

Shunyata Research and the Power-Cable Tryouts - Part 1

When I first talked to Shunyata Research's Grant Samuelson back in May 2015 about the company's products, I could sense that he initially thought I was a power-cord skeptic -- someone who didn't believe cords or conditioners could make a hint of difference to the sound of a system. It was probably because he could hear some hesitation in my voice when we started talking.



Doug Schneider

Realizing that Grant probably thought one thing while the truth was another, I decided to clear the air by explaining what my hesitation was about -- that I'd had plenty of positive experiences with power-related products, starting about 25 years ago, but some bad as well. And the bad outweighed the good. For example, I told him that I used to have an expensive audiophile-type power bar that was supposed to be built to a high standard, but later, after it almost destroyed amps and preamps hooked to it, I learned that the soldering inside was so poor that the internal wires weren't making proper contact with the connectors. Another time a manufacturer sent enough power cables to use with all my components, but didn't tell me that despite having the third prong for ground visible on both ends of the cables, there were actually no ground wires in any of them. This posed three problems. One was that with no grounds, the chance of shock from an equipment fault was obviously higher. The second was that my insurance doesn't allow me to have all this equipment hooked up

with no grounds, so I didn't need these cables around if my house burned down. The third was the moment when I actually realized that I had no ground connections anywhere -- when I flicked my system on with all those groundless cords in, an extremely loud hum burst out of my speakers. I have no idea whether that massive hum could've damaged my speakers (likely, if I left it on for long enough), but after that, I pretty much stopped screwing around with audiophile-type power cords and have since stuck to generic cords with CSA or UL approval stamped on their jackets. My power strips have come from the power-tool areas at places such as Home Depot and Canadian Tire -- I figure that if a power product is safe for a workshop, it will be safe for my audio gear and my house. To me, safety takes precedence over any slight improvement to the sound.

On the positive side, I remember the first time I hooked up a good power cord to my amplifier and heard a noticeable drop in the noise floor -- color me impressed. Then there was the ExactPower EP15A power regenerator I reviewed and then used for years when I lived in an apartment. It cleaned up a lot of noise-related problems that I could hear through my speakers. I ended up selling the EP15A to fellow-reviewer Philip Beaudette, who currently lives in an apartment and still uses it to this day because he battles the same kinds of issues I did. I also know the benefits of having dedicated lines for my equipment, something I learned back when I worked as a computer guy in the '80s and '90s. Having clean power to certain pieces of equipment was mandatory to ensure they were always working correctly and not getting interference from other things plugged into the line. As a result, when I set up my listening room in my house, the first thing I did was have dedicated lines put in.

Hearing that, Grant seemed more at ease, so he made a simple suggestion: he'd have the company send up enough power cords for all my components, plus a couple of their power distributors. He assured me with a smile and a bit of a laugh that everything would have grounds intact (I tested everything they sent anyway, just because that's now standard procedure around here), and that I could simply hook it all up and report back with what I heard. That report is this article -- he still doesn't know what I think.



Shunyata Research boxes

In late October, two pretty-big boxes arrived at my door housing two Venom PS8 power bars, two Venom Defender noise and surge suppressors (one for each PS8), five sets of Venom HC power cables, and three sets of Alpha HC power cables. Each PS8 is priced at \$695 USD, and each Defender is \$195. The prices for 6' lengths of Venom HC and Alpha HC are \$295 and \$1250, respectively (HC

stands for high current). Grant said they sent two types of power cables so I could try one of their lower-priced models first, then go more upscale from there.

As I was unboxing everything, I was taken aback by how substantial Shunyata's products are made. Each PS8 weighs just over six pounds and feels solid, which is mostly due to the steel chassis and stainless-steel cover. The receptacles all appear to be of very good quality. Some flimsy power bar the PS8 is not -- it's built like a tank. The PS8 also looks pretty nice, something I never thought I'd say about a power bar.



Shunyata Research products

The power cables also feel substantial, with the Alpha HC being particularly hulking -- it has a super-thick black-colored jacket surrounding the wires inside -- but is also surprisingly flexible, which is important when you're winding it around an equipment rack. The Venom HC, which has a striped PVC jacket, also feels sturdy and looks really well built. Even though it's an entry-level cord from Shunyata, it doesn't feel cheap whatsoever.

That said, the one product that doesn't bowl you over visually or impress you with its weight is the Defender, which is just a little thing you plug into a receptacle. In fact, with it being that small, I wondered if it could work. But that's also why Grant simply sent it along with everything else to try.



