hardware

tara labs

The One Power Cord and the PM/2, AD/6, and IDAT Power Screen AC conditioners

as reviewed by Marshall Nack

Need yer energy boosted?

Does your system suffer from iron-poor blood? Is it low on pep, vim, and vigor? Forget those first generation remedies. Try Ceralex. Easy enough to put in—easy to hear what happens. Chances are you might suddenly imagine that you really did buy that next-model-up amp you lusted after. That is the first thing I noticed—hooked up to any of the new TARA Labs AC products, my system's energy seemed rejuvenated.

MARSHALL NACK'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS

Kharma CRM 3.2 and Kharma Ce-Sb-10 sub woofer.

ELECTRONICS
von Gaylord Audio (formerly Legend Audio Design) LAD-L2 Signature line preamplifier, von Gaylord Audio Nirvana Mk II monoblock amplifiers, and ART Audio Jota SET amp.

SOURCES
Linn LP12, LINGO, EKOS tonearm, ARKIV II cartridge, AHT Non-Signature phono preamp modified by Walker Audio, Extremephono Limited Edition and Graham IC-30 arm cables. CEC TL1X transport, von Gaylord Audio 2 chassis DAC.

CABLES
Interconnects by Kubala-Sosna, Harmonic Technology, Kondo, Kharma Enigma. Digital Cables by Kubala-Sosna, and Kondo. Speaker wire by Kubala-Sosna, Harmonic Technology, Harmonix, and Kondo. Power Cords by Kubala-Sosna, Harmonix, Golden Sound, and Shunyata.

ACCESSORIES
TAOC Rack and TITE-35S component footers, Golden Sound Intelligent Chip and Magic Rings, Walker Audio Tuning Discs and Valid Points for LP turntable, Harmonix RFA-78i Room Tuning Discs, RFS-66ZX Tuning Feet, RF-900 and RF-999MT Tuning Spike Bases, Acoustic System Resonators, Argent Room Lenses, Echo Buster & Sonex acoustic panels, Reimyo ALS-777 and Shunyata Hydra power conditioners, and Ensemble Mega PowerPoint outlet strips. ERaudio Space Harmonizer component platforms. Shun Mook Tube Resonators.

Now we are talking TARA power!

Cable maker TARA Labs fell under the radar a couple of years ago, but now they are back, and loaded with a stable of most impressive goodies. These include power conditioning and new technology in signal wires. I began by taking the measure of the power products.

This time around, I did the experiment a little differently. I thought I would start by putting in all of the TARA power products at once to get the overall effect and then work backwards to see what each was contributing. The Reimyo ALS-777 conditioner plus two Harmonix Studio Masters parted company with the front-end, replaced by the TARA IDAT. The Shunyata Hydra and mating Anaconda plus a Harmonix Studio Master were removed from the ART Audio Jota amp and in went the TARA PM/2. TARA Labs now conditioned all components and five of TARA's The One power cords were in play. I left it to cook overnight (burn-in is largely complete within 24 hours).

The next day, I am peering at a changed soundscape. I have been using the *Britten: Violin Concerto* for my comparisons lately (EMI 5 57510 2, with violinist Maxim Vengerov and Rostropovich conducting the London Symphony Orchestra). The *ppp* timpani rolls that begin the piece are way down deep and now just right of center. I am certain the faint cymbal brushwork is attached to that location as well. In fact, I have more certainty about all instrument placements. Oh yes, Vengerov's violin has bite, dynamics and color. Yet there is nothing hard about any aspect of this presentation. It is a very pleasing combination of resolution and precision on the one hand and smoothness and weight, on the other. The full low-end of timpani and double basses is kept active behind, and out of the way of, the higher strings, so those instruments are not confused. I am sucked into the illusion—I am informed with abundant auditory cues to assist me in the great escape.

