies, thus allowing you to readily hear that nothing artificial is being used as a filler, but you can feel a wealth of previously imperceptible detail now firing through your synapses.

This was followed by Dirk von Lowtzow singing „Ich will die Welt



durch deine Augen seh'n“ (I want to see the world through your eyes) in „Das Wort.“ So great is the gain in vocal transparency and fine layering that I had the impression of being able to hear the song through the ears of the mixer. And finally, “Homesick” reveals even more information about this power cord’s remarkable capabilities: The width of the soundstage now expands with each of those surprising sound effects and does so repeatedly by and by. The pulses of the bass burst more powerfully onto the stage, while those blended-in sounds, not unlike the dull clang of an old cash register, seem more authentic with their dry overtone and enhanced physical presence, where they previously sounded somewhat synthetic. And time and again that compellingly quiet backdrop ... as if some lint roller had removed all the restlessness and residue from the recording to allow a more unhampered and natural sound reproduction.

How is it that a power cord can make such a difference in quality? Doesn't it seem rather illogical when you consider the many meters of conventional wiring in the walls? No, it isn't, due to the fact that high-frequency interference diminishes with the square of the distance.

The crucial link is that last segment connected ahead of the device, if only because of the increasing volume of electromagnetic interference we've been witnessing in recent years. Kiuchi-san says that his objective is the least-possible loss of energy. For one thing, he intends to achieve this by using his tuning methods and tools that are designed to shift incoming HF interference into an uncritical range. Here this takes place within the thick sleeve of wood located in the middle of the power cord and at the Wattgate plugs. All of this is designed to balance the flow of electrons from the beginning to the end of the cable, explains Kazuo Kiuchi in his typically cryptic style. And finally, there are a number of tangible and easily understandable remedies he employs: The cable material that he obtains as a limited, custom-made article from Furukawa, Japan's giant (“How many miles do you need?”) electric industrial cable company, consists of the purest available oxygen-free copper in as-cast PCOCC quality. This acronym stands for “Pure Copper by Ohno Continuous Casting,” or in other words, a single-crystal copper cable that is continuously cast (instead of being cold-extruded) and then slow-cooled over time to give it an optimally dense conductive structure in a process named after its inventor Ohno. It has been shown that this extremely soft material possesses the kind of enhanced conductivity that can be accurately measured. Once this process is complete, the cable goes to Combak, the group parent of Kiuchi's companies, where it is crafted entirely by hand to ensure that the density of the crystal core is not subjected to the enormous stress so characteristic of machine processing. According to Kiuchi it takes altogether more than 80 hours to manually produce one cord. Much time, effort and expense was also involved in selecting the insulation materials, as these too are responsible for what is an exceptionally undisturbed flow of electrons free of interference and electrostatic influences.





Power Cord Harmonix X-DC SM Million Maestro Series

In December of 1968 Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the pioneer of musical interpretation using original and historically correct instruments, triumphed with his marvelous recording of Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (Telefunken SKH21, 3LP), revered as the first opera in the history of music – as we keep with the great pioneers and the finest music. In the prologue, and with the Harmonix Million Maestro, the instruments appear with improved grandness as they make their strident entrance, the stage has moved closer, and you acquire a more realistic image of it. Yet even more astounding is the second, more sedate entrance, which is now much better structured thanks to the Harmonix cord. The same is true for Rotraud Hansmann's vocal delivery as *La Musica*: The heightened charm together with the finer expression exemplify in the most beautiful way that overwhelming power of music that Monteverdi put to score. Besides enriched musical sensibility, the improvement in fine resolution is demonstrated by the now clearly more audible movements of the mouth at the microphone. The way the voice emerges with more breadth is part of this, but also, and perhaps above all, the manner by which the space in front of what is now a quieter backdrop reveals her "breath." With the X-DC SM Million Maestro the underlying noise is reduced to such an extent that you can plainly hear the micro-acoustics of the recording hall that were masked before. The entrance of Nigel Rogers as the second shepherd is simply amazing. Whereas beforehand his voice coming from the left was somewhat veiled, this Harmonix power cord lets your sense of hearing absorb and appreciate the entire situation: His position is rather more isolated and the slight reverbs and resonances in the hall were what caused that earlier veiling effect. But now, all the rich details unfold before your ears.

