

# HIFICRITIC



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# Floating on Air (and Springs)

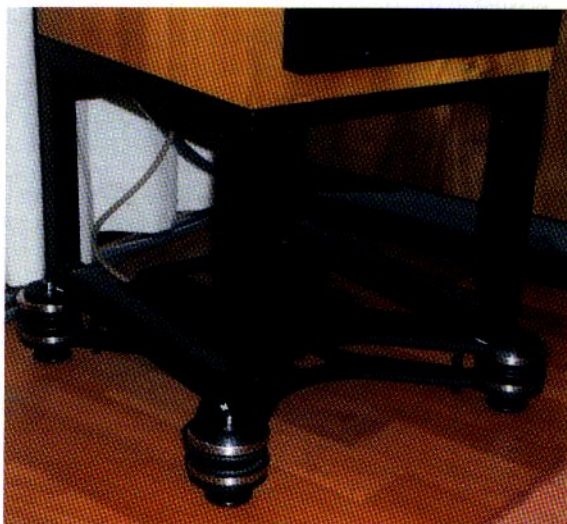
PETER MAGUIRE HAS A PROBLEM WITH THE BASS FROM HIS LISTENING ROOM DISTURBING THE REST OF THE HOUSE. HE AND CHRIS ELLIS EXPERIMENT WITH TOWNSHEND'S STELLA DECOUPLING SPEAKER PLATFORMS

PETER MAGUIRE  
CHRIS ELLIS

My quest to hear more of the music started well over 40 years ago with the huge leap from an auto-changing record player to a B&O radiogram. It has continued ever since, assisted no doubt by my regular contact with many hi-fi designers, but primarily because music has always been very important to me and those around me. My wife and daughter both sing, while my son is an avid and knowledgeable vinyl collector and sometime DJ, alas in an area of music largely inaccessible to me, and has sometimes been able to find a home for my hi fi cast-offs. As for yours truly, I'm just an enthusiastic listener.

A pair of Max Townshend's *Stella* anti-vibration supports were obtained to see how much of the annoying thump heard in a downstairs room was due to direct mechanical excitation of the floor by the ATC *SCM50ASL* speakers, and whether this might be usefully reduced with due regard to any accompanying changes in system sound quality. I was aided by an experienced audio engineer, Christien Ellis (CE Electro-Acoustics [www.christienellis.co.uk](http://www.christienellis.co.uk)), who was already familiar with my set-up and is a fellow fan and long term owner of ATC active loudspeakers. I looked after the Blu-Tack while Chris did the manhandling.

The listening room is an upstairs ex-bedroom in a 20-year old brick-clad timber-frame house. Prior to building this house, I had been told that sound transmission can be a problem in timber-frame houses, so arranged for all the internal stud-work walls to be filled with rock-wool to attenuate sound transmission.



This has largely worked, but one problem that remains that too much sound, especially annoying bass thump, transmitted to the room below – a large kitchen/family room with no soft surfaces of any kind – frequently resulting in complaints from a higher domestic authority.

The listening room dimensions are a near-square 3.68m by 3.75m by 2.38m high. The speakers are located along one of the longer walls and the opposite wall is lined with shelves containing books and LPs, with leather armchair seating in front. The equipment and other furniture including CD storage and more LP storage are stood along one of the shorter walls and more CD storage and a door are along the opposite side wall. Much of the floor in front of the speakers is covered by a rug over vinyl flooring. The small room dictates that the speaker centres are 1.75m apart and that the primary listening position is 2.5m from the speakers. I think that the resultant sound is pretty good although the soundstage width, depth and height are not very expansive.

Townshend's *Stella* supports are impressively understated in black and chrome and consist of black-coated upper and lower skeletal steel plates. The lower one is fitted with adjustable feet and the upper one is arranged to carry the speaker. The upper plate is supported on the lower plate by four compression springs located at the corners of the respective plates. One clever bit is that the springs are damped by being enclosed in rubber bellows with a controlled air leak; another is that the support provided to the speakers permits movement in both horizontal and vertical planes. Thus both vertical impact and rocking forces are addressed.

However, this is a long way from the traditional rigid floor-coupled speaker support normally thought to be desirable and taught by most speaker designers. How would this decoupling affect sound quality? Would there be losses as well as gains?

The particular *Stellas* tested here cost £980/pair. Versions covering other heavier speakers and special designs for Quad Electrostatics and many B&W models are also available.

