

Stillpoints Ultra ESS equipment support

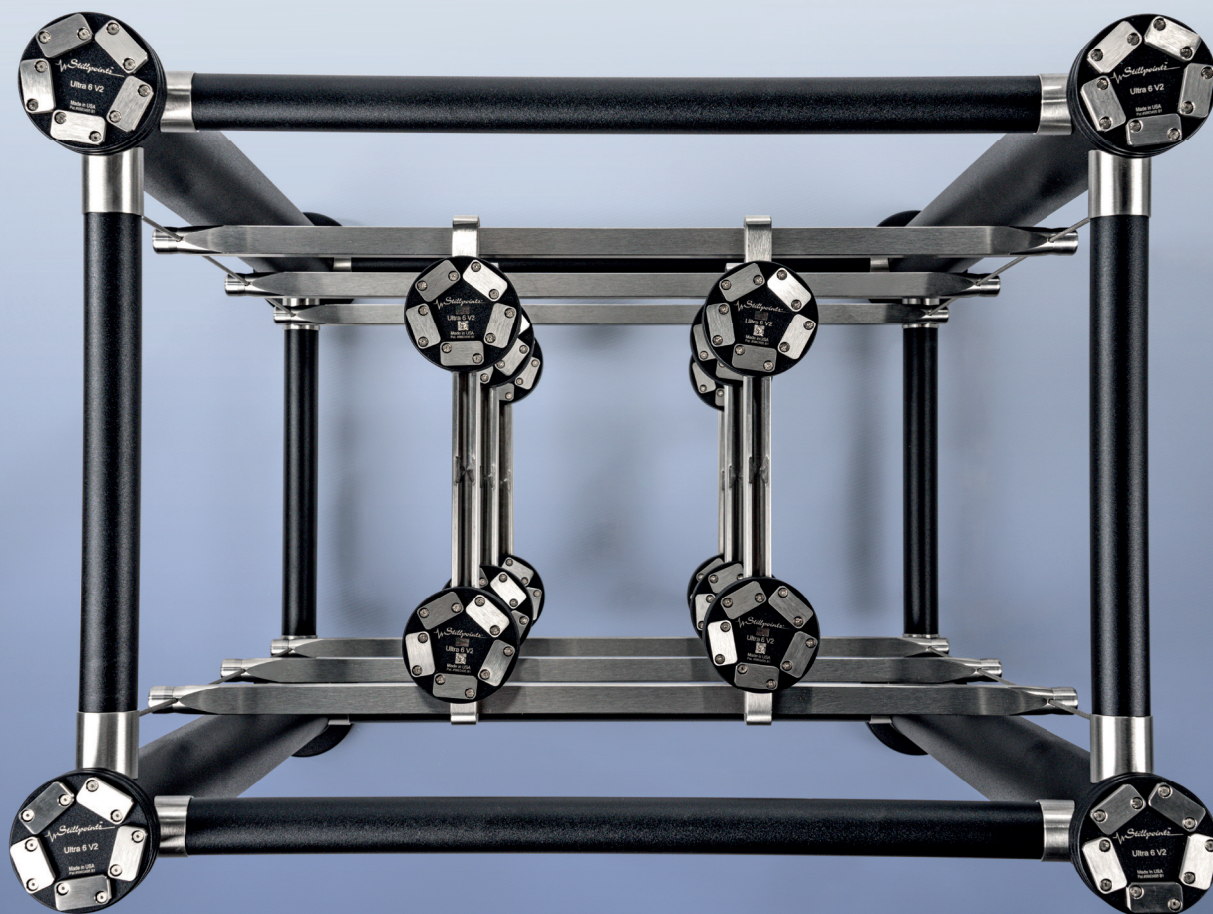
Paul Soor

For more than a decade, Stillpoints has specialised in products addressing vibrations in audio equipment. Its isolators specifically address the fact that when electricity is supplied to any discrete component, it vibrates. Those very high frequency vibrations cloud the signal, and in turn faithful musical reproduction. Further, Stillpoints recognises the internal architecture of every audio component is different. This is why all their isolation products bypass existing equipment feet, meaning Stillpoints isolators can be placed closer to internal components, sources of vibration, such as circuit boards and transformers.

