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P r o d u c t R e v i e w

Audience aR6 Power Conditioner

by Doug Blackburn
db@soundstage.com

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This month, Audience celebrates ten years in business. Probably best known for its speaker cables, interconnects and power cords – cleverly called “powerChord” – Audience also sells an optical-disc resolution-enhancement product and the Auricap brand of capacitors favored by many DIY audiophiles and by some equipment manufacturers as well. The company debuted a new Teflon capacitor and high-sensitivity line-source loudspeaker last month.

Audience introduced its first power conditioner, the 12-outlet adeptResponse aR12 (\$4,100 USD), in 2005. The following year I called it “king of the passive [power conditioners]” for its ability to make good systems sound even better – better, in fact, than any passive power-conditioning product I had reviewed up to that point. I’ve lost accurate count, but I’ve reviewed about 90 power-conditioning products in the last 12 years. Still, the aR12 is at the top of my list with very few other products – the 185-pound Equi=Tech 5Q, the ExactPower EP15A and UltraPure, and Furman’s 20i. Audience also makes the single-outlet adeptResponse aR1p (\$495) with similarly stellar musical characteristics.

What about the aR6?

When I was asked about reviewing the aR6 (\$2,800), the first thing I did was check out Audience’s website and ask John McDonald, Audience’s president and CEO, a few questions. I was assured that the aR6 is essentially half of an aR12 – same low-impedance/high-current design, same cryogenic treatment, same non-degrading surge protection, same Auricap capacitors used in the filters for each outlet. That last point is all important. Most power conditioners have a filter for each pair of AC outlets, so two components share a single filter. Audience puts a filter on each outlet to reduce noise getting into the component or trying to get from the component to other components.

The aR6 also has the same relatively expensive magnetic-type circuit breaker/power switch that’s in the aR12. Based on experiments I’ve done in the past with this type of breaker, it is far better for sound than conventional breakers or fuses in combination with a switch. The chassis has a nice satin silver finish (black is an option), with the blue adeptResponse logo and a

Review Summary

Sound

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Features

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Use

“The aR6 review sample took a long time to break in. Things changed rapidly enough in the first 100 hours that doing any evaluations was really a waste of time. For the next several hundred hours there was a very slow but steady refinement of the sound.” “The review sample aR6, with 15-amp circuit breaker and outlets, responded quickly to overloads.”

Value

“If you don’t need 12 outlets for your system, the aR6 gives all the performance of the aR12 for \$1,300 less, and it stands with other top-tier power conditioners.”

single blue LED on the faceplate. Thank you, Audience, for making this LED relatively dim. The last thing we need is more bright LEDs in the equipment rack.

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Product Review

Six red outlets fill most of the back panel along with the power switch/breaker and power-cord connector. Buyers have the no-cost option of 15- or 20-amp capacity for the breaker, outlets, or both. The 20-amp outlets allow use of AC plugs that have one horizontal and one vertical prong or two vertical prongs.

The supplied power cord is one of Audience's own 10-gauge powerChords, which is also sold separately for \$505. The detachable powerChord provides excellent performance with a wide range of high-end components. Audience has wisely chosen the fabulous Neutrik PowerCon connector instead of a standard IEC, which has a nasty habit of loosening up over time, especially if the component is elevated in a rack. Sometimes IECs *barely* make contact with the prongs in the socket, so any little disturbance causes a loss of power, even if the power cord doesn't fall out completely. The PowerCon is a twist-and-lock connector that won't let loose unless you pull back on the release tab, twist, and pull it out. This is the connector everybody should have been using for power-cord connections from the very beginning.

Audience's powerChord is so good that you won't miss not being able to try any of your other IEC-equipped power cords. But if you just can't live without changing the supplied power cord, you can purchase a Neutrik PowerCon and install it yourself on your favorite power cord.

