

A Nagging Suspicion

by Francesco Bollorino

BLACKNOISE

Tweaking and variations art is a well rooted passion in the audiomaker world. There are two tweaker classes: one is equipped with soldering-iron, good technical knowledge and/or boundless faith towards the received advices, that sometimes interfere hardly inside the electronics; the other, like me, that while is searching for the optimal set-up of their system, sometimes finds some add-ons for their needs (at times more remarkable than just a change of electronics or speakers and often less onerous than that). In fact, just swapping components often causes the problems to grow bigger instead of diminishing, because a stereo sound **NEVER** results from the simple sum of its parts, but from the perfect synergy created between all the different components, chosen during time and with much calm, with this proper aim in mind. Furthermore all parts have to be enabled in order to "express the best" of their possibilities removing earlier in the process the "base" problems that might be at the very first place in whatever audio system we are going to assembly.

In other words, I am personally convinced that only after we have "squeezed the most" out of our existing setup, we could act on it with meaningful, well considered changes, aimed to be a real step ahead toward the overall sound quality we are searching for (always relatively to our musical taste and the available budget).

At this first rendezvous I am concerned with two "sworn enemies" of good sound: the poor quality of mains line and vibrations; and how I tried to put right to them.

Roberto Amato is a pleasant roman man that started the BlackNoise production and marketing, under the trademark Systems And Magic (<http://www.systemsandmagic.com>). BlackNoise filters are a sort of adapters, very fancy, speaking aesthetically, with two sockets. They have inside a filtering setup that acts on the mains line feeding our electronics.

I discovered their existence on the Internet, I heard a lot about them and I have not left out the opportunity to give them a try.

They are mains filters, not conditioners, but the inspiring principle is the same: our equipment "live" with electricity and the better it gets, the better our setup should play.

Power quality actually changes a lot from block to block and all electrical/electronic devices inside



our homes might worsen the current we send to hi-fi devices, also affecting the signal heavily, adding some "noise" to it.

When I reorganized my house, I brought a mains line directly to the planned audio room. Besides in Genoa, my city, ENEL⁽¹⁾ works quite well therefore my remarks about using the BlackNoise filters take place in a "good" environment. So we can reasonably suppose that in more degraded situations or in the presence of louder noises on mains line, we can obtain higher and sharper outcomes.

I leave out the filters technical description, referring to all interested people the beautiful article written [in this number by Fabio Cottatellucci](#) and to the manufacturer website, where all is widely explained.

But let's proceed with order:

First remark is that it's better to have several filters in order to employ the BlackNoise in all critical points of the setup. I used three of them: a 2500 upstream of the two OTL monoblocks custom made by Giancarlo Massa (that superbly drive my QUAD 988); an Extreme, set before the power supplies of Lector DIGIDRIVE and DIGICODE that (correctly tweaked and still unequalled regarding sound quality) represents my digital source; and finally a 500, set upstream the QUADS.

(1) National Electric Energy Company - ndt

Having a passive preamplifier I couldn't test the filters with this kind of electronic, so my remarks will concern either each filter and the overall result of my "BlackNoise-filled" setup.

I started with the DAC connected to the Extreme: connecting the mains plug, obviously paying attention to the right polarity (using a normal plug, the phase coincides with the D letter printed at the bottom of the two Schuko sockets present in every BlackNoise), the effect is immediate. Comparing the same setup with or without the filter, seems clear now that a thin layer, a sort of grain, has disappeared: a very evident defect now eliminated.

The tonal balance does not seem to be influenced by the filter, and especially with voices (the



excellent version of Julian Baird in DORIAN SAMPLER vol. 2, track 2) becomes evident a greater lightness and naturalness. The same occurs with Mark Knopfler voice (Private Investigation, CD Sampler Philips). Without denaturalizing itself in the voice just fades away a patina of "hoarseness". Together with voices, the other element that seems to acquire a better result using BlackNoise is the micro-informations, that now appears more open and richer of previously lost gradations.

Then I added the CDP.

The insertion of the BackNoise seems to affect mainly the soundstage, the offered virtual image appears deeper and broader. Listening to track 12 of James Taylor Live (Columbia 1993, a CD also advised by Kimber Cable for a critical evaluation of one's setup) lets greatly appreciate the hall ambience and the feeling of space increasing around the instruments and in short, the whole acoustic scene appears more solid and defined.

A feature to remark right now is the sum of the perceived improvements. That is, the BlackNoise insertion upstream the Lector combo produces a greater effect than its use on each one of either electronics.

Next, I connected the filter upstream the QUAD electrostatic speakers.

Dusty Springfield in "The look of love" (Casino

Royale Original Soundtrack, Varese Sarabande, a CD with a unique beauty and sound quality, unfortunately very hard to find, like all beautiful things) seems now to be carved in the room center. The sound now acquires a further cleanliness, the Herp Alpert trumpet is more "here" than before. The improvement of the acoustic scene in all dimensions increases in a less marked way than with the CDP, but it is always evident.

Then I inserted the filter upstream the power amps.

Here the change is dramatic even before starting the listening session: my two big OTL all of a sudden are noiseless, the big transformers buzz much quieter than before. I think it's the most evident test about the effect introduced by the filter. I have to be honest: I didn't expect it!

Proceeding with the listening, what I most appreciated is the better naturalness of the emission. Both male and female voices appear richer of gradations. Now I can appreciate the absence of a nasal sound, and a further increase in the acoustic scene, particularly in the upper dimension. Like all the other observations I made so far, the "defects" become perceivable only



when, after adding the filter, the sound objectively changed for the better.

Being over with the "adding procedure", I started the opposite one, taking them off one by one, trying to determine where their action was most evident: that is, which element of the audio chain was the most sensitive to their effect.

The practice confirmed the previous observations, allowing me to word a personal liking table: in the first place I would surely put the power amps, particularly the tube ones like mine; the second place would be taken by the CDP transport, the

third for the speakers and then the DAC. It's a mere matter of shades, but I think it could be a useful information. It's important to underscore that this is not an "ad escludendum" table but a simple lead of greater and greater efficacy. In this test the thing that absolutely has struck me is the synergic effect on the overall sound improvement due to the connection of more BlackNoise filters in the same setup. So much so, that my advice is to fill the whole setup with BlackNoises, for this is the only way to obtain the best results in absolute terms.



With the BlackNoise we are facing not just a mere accessory for our setup but we are dealing with a truly additional electronics that, at a reasonable price, brings the most out of what we already own.

I heartily advice them to everybody, in particular to the tube power amps and the electrostatic or amplified speaker owners, as well as anyone who wants to get the best from their setup: as a matter of fact, lets not forget that electronics completely depends on electric current, an absolutely vital element in the final quality outcome.

Highly recommended, a must! I bought them for my home setup.

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