

On Distortion (2)

IN WHICH JULIAN MUSGRAVE CHUNTERS ON QUIETLY IN A CORNER THEN SETS YOU SOME HOMEWORK

The last article had us head-butting the brick wall conclusion that distortion may well be the property of the audiophile rather than the equipment. This implies that equipment doesn't have distortion but we audiophiles do: (bang, bang, bang). That actually equipment doesn't sound different, we just think it does: (bang, bang, bang). Ergo all audiophile angst is our own fault for being so bleedin' picky: (bang, bang, bang). (Oooh! That hurts.)

Actually, I'm suggesting something subtly different: it should, at least theoretically, be possible to define and measure each and every distortion, connecting each to a specific change in sound quality. But because distortion measurements are inadequate, and audiophiles vary greatly in their judgements of sound, we have a *de facto* situation where the *perception* of distortion is the property of the audiophile.

More importantly perhaps, until we have a Comparative Distortion-O-Meter, measurements will never work. We must learn to trust ourselves a bit more, and ground our sound/distortion judgements *wholly* in the subjectivist audiophile domain. This does appear, however, to be a retrograde step; a default to either a useless unfocused fuzziness, or the crude nice/nasty dichotomy, both of which become increasingly inadequate the higher we climb in high end audio. So we need to up our game and become more (ahem!) objective about our subjectivism.

More on CODs

In the previous article we discussed the Conundrum of Diversity (COD); or why audiophiles have such divergent views about audio equipment sound. It is time we looked into CODs a bit more closely. We'll start with the statement that audiophiles are made rather than born, as there is no instinct, survival value or genetic coding for being excessively picky about speaker cables. The love of music may be universal enough to be considered instinctive, but the love of boxes full of electronics is not. So that conversation on the Serengeti plains about fifty thousand years ago might have run thus:

"Coming out to hunt wildebeest for dinner Ugg?"
 "Nah mate. No time for trivial tosh like food. Still

trying to get the ritual chant storage medium right. Tricky stuff granite. Always a hilly bit when you want a dale and *vice versa*. And that's before you try and get it perfectly circular. And as for cutting the flints to track the ups and downs..."

But almost certainly did not take place, which is maybe a shame.

So we learn to be audiophiles, though it might take twenty or more years from first becoming aware of music to realising that we really care about sound quality. Thus an audiophile is the product of a technically and culturally sophisticated process, who self-defines after a long maturing process. (You might quibble with the culturally sophisticated label, since some audiophiles probably still listen to James Last records.)

By the time we become hard-core audiophiles, we will have already heard a lot of music, both live and recorded, and experienced the various emotions evoked, both negative and positive. These often very powerful pre-audiophile experiences will incline us towards or away from different musical genres, sound worlds and equipment, and these experiences define and drive our deeply-seated audiophile preferences. Most importantly, each audiophile will have a significantly *different* history, a history that is further differentiated by the differences in our hearing structure and acuity, raw sound processing, and culture. These differences are then amplified by the hyper-sensitive refined connoisseurship of the audiophile, to the point where each of us occupies a distinctly different audiophile space.

Put like this, not only are CODs easily explicable, but seem to be inevitable. The conclusion we should draw is that the singularity of each audiophile's take on sound must become the starting point of any audiophile-centric treatment of distortion.

Profiles from Peculiarity

One consequence of the singularity of each audiophile's judgement criterion means that each of us has what we might like to call a different Distortion Profile (DP); that is we have differing sensitivities to the many types of distortion generated by the recording and playback process. So you

may be very sensitive to, and thus care a lot about soundstaging, while another audiophile may care not a whit about it. He may be ultra-picky about instrumental timbre and whether he can differentiate between a violin and a viola; something that features lower on your scale of audiophile values.

Some audiophiles seem virtually insensitive to turntable wow, whereas others are rapidly turned into gibbering wrecks. Some audiophiles demand levels of detail and clarity that others label 'bleached' or 'hard'; and so on, *ad infinitum*. These differences are not the result of inexperience, 'listening wrongly', or being wilfully stupid. They are the real world exposition of the different histories that we have internalised over the years, particularly in our pre-audiophile eras.

The result is that your specific version of audio perfection may not play to my DP at all, and mine may start you wondering about the precise ratios of sawdust to feathers I have in my pretty little head. But that is not the point. The great audiophile god HEWB (High End Worshipful Being) has made all of us audiophiles different, so we had better start dealing with the consequences.

Having a complex set of musical and equipment experiences, we could, were we so minded, interrogate them to map our own highly individual DP; something that would be of great value to us on our journey. Do we do this? Er No. When we become audiophiles we bury the landscape of that inner audiophile under an avalanche of equipment reviews, audiophile blogs, forum threads et al, and then retreat into useless measurement regimes. Anything but do the hard graft of examining our own innards.

The result is an ongoing guerrilla war between our inner audiophile and what the outer world wants to tell us to listen to and use. The outcome of this conflict is our old friend and companion 'audiophile nervosa'.

Defining Your Own DP

How then can we use these observations to become a bit more objective about our subjectivism? We have already decided that all measures of distortion used in an audiophile context are useless, so ignoring them is a good start. All an audiophile needs is a good pair of ears that are regularly refreshed with a dose of live, unamplified acoustic music.

The second is that the singularity of your own DP invalidates other peoples' opinions on sound quality because they can only speak only for themselves. All judgements on sound quality must be validated against our own DP – and then trusted.

But for this to work we need to map our DP

because it is all too easy to be seduced by the sound of audio equipment particularly if it offers a radical new sound and is 'validated' by a handful of rave reviews. The result is that we are bowled over by the brilliant 'newness' of it, irrespective of whether or not it fits our DP.

This disconnect between our quiet but immovable inner audiophile, and the shouty but flakey outer world, results in us buying equipment for what *we think it does right*, then later selling it for what *we know it does wrong*. This particular cycle, the 'audiophile nervosa' recidivism, is one we could well do without.

Getting down to practicalities of DP mapping, an effective exercise is to list six audiophile parameters that are especially important to your own specific sound world. These being:

- A) The three most important sound qualities you *must have* in audio equipment.
- B) The three most important sound qualities you *must avoid* in audio equipment.

Sounds easy doesn't it? But there are rules to this little game, as follows:

- a) Vague, fluffy words like *musicality*, *fluidity*, *organic* etc. are banned as insufficiently precise. These qualities will arise naturally when we find equipment that fits our own DPs.
- b) The qualities in each list should not be antonyms of one another. So if you put *transparency* in the Must Have list, putting *muddled*, *muddiness* or similar in the Must Avoid list is a waste as you have already dealt with that. Deal with six separate audiophile parameters.
- c) Exclude specifications like power, frequency response etc.

What this little list does is to help us focus us on what is important to each of us and thus avoid equipment that will not serve us well in the long term. It was only when I started to define my own DP that I started to connect with that inner landscape and select equipment that fitted well with it. The result is that I hardly twitch at all these days. No really: my wife now says I'm the most normal she's ever seen me. (Normal by audiophile standards that is.....)