Audience includes a small plastic vial of Caig Labs DeoxIT to apply to the Neutrik connector and to all of the prongs and sockets to ensure the best possible electrical connection over many years of service. I heartily endorse the use of DeoxIT, having used it for decades to settle down the operation of professional imaging equipment all over the world. It prevents oxidation at friction connections of all types, including RCA and XLR connectors, and protects porous gold plating from being degraded by oxidation of the underlying metals. It's so effective that equipment plagued with months of random failures suddenly became rock solid and dependable. Its inclusion is another very thoughtful detail on Audience's part.

How it was done

The following components and cables were used in my reference system: Belles 28A preamp with MC phono stage, Belles 350A Reference power amplifier, modified Pioneer DV-525 DVD player as digital transport, Perpetual Technologies P-1A/P-3A for digital-to-analog conversion and upsampling, Monolithic power supply for P-1A/P-3A, Roksan Xerxes turntable, SME V tonearm, Cardas Heart MC cartridge, Vandersteen 3A Signature loudspeakers, two Vandersteen 2Wq subwoofers, Audience Au24 speaker cables, Magnan Signature and Audience Au24 interconnects, and Audience Au24 digital cable. Audience powerChord, IsoTek Optimum and Elite, and JPS Labs Power AC+ power cords were also used.

When not using the aR6, I used a DIY six-outlet AC power strip with high-current internal wiring and power cord so all components could be connected to a single outlet — just as if the aR6 were being used but without power conditioning. Listening comparisons were done with wall-outlet power and an ExactPower EP15A. During the review period, the preamp, digital components and amplifier were only turned off to change their power connections —

important for ensuring repeatable results when you are evaluating power conditioners.

The aR6 review sample took a long time to break in. Things changed rapidly enough in the first 100 hours that doing any evaluations was really a waste of time. For the next several hundred hours there was a very slow but steady refinement of the sound. Things got a little more transparent and a little more detailed as hours of use accumulated. So give the aR6 two to three weeks of powering the system 24 hours a day at low volume levels, or even with the equipment simply idling, and you'll be at or near the end of the break-in period.

What it did

I want to do away with wall-outlet power *right now!*

Last year, I moved from New York State to Colorado. In New York, the AC sine wave was visibly distorted and noisy on an oscilloscope. I was overjoyed to discover that the sine wave in Colorado is almost perfect, with very little noise. But, despite the big improvement in the quality of the sine wave, everything and anything connected directly to the wall outlets *still* sounds awful — dead, dull, flat, uninspiring, and just plain boring. Wall-outlet power sucks even if the sine wave looks pretty decent on an oscilloscope. It takes about two weeks of using wall-outlet power exclusively to forget how much better the sound is with good power conditioning. Once good power conditioning is in place again, you wish you could have those two weeks back.

The aR6 to the rescue. It injected an infectious playfulness to the music. The presentation became more bubbly and exhilarating — the way any event is moved to the next level when the first bottle of champagne is opened. The aR6 doesn't produce the blackest background I've heard, but I forgot about that quickly because listening to music was so much *fun*. Every voice, every instrument had an aura of excitement I don't hear from other power-conditioning products. Dynamic prowess and harmonic richness were enhanced, and there was something happening with the timing as well. Music seemed sprightlier, like an accomplished dancer toying with gravity. It was hard not to smile when the aR6 was powering the system. Whether the music included simple guitar and voice or it was an all-out symphonic or rock extravaganza, the aR6 never failed to impart a large dose of drama while maintaining a high degree of precision. This effect was present in every octave, bottom to top.

But don't get the wrong idea. The aR6 didn't overpower the basic sound of my system. It won't fix problems, and it doesn't turn solid-state sound into that of tubes, or vice versa. If you have a problem in the upper bass, it's still going to be there with the aR6. If you're highs are dry and bleached, they are going to stay dry and bleached. But everything will be energized, loaded with detail, and the blazing dynamics will demand your full attention.

