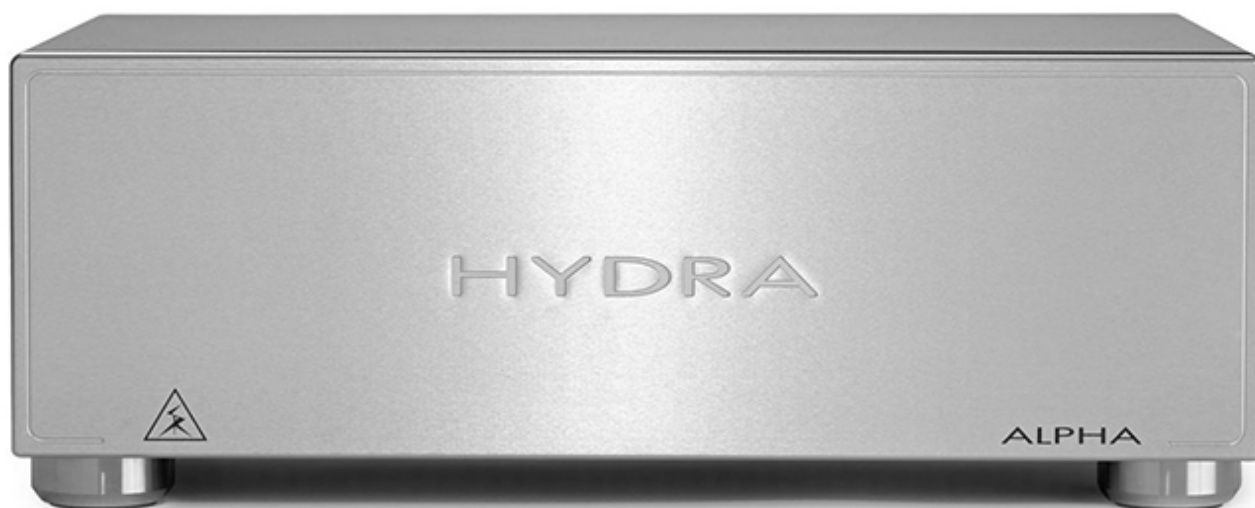


Shunyata Research Hydra Alpha A12 Power Conditioner & Shunyata Research Venom NR-V10 Power Cord



I go way back with Shunyata Research, and fondly remember the days of The World's Best Audio System (TWBAS) events -- gatherings of manufacturers at my home for which I'd chosen and assembled into amazing systems the best audio components then available -- and the sense of discovery we all felt. My first TWBAS, in 2004, included products from Wilson Audio Specialties, EMM Labs, and Shunyata Research. TWBAS 2004 was a watershed for me -- at the time, it was, by far, the best sound I had ever attained in my home. Although that system's sound would be greatly surpassed by subsequent TWBAS systems, the bar set by that first one was already very high. Shunyata was represented in TWBAS 2004 by their Hydra Model-8 power conditioner (\$1995 at the time; all prices USD), various models of power cord from their Anaconda and Diamondback lines, and their Constellation Aries and Andromeda signal cables (these models were discontinued long ago; see archived articles for cable prices).

In TWBAS 2009, almost everything was different. This time the speakers were from Rockport Technologies and most of the electronics from Behold, with other additions and subtractions. The sound was even better, partly because I'd assembled this system in my newly constructed, dedicated listening room, the Music Vault. The only brand carried over from TWBAS 2004 was Shunyata Research: a Hydra V-Ray II power conditioner (\$4999) and Anaconda and King Cobra power cords. But after TWBAS 2009, I didn't keep up with Shunyata's products, and I'm not sure why. It was a decade before I revisited the company -- and I'm so glad I did.

The current Shunyata Research

Those who've followed my writing over the years have seen a number of changes in my approach to audio gear. The most obvious was when I stopped assembling such cost-no-object stereo systems as the TWBAS arrays. Other refinements in my thinking have been

necessitated by my experience with many subpar components over the years. Like many of you, I now know, without question, that high price does not necessarily mean high performance. You can easily pay in the high five or even six figures and still get under-engineered, poorly built and tested audio gear.

