

finite elemente Pagode HDO3 Master Reference Rack

by Roy Gregory

A decent hi-fi support needs to sound good. It also needs to look good, be adjustable and large enough to accommodate a wide range of equipment. It needs to sound good. It needs to fit into the domestic environment, be finished to furniture standards and in a range of finishes. It also needs to sound good, or rather, ideally, not sound at all. And therein lies the problem. All too often, sonically acceptable solutions are anything but domestically pleasing. Let's be honest, it takes more than a lick of coloured paint to turn steel tubes and sheets of glass into a thing of beauty. And that's assuming that they're sonically acceptable in the first place. Fortunately, we've come a little further than the assumption that as long as it's rigid and it's got spikes then it'll deliver the sonic goods. Indeed, these days even spikes are considered suspect, depending on how you use them of course.

The fact that listeners are switching on to the significance of equipment supports, questioning the entrenched wisdom of decades and finally opening their wallets in sympathy with their concerns, has resulted in turn in a dramatic increase in the sophistication of the support solutions on offer: New materials, new technology and new approaches. Where once we had only steel and MDF with glass seeming the height of sophistication, we now have aluminium in every conceivable

extruded shape, modular construction, multi-layer damping, mixed material construction and even air suspension. But the real advance has been in the adoption of non-resonant construction



and materials, with welded metal frames and to a lesser extent, glass shelves consigned to the dustbin of history.

Recently I examined a pair of contrasting racks, the diminutive Quadraspire Reference and the finite elemente Pagode Signature. Both shared organic shelving combined with aluminium uprights. Both offered adjustable spacing and both in their own way sounded excellent, clearly

underlining just how far we've come. Having enjoyed the Pagode so much, I was intrigued by the prospect of its bigger and even more sophisticated brother, the HD (High Definition) Master Reference.

Obviously, there are common themes here, and the Master Reference and Signature share basic constructional features. Both are based around a solid maple frame that supports extruded aluminium uprights, tied together at the top by further solid maple cross-members. Both also enjoy a standard of fit and finish that you don't normally find outside of seriously expensive furniture stores, one that's almost entirely alien to the hi-fi industry. But whereas the Signature rack uses a single pair of uprights, the Master Reference employs two pairs, allowing deeper shelves to be used. These shelves are fixed by horizontal cones that are screwed and locked into dimples in the uprights. It's a unique approach and one that allows relatively simple adjustment of shelf spacing. The surprisingly heavy solid maple shelves are supported by spikes that locate into the maple frames, surrounded by rubber damping grommets that prevent the horizontal surface sliding and contacting the surrounding frame.

But the really clever bit is tucked away out of sight. Look at the picture and you'll see that the space frame that supports each shelf has two pairs of steel bosses located next to the cups that accept the shelf's feet. These are located in wells in the framework, ►

► and consist of a solid drum with a thin rod protruding from its center. These rods act as resonators, dispersing energy at key frequencies. By varying the length of the rods, so you alter the frequency at which they resonate. The nearest thing I can think of is the small weight and leaf spring assemblies used by Naim to control the mechanical behaviour of their speaker cabinets. As the accompanying picture shows, finite elements provide these resonators in no fewer than six discrete values. These they mix and match within a rack, depending on the number of shelves and the position they occupy. To the extent that quite often, if you add an additional shelf at a later date then you'll also end up changing the resonators in at least one of the existing shelves too.

The precise frequencies used for each shelf are the result of research carried out at the University of Dortmund. They relate to the anticipated weight of the individual components and the load as a whole, as well as the structure of the shelves themselves.

The base element employs exactly the same construction as the other shelves, but its hardwood frame is deeper, allowing for fixing of the uprights, and four M8 spikes to allow for leveling. It's also available as a separate unit to act as an amp stand (the HDO9 and HD10), and shelf dimensions are such that all but the biggest units will be happily accommodated, even in the context of a rack. Certainly, the enormous Gryphon Antileon fitted with no problem, as did my often problem-atic Jadis JA30s, albeit sideways. The floating area offered is 465mm deep by 515mm wide, although the all important space between the uprights, all too often a limiting factor, stretches to 635mm.

If that isn't big enough, then the company offer 750mm and 1120mm wide versions as well. That lot should take just about anything that I know of, while the adjustable spacing means that even awkward customers like the tall Theta amps or Levinson No 33Hs can be racked if you insist. The shelf units are even available in black (if you must) with special wood finishes possible – just don't expect them to be quick or cheap.

So much for the theory, how does it work in practice?



Having been suitably impressed by the holistic, organic and powerful presentation of the Signature, I wondered just how the Master Reference would improve on it. I needn't have worried. The Signature majors on the shape and broad sweep of the music, giving the instruments substance and a sense of togetherness, at the expense of some inner detail. It puts music first, where some racks major on detail, pulling

proceedings apart in the process. Well, the Master Reference builds on the performance of its cheaper brother, delivering the same sense of musical integration, but adding greater detail, instrumental colour and dynamic range. Along with the greater tonal differentiation of instruments comes better separation and greater transparency, yet all within the context of a coherent musical whole. The sheer power and stability that underpins completely over the top orchestration like the *Gladiator* OST brings poise and natural grace to proceedings, eliminating the edgy strain that can sound

exciting yet tiring at the same time.

The Master Reference racks allow equipment its full range of dynamic expression at both ends of the spectrum. So whether you're talking the opening brass tutti of Mahler's *Third* or the more intimate vocal control of Gillian Welch, the musician's intent is preserved intact. You need louder, you'll get it. Which might seem an odd thing to say about a rack, but dynamic range and energy distribution is exactly what they effect.

Think back to the steel and glass constructs of the past. They injected bands of energy into proceedings, giving an impression of pace and dynamics. They robbed music of its coherence and colour, they robbed it of weight and harmonic complexity. Moving away from that construction allows music to sound more natural, whether it's to a wood composite structure like an RDC rack or an air suspended one like the Voodoo or Townshend. More natural because it restores the evenness of the energy envelope, allowing each instrument ►

► its own energy spectrum. The lack of peaks might sound initially unimpressive, but what you quickly realise is that dynamics are actually wider, just less obvious. That's about where the Pagode Signature is. The Master Reference extends the performance boundary pretty dramatically. Rather than the scaled dynamics of a rack like the Signature, the Master Reference retains the trademark even handedness but breathes real life into proceedings through its lack of dynamic constraint. I'm playing *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* as I write this, and the discrimination in the weight and pressure of the piano notes is breathtaking. Try as I might my



attention keeps wandering to those apparently aimless musical doodles, drawn by their shape and the expressive playing. It's a disc it's easy to get wrong: One where the gap between LP and CD is unforgivingly great, yet the Wadia, perched atop the Master Reference struts its stuff with aplomb. The music comes and comes, the system passes unnoticed. That's the beauty of the Master Reference.

In its ultimate incarnation finite element's Pagode stand nears the hi-fi ideal. It allows equipment to perform at its best, while simultaneously delivering the looks, finish and versatility to meet the equally important domestic and practical

demands. In the context of a serious hi-fi system its price might seem excessive until you compare it to the cost of the equipment it supports and its sonic contribution. Then it becomes a no-brainer.

At last, a rack that should be seen and won't be heard! ➤+

finite elemente

Kirchplatz 16 A, D-59909 Bestwig Germany
Tel. ++49-(0) 2904-4192, Fax ++49-(0) 2904-3580
info@finite-elemente.de, www.finite-elemente.de



pagode Master Reference



finite elemente

www.finite-elemente.de