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First Sounds: Fono Acustica Sinfo

by [Roy Gregory](#) | October 20, 2015

The great debates continue to rage: solid state versus tubes, vinyl versus CD versus file replay, everyone versus SACD (or so it seems). But in many ways, arguably the most low-key yet fundamental debate involves the AC supply -- or more particularly how to access it. You can sum it up as *To filter or not to filter?* but that fails to convey the depth of the divisions on the subject -- and just what a profound effect the chosen solution can have on the musical performance of your system.

There's probably nowhere that prejudice is more clearly entrenched than in the UK, where the Linn/Naim axis threw its full weight against the filtering of AC supplies, citing increased source impedance and a resulting loss of dynamic and rhythmic integrity as the unwanted side effects of any kind of filter positioned in the AC line. As a result, as far as many in the UK audio community are concerned, it's a commandment carved in stone, our very own hi-fi equivalent of the Second Amendment, a truth self-evident and thus immune to logic, evidence or reality.

Being ornery and disputatious by nature, I've never been ready to simply accept this stance, so I've examined the options with regularity, returning to the issue again and again. Each time I confirm that, like many environmental questions concerning complex systems, there is no one answer. There are definitely situations where filtering can work -- and as filters improve and digital hardware proliferates, the number of such situations is also increasing. However, there's a "but" -- in fact, there's two, and they're pretty big "buts" too. Although AC quality is crucial, so too are ground integrity and routing and in many cases they can trump the benefits of filtering. But just as important is the mechanical pollution that enters the system through the AC line, a separate concern that has only recently hit the agenda.

Taken together, these issues help explain why I've relied on first the Russ Andrews power pyramids and then the Quantum QB8 distribution blocks for the last few years, the latter being mechanically tuned, star-grounded power strips that allow me to run the system off a single dedicated AC outlet, deal with its mechanically intrusive pollution and provide optimum grounding for the system's multiple power supplies and components.

In fact, the QB8s have become such a permanent part of the AC status quo that I was in danger of falling into simple acceptance by default. That is, until the day a long, slim but astonishingly heavy box arrived from Fono Acustica. This Spanish cable manufacturer may not have the highest profile in the high end, but they are quietly building a reputation for products that put musical performance above all else, products that embody the heart and soul of that performance rather than the glossy convenience of spurious numbers or bogus scientific explanation.

Asked how he develops his products, head honcho Felix Avalos is refreshingly candid: "I listen!" Opening the box he'd sent, I found inside one of his Sinfo AC distribution strips -- although given the sheer mass and astonishing solidity of the unit, it should definitely be classified as a distribution *block* -- if not block house. As well as being heavy, the Sinfo is really rather beautiful, its deep gloss lacquer laid over a flawlessly macassar-ebony-veneered chassis (also available in black) that shares the same sinuous curves as the S-shaped blocks that identify Fono Acustica's cables -- just writ larger than life. Make no mistake, the Sinfo is definitely large, longer, much wider and twice as deep as the QB8, despite offering only six outlets to the QRT's eight.



In part, that enlarged body accounts for the remarkable weight of the Sinfo -- but only in part. Look closely and you see that it is built using a classic clamshell construction, an approach that in this case also creates a non-resonant sandwich. But the real secret lurking under the Sinfo's pretty skin is the material used in its construction: Tankwood -- a fiber-based "armored plate" developed to reduce the overall weight of military vehicles. That said, being lighter than hardened steel is a relative thing; it doesn't make Tankwood light! As well as being heavy and expensive, Tankwood is also extremely difficult and time-consuming to machine, which helps explain the gorgeous finish of the Sinfo: anything this expensive had better at least look the part. How expensive? Try on €10,000 for size. This thing better sound good -- which of course is what makes it so interesting.

Plug in the Sinfo in place of the QB8 and the sonic and musical differences are substantial and significant. The Fono Acustica block brings a remarkably focused sense of body, presence and energy to proceedings. Tonally it is rich and warm, but unlike so many products that garner such descriptions there's nothing slow or sluggish about the Sinfo's sound. Instead it is direct, purposeful and propulsive, driving energy into the system and into the room. It brings substance, shape and solidity to performers, impact, energy and drive to performances. Its presentation is compact and unambiguous; it could almost be dubbed "the solid sender" if John Lee Hooker hadn't gotten there first. There's no messin' with the Sinfo in your system.

Now, whether the Sinfo does what you want or your system needs is down to individual taste and circumstance. But what makes it so fascinating to me is that it has such a dramatic impact on the sound and presentation of the systems you use it with. Which is why about now, if you haven't already started, you should start wondering what's inside it. The answer? Not a lot. It's hard wired (using Fono Acustica's proprietary silver-gold alloy) and it's star grounded. Other than that it's about as straight through as a six-way block can be. That's what makes it so interesting. The thing about Tankwood is that in order to work -- that is, in order to resist high-velocity rounds -- it needs to be able to absorb and dissipate huge amounts of energy very quickly. And let's face it, compared to an anti-tank shell or even just a high-velocity rifle round, the amount of mechanical energy carried by your AC supply must seem pretty mundane, allowing the Sinfo to deal with it in no uncertain terms, preventing it from reaching the sensitive power supplies and signal paths in your system, smudging edges, dissipating energy and diluting dynamics. With the Sinfo in play there seems to be no doubting that every last ounce of energy generated by your source and amplifiers is being almost physically propelled out through your speakers. Not bad for a completely passive device.

The arrival of the Sinfo has acted as a timely reminder of just how much damage the mechanical energy carried by the AC supply can do. The Sinfo removes thinness, glare and vagueness from the music, replacing them with rich, natural harmonies and a definite sense of purpose and direction. It is also the first AC-distribution or -filtering product I've used that shows up weaknesses in the QB8's overall balance and capabilities. It's not perfect. I'd like to see more than six sockets, I'd like a ground terminal, and I'd definitely prefer a lower price tag. Such cost for a distribution block will exclude all but the most lavishly shod, but if you are in that category and your system sounds like it needs what the Sinfo offers, I'd strongly recommend investigating it. It impressed the daylights out of me. If it is too rich for your pocket, take away the free lesson it just delivered -- never underestimate the importance of your AC supply. It delivers the raw material your system feeds on and that you end up listening to. Things don't get much more fundamental than that.

In the meantime, I've been sufficiently impressed by the Sinfo, both its performance and the listening-led development path that produced it, to have a play with Fono Acustica's almost equally distinctive Virtuoso cables. First impressions suggest that the brand could have a higher profile real soon. 🍷

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