



Stillpoints ESS Equipment Rack, Ultra 5 Isolator, LPI LP Isolator

An Old Dog Learns a New Trick

Robert Harley



Until recently, if you had asked me to make a hierarchical list of what matters most in the music-playback chain I would have put loudspeakers, recording quality, and room acoustics at the top, and vibration isolation down toward the bottom along with CD treatments and the like. Although I've improved the sound of my system with isolation products like Tiptoes and Sorbothane feet, those improvements were always marginal at best.

That was until I tried the Stillpoints Ultra SS isolation devices in place of the stock spikes of the Focal Stella Utopia EM loudspeakers. In my review of the Ultra SS in Issue 219, I expressed my surprise at just how big an improvement the Ultra SS made. Low-level resolution increased and the background became blacker, qualities that combined synergistically to preserve more fine detail, reveal previously lost spatial information, and change the way that notes ended in a manner that was more like that of live instruments (i.e., as the higher resolution of fine spatial detail increased the sense of the hall's size and acoustic, reverberation tails became more audible at the lowest levels).

The next step was obvious: Replace my 17-year-old Billy Bags

racks with Stillpoints ESS equipment racks. The Billy Bags racks are sturdily built and have been workhorses through more than 350 equipment reviews. I had never considered these racks a limiting factor in my system's performance. But after hearing what the Ultra SS did for my system, I had to wonder if for all these years I'd overlooked an important factor in getting great sound. Perhaps it was time for this old dog to learn a new trick.

Description

The ESS racks are modular to some degree, allowing you to configure the rack to your specific needs. Three widths and three heights are available, and you can order any number of clear acrylic shelves for all widths and heights. I received a 26"-wide, 28"-tall rack with three shelves for my analog front end (turntable, turntable motor controller, vacuum control, phonostage, and power conditioner) and one 20"-wide, 42"-tall model with six shelves for the rest of my electronics.

The ESS's design is ingenious. The shelves, which incorporate the Stillpoints vibration-dissipation technology, are suspended on four steel cables that run vertically between support arms at each

corner of the rack. Because the shelves are held in place by set-screws, you can position the shelves at any height along the cables.

The ESS racks, and all Stillpoints products, are based on a patented technology that is applied in different ways and at varying levels of implementation among the product family. This patented technology is an intricate structure composed of tiny ceramic spheres that dissipate vibration. Vertical vibration is dissipated by being converted into horizontal motion. This newer technology (which carries the "Ultra" designation) replaces the original Stillpoints design, and is reportedly ten times more effective in vibration isolation. In the ESS racks, the 3/4" shelves (1" shelves are optional) are mounted to the cross bars via six of these isolation "pockets." The shelf thus "floats" on the crossbars, which are then suspended on the vertical cables. This arrangement provides isolation in two directions, preventing vibration in the shelf and component on that shelf from getting into the rest of the rack structure through the bars and cable, as well as isolating the shelf from vibration in the rack.

The Ultra SS that so impressed me under loudspeakers is based on one isolation pocket per device, or four per loudspeaker. With six such isolation pockets per shelf, and additional isolation elements in the rack's feet, an ESS rack has much greater potential for vibration isolation.

When fully assembled and loaded with equipment, the ESS rack is extremely attractive and elegant. The skeletal structure and clear acrylic shelves de-emphasize the rack's visual presence and instead make the electronics on it seem to float in space. Moreover, machining quality, fit 'n' finish, and overall execution are first-rate. This is obviously a fully realized product implemented at the highest level of manufacturing quality.



After installing the racks and hearing their effect in my system, Stillpoints sent me a set of its new Ultra 5 isolators, which incorporate five isolation pockets per device. I placed these underneath the Lansche No.7 loudspeakers I have under review.

Listening

The highest praise that reviewers lavish on an accessory is that the accessory's sonic effect was "equal to that of a component upgrade." The Stillpoints ESS racks produced a marked

improvement in my system, but that improvement was far different than that rendered by a component upgrade.

When changing, say, a power amplifier, there's nearly always a set of sonic tradeoffs. Both amplifiers can be beautiful, but in different ways. For example, when I had side-by-side the BALabo BP-1 Mk-II and the Constellation Audio Hercules, I found that each has its own set of virtues. The BALabo has extraordinary bass—warm, center-of-the-earth-deep, fully fleshed out, highly textured—along with a liquidity in the upper midrange and treble that is to die for. The Constellation's strengths are its state-of-the-art transparency, extraordinary resolution of detail, clarity and definition in the mids and treble, and sense of openness and extension. The BALabo is richer and smoother, the Constellation livelier, more focused, and better resolved. These two world-class amplifiers are very different sounding, but each has its allure. Switching between them traded one set of virtues and verities for another, different set. I could see how one listener might prefer one amplifier over the other.

