2020 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

Accessories of the Year

Townshend Audio Seismic Podium

$1700–$4000 per pair

Seismic Podiums, Townshend Audio's unique take on speaker isolation, are steel platforms supported at each corner by Load Cells (a damped, height-adjustable spring system). Rather than attempting to tune the relationship between floor and loudspeaker, as with mass-loading or coupling with spiked footers, Townshend wants to sever the speaker/floor feedback loop through full decoupling. In practice, the Podiums never insinuate themselves into the music; they are essentially colorless. Any suggestion of sonic confusion, constraint, or congestion simply goes poof. The musical soundstage is liberated from any subtle opacity and veiling—a feat that results in wider timbral gradients and better micro-dynamics and dimensionality. Images emerge and recede naturally, firmly rooted in space and proximity to adjacent players. Bass extension and pitch definition are freed-up. The Seismic Podiums become so fundamental to the listening experience that calling them mere accessories fails to give them enough credit. Real stunners. (Reviewed this issue)

Townshend Audio Seismic Isolation Podiums

Earth Shaking

Neil Gader

True story. It happened on the main exhibit floor at a trade show, quite by accident. I walked up to a pair of slender floor-standing loudspeakers and casually placed my hand on top of one of them—the classic audiophile move meant to gauge weight and stability. I gave them a gentle nudge. Suddenly the entire speaker began rocking in place, pitching gently to and fro. In panic, I removed my hand as quickly as possible ready to catch the speaker if it toppled over. But no, it merely sprung back into its original vertical position, reminding me of my Bozo the Clown inflatable punching bag from the 1960s. I looked down and found the cause for my alarm. The loudspeakers were sitting on heavy platforms elevated at each corner by some mysterious pod-like footer. This was my heart-stopping introduction to premium speaker isolation, Townshend Audio-style. The brochure I grabbed called them Seismic Isolation Podiums. But what exactly were they?

A brief backstory: Max Townshend and his Townshend Audio team have built a small kingdom on the basis of innovative isolation/decoupling technologies; among their products are Seismic Sink platforms and stands (reviewed in Issues 148 and 114 respectively). But Townshend Audio is also celebrated for preamps, super-tweeters, cables, and perhaps most prominently the Rock 7 turntable, reviewed by Robert E. Greene in Issue 209. That 'table garnered a Golden Ear Award in 2011. Known for its distinctive tonearm-damping trough, Townshend Audio had, REG concluded, shown "what remarkable results can be obtained, not by flinging mass and money at the problem…but by inspired engineering."

My head-scratching encounter with the Seismic Isolation Podiums more than piqued my curiosity. I promised myself that when I finally had a stout pair of loudspeakers on hand, I would arrange to review the Seismic Podiums. My ATC SCM50 active towers were ideal candidates.

For myself, and TAS readers of a certain age, the mechanical isolation of components, especially speakers, means mass-loading them or coupling them to the floor using pointed footers or some variation thereof. Back then, this was the accepted way to remediate resonances and colorations. My initiation into this practice took place in the 1970s when I placed the popular Tiptoes brand of aluminum spiked footers beneath a pair of AudioPro subs, and immediately noted an improvement in low-frequency control and pitch definition. But it struck me at the time that the "improvement" seemed to occur in a fairly narrow band of the midbass—resulting in an amusical emphasis that once heard couldn't be ignored.

The Townshend approach heads in the opposite direction. Rather than amplifying or tuning the bond between the floor and the loudspeaker by coupling with footers, Townshend aims to eliminate the interaction at the root—to sever what is essentially a feedback loop of mechanical dysfunction and spurious vibrations between the speaker and the floor or, as Townshend describes it, to break "the acoustic connection between the floor and the speaker, preventing the passage of deleterious vibrations both to and from the speaker cabinets." I found another way of looking at it: The Podiums become a newly suspended floor over my existing one. There is precedent for this. Engineered "floated" floors are not uncommon in recording studios and even in some costly dedicated listening rooms.

The Podiums arrived fully assembled and nicely appointed with a black crackle finish. The heavy steel platform is supported at each corner by Townshend's Captive Load Cells that extend beyond the perimeter of the platform, providing a stable base. The Load Cell interior houses a steel-alloy compression spring surrounded by a flexible synthetic rubber jacket with two end plates—a movement-sensitive, air-resistant damper that dissipates low-frequency oscillation (down to 3Hz). The Podiums are designed to move freely in all axes—up and down, left and right, back and forth. Since loudspeakers often have a forward weight bias due to heavy front baffles and drivers, the Load Cells are hand-adjustable for height

Specs & Pricing

TOWNSHEND AUDIO
7 Bridge Road
East Molesey, Surrey
KT8 9EU UK
townshendaudio.com

EAR-USA (U.S. Distributor)
1087 East Ridgewood Street
Long Beach, CA 90807
(562) 422-4747
info@ear-usa.com
Price as reviewed: Size 3, $2600/pr. (model sizes vary between $1700–$4000/pr.)

and to balance loads via a circular top ring. Along with an adjustable round foot on the bottom to compensate for out-of-true floors, this also allows for easy leveling. The Seismic Podiums are available in five standard sizes with different weight-range capacities, varying progressively from less than 10 pounds up to 400 pounds (including the weight of the Podium base plate). My own ATC SCM50 towers required the middle-range Size 3. For even greater loads, custom-design Podiums that include six or more Load Cells are an option. Virtually any weight of equipment can be isolated. The Podiums are suitable for wood, tile, or carpeted floors.