In case you prefer not listening to the details – a challenging undertaking as they grow in abundance and subtlety – then consider how Harmonix improves these key aspects of *L'Orfeo*: Voices and instruments resound with a more immediate and accurate texture and physical expression in what is no longer a space confined at its sides and front, and the fresh coloration of the presentation makes the earlier portrayal seem somehow grayish, and less graceful and vibrant.

After that I removed the cords from the power amplifiers so that I could try them out on the preamplifier and the turntable's power supply. In direct comparison, the difference to the cables originally connected to the power amplifiers was somewhat sobering; after all, even after years these had proven to be the best among a multitude of tested power cords. Manuel Götsching's guitar was not as clear-

ly delineated on the second side of E2-E4 (ID 20004, LP), almost as if the VTA of the tonearm was misaligned – in this case a little too high since it sounded slightly brighter, and perhaps also because the dynamic force from the bass regions seemed not as great.

So far, no power cord has ever fit nearly as well on the Kondo KSL-M77 preamp as Kondo's own, which is why I didn't expect miracles from the Harmonix cord even after its remarkable performance on the Jadis amplifiers. However, Christa Ludwig and Fritz Wunderlich taught me a thing or two with their noticeably clearer and more sharply outlined voices, and which – despite the fact that they had sounded wonderful before – had seemingly shed all traces of recording artificiality. Be that as it may, in her *Lied von der Erde* (Song of the Earth) under Otto Klemperer (EMI 1C 065-00065, LP) the emphasis on „die Gläser leeren“ (empty the glasses) is now more commanding and naturally full-bodied, while the subsequent and more serene passage in „Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde“ (The Drinking Song of the Sorrow of Earth) sounds more straightforward and absolutely divine. The louder sequences that follow now become really loud, whereas prior to this the system tended to curtail this rise in volume – something I always considered a phenomenon of the recording process. But no, with the X-DC SM Million Maestro all the stress is gone and the preamp now enjoys free reign. One thing, however, overshadows all the joy and delight from the gain in details, coloration of the instruments, and dynamic performance: Now you can really immerse yourself in the mu-



Fine tuning: Metallic capsules and other structures are said to be concealed beneath the wooden sleeve

sic and let your mind and soul be swept away by the sheer beauty and power of its sound. Oh yes, and then there's that exquisitely cultivated sound of the strings ... when it comes to very difficult musical material, this power cord's impact on the Kondo KSL M-77 is what I would call pretty near dramatic!

And finally, I connected the second cord to the Nottingham Deco's power supply. In my new selection of artistic mastery by Burial, Rival Dealer (Hyperdub HDB080, EP), the beats are more pronounced, the dynamic penetration is a bit more jarring, and the well-attuned samples seem more sharply edged – all of which promotes your desire to discover and hear more of the sound, although I would not speak of any vital significance in terms of timbre – unlike the improvements in Lied von der Erde. Things are now moving up a notch in dynamics, the bodies of sound are focused and released more effectively, and altogether more subtle in coloration and richer in overtones, while the strings and wind instruments have better separation and resonate more naturally. In addition to the improvement in beautiful sound, noises again appeared within the recording venue from an un-

derlying disquiet that was not noticeable before. Everything seems to come together to more smoothly and energetically power the turntable. Although the Nottingham Deco was slightly superior in coloration to the Brinkmann LaGrange with its "RöNT" tube power supply – the latter having a somewhat tighter and muscular air about it – the Deco now surpasses it in every respect thanks to the masterfully tuned Harmonix power cord.

What Kazuo Kiuchi's X-DC SM Million Maestro power cord accomplishes is practically unbelievable. Acting like a detector, it seeks out and eliminates minor stress vulnerabilities in the components, and renders a more expansive soundfield, improved color, a quieter backdrop, finer details and greater dynamic autonomy – wherever the cord is used and more fervently than you'd think possible. It worked throughout the test system like a genuine missing link in a twofold sense of the term: First, it is the bond that was lacking to coalesce all of the musical information into one consummate and magical whole. And second, because it is the one connection you'll really miss should you ever have to remove it from your system. □

Power Cord Harmonix X-DC Studio Master Million Maestro Series

Unique features: Wooden sleeve with HF tuning, pure copper wire made by Ohno continuous casting, handcrafted production **Lengths:** 1.5 meters, 2.0 meters **Pri-**
ces: 8900 euros, 10900 euros

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