Listening to Keb' Mo's self-titled debut album [Okeh/Epic EK57863], the presentation was especially lively, demanding me to stop everything and pay attention to every nuance. Dee Carstensen's remarkable pop/rock harp and vocal performances on *Regarding the Soul* [Exit Nine EXIT9001-2] were in sharp focus with great

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Product Review

width, depth, and height. Everything from the intake of breath to the soft sound of fingers on strings before the pluck became an exciting part of the performances. The detail, dynamic agility, and sheer musical joy were riveting.

The remastered version of Paul Simon's *Graceland* CD [Warner R2-78904] was especially well served by the aR6's energetic sound. The dynamics and energy the aR6 imparted were certainly in keeping with the rhythms and up-tempo fun. In "Gumboots," the saxophone bit clean through the rest of the instruments, but did so without a hint of harshness. The *a cappella* vocals that open "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes" were appropriately ethereal, but they became more forceful and solid once the beat picked up. The popping bass strings on "You Can Call Me Al" were bodacious and powerful, just as you would want them to be on this romp of a tune. The pennywhistle cut through everything without sounding forced or hard, though it was clear the player was giving it everything he had. The instrument was clearly recognizable as a pennywhistle, not a flute or piccolo.

The review sample aR6, with 15-amp circuit breaker and outlets, responded quickly to overloads. My Belles 350A Reference amplifier tripped the breaker of the aR6 when it was turned on. It's hard to blame the aR6 for this, because the Belles amp can trip a 15-amp circuit breaker in an electrical panel due to the huge in-rush to its power supplies. Lights dim in the whole house when I turn it on. The current demands of the 350A Ref drop to a few amps at most once the amp is in operation, unless you really push things hard. Because the 350A Reference won't trip a 20-amp breaker, Audience's no-cost 20-amp option would be the ideal solution.

Comparison

The other passive power-conditioning products I have on hand are considerably less expensive than the aR6 and are hopelessly outclassed by it. Comparing them to the aR6 wouldn't reveal much. However, the ExactPower EP15A (\$2499) is a different matter. In case you are not familiar with it, the EP15A is an active power conditioner that outputs a "perfect" sine wave with no distortion or noise. It can deliver short bursts of current in excess of 40 amps. In comparing the aR6 and EP15A, listening levels were checked periodically at 1000Hz using a hand-held SPL meter and double-checked several times with a digital volt meter.

Sonically, the EP15A produces more of an eyes-closed, laid-back experience. It is very dynamic, but music seems less energetic than with the aR6. The EP15A produces a great sense of musical envelopment, with superbly inky-black backgrounds. The aR6 produces more of an active wide-awake sound quality that attracted me to the music differently. Some will prefer, and others will abhor, the lower excitement level of the ExactPower product, so it's great that there are choices.

I can't really pick a sonic winner here, because the sound of both is very accomplished, but it's also very different. However, in terms of power delivery, the ExactPower EP15A takes the huge suction the 350A Reference puts on the power line in stride, its peak-current capability giving the Belles amp what it wants for that brief moment after turn-on. That alone may sway some listeners toward it.

Rounding up

Audience delivers reliable power conditioning and permanent surge suppression with a strong dose of high-end-audio sensibility with the aR6. It may have half the outlets of the aR12, but it revealed that it certainly isn't half of that unit when it comes to the improvement it brings to an audio system. In fact, there wasn't a hint of the aR6 being a lower performer in any way. If you don't need 12 outlets for your system, the aR6 gives all the performance of the aR12 for \$1,300 less, and it stands with other top-tier power conditioners.

The improvement in audio quality the aR6 produces is significant and easily audible — it gives music an exciting character that's habit-forming. The degree of improvement is on a level that sends dedicated audiophiles into hours of debate and comparisons in their quest to elevate the performance of their systems to new heights. If the aR6 represents your sonic direction and price point, you can't do better.

...Doug Blackburn
db@soundstage.com

Company Info

Audience aR6 Power Conditioner

Price: \$2,800 USD.

Warranty: Ten years parts and labor.

Audience, LLC

120 N. Pacific Street #K-9, San Marcos, CA 92069

Phone: (800) 565-4390

Email: info@audience-av.com

Website: www.audience-av.com