In this review, I take a holistic look at the new Ultra ESS rack fully loaded with the latest V2 Stillpoints isolation products. I will be comparing the new Ultra ESS with Rail Grids to my ESS rack with X Grids and a combination of older V1 Ultra isolators. There are many Stillpoints V2 isolation products in this review rack that can be used in many permutations on any rack. Therefore, part two of this review, in a future issue, will look at the V2 products and the new, very special, Component Stand.

Looks different but...

The new Ultra ESS rack looks quite different to the open frame ESS rack with masts and central cross bars. The





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» ESS remains a current product. The Ultra ESS retains the ingenious, precisely highly tensioned stainless-steel ropes, to which internal stainless steel support bars attach, that can be easily spaced as required. I say ingenious, because, in a previous life, I learnt that steel ropes have inherent compliance and mechanical vibration damping, provided by friction between individual wires. Think of a vehicle suspension leaf spring, albeit in helical form.

The reason the Ultra ESS rack looks so different to the ESS, is to address the needs of modern high-end turntables that can be big, heavy, and sometimes have two arms. They require a larger, higher load capacity platform, more so if you have a wobbly suspended wooden floor.

That explains the four solid legs complemented by Ultra 7 V2 feet at the floor, and Ultra 6 V2 feet at the top, supporting a beautifully and dimensionally precise formed black stainless-steel top shelf. Speaking to Paul Wakeen, Stillpoints founder, about the development of the rack, he mentioned

the importance of metal to metal contact between isolators and supported components. So, where the underside of the top plate contacts the Ultra 6 V2 isolators, there is no coating. That's just one example of the immense attention to detail invested in the design, development and manufacture of the rack, and the latest V2 isolators. Although initially the design goal was for turntables, it soon became clear the new design of the Ultra ESS greatly benefited all components, as I have found with my dCS Rossini APEX Player and Master Clock.

Evolution not revolution

Good news for upgraders. The design of the new Ultra ESS rack considers owners of the current ESS rack by allowing their existing support bars and shelves (be they Acrylic, X Grids or Rail Grids) to be simply transferred to the new Ultra ESS. Further, at the time of writing, Stillpoints are developing a trade-in programme should ESS owners want to upgrade to the new Ultra ESS rack.

Dismantling and rebuilding a system always takes forever so I was very grateful for the help and guidance from Fraser Robertson of Airt, who is the distributor for Stillpoints in the UK. Rebuilding the system together gave me some fascinating insights into the rack's design and attention to detail. The rack is supplied in modular form, where the sides are pre-built with the pretensioned stainless-steel ropes. The sides are connected by two pairs of crossbars, top and bottom precisely joined by spigots locked by stainless steel socket head grub screws. All perfectly selected tools are supplied for assembly and set up.

Ultra precision

Getting the Ultra ESS rack and support bars perfectly level is critical. First, we levelled up using the supplied spirit level which was then supplemented by my own engineers' precision level which can measure with an accuracy of 0.02mm per metre. After that we added the internal, beautifully machined, stainless steel Rail Grids, and the top plate, also precisely levelled.