These days, I have several criteria a product must meet before I give it my stamp of highest approval: buying it myself. First and foremost, of course, the product must exhibit the absolute best sound quality, without qualification. Second, it must be built to the very highest standard -- I look very closely at products' parts quality and how those parts are assembled. Third, I very much like to see measurements of the product, as a way of vetting its engineering and to provide some peace of mind that it will reliably perform for a long time under a variety of operating conditions. In the years since TWBAS 2009, I've noticed that Shunyata Research has increasingly focused on providing demonstrations of their products in which they also present measurements. Whether videos or white papers, Shunyata wants you not only to listen, but to pay attention to the science behind their products. I appreciate this. High-end audio has never been short on cable and power products that seem to be based on voodoo engineering. Shunyata wants you to know that they're different, and they've gone to great expense to prove it.



Another thing that I like about the current iteration of Shunyata Research is that you can buy some of their best technologies at prices that are not absurdly high. It was this that convinced me that it was time to revisit the brand. Grant Samuelson, who's long been Shunyata's director of marketing and sales, had sent me an e-mail asking if a SoundStage! writer would like to try their newest products, the Hydra Alpha A12 power conditioner (\$4498) and Venom NR-V10 power cord (\$498/1.75m). It took me only a few moments to decide to take them on myself.

Mine is a simple system

I've made some very intentional choices with respect to my current audio system. A reader from France recently wrote a letter in which he described my approach perhaps better than I have: "I'd like to build a system that's like this bottle of wine that you open, and it's directly enjoyable and pleasant and not this fussy-elusive wine that has to have the right temperature, the right glasses, and you have to concentrate to find the notes."

Since my system is so minimal, there's limited application for power conditioners and cords -- it was fully accommodated by the contents of just two small shipping cartons from Shunyata Research. In one box were three Venom NR-V10 power cords: one with a custom 32A connector, to fit my Boulder Amplifiers 2060 stereo power amplifier; one for the Hegel Music Systems HD30 digital-to-analog converter with integral volume control; and one for what was in the other box, Shunyata's Hydra Alpha A12 power conditioner. The Hegel plugged into the Hydra Alpha A12, and the Boulder directly into the wall. The loudspeakers were my references, the Vimberg Tondas from German manufacturer Tidal Audio, and interconnects and speaker cables were Siltech Explorers. The electronics, including the Hydra Alpha A12, sat on an SGR Audio Model III Symphony rack.

Venoms and a Hydra

Shunyata's Venom power-cord models are inexpensive by high-end standards, and I like that you get a generous amount of tech for your money. The Venom NR-V10 is a ten-gauge cord with conductors of oxygen-free electrolytic (OFE) copper and is shielded against RFI/EMI. The metal contacts are cryogenically treated, and the cord includes Shunyata's Component-to-Component Interference (CCI) filter, to keep powerline noise from entering the connected audio component. Yes, these cords are claimed to reduce noise, not just provide a clean pathway for power. Shunyata also states that their Kinetic Phase Inversion Process (KPIP) reduces burn-in time and accounts for wire directionality for overall better cord performance. The standard Venom NR-V10 is terminated with EF-C15 CopperCONN connectors.



The Hydra Alpha A12 power conditioner has six pairs of Hubbell outlets, each pair surrounded by one of Shunyata's Cable Cradles, to support the terminations of the cords plugged into them -- no strained and sagging connectors here. The Alpha A12 can be used with high-current devices, due to its use of Shunyata's Dynamic Transient Current Delivery (DTCD) system. The Alpha A12 uses several Shunyata noise-reducing technologies, including the CCI filter, the Noise Isolation Chamber (NIC), and Ground Plane Noise Reduction (GP-NR). I won't try to describe what each of these do -- you can read more about them here -- but briefly, each is included to ensure that your components are fed the cleanest power possible, for better sound. The Alpha A12's case has been treated with vibration-absorbing and -damping compounds and materials, and its footers are designed to minimize the transmission of resonances from the support platform to the component. Overcurrent protection is provided by a hydraulic electromagnetic circuit breaker, a type superior to thermal breakers or fuses. Even the Alpha A12's internal wiring, for which Shunyata used their own ArNi conductors, incorporates several of the company's technologies. All in all, the Alpha A12 seems to have been thoroughly engineered, from inputs to outputs.

