



PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

As previously reported, high-end connector manufacturer WBT took the unusual step at this year's CES of not just demonstrating their products, but demonstrating them against fake versions manufactured in the Far East. Using a specially adapted pair of Audio Physic speakers, they were able to compare the sonic performance of their NextGen and Economy Line terminals to a pair of cheap imitation ones.

The results were so interesting and impressive that I decided (with WBT's help) to develop the demonstration still further and present it to readers at the Bristol show.

Normally our demos are not company/product specific; in fact, despite appearances, neither was this one. It's actually about connector quality in general. It's just that WBT's position as market leader gives them the dubious status of having the "most imitated" products, thus allowing the widest possible comparison of apparently similar items. Using the same pair of Audio Physic speakers, I had the Chord Co. produce three sets of identical length Cobra interconnects, one standard, one with WBT NextGen plugs and the last (you guessed it) with fake WBTs. They were also burnt-in for identical periods before the show.

I won't spell out the demonstration in detail, but clearly the set up allowed us to change interconnects and speaker terminals in turn – and each time the difference was clearly audible. But the real shock was going from the all-NextGen to the all-fake set up, a difference that can only be described as huge. Using a Bill Malonee track, the music went from interesting, engaging, intimate and enjoyable to a disjointed, grainy, nasty and frankly rather unpleasant facsimile of itself. Indeed, it was hard to credit that this was the same track. And note that these were not fancy, high-priced cables in some super critical system. Note also that the differences weren't hi-fi in nature but musical, turning a great performance by a great singer into something not worth listening to. Impressive stuff for just a couple of connectors!

But this is still only half the story. What about the speaker plugs and the sockets on the electronics? Well, marking the launch of their new 4mm plug at the Munich show, WBT went the whole hog, bringing speaker cables and specially adapted electronics into the mix. In practice, swapping between the RCA sockets proved a step too far for a show situation (the potential for disaster being just too great) but just the ability to hear an all

NextGen system, equipped from end to end was a treat in itself – and the results didn't disappoint. Here was an even starker contrast between the system's capabilities, open, unforced and

natural as compared to grainy and dislocated. Using the fake plugs and speaker terminals turned the music into a flat, two-dimensional collage – like the images that David Hockney used to produce from multiple, close-up Polaroid shots; some details and shapes got distorted, some disappeared altogether. Compare that to the solid, three-dimensional, coherent whole presented by the

NextGens and that's quite a shock.

Where does this leave us? Well, it does two things, throwing a stark spot-light on the issue of connector quality and also pointing the way towards the next big battlefield in the cable wars. Ulrik Madsen of Argento cables showed me some beautifully executed prototypes of the low-mass plugs he's developing for his latest assault on the state of the art, and several other manufacturers are whispering darkly about designing their own connectors. Tellingly, the main object of their loathing seems to be the XLR, a plug where none of the commercial versions sound any good! Read the Hovland STRATOS review and you'll see that I preferred the amp connected via its RCA inputs – despite the fact that it's a fully balanced design. And guess what? The differences I heard were exactly the type of differences I hear between the best connectors and their mediocre equivalents.

Of course, manufacturing small numbers of specially designed connectors is going to be costly, threatening to push the price of already scarily expensive cables out beyond the stratosphere. A really well designed OEM solution will always be more cost effective and by far the best option for those manufacturers who lack the knowledge, capability or scale of operations to create their own designs. Besides which, WBT have another card up their sleeve; those still to be heard socket comparisons they're now equipped to demonstrate. Hopefully it's an opportunity I'll be getting sooner rather than later, but between you and me, I've a sneaking suspicion that plugs are only half the story and that the female half of the connector equation might just represent the final frontier when it comes to signal transmission.