We've got some extreme resolution going on here. There is no doubt that we are on very elevated terrain. It reminded me of some of the super systems I have had the pleasure to visit over the years. Those memorable occasions always impressed with their mastery over common audio gremlins. [But not always with their portrayal of music. It is kind of a conundrum: the more they excelled at subduing the gremlins, the more false they became. If some effect, like soundstaging (a byproduct of playback), is impressive and desirable, well, they had to have it—in spades. Audiophile virtues taken past a certain point can become unnatural, like Hi-fi on steroids. Such a system's owner is not interested in replicating natural sounds: he wants to elicit the WOW reaction, as if you were at an amusement park sideshow.]

As I was saying, I knew it was very fine; I also knew it was unfamiliar. I puzzled for a while, and then it dawned on me: where were all my familiar colorations? What happened to all that expensive euphony I put in to make the sound good?

Let me back track a bit. Following my recent love-fest reviewing all kinds of SET amps, I thought I knew what my system needed. The kingpin—resolution—had to yield the throne in order to give instruments more breathing room, more space to move around in. I needed to let some slack into the tight grip I had over the presentation. I needed to move tonal richness into first place, plus I simply had to give images more flesh and body mass, and especially more weight.

The first leg of my journey into this pseudo-SET adventure (pseudo because it did not involve low-powered tube amps and high sensitivity speakers) began when a colleague extolled the Harmonix Studio Master power cords. The Studio Master's abundant flesh and pronounced, punchy low-end, helped greatly. However, its most notable characteristic is its overall acoustic signature. Put in this PC and you will think you have added some tubes. (I became enamored with the entire line of Harmonix accessories; all are voiced like the Studio Master.)

The One Power Cord

So, what's not to like? The rub is in how the Studio Master accomplishes these things, which became clear once I substituted a very neutral PC, the TARA Labs The One power cord. The Studio Master is playing some games. It creates an aura, a kind of acoustic cloud around instruments. This may be intrinsic to the instrument—it certainly does not sound mechanical—but the trouble is the aura is present all the time and, more problematically, you hear the aura more than the note itself. This is reversed: you should be hearing the fundamental first and foremost. The result is a hollow core; the center of the note is missing. And then there's the transient—the Studio Master takes the leading edge and makes it a curve, it slides into the note (think of those graphs you see in audio cable advertising showing how one brand approximates a right angle, while the competition has a slope). Further, sustain is uneven. The Studio Master imparts *whininess*, something like a wah-wah pedal effect. Finally, there is the ever-present and pronounced exaggerated trail at the finish. Taken as a whole, all of these pretty effects make it seem like there is more "acoustic stuff" going on. Depending on the quality of your rig, this could be a big improvement, as many problem areas will become overlaid with the Studio Master's character. (In addition, Harmonix tuning can fix treble issues. These are exactly the reasons I liked it.)

All of this became apparent when I substituted The One power cord—and the observation left me shaken. After all, the Studio Master is my main reference PC. The TARA Labs The One power cords (and the entire TARA power product lineup) are normalizers—they do not play with the sound or add effects. The One PC does not inject "atmosphere". It does not "improve" the attack. This PC delivers the goods straight up, focused and direct. Its power, even more than the Studio Master, more than any PC in my library—comes from a prodigious bottom end, along with heightened macro-dynamic capability. It is the most powerful sounding PC I have come across. Along with pacesetting low-end, it lets the treble run its course—there is no cover up, or tuning. If what goes in is rough or abrasive, what comes out will be likewise. (Note: The One is a complete cable line, but the PC does not sound like the signal-carrying wires, which are intentionally rolled on top for compatibility with bright systems. The One PC is full bandwidth.) Even without the "atmosphere", soundstaging is better—bigger, more forward; some might think too forward. The One PC gives you body, weight, and power …without Technicolor excess.

So now, I was encroaching on the turf of the big boys—and it had me a bit worried. I felt like I was in one of the big suites at Home Entertainment 2005.

