

>> Cheap Tweaks

UPGRADE WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK

Audio enthusiasts have one thing in common: they're always yearning after something that sounds and performs better than the gear they already have.

We devour all and any news about new products and technologies. We scour the classified ad sites (including, of course, the AVSA classifieds) for better equipment at bargain prices. And we ponder the possibilities of improving the performance of the components and systems we already own.

Of course, the obvious upgrade path is to keep on investing in better and better components. Unfortunately, the cost of quality consumer electronics (and the way our currency continues to weaken) means making do with what you've got for longer is a frustrating reality for most of us.

You could stick to the components you have, and rather investigate the way they're connected and the way they're powered, of course. Like it or not, but better interconnects and speaker cables do make a difference.

But there is a caveat that holds true not only for cables, but for hi-fi and home theatre as a whole: the more you spend, the smaller the return. Upgrade from those cheap and nasty interlinks that came with your CD player to something with a thicker gauge, and the chances are you'll hear a big difference.

Sadly, moving from that entry-level interlink to something more sophisticated at 10 times the price won't deliver the same multitude of improvement. Yes, it will sound better, but not 10 times better. And as you move up the ladder, the margin of improvement will get smaller.

But what if, like most of us, you can't buy new kit? How can you go about improving your system without raiding the piggy bank, or mortgaging the house?

Well, let's start with the basics. Better sound is all about an unencumbered signal, and there are several factors that can get in the way of good signal

transfer. Let's assume that your system uses cables and interlinks of reasonable quality — if not, go looking for some entry-level oxygen-free cables, audition them if possible, and if you like what you hear, buy them.

But if your system has been languishing in its rack for several years, let's start with a bit of spring cleaning. Unplug all the interconnects, speaker cables and power cables. Then, using some pure alcohol obtainable from a chemist and an earbud, carefully clean all the connections on each component, as well as the relevant connectors on the cables.

There are many special cleaning/preservation agents aimed specifically at this task, but pure alcohol will do a pretty good job. There shouldn't be any residue once you're done, and remember to frequently swap out earbuds.

It's probably a good time to rid your components of accumulated dust. Don't bring soap or water anywhere near your precious gear, though — use a can of compressed air to get rid of internal dust, then gently wipe with a moist cloth.

Use the opportunity to inspect the cable connectors for frayed ends, worn joints or deteriorating solder, then reconnect the interlinks, taking care to ensure a nice, positive connection in each instance.

You'll want to prevent running power cables and signal cables close to each other, but you can bunch together and sleeve analogue signal cables, for instance, if you want that spider's nest behind your gear to look a little tidier. Run speaker cables where they won't be stood on or trip up visitors.

Keep your power cables tidy, and try to use heavier-gauge cables for power-hungry devices such as amplifiers. Don't overload one wall plug with too many components — spread the load.

If you have some spare budget, seriously consider upgrading that multi-plug adapter to a power conditioner. Good ones will passively filter noise without choking supply.

Once everything is back together again, take a break, sit down and listen to a favourite piece of music — you'll instantly hear the difference! Why? Because you will have improved the efficiency of the signal transfer from source to amplifier, and from amplifier to speaker.

Vibration is another factor that can negatively impact on sound quality. If your beloved components are precariously balanced on dodgy shelves or in an old cupboard, the chances are they're being affected by mechanical interference, aka vibration.

We'd all like to buy a well-constructed, intelligently designed piece of audio furniture for our gear, and we should, but until you can afford it, try to locate your hi-fi on surfaces that are as rigid and vibration-free as

possible. Good ventilation prevents overheating and benefits long-term reliability, so that's important to consider, too.

If you do have a hi-fi stand with coupling spikes, make sure the stand is perfectly level, and that the spikes are secured properly. The same goes for speaker stands – you want the speaker to be located on a solid base, and perhaps even mated to it with a compound like Prestik. Even microscopic movements of the speaker can blur focus and staging.

As we report elsewhere in this issue, speaker positioning is another important element that can have a substantial impact on sound quality. You may still be using the same speaker positions you did when you first bought them, but it's worth experimenting with width, toe-in and proximity to side and rear walls.

Be patient, make small adjustments at a time, and listen closely to a passage of music that's well-recorded, has a wide tonal range – and that you are very familiar with. You'll be surprised how different a set of speakers can sound when moved around a bit.



If your speakers are ported bass-reflex designs, too much bass or interaction with the room can be addressed by partially filling the port with straws, foam or even an old sock. It can be a handy way to 'tune' the low-frequency response of a speaker located near rear walls or corners.

Back to your system components. One piece of kit particularly sensitive to vibration is a turntable. It has to retrieve highly resolved sonic detail from the groove of a vinyl record, then transfer the extremely low-level signal to a step-up transformer, and then on to the amplifier.

Isolation and rigidity are the main factors to consider when installing a turntable. A robust, solid and inert platform, as immune as possible to resonance and vibration, is a must. You can also use coupling spikes, sorbothane pads – or even a slightly inflated bicycle tube – to isolate the platform from the main location, be it a hi-fi rack, a dresser, a table or a shelf. Tennis balls or squash balls cut in half can also be used as effective isolators.

Finally, there's the listening room itself. Some call it the biggest and most important component in your audio system. And yes, it's true that it can, and does, have a major impact on system sound.

Hard, reflective surfaces will emphasise trebles, and create reflections that can negatively impact on sound. Soft furnishings, bookcases (with books), and carpets can make a big difference without needing to invest in costly acoustic aids.

By the same token, too many absorptive surfaces can dull the sound and dilute the soundstage: thick drapes, plush carpeting and bulky furniture might create a cosy atmosphere, but they can stifle the sound and rob it of dynamics and sparkle.

So, a mild makeover of the room can also help to optimise the sonic performance. Try to find a balance between hard and soft surfaces, and experiment with moving around some of the furniture.

These are only some examples of cheap and simple tweaks. Most of them are pretty straightforward and sensible — rocket science it certainly isn't.

But most importantly, tweaking your system should be fun. You should be able to hear significant improvements in most instances, and the result should be a renewed appreciation of just how good that hi-fi actually is ...

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