## Sound Quality

Installation of the *Stellas* – not an easy task with speakers weighing around 50kg each – was immediately evident in a change in sound quality. I was struck by a more

even sound and but also by an apparent lack of bass. A marked increase of 'air' around solo voices and a general increase in clarity and focus could be heard, and a previously unnoticed degree of bloom and muddle had been stripped away. There was also a surprising increase in image height, rather more than the modest 8cm height contribution of the *Stellas* themselves. However I also detected a moderate increase in sibilance on some recordings. Was this due the shift in tonal balance, the lighter sound, or was it due to the new isolating supports?

Where had that previous, familiar bass 'weight' and 'thump' gone, even though the very low frequencies themselves seemed largely unaffected? I now felt the need to wind-up the volume a bit, though this did not restore the previous balance at lower frequencies. Eventually it dawned on me that I was now hearing the ATC speakers without a significant drum-like contribution from the wooden floor. Now we checked to hear what was happening downstairs and it was immediately apparent that much of that unpleasant thumping had been greatly reduced.

Success! Of course, the speakers were still acoustically (rather than mechanically) coupled to the structure of the listening room, and inevitably some of this leakage was still being transmitted to the room below. Returning upstairs, some further experiment was called for. We tried moving the speakers back closer to the front wall in an attempt to restore some bass 'weight', and that seemed helpful.

I later noticed that Chris had toed-in the speakers rather more than I normally did, and repositioned them slightly, and this had largely removed the noted sibilance. I have since found that the impression of image height appears to be somewhat recording dependent, although it does still seem a little higher than before in general, while I continue to find having speakers that rock when pushed very odd. However, I'm really relishing the improved image focus, rhythm and clarity, and the floor-coupling has moved quite a big step in the right direction. Even that higher domestic authority agrees that the worst of the thump has now gone.

### Conclusions

I didn't hear significant negative changes in focus or dynamics with the decoupling supports; indeed I rate the greater speed and clarity as a significant benefit. That increase in clarity, plus the anticipated improvement in domestic harmony, is ample reward. On balance the *Stella* supports have had a substantial effect on the system sound, most of it good, and I'm readjusting to the new system balance – one could say that the

previous sound was incorrect, marred by the coupled vibration and resulting resonant coloration from the floor. Concern about possible side effects from rocking was dispelled, at least with my massive, high inertia speakers, and this well made and designed product successfully delivered the promised performance in my system and location.

### Christien Ellis comments

I felt that the system had very good clarity and detail with fine mid and treble dynamics, a crisp, dry and tight balance, with no obvious lower frequency room modes. The speaker/room combination has good low frequency extension and level in the region 30 to 50Hz, but some dryness in the 60-120Hz octave leaves the midrange somewhat emphasised. I noted a fine mid to treble balance, but with a slightly pronounced mid range 'ring' around 1kHz, possibly a room cross-mode.

Downstairs, with the system playing upstairs, the sound transferred into the kitchen was relatively high, mainly localised under the speaker positions but reverberating around the space because of the lack of absorption (all hard surfaces – mainly tiled, and no rug). The breakthrough character was irritating and annoying; the bass line of the speakers clearly audible, but more annoying for me was the kick of the upper bass, which came through rather like the slamming of a car door.

After fitting the *Stella* isolators the system showed improved focus and staging, and less room reverberation/resonance. Clarity and detail seemed similar; mid and treble dynamics likewise. However, there was also some improvement in mid and treble smoothness (and less of that ringing coloration at 1kHz). It was clear that we had achieved effective mechanical vibration isolation from the speakers to the floor, with the isolation operative in all planes. But as Peter also noted, the speakers now sounded a bit dryer, due to moderate loss of mid bass weight. The speaker / room combination still had good low frequency extension, but at a somewhat reduced level.

Popping downstairs, I found that the sound transfer into the kitchen was now less localised with improved isolation, imparting a quieter and smoother noise characteristic. Now the transfer character was very different, less percussive, less boomy and much less annoying.

### The System

Sources include Naim CDS3 CD player and SME 20/2 turntable with Koetsu *Red T* cartridge, Roksan *Phono Reference DXP SE*. These drive an Audio Research *Reference 3* pre-amplifier which supplies a ten-year old balanced input pair of ATC *SCM50ASL* active speakers, recent refreshed with new tweeters. The SME sits on a wall-mounted plinth and other components on a Finite Element *Pagode* stand. Interconnects include VdH *The Second*, cryo-treated Siltech, and Naim *Hi-Line*. Mains power is supplied from a dedicated spur via an Isotek *Titan* mains conditioning unit.