Adding the Stillpoints racks to my system was not like changing a component because there were no sonic tradeoffs.

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ESS Equipment Racks

Rack widths: 20", 26", or 40"

Rack heights: 28", 34", or 42"

Shelf options: 3/4" or 1"

Price: \$8450–\$12,285

Ultra SS Isolation Devices

Price: \$249 each

LPI LP Isolator

Price: \$549

Ultra 5 Isolation Devices

Price: \$699 each

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ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

Lansche No. 7 and Venture
Ultimate Reference
loudspeakers, Hegel P30
preamplifier and Hegel H30
power amplifier; Lamm
ML2.2 power amplifiers;
Jeff Rowland Design Group
725 amplifiers, Corus
preamplifier, and Aeris DAC;
dCS Puccini/U-Clock, and

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha

DAC Series 2; iMac server
with Berkeley Alpha USB
interface; Basis Inspiration
turntable with Basis Vector
4 tonearm, Air Tight PC-1
Supreme cartridge; Aesthetix
Rhea Signature phonostage;
BSG Technologies QOL;
Shunyata Triton and Talos
AC conditioners, Audience
aR6TS power conditioner;
Shunyata CX-series and Zitron
Anaconda AC cords; Audience
Au24 and PowerChord
AC cords; Shunyata
Anaconda interconnects
and loudspeaker cables;
AudioQuest Diamond USB
digital cable; AudioQuest
WEL Signature interconnects,
Transparent XL Reference
interconnects; Transparent XL
Reference loudspeaker cables;
Billy Bags equipment racks,
Stillpoints ESS equipment
racks Ultra SS, Ultra 5
isolation devices, ASC 16"
Full-Round Tube Traps. VPI
16.5 record-cleaning machine;
Mobile Fidelity record brush,
cleaning fluid, stylus cleaner

The ESS racks don't force you to pay a penalty in one area to get what could be an overall improvement in many others. Rather, the Stillpoints products raise the performance of every aspect of the system and degrade none. No listener in my view would ever prefer the system without Stillpoints. Moreover, if you already like the sound of your system, you'll like it even more; the Stillpoints products provide a platform for your components to reveal more of their intrinsic qualities. Switching to the ESS racks didn't change the character of the components they housed but instead seemed to liberate those components from a low-level murkiness that obscured their personalities. The ESS racks brought a clarity and resolution to the system that threw into sharper relief differences between, for example, digital-to-analog converters or USB cables. It was like hearing more clearly through the playback system and recording chain to what the microphones picked up.

Moving my equipment to the ESS racks catapulted the sound of my system into a completely new realm of excellence. The musical effect was startling. The soundstage was more detached from the loudspeakers, with a greater palpability of instrumental images. I heard a greater sense of air and space around voices and instruments, giving the presentation a more three-dimensional quality. Images were not just more present spatially, but also texturally by virtue of the greater resolution of very fine information that increases density of tone color. Switching to the ESS racks made the soundstage considerably wider, deeper, and more three-dimensional. The apparent size of the hall increased and, with it, the duration of reverberation times. I could hear down into the very finest spatial details, as though some limit to low-level resolution had been stripped away.

The bass benefited as well, becoming tighter and better defined. Bass lines that had been a little indistinct or muddy were suddenly clearer in both pitch and dynamics. Bass lines also seemed to "bounce" more because the system was revealing greater dynamic contrasts in the leading edges of, for example, plucked acoustic bass. The feeling was one of greater energy and visceral involvement. In fact, music in general sounded "faster" and more upbeat. The superior pitch definition made the bass player's musical contribution more readily apparent, a quality that was particularly rewarding on the new 25th anniversary reissue on 180-gram LP of Paul Simon's *Graceland*. It wasn't just the bass dynamics that improved; dynamic contrasts across the spectrum were wider, with steeper attacks, deeper silences between notes, and a heightened sense of impact.