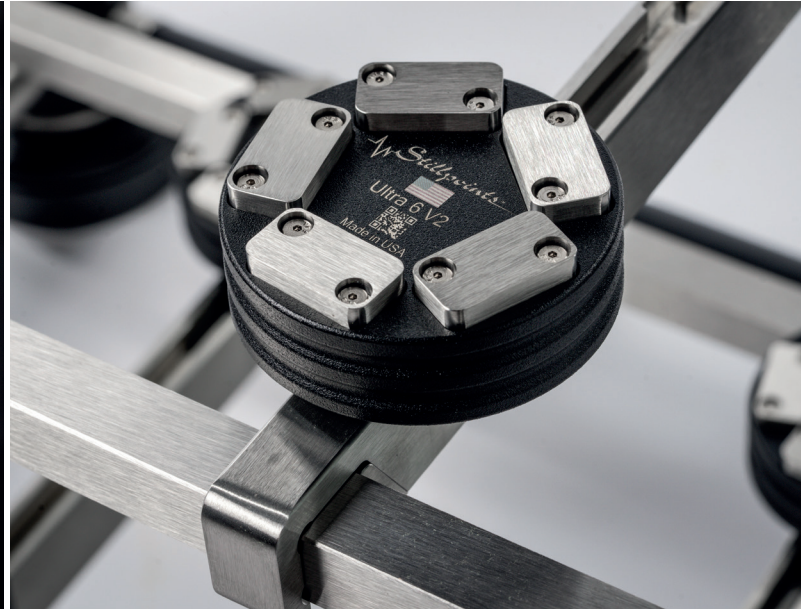
Rail Grids are Stillpoints' latest and most advanced interface between the support bars and isolators, allowing optimal positioning of the chosen Stillpoints isolator under components. We were then ready to present the components.

The Ultra ESS arrived with four shelves, three internal and one on top. Within the rack, I positioned my David Berning QZ mono power amplifiers on the bottom two and my Pre-One preamplifier above. The support bars





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» were linked with two Rail Grids to support four Ultra 6 V2 isolators. My dCS Rossini APEX and Master clock were on the top plate supported with Ultra 6 V2 Isolators and Bases for perfect levelling without rocking.

Locked-in confidence

As a mechanical system, the Stillpoints Ultra ESS rack is a joy to set up with ease and micro millimetre precision. It gives confidence that once set up, it will remain that way for consistent performance that will not change with temperature, humidity or over time. More so because every interface is a solid mechanical connection that cannot go out of adjustment, ever. I can't wait to set up a turntable on the Ultra ESS!

Important: The system had just been fully rebuilt into a new mechanical support infrastructure. So, as with all high precision electromechanical systems, our audio systems, over the following days, the system sounded better and better as everything warmed up and restabilised.

Freedom to experiment

This is the setup stage that really highlights the benefits of the new Stillpoints Rail Grids compared to previous solutions. I could easily position the Ultra 6 V2's under each component and experiment where I thought the sound was best. As mentioned at the start, every component is different. Please don't underestimate this. I remember being at a dear friend's house many years ago listening to a

high-end CD transport thinking "yeah that's okay", but then my friend repositioned the Stillpoints Ultra 5's and I was shocked how much better it sounded to the point where I said, "I would now buy that transport!". So, please do exploit the freedom Stillpoints allows to experiment. You will be shocked.

There is a common theme with all the music I'm enjoying with the new Ultra ESS. A new level of detail and understanding. What really stand out are nuances and subtleties in vocals, instruments, 3D space, atmosphere, and especially timing changes. Combined as a whole, those things can transform your listening experience and emotional response to another level, one that I have rarely experienced with any upgrade.

There is also a greater sense of full bandwidth with unlimited resolution throughout the spectrum, especially lows. For example, I continue to be blown away by how a bass guitar, a damped kick drum, a cello, brass instruments and more are now so clearly separated, on display with full colour, 3D and texture yet integrated with artistry and beauty I haven't experienced before from an audio system. It's both astonishing and moving.

