

part-time audiophile

Review by Lee Scoggins

The Shunyata Denali's Towering Achievement



“Why don’t you leave me alone? Why don’t you call me on the phone?”

Thus begins the track “Limbo” from Yello’s tour de force album Toy.

The bass is deep and rich. The clarity of the midrange is sublime. I feel like I am in the studio with Dieter and Boris. Right now I am listening to my ever-evolving headphone rig in the home office. Amarra 4 is feeding Tidal HiFi streaming to a Benchmark DAC3 which in turn is feeding a Rupert Neve Designs RNHP headphone amplifier powering Audeze LCD2C headphones which have a slightly warm, but very revealing sound. My ears are in heaven.

All of these components are world class and in various stages of review. But I've left out my headphone rig's secret weapon. It is being powered by a Shunyata Denali 6000T "tower" which is a sort of vertical line conditioner incorporating Caelin Gabriel's latest science. Before I plugged this in, I had been using my Shunyata PS8 power strip with the Defender plug-in module. That was excellent too but the Denali is truly next level.

But why would one spend thousands of dollars on line conditioners in the first place? And what the heck is Scoggins doing with one in his headphone rig?

First, I like to evaluate components in for review in both a mainstream two-channel setting and in a headphone setting. The latter as it helps reveal nuances in sound on revealing cans and IEMs. I had several great devices to listen to: Audeze LCD-2C cans and Empire Ears Zeus ADEL XR and Noble Katana IEMs. Some headphone enthusiasts are using very high end gear now for the best possible sound and I don't want to miss sharing thoughts with that part of the audience.

Second, a modern line conditioner is one of the best "three-fers" in audio. A good line conditioner lowers the noise floor which lets one hear cleanly across the bass, mids, and highs. The Shunyata Denali excels in all three areas but also performs a trick that, in my experience, only a very small number of conditioners do: It allows one to plug in an amplifier with no loss in dynamics or clarity. No, that's not quite right. The Denali actually IMPROVES the sound of an amplifier. Remarkable. Even an heavy current draw amp like my heavily-modified Audio Research VT-100.



Grant Samuelson from Shunyata also sent along their latest cables from the Delta series which I used to evaluate both the Denali tower and the Delta power cables, XLR interconnects, and speaker cable. I was surprised by the price-to-sound value on the Deltas but more on that later. Suffice to say, Grant and I agreed that it would be best to evaluate a full "loom" of Shunyata wire and a current Denali conditioner so we could get a real sense of the sonic characteristics of the brand.

Back to Yello. "Tool of Love" is now on and the Audeze cans are blasting out a nice tight bass. It's a wonderful experience. Moving to the listening room and I cue up Yello on the PS Audio DirectStream DAC after inserting the Denali and Delta cables into the system. Ahh, the Magnepans are really excelling at placing instruments across a deep and wide soundstage. The combination of the Delta cables and Denali tower are working magic. The "tower" simply means six outlets arranged vertically which is clever as it makes messing with power cables so much easier. Better still, Shunyata has created a durable plastic "cradle" in a fat U-shape that holds the cable in place which is a godsend for these thicker, "garden hose" cables we audio nerds are using these days. I've tried several other non-Shunyata power cables as well and the cradles seem to be a fairly universal fit. One word of caution is that they don't work on wall warts and other irregular shaped plugs but I solved that by just plugging in my PS8 power strip into one of the outlets. A nice feature are the 20 amp ready, lower two outlets, meant specifically for high current devices like amplifiers. My Audio Research amp sounded actually better when plugged directly into the Denali. No more worrying about cable length to the wall for amplifiers!



Shunyata Denali AC cable "cradles."

The sound of "Dialectical Kid" is now filling the room. My humble Maggies are creating lots of resolution which is highlighting the spatial effects on this track. Vocals are again emerging clear against a background of deep synth notes and wide percussion. Noise is almost non-existent. My quiet tube fan is audible but not much else. I know the system is

dialled-in when I am listening to the music and forgetting about the equipment and worrying about setup. So obviously I had very good luck with the entire Denali/Delta system. What is going on with the line conditioner that works so well?

Well this is a bit of a loaded question as there are several areas that Shunyata has focused on and sought to improve. Important to keep in mind is that Caelin is a scientist that has built measurement gear to determine if his innovations are causing improvements in the measurement as well as the subjective listening. The Denali incorporates a lot of the thinking from the flagship Hydra Triton line and centers on three areas of sonic impact:

1. Component to Component Interference – These “V3” modules isolate power line noise from one component to another component based on work Shunyata has been doing for medical imaging research. Shunyata claims these modules allow interference levels to be reduced more than -60dB from 500 KHz to 10 MHz.
2. NIC filters use ferroelectric chemicals to reduce noise in the high frequency region. The Denali has V2 NIC filters which have efficiency and size improvements over Shunyata’s earlier version.
3. QR/BB technology – this is perhaps my favorite innovation as it is what allows the connection of an amplifier with no cost of dynamic compression. Remarkably, my Audio Research amplifier had better (!) dynamics through the Denali than when I plugged it into the wall even with two different audiophile-grade outlets.