Setup is a two-stage procedure, each step equally critical. The first is to level the podium respective to the floor. A wrench is provided to adjust the four feet appropriately. Once the speaker is positioned upon the platform, each Load Cell is released by turning the top ring, which raises the speaker until it is fully suspended and the Load Cells are free of any contact with the chassis of the podium. Height adjustment range is about 0.75**. It's good to have a carpenter's level handy for rechecking level, given the fact that many loudspeakers tend, as noted, to be front heavy.

Sonically the key takeaways became immediately apparent—increased transparency and resolution. The Seismic Podiums instantly lift a subtle opacity and veiling from the vast canvas of the musical soundstage. As I listened to Stravinsky's *Apollon Musagete/Pulcinella* [St. Martins/Marriner, Argo] I noted wider timbral and micro-dynamic gradients within the orchestra. Images emerged and receded naturally, as in a performance, firmly rooted in space with airy proximity to adjacent players. Significantly, the effects of the Podiums were more global compared with the narrow-band effects typical of common footers/spikes. What the Seismic Podiums didn't do was dampen or slow transients, soften dynamics, or reduce pitch resolution. In the larger sense, it was as if the loudspeaker was allowed to fully clear its throat and to perform at a more lively and musical level.

Sometimes the line between observed "difference" and genuine improvement is tough to judge.

Low-level resolving power benefited from a more stable soundstage, darker backgrounds, and deeper silences. A prime example of this shift occurred as I listened to Itzhak Perlman's glowing performance of the Bruch Violin Concerto No.1 [LSO/Previn]—the image stability (and even the physical presence) of the violinist was more fully realized. The decay characteristics of the orchestra also seemed to be extended. On other discs, the gathering of voices from backup singers, duets, or large choruses further bolstered my impression of the Podium's ability to better resolve images within an ambient space. Whether it was the vast chorale of the Rutter *Requiem* or the three voices on Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, and Linda Ronstadt's *Trio* album, vocalists retained their singularity even as they joined harmonically as a collective whole within a broader soundspace.

For solo piano there was greater clarity between note fundamentals and trailing soundboard resonances. I noted this same clarity time and again with soloists in general, from violin, guitar, winds, and brass. The overall effect was a refinement and focus akin to achieving just the right amount of speaker toe-in, or precisely dialing in a cartridge.

Bass response, extension, and pitch definition were clarified and delivered in natural lockstep with the rest of the frequency spectrum. Low-frequency weight was evenly balanced and reflective of the musical source material. During Cat Stevens' "Hard Headed Woman" from *Tea For The Tillerman*, the kickdrum sound (which is particularly prominent during the song's bridge) was more tactile and complex, with a greater sense of the drum skin moving air back and forth under high pressure.

The other major takeaways regarded loudspeaker localization and soundstage dimensionality. As for the former, the loudspeaker simply vanished. It just couldn't be localized as a source anymore. With the Podium in place the orchestral soundstage became infused with sharper contrasts and richer colors. The Podium delivered greater intensity and timbral detail, improved dimensionality, and clearer placement of images. I also noted during Ray Brown's "Teach Me Tonight" [*Soular Energy*] that vertical information was enhanced—the cymbals on this track were lifted higher, and sustained longer seemingly on a raft of air.

Of equal importance, the Podiums preserved the general tonality and balance of the loudspeaker. Whether your current system's overall voice is dark and ruminative or light and airy, these characteristics remain untouched. The Podiums don't insinuate themselves over the music; they are essentially characterless. The difference is that any suggestion of confusion, confinement, or congestion is ameliorated.

The pleasures of the Seismic Podiums can sneak up on you at the oddest moments. For example two of the most commonly played male vocal tracks I listen to are Tom Waits' "Georgia Lee" and "Take It With Me" from *Mule Variations*. Waits' raspy voice is rich with deep chest tones, perhaps at times overly resonant. But with the Seismic Podiums there was a small but critical shift in this perception. Earlier hints of resolution-loss and smearing during his vocals seemed to vanish as if a light fog had drifted away—his voice rising to the surface of the mix with greater timbral detail and clarity.

It's axiomatic that in high-end audio everything makes a difference. But sometimes the line between observed "difference" and genuine improvement is tough to judge. There is no doubt where the Seismic Isolation Podiums stand on this point. They lifted my loudspeakers and overall system to a much higher and more musical level.

The Podiums are not inexpensive, but it only takes a couple minutes to realize that the musical contribution these platforms are making is fundamental to the high-end experience. Townshend's Seismic Isolation Podiums registered on my own personal Richter Scale like few so-called "accessories" I've ever experienced. And that, dear readers, amounts to an unshakable recommendation. **tas**