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Equipment Report

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Salamander Design's Synergy System

After a hard day at the keyboard, sometimes I like to relax by watching what my wife calls "house porn"- the renovation and redecorating shows that lurk on the lesser cable channels. I don't know why shows like *Homewise*, *Room by Room*, or *Dream Builders* so entrance me, except that as my mind wanders, I find myself fascinated by the strangest things. Such as: Where do these people keep all their *stuff*? Their sofas, unlike mine, aren't piled with half-read *The New Mexicans*, old *New Yorkers*, and CD jewelboxes. Bookshelves are empty, except for the odd knickknack or two; mine are crammed with books, which are usually supporting other books. And stereos- don't these people ever listen to music? I don't think I've ever seen a speaker, stray wire, or electronic component (other than a TV) in any of those houses.

And that's just wrong. Not simply because I happen to be a slob, but because that type of show is selling the fantasy of the good life, and how can life be good without music? "But," I can hear interior decorators muttering, "audio equipment and-even worse- audio 'furniture' is not very aesthetically appealing. In fact it can be downright ugly."

Horse hockey! Sure, there's some unattractive stuff out there, but there's a whole lot of audio gear being manufactured now that's downright gorgeous. Take a look at our cover- if you owned a Sonic Frontiers Iris transport, wouldn't you want to have it out

where everyone could see it? Or glance at the Bow Wazoo elsewhere in this issue. That's a piece of gear you don't need to throw a paper bag over to stay in the same room with. So, too, with audio furniture. You can still find some hideous examples, but at every HI-FI Show and CES there seems to be more and more serious support gear that is also *bee-you-tee-ful*.

Salamander Synergy
Take the Synergy System by Salamander Designs for instance. It's a modular system just brimming with options, and so handsome it literally stopped me in my tracks at WCES '98. I was rushing to an appointment when I saw a display of real furniture designed for serious audio gear. As well as sporting brushed-aluminum and rich wood finishes, this stuff also had luxe Ultra-Suede™ side panels, perforated metal doors, and Biedermeier-influenced curved metal legs. Only after I'd drooled over it a while, wondering who'd come up with such a combination



Salamander Synergy System

of style and function, did I notice Sal Carraba (the "Sal" in Salamander) grinning at my response. Reluctantly, I tore myself away to my appointment, promising Sal I'd return to examine the Synergy line at my leisure.

Synergy's versatility stems primarily from the four posts that support the top and from which the shelves are suspended. At first glance they seem to be rectangular aluminum bar stock, but they are really an ingenious extrusion that incorporates grooves into each face- the grooves are where all shelves, doors, and side panels screw into the threads of the extruded posts. Like most great

ideas, it sounds complex but is quite simple in execution.

Salamander's Archetype stands (reviewed in Vol.20 No.9) utilize threaded rods and large nuts to clamp the shelves- but even when you use great force to tighten the nuts to the shelves, the structure begins to sway. The Synergy stands, however, are as rigid as a rock, because of the way that their top and bottom plates fasten to the support posts. But don't be in a great hurry to assemble the unit, or you'll find yourself taking it apart again to install the door or other extras.

You have to plan for your options very carefully. For one thing, Salamander has done a great job of figuring out what accessories to offer. You can have an open rack, with the equipment visible and accessible from all sides, or you can add side and rear panels of perforated metal, wood, or even Ultra-Suede. You want doors? You can have perforated steel or frosted glass framed in wood-full height, three-quarters height, or half height. There are add-on drawers that can hold 100 CDs. Shelves can rest on spikes or rubber nubbins. You can buy double-width units (perfect for supporting wide screen TVs), or you can stack several posts together for really tall stands. You want wheels? They got 'em. Or maybe you'd prefer gracefully curving metal feet that lift the whole structure off the floor. Boy, do you have choices.

You can choose the height of the rack, for instance. Synergy stands are available in 22", 32", and 42" heights. You can also add shelves to fit your needs. (The 22" model comes stock with one shelf in addition to its top and bottom plates, the 32" with three, and the 42" with four) And, of course, you can buy a configuration that suits your system now and add to it as your inventory changes.

Even after you've made your choices, you have to be alert about the order in which you assemble the unit. I screwed on the big plastic leveler feet (suitable for shiny wood or ceramic tile floors!), clamped the oversized cherry bottom plate firmly onto the posts, installed and carefully leveled each shelf, and really grunted down the oversized cherry top plate- then had to take *off* the top plate and uninstall the shelves to install the door.

So I cussed alot. Why was all that necessary? Well, it's a groove thang. You have to clamp each item into the groove on the post by sliding a special fastener down the groove from the top of the unit. Then, by tightening the screw, you connect the hardware firmly to the structure. My order should have been: feet, bottom plate, hinge, shelf, hinge, shelf, top plate. this is a minor quibble that could be leveled at just about any product that's shipped knocked-down. It's hard to write foolproof instructions; some fools, such as I, never read 'em anyway.¹

Once assembled, though, the Synergy stand was undeniably handsome, with its cherry top and bottom plate, black shelves, media drawer, black perforated metal side panels, plain black back (easily removed for wiring changes, thank yew very much), and nifty little half door in cherry-trimmed, perforated black metal.

Of course, looks aren't everything in the world of audio. The big question is, how'd it sound? I don't pretend to hear a difference *every* time I put a component on top of something else, but some supports do sound better than others. When I was an audio salesman, I used to amaze customers by playing them a CD player sitting on top of a heavy piece of wood furniture filled with LPs, and then playing the same CDP as it sat

atop a light but rigid audio rack. People would stop telling me how there couldn't possibly be a difference and say, "I *heard* that!" When I asked them to describe what they heard, most said that the CD player sounded more "blurred" on the heavy furniture, and cleaner, more detailed on the audio stand. That's what I heard, too.

With the Synergy stand, I could get that sense of clarity and detail if I used the internal shelves- the ones resting on spikes or rubber pads. The top plate, connected as it is to the rest of the stand's mass, tended to add a very slight degree of haze if source components, such as CD players or turntables, stood directly upon it. Was this so noticeable that I was able to stride into the room, listen briefly, and declare whether or not the source unit was resting on one shelf or another? I think not. But the difference when I compared the sounds of a CD player on an inner shelf and on a top plate was obvious enough that I wouldn't just set a player on top without misgivings. Better buy a stand with sufficient shelves for your needs and keep the top clear for knickknacks- and maybe I'll see *your* room on TV some evening.

I really like Salamander's new Synergy line. It's well thought-out for audiophiles, and handsome enough for furniture snobs. The base prices are quite reasonable, as quality furniture goes, although the price climbs steeply as you add all the extras. Even so, these racks should last a lifetime, so you'll get alot of performance for your investment. I recommend them to anyone looking for a sensible solution to audio clutter.

¹Since I wrote this, Salamander has updated its instructions, especially for accessories.



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