

POWERBIS MAESTRO



What is this device really? It appears to be a power bar, with six outlets and the usual IEC 320 jack for use with a standard power cord. Or is it a power line filter?

BIS Audio is a small Montreal-area company that once did modifications to older electronic equipment, such as Quad amplifiers. But don't ask, because that was then and this is now. The company now makes cables, all kinds of them, including *power* cables. And filters.

We have often warned against trusting a design entirely to one's instruments, however sophisticated. Actually *listening* to the product you've designed (what a concept!) tells you whether you've measured the right things. BIS Audio's Bernard Brien tunes his products by ear. And there's a lot of tuning to do, because he's not fond of buying cable off the shelf. He'll actually purchase individual conductors, dielectrics and sleeves, and put together something that sounds the way he wants.

And the most expensive is not always the best. Considering the name of this product, you would think he would recommend the use of his top cable, which is also called Maestro. Not so. Brien says he has voiced the PowerBIS Maestro to go with the AC20WG, which we had reviewed earlier in *UHF* No. 82.

You can imagine that, with this sort of hand manufacturing, these products can't be sold at mass market prices, and that is of course true. We'll get to the pricing shortly.

First, let's see what's inside. There's no mystery concerning the duplex outlets, since they are clearly labelled. They are Wattgate 381's, whose innards are copper with a triple plating of gold. What looks like plastic is actually a mix of glass and nylon. Like the more familiar (and

cheaper) hospital-grade outlets, these are designed to stay tight and grip the plug solidly.

The IEC jack is from Furutech. The inside of the box is damped with an asphalt-based material, to prevent vibrations that can generate electrical noise. Brien says that even in an extreme case — if you plug a wall wart with a transformer directly into the Maestro — its vibration won't shake up anything else.

You can get a version with the IEC jack on the top, if that's more convenient, and there is also a version with eight outlets instead of six. "Have it your way," as they say in a restaurant chain that is not on our list of favorites.

Yes, it *is* a line filter as well as a power bar. Included in the housing is a parallel filter that shunts high-frequency noise to ground. There are no series elements that could compromise current transmission.

How to test a product like this? We have, in some filter tests, run our Alpha system bareback, with no filtering at all, but the result is not too pleasant, and we shy away from bad experiences. Instead we designed a two-stage test.

The Alpha system's power is filtered by an Inouye Synergistic line filter, which we have owned for many years. We began by listening to our three test recordings with that filter. We then substituted a GutWire StingRay power bar, a \$385 device that has no pretensions to filtering, but is built from Hubbell hospital-grade parts with a shielded captive cord. Its well-shielded cord has enough capacitance to do some filtering. Finally we listened to the Maestro with its AC20WG power cord.

The first recording is a familiar one, the SACD version of the choral recording *Now the Green Blade Riseth* (Proprius PRSACD9093). With the StingRay it sounded way better than it would have with an ordinary power bar, but it was a come-down from our Inouye filter. The flute introduction was thinner, but with more of an emphasis on the middle tones. Both Albert and Toby found the sound initially quite acceptable, but then began noticing what was wrong. "There's roughness on the syllables by the male singers," said Toby, "and the sound was flatter and somewhat confused, with less warmth in the final crescendo." Said Gerard, "it actually sounds louder, but not for the right reasons."

We continued with the Reference Recordings SACD of Bruckner's *Symphony No. 9* (from *Tutti*, RR-906SACD). Albert was impressed by how well the *Scherzo* movement's impact was preserved. "It's better than I had feared," he said.

But that didn't mean it was right. The spaciousness that is characteristic of Keith O. Johnson's productions was shallower, or — more likely — the depth was hidden by a lack of clarity. The impression left was that the sound field, normally very large, was compressed. But there was worse. Toby described the trumpets as "zippy," and Gerard as "hard and artificial." There was a certain cacophony we had not heard with our filter in place, and we got the feeling once more that we were playing the music a little too loud...even though we had not touched the volume.

We ended with Thelonius Monk's *'Round Midnight*, sung by Carmen Lundy (the song is from the JVC album *Self-Portrait*).

Once again Albert found it better than he had feared (the StingRay really is pretty good), but everything was smaller, shallower. The emotional tension of this song of disappointed love dissipated. "It's squared instead of cubed," said Toby. There seemed to be more energy shifted to the upper midrange, but it wasn't real information.

We disconnected the StingRay, substituted the PowerBIS Maestro, and listened again.

We needed only the first recording to know that the improvement was truly huge. From the first notes there was a “rightness” to the flute introduction, and to the gorgeous women’s voices. The confusion was gone, and the tonal spectrum was in better balance. Textures of both voices and instruments were rich and fine. “Everything is in its place,” said Albert, “and there’s nothing to irritate you.”