Now, I want to discuss build quality. The internal wiring uses the latest Shunyata ArNi cable geometry and metallurgy as well including their VTX hollow tube conductors in an 8 gauge configuration. The unit is designed for high power 20 amp current and the lower two of the six outlets on the back of the “tower” are designed for high current devices like amplifiers. The outlets themselves use OFE copper. There is a process termed Kinetic Phase Inversion Process (KPIP) that is intended to pre-condition all connections and wiring. This limits the amount of burn-in required for optimal operation.

The structure of the tower itself is elegant with a gentle, backward slope front fascia of thick metal with “DENALI” cut into the panel and a heavy electromagnetic breaker to turn on the unit on the bottom with a blue LED to indicate operation. There are grounding wire connections on the back of the unit and the whole tower is very stable as there are vibration dampening feet in speaker-like outrigger configuration.

It’s a solid piece of gear but perhaps the best thing is the vertical layout. This is just a nifty way to organize cables flowing in from your various source, preamps, and amps. I positioned mine right next to my Salamander Designs equipment rack and it sure beat crawling around the back of the rack trying to plug in thick-gauge AC cords into a lower shelf unit. It looks so cool, I suspect many will want a “line of sight” view for the Denali. To sum up, the fit and finish on the Denali is sublime.

Before I received the Delta cables, I noticed a substantial decrease in noise when this was first placed in my system. Many months passed before I added the Delta cables and that further improved the sound.



Shunyata in the details

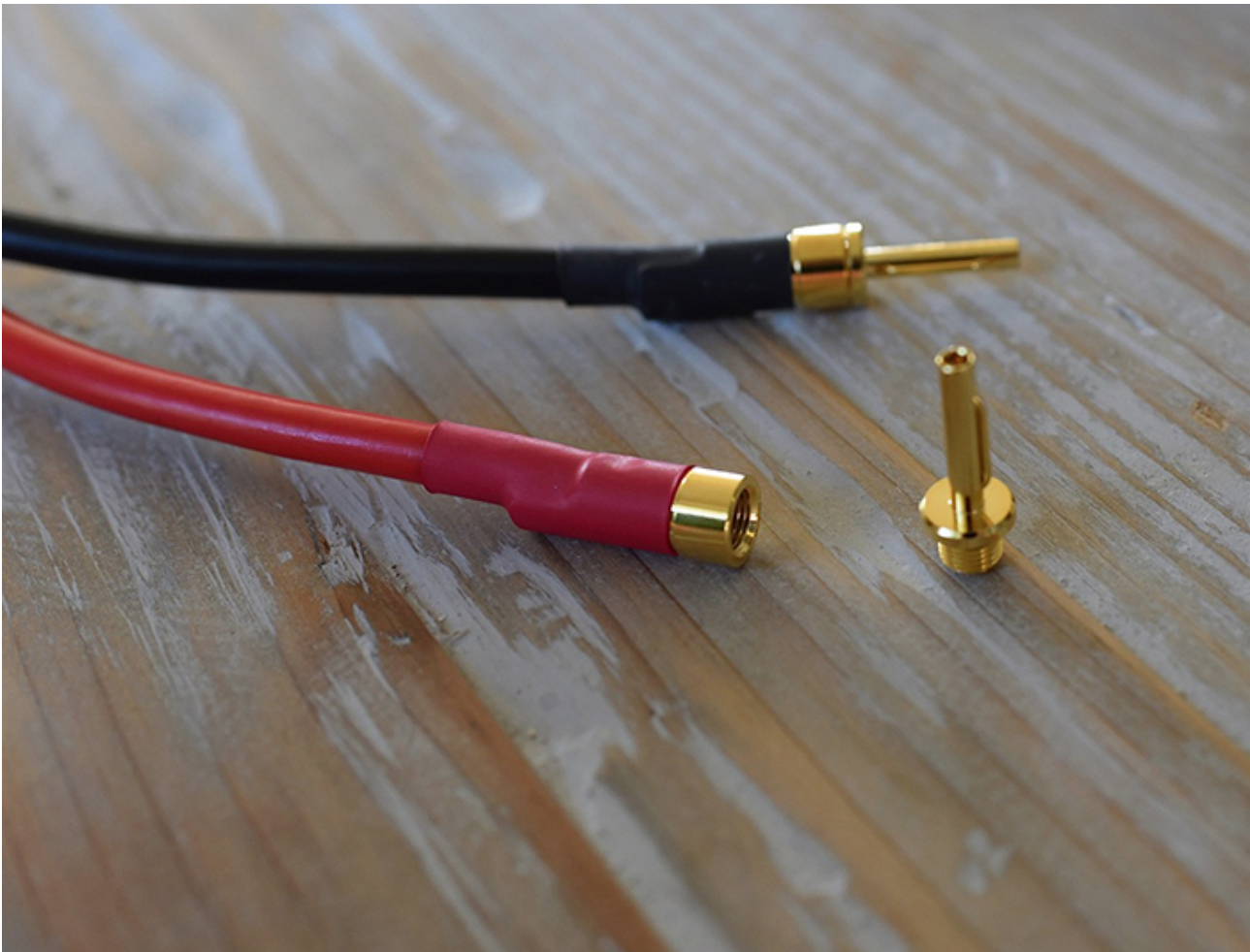
Why do the Delta cables sound so good? Part of it is just high quality OCC copper with excellent “customized” connectors. Delta power cables also prevent component to component interference (“CCI”) via an in-line filter built into the IEC connector. Here is Shunyata’s explanation from their Cable Guide:

DELTA SERIES builds upon the Venom Series high-quality features with advanced fluorocarbon dielectrics, larger VTXTM conductors, and superior connectors terminated using a high-tech sonic-welding process. The Delta power cords include Shunyata Research’s own CopperCONN® connectors made with pure copper contacts. The Delta is also the first in Shunyata Research’s NR Series of power cords to incorporate on-board CCITM noise reduction filters. Finally, the Kinetic Phase Inversion Process — abbreviated KPIPTM, makes its first appearance in the Delta Series. KPIPTM is more than just another break-in box; it is a truly transformative conditioning process that goes beyond simple burn-in. KPIPTM not only makes time consuming burn-in a thing of the past; it elevates the performance of the products to which it is applied.

I noticed there was very little break-in on the cable, if any. So I suppose the KPIP process is working well. It can be difficult to evaluate the sound of the CCI noise but the cables seemed less veiled than others at their price point.

There were some other nice features to the cables that I liked. On the speaker connector ends, Shunyata has STIS connectors which allow one to simply screw in the correct connector for your speaker, spade or banana. So much easier than specific terminations! And it makes it much easier to try the cables on a friend’s system. On the interconnects, I found the XLR connectors to be of very high quality and the cables were nice and flexible

while still remaining solid. Perhaps the power cords, though, were the most impressive. I tried these in a variety of areas always to good effect. And of course they fit the Denali cable cradles perfectly. I hope more manufacturers will adopt some sort of similar cable management. It just makes life much easier.



Spades, bananas... you pick with Shunyata.

I tried the signal cables in the headphone rig both with and without the Denali to try to get a better handle on what sonic signature they had. Here's what you get with fine copper, ohno casting, and Shunyata filters... a really solid foundation in the bass and a really nice, open midrange. Are the highs quite at the level of multi-kilobuck cables in terms of openness? Nah. But it still sounds very clear and open. The separation of instruments on Sinatra's *Swingin' Sessions Mobile Fidelity CD* re-issue is dead on. The timbre of the instruments is spot on and Frank's vocals are nice and rich with the right amount of chestiness. The sax on "Blue Moon" just comes to life. When I played "Celestial Echo" from Malia's track on *Convergence*, her breathy vocals offset so wonderfully the wide and deep bass at the opening of the track. It seems that in many ways, the bass quality was superb like that from the Denali tower. I suppose particularly excellent bass is a hallmark of Shunyata gear just getting out of the way. It's seductive once you have it. I felt it too in the main rig even if I am a bit handicapped by the Maggies stopping at 38hz. I would add one quibble on the XLR interconnects and that is that can be difficult to discern the red SR logo on the right cable in low light. Perhaps rubber collars in red and blue around the XLR would be helpful?

I was impressed with the sound quality of the Delta cables. For well under a thousand dollars, these cables are very high value, even more so when you consider the very strong

Shunyata build quality. I had enjoyed an XLR run of Shunyata Venom which was also excellent but the filters and extra care on build take the Delta series much higher in transparency. I think Grant is correct in thinking this is the sweet spot of the line. Highly recommended. To top it off, the cables include a very nice circular, zipped tote case that is well made with the Shunyata Research logo. Classy.



Built for each other.

I am saving my highest recommendation for the Denali tower, however. The performance of this beautifully-designed device just blew me away. It was the first serious line conditioner I put in the main rig. It quickly schooled me on what a difference a quality line conditioner can make in terms of lower noise. The icing on the cake was plugging my bulky, high current Audio Research amp into it actually improved the sound of the amp! That was a first in my experience. Add in the build quality of the unit and the gorgeous, sloped appearance and you have a winner.

My advice to any audiophile looking to build a serious system is to think of a line conditioner not as an expensive tweak but a critical component that makes other components perform sooo much better. And when you get serious about auditions, please add the Denali tower to your short list. You won't be disappointed.