Shunyata Research Defender

Of course, the real thing with this stuff is not what it looks like, but how it affects the sound. As of right now, I have had the PS8s, Defenders, and HCs running for almost two months, but I haven't finished listening enough to fully gather my thoughts -- so check back for an update toward the end of this month to find out how it all performed. After that, I'm going to put the Alpha HCs in and report on that.

Shunyata Research and the Power-Cable Tryouts - Part 2

If you read "Shunyata Research and the Power-Cable Tryouts -- Part 1" when it was first published in early January, then you will know that I am about a month behind with this article. In that first part, I wrote that I installed Shunyata Research Venom PS8 power distributors, Venom HC power cords, and Venom Defender noise suppressors in my system and that you should "check back for an update toward the end of this month to find out how it all performed."

I'll cut to the chase on why the delay occurred: CES 2016 came right after that article and took about a week and a half out of my life; I had many other articles I had to write, including a couple of lengthy reviews; and I was involved in the production of a couple more SoundStage! InSight videos, including one on GoldenEar Technology's new Triton Two+ and Three+ loudspeakers, which we put on YouTube the other day. I was working very hard the entire time, just not on this article. I mention this only because I don't want anyone to think there was anything wrong with the Shunyata Research products after I installed them -- in fact, the opposite occurred.



Shunyata sourcesSource components

After I connected the various Venoms, I immediately noticed significant and surprising improvements with my system. But before I get to what the improvements were exactly, let me tell you where the Shunyata Research products were and weren't used. Two Venom HC power cords connected the two PS8s to the wall receptacles (these two power cords I had Shunyata make longer to make sure they reached my wall receptacles), I used a single Defender with each PS8 (it plugs into a PS8 receptacle), and I used two more Venom HC power cords (standard 6' lengths) to plug a Hegel Music Systems HD30 digital-to-analog converter and Moon by Simaudio Evolution 740P with the optional 820S external power supply into one of the PS8s. Blue Circle Audio BC204 and Audio Research GS150 amplifiers were plugged into the other PS8, but using their stock cords -- that's because the BC204 requires a cord with a Neutrik PowerCon connector and the GS150 needs a 20A connector, but Shunyata supplied the Venom HC cords with standard 15A connectors. Still, the amps had the benefit of being plugged into a Defender- and Venom HC-equipped PS8. The only other thing using a stock cord was my Samsung laptop, which was plugged into the same PS8 as the HD30 and 740P.