The One PC has 12-gauge conductor runs comprised of 36 RSC (rectangular solid core) Gen 2 conductors helixed around a Teflon air-tube. Each Neutral run is shielded with anti-corrosion-coated copper braid. The braid and all conductors use SA-OF8N copper (The Super Annealed™, Oxygen-Free Eight Nines process creates one long, unbroken single crystal, or mono-crystal, structure. All TARA Labs wires use this metal). The braid in The One is extra heavy to block pickup of stray EMI. Break-in occurs in stages. Initially the cable is dark, dynamic, and powerful. Within a couple of hours, you will notice it begin to open up. After 24 hours, the last of the veiling disappears. It is sheathed in black mesh with black terminations—a black-tie affair—with heavy-grade translucent plastic over the AC and IEC plugs. You can see (and feel) two twisted conductor runs under the mesh. Each of these is as big as a Studio Master (a normal diameter PC), and *en route* to Shunyata Anaconda girth. In spite of its diameter, it is easy to use—it is flexible and of average weight.'

Power Conditioning: Shunyata Hydra vs. TARA PM/2

The Shunyata Hydra AC conditioner and its associated Anaconda PC are recognized benchmarks in the realm of passive power conditioning products. The Hydra and Anaconda are vaunted for their noise reduction and smoothing effects, but mostly I put them in when I need to lower the tonal balance and grab some more weight and body—there is nothing like them for this purpose. One of the original Hydras has graced my reference system on and off for a long time. I had it feeding the ART Audio Jota amp. (I only use it on the amp—I feel it does less damage there, for reasons I will get to shortly).

Once again, compare these items to a "normalizer" product, in this case, the TARA Labs PM/2 Power Screen passive conditioner (and throw in another The One, because you need an extra PC), and you see what's really going on.

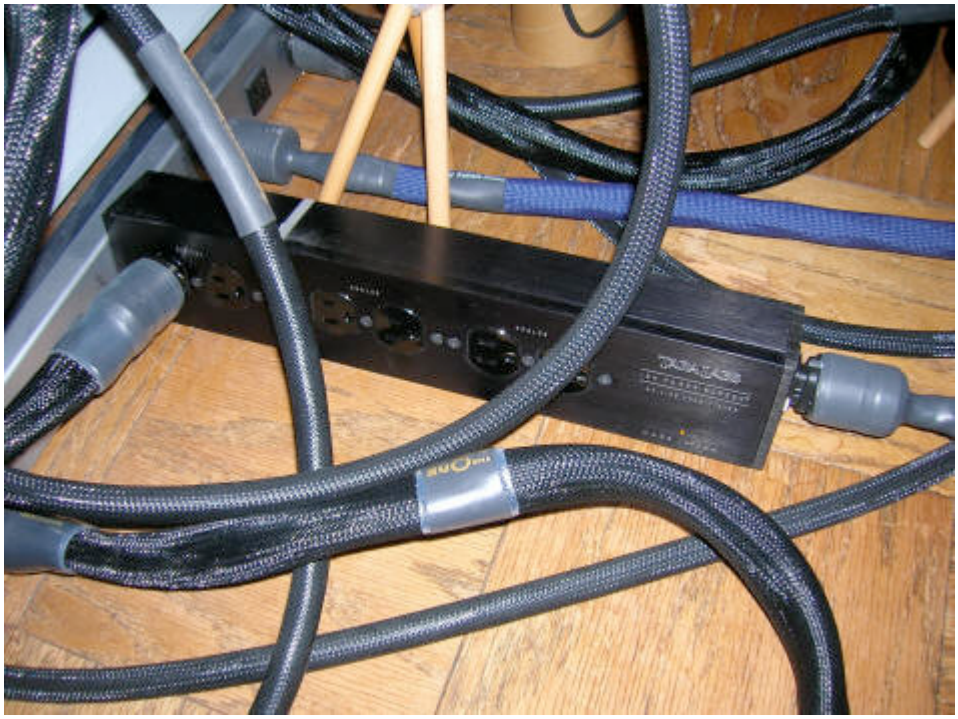
Along with all that weight, the Hydra/Anaconda impart lots of atmosphere and decay. It produces borderless, hazy-edged images—one bleeds into the next across the stage, which is a little foreshortened, depth-wise. The stage it throws is like a warm, soft-focus picture—a little like a framed wall hanging, or a scrim. Because of the foreshortened depth, it has mostly horizontal and vertical extension. Frequency integration and temporal coherence with the Hydra are excellent. And there is that smoothness, which for me, is noticeable to the point where it affects resolution of micro-details and texture. Transients, although weighty, definitely have soft edges. I would say these products are slightly romantic, but not too far from the real thing. So, who's complaining?