Performance

The main purpose of this section of a review is to describe what I hear when I've inserted the device under test (DUT) in my system. However, it's also useful to know where the DUT fits in the greater scheme of things -- is it really good in comparison with its peers, and is it a good value for money? A reviewer who wants to make such assessments must begin by understanding the manufacturer's intended purpose for the product -- in layman's terms, What's this thing all about? But once you know that, you can decide if that purpose fits with your audiophile worldview, and whether or not the product is worth an audition.

Shunyata's ethos definitely aligns with what I think power products should be all about: reducing or eliminating noise interference. If you browse their website and read what founder Caelin Gabriel has to say, it all seems to add up to just that. Of course, this is good for the audiophile: remove noise, and you hear more of your music. Shunyata's ethos is not about tuning your system a certain way, or adding this or that coloration to somehow enhance certain aspects of the music, or to counteract colorations caused elsewhere in the system. Shunyata's products are about maximizing current delivery and reducing noise, and not much else.



The first thing I did was to check the steady-state noise floor of my system, which was already plenty low. With the Hegel HD30 DAC connected to the Hydra Alpha A12, one Venom NR-V10 cord on the Hegel and another on the Boulder, all electronics turned on, and one ear pressed against the tweeter screen of a Vimberg Tonda, I could hear only the faintest wisp of noise. This was a slight reduction of the level of noise I hear without the Shunyatas, so this quickly established that they had indeed

lowered my system's noise floor. With the Hegel turned off and only the Boulder on I heard nothing at all, the same as with no Shunyata products in the power chain -- you can't improve on dead silence. Along with Devialet's integrated amplifier-DACs, the Boulder 2060 is as good as it gets in terms of self-noise: it has none. Music will emerge from the

starting point of completely “black” silence. But most important was to hear what sort of noise, if any, was audible with tunes.

I began with “Lament and Wake,” from the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet’s LAGQ’s Guitar Heroes (16-bit/44.1kHz ALAC, Telarc). Noise can ride along the top of string sounds, and this 2004 track is very revealing of such artifacts. No such problems here -- with the Shunyata products in my system I heard only clean acoustic-guitar playing. The finger picking and plucking at 2:51 sounded pure -- just the guitar notes -- with crisp, sharply defined transient snap and no hint of noise or distortion to flatten the dynamics or fill the spaces between notes. I cranked up the volume and the sound in my room swelled, culminating in the ramping up of this track’s energy between 5:40 and 5:50. And the Shunyatas supported this recording’s wide dynamic range -- current delivery was not a problem. I was sure pleased with what I was hearing.



Speaking of dynamics -- often, when a system’s delivery of power is suboptimal, noise can subdue dynamics. In this regard I found the performance of the Shunyata power-delivery system exemplary. Arabella Steinbacher’s recording of the Winter concerto of Vivaldi’s The Four Seasons, with Clemens Schuldt leading the Munich Chamber Orchestra (24/96 FLAC, PentaTone/Qobuz), exploded from a backdrop of near silence. This gave the music real life -- that pop you hear from live music. The sound of Steinbacher’s violin was absolutely, pristinely clean at any volume I cared to play it. Not only did notes emerge from silence, they decayed back into silence naturally, with only the recording venue remaining audible to provide the sense of space around notes that gives them substance. In short, there was nothing in what I heard to jar me back into a different reality: the fact that I was sitting in my listening room at home, listening to a recording of music. In fact, I noted that the real limiting factor was my room -- and my room’s acoustics are good.