Freedom to explore

I was listening to Peter Gabriel's version of David Bowie's 'Heroes' from the album *Scratch My Back* [Real World]. It is intimate and staggeringly authentic where the almost crying Peter Gabriel, feels to be performing only for you, perhaps »



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» for the last time. The track starts quietly and builds with modulating violins, a double bass is joined by a cello where, with the Ultra ESS, I can virtually see the low frequency waveform of the cello's bowed strings with beautifully superimposed harmonies. Yet the higher frequencies of the violins and cello both interplay without interfering with each other. It feels like a privilege to be allowed to witness a magical collaboration between amazing musicians with staggering results. At any time, I could choose to marvel at an individual musician yet, whenever I wanted, stand back and equally marvel at the whole; there was a newfound freedom to be inquisitive and explore at will.

I then noticed how sounds started, phrased and stopped, the leading and trailing edge, be that a note or a vocal. My system had a newfound clarity and without any sense of lag or smearing. Listening to 'That's the way' from the album *Led Zeppelin III* [Atlantic], starts with multiple guitars, a ukulele plus a beautifully voiced electric guitar in the right speaker, of which I became aware that the rise and decay of the notes was far from linear. It was a complex profile that I could easily visualise that added new meaning to the lyrics. I was left open mouthed thinking how can a song take on a new meaning, and how did that happen?

Noise floor

I must comment on my systems new low frequency performance. It was always amazing, a trademark of David Berning amplifier designs. But it is now on a new super intelligent intuitive level. My system with the Stillpoints Ultra ESS rack somehow knows when to produce more bass depth with more resolution, texture and resonance at the right time. Yet another time, reign it in, all in proportion and with magical balance and empathy. Stillpoints has always been about adding nothing but removing noise, lowering the noise floor, and never has it been so evident as now, allowing the music to breathe, unrestricted, with ease.

That leads into another effect of the Stillpoints Ultra ESS rack, one that I had not previously considered. I was listening to 'Ein deutsches Requiem, Op. 45: I. Selig sind, die da Leid tragen (Choir)' by the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra from the album Brahms: Ein deutsches Requiem [Harmonia Mundi], that once sounded, dare I say it, dark and tonally slightly dull. The music is concentrated in the low to mid bands where there is so much happening both quiet and loud including the choir (male and female), their precise interactions, an organ, plus the hall. With the lowered noise floor, greater resolution was liberated – another Stillpoints

attribute – and the piece now made perfect sense. The piece took on a new musical brightness where the close concentration of sounds was something to behold.

And I thought I knew

Before the new Stillpoints Ultra ESS rack with V2 isolators was installed, I had no complaints with my system's performance with the ESS rack and V1 isolation products. Sure, there were some recordings where I felt things could be 'better' but, given I had a beautifully transparent, open and musically involving system, I put that down to the odd recording.

It's now clear. Crystal clear. The excellent components I have can perform at an astonishingly higher level when floated on a lower, subterranean, noise floor. This is amongst the most significant upgrades I've ever experienced. The Stillpoints Ultra ESS rack with Rail Grids and V2 technology is an essential foundation product for high-end audio systems. It looks great too. +

Pricing and Contact Details

Note: The review sample features Stillpoints Ultimate Ultra 6 V2 Isolators and Shelf Support options on each level. The Ultra ESS support can be configured in both height and width like a standard ESS support. This allows options for any performance level a client chooses based on either budget or preference for individual components, this includes the choice of Shelf Support and/or Isolator for each tier as well.

Review Rack configuration:

1 x Pair Ultra ESS 34" Tall Masts - price includes 4 bespoke
\$19,700 £17,500

Ultra 7 Isolator Footers, 4 Ultra 6 V2 Isolators for top plate,

1 x Stainless Steel Bespoke top plate as support for a
Turntable or other Source Component.

3 x Pairs 20" Blank Stainless Steel Support bars
\$4,500 £3,300

3 x Pairs Rail Grids - Stainless Steel Shelf Support
\$7,500 £6,000

12 x Ultra 6 V2 Isolators – 4 for each Shelf Support
\$15,408 £13,200

Total cost as tested: \$47,108 £40,000

Current ESS owners should contact Airt Audio to cost/facilitate upgrade options to Ultra ESS.

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