With the TARA PM/2 in place, the edge on transients is back. That ever-present, reverberant "atmosphere", or hall sound, of the Hydra is largely absent. (If you define this "atmosphere" as air, you will probably find the PM/2 suffocating.) Overall, the PM/2 with The One is a little lighter tonally (I can't tell whether that's due to the PM/2

or The One, because the Anaconda uses a locking Nema connector and can't be separated from the Hydra), but the spread of energy across the frequency spectrum with the PM/2 is better apportioned—you don't feel that treble or deep bass is dulled down (the Hydra softens up the extremes). Like The One PC, the PM/2 is dynamically charged, with a punchy and round bass. The PM/2 shows what your system is capable of; it is a pass-through, unveiling your system's quality—for better or worse.

The TARA passive conditioners come in two models. The PM/2 Power Screen ($395) is impressively machined out of thick, black, mil-spec aluminum, with an overbuilt, rather than luxurious, appearance (personally, I would like to see rounded corners and a smoother finish). It sports a detachable power cord, surge protection, one duplex outlet, an amber pilot light, and treatment for noise reduction, which we will get to shortly.

The AD/6 Power Screen ($695) is an expanded version of the PM/2. It has the same technology, still passive, but separates four outlets for analog usage from two labeled for digital. A grey "Barrier Plate" provides physical separation between the A and D outlets. The AD/6 Power Screen can be used anywhere: you can plug your whole system into it, including power amps. The PM/2, with two outlets, is an affordable choice for dedicated use on power amplifiers, powered subwoofers, and electrostatic speakers. Being passive, there is no AC current limiting, however, the surge protection imposes a 15-amp ceiling on these Power Screens.



The AD/6 and PM/2 like to sit on ERAudio boards. Golden Sound DH Squares with a little BluTack were also good. *Methinks* these passive conditioners benefit from a little resonance control.

The Secret Ingredient: Ceralex

The Power Screens employ a newfangled, proprietary noise absorption material developed by TARA Labs called Ceralex. Ceralex is a tuned, bandwidth controlled and absorption limited form of ceramic/metallic oxide—it absorbs noise and dissipates RFI and EMI. It is sintered like clay, and looks like clay, and shaped into sleeves, which fit around each live, neutral, and ground wire on each of the duplex outlets. In principle, Ceralex is similar to the popular ferrite cores that we clamp onto power cords. In practice, ferrite is nasty and crude—the sledgehammer approach—affecting a wide frequency range, even messing with the higher audible part of the spectrum. That is why they have such a powerful (and deleterious) effect. Moreover, no two ferrite cores absorb identically. Ceralex stays far outside of the audible band and is carefully tuned for a specific usage—those sleeves destined for digital outlets are absorptive in a much higher RF frequency range than those for analog use. Yes, the A and D outlets do sound different.

Here is what you can expect if you park a Power Screen in front of an unconditioned component. It is definitely darker, and probably a bit warmer, with more tonal saturation. Another level of grit and edge has disappeared. Less artifacts and noise mean you lose some excitement, some presence—it may sound slightly tamped down, a bit heavy-handed. Many instruments are suddenly free of reverb altogether or have it in varying degrees—piano notes had sustain when the pedal was depressed, but were staccato without pedal. There is no smearing, no smoothing. It sounds like many accumulated audio add-ons are stripped out. That is the "air" escaping. It sounds unaffected and honest to me and, I think, more lifelike.