I conducted my next experiment on a Sunday morning, when all was quiet -- a rarity these days in our two-teen house. As I listened to the first volume of the Dudok Quartet Amsterdam’s cycle of Haydn’s String Quartets, Op.20 (24/96 FLAC, Resonus Classics/ZenneZ/Qobuz), the system was so quiet that I could hear other electronics in the room that weren’t connected to my main system. On the other side of my listening room is a small two-channel system I occasionally use when streaming Netflix or Amazon or Disney+. It comprises a Coda Model 11 stereo amplifier connected to a pair of Monitor Audio Studio stand-mounted loudspeakers and fed by an Oppo BDP-103 universal BD player, all connected with AmazonBasics interconnects and speaker cables. To hear the Dudok’s playing at its fullest, I had to unplug the Coda from the wall, and unplug the

Panamax surge suppressor that feeds the Oppo and our Sony TV. Now my system sounded its absolute best -- the silence between notes was truly silent, at least in the context of the limitations of my own hearing. I was thrilled -- with all power-related artifacts removed, the sound that remained was as transparent as I've heard since moving into my new listening room a year and a half ago.

A question of value

In October 2019 I reviewed the GigaWatt PC-4 Evo+ power conditioner, which retails for \$9999 with included LC-3HC power cord (1.5m) and, like Shunyata's Hydra Alpha A12, has 12 outlets. In that review's "Conclusion," I wrote: "It improved the sound of my main audio system by washing away a subtle grain that I could again easily hear when the GigaWatt was then removed from the circuit." The Hydra Alpha A12 costs \$4498, and the Venom NR-V10 power cord (1.75m) that plugs it into the wall is \$498. In my system, the Shunyatas accomplished the same thing as the GigaWatt, at well under half the price: It lowered the noise floor of my audio system, letting me experience cleaner sound with music that demands the absolute quietest background for proper reproduction (in my experience, mostly strings).



The three Venom NR-V10 power cords and one Hydra Alpha A12 brought the total cost of outfitting my system with these Shunyata products to \$5992. When you consider that my stereo retails for a total of just under \$95,000, the addition of a Shunyata power-conditioning system is a good -- no, a great -- value, and a must-have addition to a complete high-end stereo system.

As I write this, I'm somewhat amazed that, in the context of the gear usually reviewed on SoundStage! Ultra, my \$95k stereo system would be considered a fairly modest one. But I'm just as amazed that the level of sound quality I now hear in my room can compete with virtually anything out there, with only the subtlest differences separating it from the state of the art. The fact that Shunyata Research's Hydra Alpha A12 power conditioner and Venom NR-V10 power cords got me that much closer to the state of the art for only about 5% of the cost of my system is a testament to what Caelin Gabriel and his company have accomplished. That makes these products not only an easy recommendation from me, but one of the best values in high-end audio. If you buy them, you'll be acting as a responsible steward of your stereo budget, and increase your enjoyment of your music as you get closer to true ultra-high fidelity.

Shunyata Research Hydra Alpha A12 Power Conditioner & Shunyata Research Venom NR-V10 Power Cord

Part Two: Jeff Chooses Shunyata Research

Man, can I drag things out. I wrote the first installment of “Jeff’s Getting a New Stereo System,” for SoundStage! Ultra, in July 2017. That series of six articles, the most recent published in December 2017, chronicled my search for -- you guessed it -- a new audio system. When I conceived of the series, I was about to move from our former home, had just sold my \$400,000 reference stereo system, and was looking forward to whatever might be next. Perhaps the title of the series should have been “Jeff’s Getting a New Stereo System . . . or Not.”

I never finished the system. I like to think that was because, this time, my approach was super-pragmatic. I’m not as rash as I was in my youth -- or so I try to convince myself -- and surely that will help me make the best choices in choosing a stereo. If idealism is the opposite of pragmatism, then in this area of my life, at least, I can get behind my, um, delayed response. In high-end audio as in anything else, it’s too easy to buy the wrong thing. Such mistakes can be expensive and frustrating.



Jeff Fritz

Nonetheless, here it is May 2020, and I'm taking another step toward the completion of my reference audio system. I won't recount everything I've done up to this point -- all of the older articles are available in the SoundStage! Ultra archives. This article is about the next step -- interconnects, digital links, speaker cables, and power conditioner -- and it's one I'm confident in taking.

