

Article from hifi.nl by John van Polen on the Phono Booster and Ground Conditioner Castello.

John van Polen often finds himself trying to optimize the sound of his hi-fi system. For the past couple of decades, he has been 'quite obsessive' about improving his three set-ups. Much time and money has gone into this endeavour, but it has also taught him a thing or two. According to John, his most important result is finding out how much the rendering can be 'influenced'. 'Precision engineering' a set-up with accessories costs a lot of time. Time that John has put in, and now he would like to share some of his experiences with fellow enthusiasts. In this second chapter: the concept of 'clean earth'.

About thirty years ago I was introduced to products that attempt to improve the electric current in an audio installation's power supply. Since then I have been busy testing filters, power conditioners and devices that completely rebuild the current, with very satisfying results. I can hardly imagine any expensive high-end system that simply 'feeds' on whatever comes out of the wall.



Lately, however, it seems a new set of accessories has entered the market – usually classified as power conditioners, these devices actually work fundamentally different. I'm of course talking about the so-called Ground Boxes: devices that exclusively focus on the earthing of a set. They are available from various manufacturers.

Does 'clean earth' exist, and if so, what kind of results can it yield?

Clean earth

The idea of 'clean earth' isn't entirely new. About twenty years ago I read of a man who rammed an earthing pin into the ground, in the hopes that he would get a cleaner grounding connection for his audio set than he was getting through the earthed socket in his wall. But how can we even begin to imagine 'polluted earth'? Here's my attempt:

Devices generate all kinds of high frequency currents and electromagnetic fields, which travel over metal encasings, earthed sheaths of power cables, etc. This interferes with the optimal functioning of the system, on top of which come disturbances from strong electromagnetic fields that are caused by

wireless communication. These disturbances exist in abundance all around us; even the earth cannot dispose of so much high frequency misery.

This is where the Ground Boxes come into play. The core idea is that high frequency noise that pollutes your system locally, can also be removed locally. Connect your audio device directly to this 'miracle box' and it will absorb all the pollution that interferes with the device. But how?

The Ground Box according to Akiko Audio

Akiko Audio was founded in Maastricht (The Netherlands), by Marc van Berlo together with his son Sander. They managed to establish a successful company within a short period of time, which now exports to half the world. Akiko Audio produces two Ground Boxes: the smaller Phono Booster is connected to the earth of a phono preamp, whereas the more recently developed Ground Conditioner Castello is meant to be connected to an entire set.

The Castello has three sturdy connections for banana plugs. It comes with three 1.5 metre cables with RCA plugs to connect to unused in- or output connectors. If you would like, you can request the cables be fit with different connectors. Note that both Boxes are only connected to the earthing of the relevant device, and not to the main electricity network.

How is this supposed to work? Well, essentially the high frequency currents and electromagnetic radiation are absorbed by crystals inside the box – which is actually a known and measurable phenomenon in physics. Think of a quartz crystal for example: an electrical current will cause the crystal to vibrate, and vibrate at such a stable frequency that it actually creates a precise clockwork.



The Akiko Audio Ground Boxes contain a mixture of crystals, selected by ear for the right composition. This 'tuningmix' is cast in black resin (opening the box merely shows a black drab) and connected to the earth of a device through a wire. In the end, the pollution on the earthing is turned into lattice vibrations – which create a minimal amount of heat.

The Phono Booster and Castello's sound

I've been using the Phono Booster for quite a while now, but the effect this funny little gadget has on the sound was clear to me from the beginning. The level of noise becomes especially low. This brings out more subtle details of the music: accompanying figures, counter voices and more interesting aspects become clear. These always seem to be extremely important for the emotional impact of a piece, especially in classical music. In short, I believe music fans who want to get the most out of their precious record player cannot go without a Phono Booster.

The Castello, which was introduced by Akiko Audio at the end of last year, is exactly right for my main system: I connected it to my CD player and pre and main amplifier, since the phono amp already has its Booster. The effects of the Castello were immediately audible and also very convincing. I heard more beautiful and fine timbres from the acoustic instruments, accompanied by an even quieter background. The timbre of wind instruments gained in character: the pregnant sound of the hobo, the warm sound of the clarinet and the quacking of the fagot clearly became more realistic and gained expressive power. The balance between musical lines seemed to also become more equal: I could hear the instruments apart from one another, providing me with new insight into pieces of music that I thought I knew well. It really hit the mark!



Conclusion

Akiko Audio's Ground Conditioner Castello has convinced me completely, though I recommend the Phono Booster even more – an absolute 'no brainer' for any serious vinyl fan. Finally, though, I would like to leave you with a general advice that I won't keep repeating: never let anyone talk you into believing that something sounds brilliant, or provides you with incredible improvements, if you cannot hear it for yourself. Only you can decide whether or not something sounds good. Which is why you should be able to test accessories for audio systems – especially expensive ones – freely in your own surroundings. Regarding this, Akiko Audio offers a 30-day money-back guarantee if you aren't satisfied.