After living with the ESS racks, I installed Ultra 5 isolators under the outrigger feet of the Lansche No.7 loudspeakers and then a set Ultra SS isolators under the Rowland 725 monoblock power amplifiers. You might think that additional isolation would result in diminishing returns, with subsequent isolation having less effect. But the opposite was true; the additional layers of Stillpoints technology were *more* audible because the system had become that much more transparent and resolving. For example, adding the Ultra SS under the power amplifiers after I had installed the racks better enabled me to hear the effect of the Ultra SS. Adding the next layer, the Ultra 5 under the loudspeakers, let me hear just what the Ultra 5's were doing. Rather than following the

law of diminishing returns, adding Stillpoints at each position in the chain produced an unmistakable synergy.

Adding the Ultra 5 devices under the Lansche No.7, after I had installed the ESS racks and Ultra SS under the power amplifiers, was revelatory. All the qualities I've described about the ESS racks were taken to another level. The increase in resolution was mind-boggling. I'm not talking about hi-fi resolution or the presentation becoming more forward or etched, but rather that about hearing much more *musical* information. I was listening to "Back Room Politics" from *Act Your Age* by Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band, and the percussion during the second trumpet solo, which had previously sounded like a series of vague transient events, jumped to life. I could hear, for the first time, the sound of a stick hitting wood, and the wood ringing and then decaying. The mechanism by which the sound was created was suddenly obvious and, with it, the percussionist's musical contribution. Later in that same track, the melody that had been played by the sax, trumpet, and trombone sections was played by flutes and piccolos against Goodwin's piano line. Adding the Ultra 5s changed the musical perception of this passage; I could clearly hear the intricate counterpoint between the piano and the flutes, and gained a new appreciation for the composition and performance. Although the presentation was more detailed and resolved, it also had greater ease—qualities that are usually mutually exclusive. The combination of ease and resolution is a recipe for musical involvement, as ease fosters a relaxation that makes you more receptive to nuances of expression.

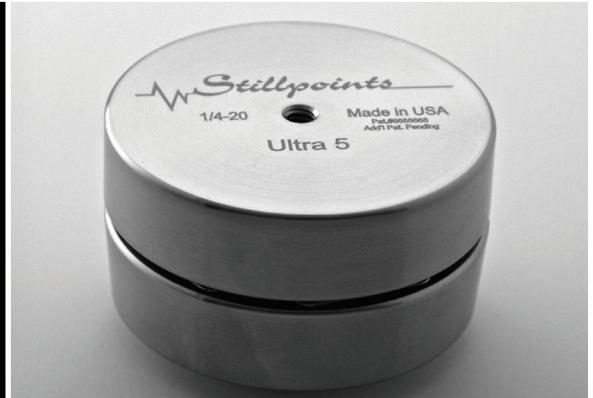
I'll briefly mention the LPI LP Isolator. This heavy round device replaces a record clamp, and absorbs record vibration through five vibration-isolation pockets on the side that touches the record. I can't use it on a daily basis because it's not compatible with the vacuum hold-down on the Basis Inspiration turntable. But I was able to judge its effect by turning off the vacuum hold-down and comparing it to a conventional record clamp. The LPI's sonic effect was similar to what I hear from the vacuum hold-down system, but not to the same degree. If you have vacuum hold-down you're not missing anything. If you don't, you should certainly audition the LPI—it's the next best thing.

Conclusion

When I heard the Ultra SS under the loudspeakers, I thought I'd heard everything Stillpoints technology had to offer. In fact, I wrote that the Ultra SS was the most effective accessory I'd ever tried. Little did I know that the Ultra SS was just the beginning. Fully loading a system with Stillpoints technology—the ESS racks, Ultra SS under the power amplifiers, and, especially, Ultra 5s under the loudspeakers—transformed my system far beyond anything I could have imagined. Whatever the music the change was always the same—hearing more music, more realistically presented, and with vastly deeper involvement. There's simply no going back.

Frankly, I'm a bit chagrined that I've been reviewing for 23 years and it took me this long to discover the benefits of no-holds-barred vibration-isolation technology. It's a new trick that this old dog was thrilled to learn. **tas**

Robert Harley



Stillpoints ESS Equipment Racks, Ultra SS, Ultra 5, and Ultra LPI Isolation Devices

\$3450-\$12,285 (ESS racks, depending on configuration); \$249 each (Ultra SS), \$699 each (Ultra 5) \$549 (LPI)