Shunyata Research enters the game

Last month, I reviewed Shunyata Research's Hydra Alpha A12 power conditioner and Venom NR-V10 power cord. If you haven't read that review, I recommend you read it before continuing with this article. The Shunyatas earned a Reviewers' Choice award, and the reasons were crystal clear. The products I reviewed have it all: fantastic sound quality, flawless build quality, and prices that, at this point in my life, make sense to me -- high value for dollar spent. In short, I had no reservations about the Shunyata models I reviewed -- something that, with me, seldom happens with high-end audio products.

Shunyata Research makes everything you need to wire up your system and clean the power you feed it. I already had the Venom NR-V10 power cords connected to my electronics -- a Boulder Amplifiers 2060 stereo amplifier and a Hegel Music Systems HD30 DAC -- so it made perfect sense to me to try speaker cables and interconnects from the same manufacturer, to hear if that would improve even more the great sound I was already getting. I called Grant Samuelsen, Shunyata's director of marketing and sales, to talk about what might be best for my system. He knows the Shunyata line inside and out -- of course -- and was already familiar with the components of my system. Samuelsen didn't hesitate to make some suggestions.

From our earlier conversations, and his knowledge of which products I've bought in the past, Samuelsen knows that I like noiseless, transparent, dynamic sound, without any sweetening, taming, or warming up of my audio system. As I write this, I'm listening to András Schiff performing the first movement, Allegro con brio, of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No.3 in C, Op.2 No.3 (16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC, ECM/Qobuz). The sound is open and engaging, filled with light and life. It is in no way warm or syrupy -- I can't tolerate a sound that drags the music down into the muck. The ceramic drivers of my Vimberg Tonda speakers are fleet of foot and can produce amazing delicacy of sound, and the Shunyata interconnects and speaker cables are a perfect fit for these attributes.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I haven't told you which Shunyata products I've added to my system.

Grant Samuelsen recommended models that he thought would be perfect matches for my current setup. I received a pair of Alpha SP speaker cables (\$4300/2.5m pair) and a set of Delta IC balanced interconnects (XLR, \$3000/6m pair) -- remember, I already had the Venom NR-V10 power cords and Hydra Alpha A12 power conditioner. I also got an Alpha USB link (\$1100/1.5m). The interconnects run from the Hegel (placed on one side of my room, on an SGR Audio Model III Symphony equipment rack) to the Boulder (dead center between the speakers). The Boulder is connected to the Vimbergs with speaker cables terminated with spades on both ends. The Alpha USB interconnect links the Hegel to my MacBook Pro computer via a USB dongle that also connects my external hard drive full of music.





I've been around the high-end audio block a few times now. Although I trust my ears -- I know well the kind of sound I like and the kind I don't like -- I'm also convinced that the more data points I have, the better. If that's your thing, too, I suggest that you spend an hour or so on Shunyata Research's website and read about the technologies they use in their products. What you'll find there is not a mess of manufacturer propaganda, but technical bits backed up with measurements that support Shunyata's claims. Many cable manufacturers are measurement averse, which makes me nervous when considering those companies' products. Shunyata embraces measurements, and the extra data points they provide buttress my listening impressions. One last point: Anyone who's familiar with my writing knows that I'm a fanatic about build quality. I want the products in my system to be constructed and finished to the highest quality possible. The materials should be commensurate with the price of the products, and the workmanship should reflect this as well. The Shunyatas exhibit these qualities to a very high degree.

Back to András Schiff . . . with the Shunyatas now connecting and conditioning the power for my entire system, his piano notes float effortlessly between my speakers, sounding delicate but not forced, tonally dense but not flat. It's as if, today, my stereo system is joyfully reproducing the sound of his Steinway. Yeah, I know -- that's not possible. Maybe, as I listen on this quiet Saturday morning, it's only I who am joyful. Regardless, I'm very happy with the sound of my system, as now wired and power-conditioned by these products from Shunyata Research.



Perhaps I was a bit hard on myself in the first two paragraphs of this piece. If being an audiophile is more journey than destination, then maybe my more than two decades as an audio journalist has all been Jeff's getting a new stereo system. Whatever, my very personal odyssey has been conducted in public, in full view. This editorial documents only the most recent step forward in a quest that, God willing, is still far from over.

. . . Jeff Fritz