Rhythm was very good as well, and that bode well for the Bruckner.

That worked too. From the start there was an emotional tension as we anticipated the orchestral explosion that was surely coming. When it came, with brass blazing, it was bright but not harsh. Odd how such music can be at once strongly rhythmic *and* lyrical, but then Bruckner was a pretty good composer! “I’m a believer,” said Toby enthusiastically. Even so he thought there was a little less dynamic range than with the

Inouye. “It’s doing something artificial,” he said, “but it’s not at all unpleasant. Quite the contrary, it directs your attention to the color and the harmonics.”

We ended with the Carmen Lundy song, and you would have needed to be deaf not to hear the improvement. “What richness in the oboe, the strings and the voice!” exclaimed Albert. “You get the whole message, from sadness to the glimmer of hope.”

“Wow!” said Toby. “Some details that bothered me were still there, but they didn’t disturb me in the same way. The sibilance, for instance. So the sound supports the music.”

All right...you probably want to know what the damages are going to be.

Well, it won’t be cheap, as you will have guessed by the way it’s built. The basic unit we reviewed costs C\$990 — you can get an eight-outlet version for \$200 more. And remember that it has no power cord. The AC20WG cord that BIS recommends (because it’s been “voiced” for it) is C\$700. A lower-cost version, the AC20, is \$400. We don’t have the heart

to add it all up.

You may be wondering whether the idea of “voicing” audio gear is legitimate. The term is borrowed from the vocabulary of the organ builder. Indeed, there are organ *tuners*, and there are organ *voicers*, those who fine-tune the sound of each pipe to give the instrument its distinctive character. So why not voice audio equipment?

The obvious difference is that organs *produce* music and hi-fi systems *reproduce* it. Creative input is not what you’re looking for.

But as we hope we’ve made clear, you can’t design a system entirely by trusting your instruments, because if you do you will make horrible mistakes — examples of this abound. So you calculate, you hypothesize, you measure, and then you listen. You listen a lot.

A good designer will be honest and admit that, sometimes, he doesn’t know *why* two elements go together...or fail to. The final judge is the ear. That is why audio design is science, sure enough, but it is also an art.



CROSSTALK

It’s the current fashion for a power filter to do all sorts of stuff you don’t need done, up to and including protecting gear against a lightning strike, or perhaps a bombing raid on your house. It needs breakers, lights, an LCD screen, Ethernet and USB connections. Or does it?

With a product like this I want only two things done.

First, I want whatever electrical current the power company deigns to give me to get to my system with as little taken away as possible, from plug to plug to plug.

Second, I want to clean out the horrible gunk that the utility sends down its wires along with its expensive current, and I don’t want more gunk either generated or spread around.

That’s it. This product does exactly that, and you can hear it.

—Gerard Rejskind

You’ll never know how good your system really is until you feed it clean power. And no tweak or upgrade will ever reveal its

true value until then. If you can’t wait to get started on that path but haven’t allowed for it in your immediate budget, you might want to consider the difference the GutWire Stingray provides — from a wider sense of space to clearer lyrics.

And when you are ready for it, you’ll have the joy of trying the BISAudio unit. Music will never sound the same. You’ll find no excesses, no sudden irritating surges, everything will be quietly controlled by a healthy dose of pure power.

Say the composer wanted his music to sound ominous at a specific section, the conductor then insisted on the intensity rising out of the strings, then shifting onto the brass and percussion, and the musicians responded and delivered wonderfully. With this unit you’ll get to hear the result of all that collaboration and you’ll hear the music rising relentlessly, filling the space around you, shattering the silence.

—Albert Simon

Greatly honored by an invitation to join

UHF’s panel for a session, I am asked for my impressions of...power bars!

Well, it’s not as if they all sounded the same. The GutWire provides serious AC distribution, but it doesn’t treat the power much, and the music loses appeal compared to the reference Inouye. There is a harshness on voices, and detail sounds artificial. It’s not the GutWire’s fault, raw AC is just bad *mojo* and there is still lots that is impressive, but I would use this bar to give a conditioning device more power outlets.

The BIS Maestro...this is really just a power bar? It’s certainly nice to the music. Harshness and artificial detail are gone. Harmonic relationships and tonal colors, key points for me, are satisfying with the BIS. The choral crescendo at the end of *Now the Green Blade Riseth* got back the heart it lost when we used the simpler unit. There’s not the air or the neutrality of the Inouye but the overall effect is remarkably pleasant.

I wouldn’t feel I needed another conditioner if I had one of these.

—Toby Earp