The IDAT Power Screen

Now we come to the active Power Screen. Like the AD/6, the IDAT (Isolated Digital/Analog Transformers, $3495) has separate banks of outlets for analog and digital, six of each, with individual Ceralex treatment. This is a big, heavy box with a pair of transformers inside—the thing weighs 33 lbs. The active conditioning theory is something called Technical Power (also known as Balanced Power). The transformer splits the incoming 120 volts AC in such a way that 60 volts appears between the live and ground wires and another 60 between the neutral and ground. Your component sees the sum of the two and gets the 120 volts it needs, but in the process AC noise has been cancelled. TARA literature refers to "balanced outlets" on the IDAT (confusing at first, since the only audio usage of "balanced" I know has to do with signal wires and circuit schematics. But I understand that BPT and Equi=tech conditioners also employ it). The IDAT is physically and functionally redundant, split down the middle so to speak, with one side devoted to analog, the other to digital—think of it almost like a dual mono topology. Each side has its own bank of balanced outlets and its own transformer. Maximum draw from these should not exceed the transformers capacity of 5 amps. This means only line level, low-power gear should be used in the balanced power outlets—Halogen lights and power amps are verboten. But the analog side does have two additional Power Amp Only outlets which bypass the active conditioning and have a 20-amp limitation.

Plug in the IDAT and a front-mounted green On/Off pilot light comes on along with a vintage-looking amber voltage meter which monitors your wall's output. The IDAT likes to sit on TAOC TITE-35S component footers. Otherwise, it is tweak resistant.

Compared to the AD/6 and the PM/2, the IDAT opens up a newly articulate treble with more wallop on the bottom. It also brings more focus and edge definition—no murkiness or obscurity with this conditioner. It somehow manages to be resolute, yet easy on the ear. The passive conditioners by comparison, sound heavier and

smoother, darker and weightier, and a little slower—a little lethargic. But that does not mean you cannot use the AD/6 or PM/2 on your front-end. I first had the Audio Note Japan M77 preamp running through the IDAT and this set-up was too lightweight. Running it through the AD/6 put the tonal balance back where I wanted it. (In an ideal world, I would not use any conditioning at all with a product of this quality. The ANJ M77 has so much purity on its own that, other than the tonal balance shift, the change in conditioners had only slight impact.)

I ran both an mbl 5011 preamp and my von Gaylord Audio Uni prototype preamp through the IDAT, and was rewarded with roundness, dimension, subtlety, and liquidity. The IDAT applied a varnish, a kind of glossy patina to images, along with more reverb and longer decays. (These things departed from the neutral/accurate track of the passive Power Screens, but were still much less than the signature imposed by the Hydra, let alone the Reimyo ALS-777. These were the only items of all the TARA products to do so.) Dynamic shadings were supple, with true sounding crescendos and dissipation of the note. The IDAT placed you further back in the hall, yet gave you a wealth of detail and information only available from a close-up microphone position.

All of the TARA power products throw big, dense, and highly dynamic images, uniformly shaped from the top down—that is, the amount of flesh is consistent. They do not miniaturize images or etch their boundaries, and these large, taut objects moved as one piece, sans lumbering fatty deposits. Even if the sculpting or 3-D effect of individual images is a bit flattened, layering front to back is excellent. All of these permutations, whether PM/2, AD/6 or Hydra/Anaconda, were 96% free of grain or other power-related artifact. The IDAT was 100% free of them.