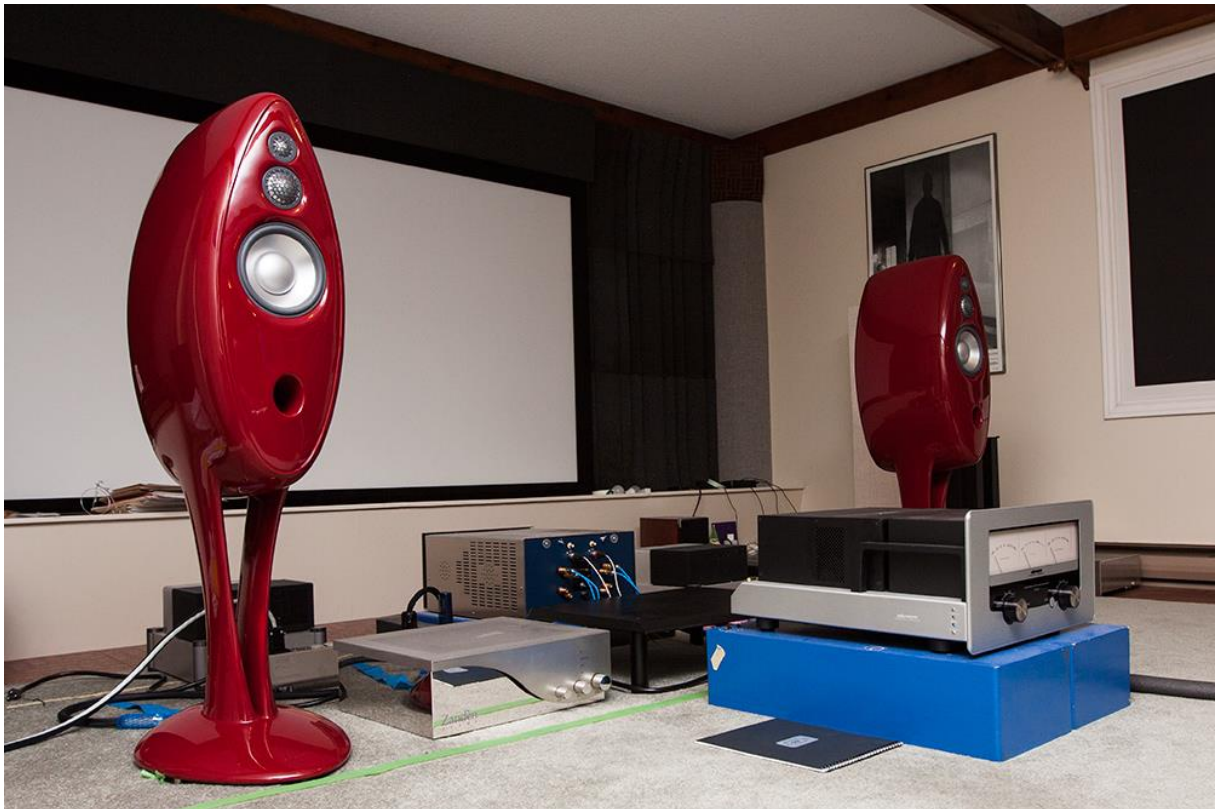


Shunyata ampsAmplifiers

The first improvement had to do with the GS150 specifically, which has a meter on the front that shows the incoming line voltage. With my previous power setup composed entirely of stock power cords and power distributors that I bought at Home Depot and Canadian Tire (the reasons for which were explained in the first article), the needle was in the range labeled Normal, but just a little below the center position. With the Shunyata products installed, the needle was right in the center position, precisely where it should be. I can't be sure this changed the performance of the amp much, but it did indicate to me that my old setup might have been choking off the power to the amp just a touch, something that I was a little surprised about.

The next thing I noticed was that some hiss and a very subtle buzz I'd always heard regardless of what electronics I was using were now greatly diminished. The hissing and buzzing were still there, but I had to put my ear to within an inch of a speaker to hear anything, whereas before I could detect the sounds from about 6" away. Obviously, these products do help reduce noise.

The final thing I noticed was that it wasn't only that the hissing and buzzing were diminished -- the entire noise floor seemed to have dropped, letting me hear more deeply into my recordings, which not only allowed me to more readily hear the subtlest details, but really manifested itself in my listening room with noticeable increases in soundstage width and depth. This was very apparent through the Vivid Audio B1 Decades, which are some of the most resolving speakers you can buy and can lay out a vast soundstage about as good as anything I have heard (I was in the midst of reviewing the Vivids when the Shunyata gear arrived).



System

This soundstaging improvement was very noticeable with recordings such as the Cowboy Junkies' *The Trinity Session* (16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC, RCA) and Ennio Morricone's soundtrack to the movie *The Mission* (16/44.1 FLAC, Virgin), both of which I've been using to assess soundstage size and specificity for over 25 years because of how well the spaces of the recording venues were captured. But it was also true of less-spacious-sounding recordings, such as Sade's *Lovers Rock* (16/44.1, Epic), an album I

love for the music, but not so much for the recording quality -- it's better than most pop recordings, but still just average by true high-end standards. Insofar as the soundstaging goes, Lovers Rock is far from the very natural presentation of The Mission or The Trinity Session -- it's basically a mixing-board creation that has good width but comparatively little depth. However, with the Shunyata Research products in the game, things improved. The second track on Lovers Rock, "Flow," has an interesting stage setup -- Sade Adu's voice appears in the center of the stage, the drums are behind her, and far left and right are Adu's backing vocals obviously mixed in (I'm assuming it's her voice since the CD's liner notes don't credit any other singer). The little depth that is there was far more discernible than before, making the distinction between her center-placed vocal and the drums more precise. The stage was slightly wider, even floating further beyond the boundaries of the left and right speakers, and I noticed increased dimensionality to Sade Adu's lead and backing vocals. The high frequencies also sounded a little tidier, and the presentation had more of an airy quality, which I really liked. In fact, every recording, good or bad, was similarly improved in terms of soundstaging, dimensionality, and high-frequency refinement -- with absolutely no downside whatsoever. Can you really ask for more?

As I mentioned in the first article, a single PS8 is priced at \$695 USD, while each Defender is \$195. The price for a 6' length of Venom HC is \$295 (longer lengths cost more). To me, these prices are not unreasonable given the build quality of the products and the improvements they brought to my system -- they were not only noticeable, but difficult to do without once I'd experienced them. Having said that, I now consider this setup my "Shunyata Research baseline" for performance.

As I wrote in January, my next step is to replace the Venom HC power cords with ETRON Alpha HC power cords and see what happens, then write about it. Priced at \$1250 for a 6' length, this power cord is priced quite a bit higher than the Venom HC, so my expectations are commensurately higher. However, I don't think I'll write it up as a blog entry here. Instead, I'm impressed enough with what I've heard so far from the Venom products that I plan to write a full review of the Alpha HC on SoundStage! Hi-Fi. After that, I might even experiment more with power-related products. Suffice it to say that my curiosity is now piqued.

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