

(AND CLEANER)

MORE POWER TO YA'

The Essence Power Distributor & Power Cords from Essential Sound Products

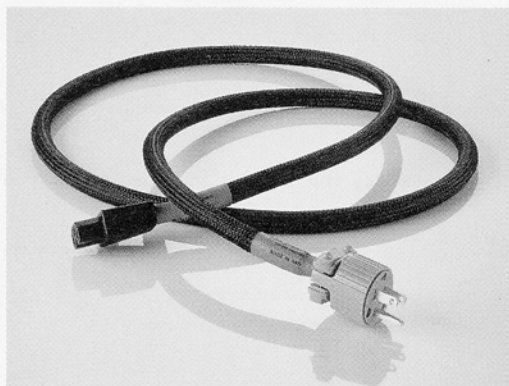
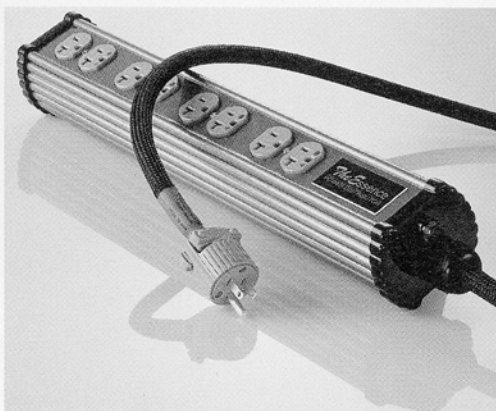
BY WAYNE DONNELLY

At some point, maintaining and improving a high-quality audio system becomes a struggle against noise pollution. RFI/EMI and other types of noise that sneak into our audio circuits from electrical outlets and the air around us can subtly degrade the sound we hear. Of course it's easy to become acclimated to a certain degree of noise—the noise floor we reviewers talk about—to the extent that we can often tune it out. Quite a few times, present instance included, I've realized with some surprise that a component or accessory has made the system quieter, getting rid of noise that I wasn't conscious of until it was gone. Reducing that overhead grain and noise lets us perceive nuances that were previously masked, taking us deeper into the music. When it comes to electric power, cleanliness is all.

Mind you, there are plenty of dissenters on the efficacy of power conditioning, and especially of power cords. You see it all the time with the Internet newsgroups. Expensive wires, especially power cords, are snake oil, fiction, wishful thinking...take your pick. After all, the current's already traveled through 30 miles of wire to your house, then passed through your breaker box and house wiring. So how are you gonna clean it up in the last six feet? Ridiculous!

Despite these commentators' self-

righteous pleasure in declaring the emperor naked, I've always found their reasoning a bit specious. It's like saying that the water filter in my kitchen is useless for removing impurities because the water has to travel from the Sierras and through the Bay area's distribution system before it gets to me.



Both chemical analysis and my taste buds have confirmed that there's a difference in the filtered water, and my ears tell me unequivocally that what happens over those final six feet of wire can substantially affect the sound I hear.

The folks at Essential Sound Products assert that the power cord is the most important wire in the system. My experiences over the years have gradually led me to give that assertion more credence than I once would have. For one thing, it's clear to me that power supply quality is one of the most telling factors in separating the very best components from the pack. Additionally, I was agreeably surprised by the sonic payoff from installing four 20-amp, polarity-correct audio circuits, isolated from the household wiring and separately grounded to a six-foot copper rod sunk in the ground. I don't recall any single component change that has equaled the magnitude of improvement, in lowering the system's noise floor and enhancing fine detail and transparency, that I got from those dedicated circuits.

I'd thought the dedicated circuits might make aftermarket power cords irrelevant, but to my surprise I found that differences among cords became even easier to detect than before—attacking the gross levels of electrical noise allowed a subtler appreciation of the contribution of subsystems such as power, interconnect, and speaker cables. In my experi-

ESP

ence, power cords have virtually always made a difference, though the changes have been highly variable: one cord delivers fatter bass, another a brighter or mellower upper-mid "presence" region, etc. These new ESP cords have been remarkably consistent in the effects they produce: always toward tonal neutrality, transient speed and, especially, enhanced dynamics at both ends of the scale.

In a sense, this review caps an ongoing series of responses to ESP products in *Fi*. Back in April '96 Michael Gindi reviewed the original Essence cords, finding that their effect on his amps was like doubling their power rating. (The current Essence cords represent a refinement and extension of the concepts underlying those original cords.) In September '97 Larry Kay rhapsodized about the effect of the ESPs on Graaf tube gear, and in June '98 Wayne Garcia found that an ESP cord transformed the Audio Research CD-2 player from a wallflower to the life of the party. In my own reviews of the VTL TL 2.5 (Nov. '97) and Thor (June '98) preamps, the ESP products contributed materially to the performance I described, enabling those components to perform better than with their original cords.