Noise Reduction

It was obvious there was some noise reduction going on because the noise floor had dropped. Products that advertise noise reduction often remove harmonics and/or low-level detail. While I could not pinpoint anything major missing, I would attribute the overall softness, smoothness and a reduction in texture as possible secondary effects (again, still less noticeable than with the Hydra). Instrumental timbre was well represented, just that it was now concentrated into large, focused cores, with consistent texture and quality from perimeter to center to perimeter—the little filigreed halo of events surrounding the instrument was gone. Gone also was most of the pervasive ambient acoustic, the "recreation of the recording venue". There was less "hall sound" and less "air". What remained was variable with the source. (I have concluded the little halo around instruments belongs in the artifact category. As for the matter of "the recording venue" and "air", this is a controversial area. I cannot make up my mind how much of it is real and how much is manufactured by our components. I do recall that not too long ago the effect was uncommon and sought after—now it is ubiquitous. Go to any audio show— you will hear it in room after room, even with mid-fi gear and even within the confines of tiny hotel bedrooms.)

Nevertheless, the Power Screens were not dry, pinched, or analytical sounding. (However, they do not sound "wet" like the Reimyo ALS-777 conditioner. If you want to introduce more of this "wetness", along with more image depth, stick a Harmonix RF-57 Tuning Base over each duplex pair.)

Those @#$% Digital Outlets!

A little Sidebar on Digital Transports

I *wanna tell ya* a little story here. Shortly after the TARA power products arrived, I had a manufacturer's loan of an mbl digital front-end. (The mbl 1521 transport ($9130) was a real eye-opener—it ran all over my reference CEC TL-1X, and got me to thinking maybe a digital transport survey is overdue.)

Anyway, when the mbl 1521 departed and I reinstated the TL-1X, quality plummeted. It just sounded dull. Bandwidth was limited. There was no finesse, just big blobs of sound. I went hunting for the culprit. What had happened to the sound of my reference? *It was the digital outlets on the IDAT!* Yes, those digital outlets do sound different from the analog ones, definitely smoother—too damn smooth, overly compensated, to the point that I lost more texture. Involvement was not where it should have been. Switching my digital front-end to the IDATs analog outlets brought back what was missing. After I settled down and let it sink in, this made sense: I *never* use the purpose-built digital outlets of any conditioner. (Some people talk about digital pollution compromising the entire system. Obviously, manufacturers think it does—that is why they build things segregating the digital. I have never been able to replicate what they are talking about.) Next time around, though, I will try the mbl 1521 through the analog outlets and see what that is like. After I determined I was not going to use the digital outlets, I switched off that side's transformer. Naturally, this had an effect on the system. I judged it detrimental, but some people might like it better.

Conclusion

I put the TARA Labs lineup of power products into the system *en masse*, and was caught off guard. There was no denying it was better in many ways from what I was used to. Still I felt I was missing something. While enjoying its superlatives, I kept thinking something was not right. Then it dawned on me in the course of comparing TARA Labs The One PC to my reference power cords. The key difference between it and most other PCs is its basic neutrality. The lack I experienced initially was the absence of my dearly beloved artifacts and colorations (and they don't die so easily). The entire TARA Labs power product lineup followed suit.

Even so, The One PC is as weighty as they come. It gives you the big bennies we are all seeking—dynamics, weight and evenness of response—and will recharge your system's energy.

Neutral, dynamic, weighty …and quiet. These are the conditioners' strengths in slaying the principal signal-degrading dragons—EMI and RFI—with a proprietary ceramic/metallic compound called Ceralex. The stuff works—I know it, because *things are quieter now*. And it is done in such a way that I do not feel I am missing any information.

The TARA Labs conditioners and The One power cord addressed the major problems I have been grappling with, while bringing me closer to the middle detent on the scale. The various Power Screens (the PM/2, the AD/6, the IDAT) and The One PC compete head to head with the best designs I've come across—and come out ahead. **Marshall Nack**

The One Power Cord
Retail: $1295/6 ft.

PM/2 with 2 outlets
Retail: $395

AD/6 with 6 outlets
Retail: $695

IDAT with 14 outlets
Retail: $3495

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