Once I heard the effect of replacing the Focal Stella Utopia loudspeakers' stock spikes with the Stillpoints Ultra SS isolation devices, I was hooked. Adding the Ultra SS to my system took the sound quality up a big notch, increasing low-level resolution, contributing to a more finely filigreed presentation, and helping the loudspeakers to more fully disappear into the soundstage. But it was replacing my 17-year-old Billy Bags equipment racks with Stillpoints ESS racks that made me realize what I'd been missing all these years. The Stillpoints racks allowed my system to resolve fine detail down to much lower levels and made the presentation that much more like music and less like a recreation of it. The LPI applies Stillpoints technology to a record clamp, emulating the salutary sonic effects of vacuum hold-down on any turntable. The Ultra 5 devices under loudspeakers are nothing short of revelatory. (Ultra SS reviewed in 219; ESS racks, LPI, and Ultra 5 reviewed this issue)

EQUIPMENT REPORT



Stillpoints Ultra Stainless-Steel Feet

A Significant—and Surprising—Upgrade

Robert Harley

I'd be a rich man if I had a nickel for every time an accessories manufacturer told me that his product would make a “dramatic” or “jaw-dropping” improvement in my system. Adding accessories usually renders a marginal improvement in sound—an improvement that is not always commensurate with the asking price. In my experience, accessories tinker at the margins rather than fundamentally influence a system's sound.

So it was natural that I regarded the claims of Stillpoints' Bruce Jacobs with a wary—and weary—eye. Jacobs suggested that replacing the spikes beneath my Focal Stella Utopia EM loudspeakers with Stillpoints Ultra feet would result in a “shocking” improvement in sound quality. There's only so much

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Price: \$225 each

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time in a day, but I gave the Stillpoints a try largely because my neighbor, Rick Brown of Hi-Fi One, is so enthusiastic about all Stillpoints products. (Rick sells a few very select lines of esoteric gear, is a great listener, and gets terrific sound at his place.)

The Stillpoints Ultra is a cylindrical metal structure with a threaded insert on one end and a concave surface on

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the other. The threaded insert accepts an adapter, also made by Stillpoints, that screws into the bottom of your particular loudspeaker in place of the stock spikes. You must specify your loudspeaker so that you get the correct adapters. When the Ultra is placed under components, such as a power amplifier, you simply forego the adapters and allow the component to rest on the Ultra's flat top surface.

The Ultra appears to have two

parts: the main cylindrical structure and a loose-fitting "cap" on the end. It is actually composed of ten internal components that form an elaborate vibration-dissipation system. The internal structure includes tiny ceramic bearings that dissipate micro-vibrations. The Ultra is a two-way device, meaning that it dissipates vibration entering from either direction (from the floor or from the component resting on the Ultra). Moreover, there is no vertical path for vibration through the Ultra. This device is the highest implementation of Stillpoints' technology, which is reflected in the price—\$900 for a set of four. An aluminum version, identical in every way except for the metal, is \$640 for a set of four. According to Stillpoints, stainless-steel more quickly dissipates vibrational energy. Less expensive versions have fewer internal energy-dissipating components. Stillpoints products are designed and made in Wisconsin.

I replaced the hefty stock Focal spikes with Stillpoints Ultras, sat back, and was shocked by what I heard. With the Stillpoints, the soundstage opened up with greater width, depth, and bloom around images. The sound became even more detached from the loudspeakers, with a greater solidity of images between and around the Focals. On the familiar "Diamonds on the Souls of Her Shoes" from Paul Simon's *Graceland*, the spread of voices in the unaccompanied opening passage extended more widely, and the sense of the voices hanging in three-dimensional space increased. The

impression of height was more tangible, adding to the increased perception of a three-dimensional soundstage in front of me.

The bass improved to a similar degree. The bottom end became tauter, better defined, and cleaner. The Stillpoints made the midbass a bit leaner, but more articulate. The improved midbass conferred greater clarity in the midrange, as well as in the bottom octave, where very low bass notes were more audible and defined once the midbass was better controlled. Bass dynamics were also improved; notes seemed to start and stop more quickly, giving the presentation greater dynamic agility and conveying more of the musicians' dynamic expression.

Finally, replacing the stock spikes with Stillpoints make the background "blacker" and quieter, allowing greater clarity and resolution of very low-level information. Sounds that had been somewhat undifferentiated with the stock feet became vividly clear. For example, percussion instruments that produce a series of very fine transients (shakers and guiros, for examples) sounded much more real with the reduction in transient blurring. Moreover, it was much easier to identify exactly how the instrument produced its sound. All this added up to a more lifelike reproduction.

At \$1800 for a set of eight Ultra Stainless-Steel feet, these devices are not inexpensive. Nonetheless, in the context of a high-end system they provide a huge sonic return on the investment. **tas**