The new kid on ESP's block is The Essence Power Distributor, which features a two-meter Essence power cord terminated into a heavy, rigid, eight-outlet strip. The outlets, configured in four pairs, are hospital-grade, using a high-conductivity bronze alloy that's 98 percent copper; each pair has an isolated internal ground, designed to avoid ground loops. The chassis is heavy, ribbed, cylindrically-shaped aluminum, chosen for resistance to floor-borne vibration and superior RFI shielding. Extensive use of internal damping around all wires and components protects against both floor- and air-borne resonances. All in all, an impressively built device.

The Essence Power Distributor's "purist" approach to cleaning up power differs from many conditioners which use transformers. As it happened, when the ESP shipment arrived I had on hand one of the best transformer-based conditioners I've encountered, the Tice Power Block III Signature (reviewed November '96). The Tice delivers good RFI/EMI rejection, strong bass dynamics, smooth and sweet treble response,


and a dramatically wide soundstage extending well beyond the speakers. But after changing to the Essence and giving it a 72-hour break-in period, I found that the ESP was equally effective—and in its effect on the noise floor, superior. The only area in which the Tice prevailed was its vast soundstage. Even there I began to perceive trade-offs; the soundstage with the Essence in the system was not as wide, but had greater depth and slightly more precise location of individual instruments.

And glory be! With The Essence, for the first time in memory I could connect my system with every piece properly grounded. Typically I plug each of my current-hungry VTL MB-750s into its own circuit, with the front-end components on another circuit. This setup, even using power conditioners such as the Tice or the excellent MIT Z-Series, required me to float the grounds on all but one piece—normally one monoblock, in some instances the line or phono stage. But this is far from ideal. Cheater plugs are usually flimsy, and their use can drain some dynamic energy from the system. Moreover, the ungrounded components are more susceptible to RFI/EMI pollution. The grounding revelation decisively tipped the scales for me—The Essence Power Distributor was here to stay. (I can't, of course, guarantee the same results in your system.)

But what about The Essence power cords? Would they add value to the Power Distributor's impressive showing? To find out, I decided to take my time, fitting one component at a time with an Essence cord, allowing for break-in, then after listening to the new setup for several hours, returning the original cord for comparison. The original cords were a mix of other brands and the stock Belden cords commonly supplied. I started by putting Essence cords on the VTLs, again plugged directly into the wall. I subsequently changed over the DAC, CD transport, phono stage, and line stage, in that order, plugging the cords into the Power Distributor. (My turntable has a captive AC cord.)

Against stock Beldens, the improvement with The Essence cords was unmistakable; if I had to quantify it, I'd say a good 15-20 percent. With the other aftermarket cords, the improvements were smaller but to me still significant. With the complete ESP lineup, the system's presentation was easier and more relaxed, timbrally purer, faster and

more dynamic than I've experienced with any other power delivery equipment.

At \$995 for the Power Distributor and \$499 for a two-meter cord, these aren't cheap goods. But when you examine their construction—and certainly when you listen to them—it's easy to see where the money goes. In my opinion, anyone with a five-figure system investment and less than pristine power—which, for starters, means virtually anyone in a large urban area—should consider at least The Essence Power Distributor. That would accommodate an elaborate system, including amps up to at least 200 W/channel. As I discovered, a good percentage of the performance of the Power Distributor + Essence cords is reached with Power Distributor + standard cords. If you've already invested in other aftermarket cords, the Power Distributor will most likely get better performance from them. But if you can afford it, the full ESP lineup is pretty dazzling. And by the time you read this, ESP plans to have an "entry-level" cord at a little over half the price of the Essence cord. Hmm, wonder how they'll match up with the Power Distributor? 

FI SPECSHEET

Product Type

AC Power Cord and Outlet Strip

MANUFACTURER

Essential Sound Products, Inc.

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog Front End: Townshend Audio Rock Mk. III turntable, Rega RB 300 arm, Cardas Reference cartridge

Digital Front End: Thor DC-1000 DAC, Camelot Merlin transport

Electronics: Thor TA-1000 line stage and TA-3000 phono stage; VTL TL 2.5 preamp; VTL MB-750 Signature amps

Speakers: EgglestonWorks Andra

Cables: Nordost, MIT, Transparent, HighWire

ACCESSORIES

Tice Power Block III Signature power conditioner, Townshend Seismic Sinks, Discovery and Transparent power cords, VPI bricks, G-Flex M1 vibration dampers, Goldmund and Black Diamond Racing cones, RoomTunes, Nordost Eco3 antistatic fluid