

Adding a Pair of Wings to Your Gears

The THIXAR

SMD Ambitious MKII Hi-Fi Rack

Martin



Is Hi Fi Rack important? Would sound performance become much better after changing to an hi-end rack? If so, is the result worth the price? These are hidden questions for many Hi Fi lovers, but they seldom take them too seriously. If they have the budget, the first thing that comes to their minds would be some audio equipment or a pair of speakers; next might be heavy duty accessories such as power conditioners. Moreover, there are hardly any media recommendations, even if there is, they are at most reports on specifications. I have gone through this, so I would like to share with you the experience of changing a Hi Fi rack in our audition room and what effect the new rack has brought.

Test by Invitation

The Rack-changing plan was suggested by Dirk Rudell, the boss of THIXAR (The HKD\$100,000 active equipment platform Silencer_iZ and the passive platform Silence Plus are products of THIXAR). Last year in July, he personally came to our office to explain the Silencer_iZ technology. Naturally, racks were involved. Dirk's professional knowledge suggested there were different levels of vibrations all around our listening environment, and these vibrations were conductible. For example, from the floor to the rack, and from the rack supports to the platform, and finally to the equipment. Once affected by vibrations, the body of the bass would be weakened, so would be the vividness, and details could not be revealed. Aiming at micro-vibrations, Dirk has made thorough researches on vibrations elimination. As a result, a new vibration-absorbing material was successfully developed and used on the newly designed audio rack. He claimed the effect was excellent. After a glance at our reference gears in the audition room he asked with confidence, "Any interest to try our new rack?"

Asking for Troubles

All my friends knew I'm specially interested in audio accessories including audio racks, only there were not many opportunities to try on similar products. If we could try this new rack in our room, it would be quite interesting! Moreover, Dirk promised to arrange for the transportation, Lincoln and I found no excuse to refuse.

Dirk sent us a message on the day the racks were shipped. 3 sets, 6 layers of SMD Ambitious MK2 racks were packed in 11 big boxes, weighing 160kg! One of the packages containing the back supports was close to 2m long and was the heaviest one. He advised me to take special care when handling them. I understand what Dirk meant. He asked me beforehand if we needed any help in the installation; I thought audio racks were simple products, so I said "No"! Until then I knew Dirk meant, "I've told you this is no easy job, don't blame me!" Well, roll with the punches!

Experienced Team

On the day before the packages arrived, our experienced assembly team made all necessary preparations. We removed the 4-piece dCS Vivaldi SACD /CD player assembly, Dr.Feickert Analogue Fire Bird turntable, and the under-test VAC Statement Line preamplifier. Experience told us, the transportation company would deliver the packages from the airport to the door of our office building, we wouldn't expect them to be sent to the office door (we're on the 11th floor)! So, we checked the number of packages, 6 of which were platforms, 4 were side supports, and the biggest one was the aluminium back support. We quickly put them on simple wooden trolleys and they were transported to our office in just a little more than ten minutes, and the assembly took another 30 minutes. Such high efficiency was because of the clear instructions, also, the construction of the rack wasn't too complicated. I believed anybody who had experience in assembling Ikea furniture could also do this rack assembly.



Spec : _____

■ SMD Ambitious MK2 (W x H x D) : 1,810 x 425 x 580mm

Board, Spacious

After transporting all 11 packages to our audition room, I unboxed the heaviest one which contained the back support board. Just unloading and standing it up made me sweat like a pig! The steps that followed were much easier. We fixed 4 side boards to the back support with screws. An iron plate had to be fixed between the side boards to form an H shape. I sent a picture to Dirk to show everything was alright. There were still two steps to be done, fixing the supports for the platforms and putting on the platforms. There were screws under each support to adjust the level. The floor of our audition

room was quite smooth. Although the carpets had been stepped on for years, there was no serious levelling problem. The six platforms were adjusted quite smoothly. Finally, the tiring work was finished and I stepped back to appreciate my good job! The rack was quite big, and there was much space left after putting back the gears. The gears were put in the centre of each platform which measured 550 (W) x 500 (D)mm and was bigger than the other 2 platforms from Thixar. It would be big enough to put on even larger gears.



From SD to HD

After putting back the gears and finished connecting all the cables, it was already late in the evening. We did not listen at once but left them for the next day. At that time, we were auditioning the VAC Statement Line preamplifier and a pair of mono power amplifiers, driving the YG Acoustic Sonja 2.3 speakers. In the half month or so before we changed to the new rack, I knew quite well the performance of the combination, not to say our reference sound source, the dCS 4-piece SACD/CD player. I could immediately tell the differences from the first track played after changing to SMD Ambitious MK2. The analytical power of every album, such as "Eight Thousand Miles" and "Virtuoso Pieces of Chinese Percussion" crystal CD, seemed to have been raised by several times, the bass had become very vivid, countless details were transmitted into my ears, just like a 2k image was upgraded to 8k! I was not exaggerating. When I played the "B-A-C-H prelude" from the LP "Reference Recordings 30th Anniversary Sampler" just issued by RR, the deep and strong basses kept rolling under my seat and I could feel the stream of power rushing up to my body! I never expected the combination, which was so familiar to me, could have such prominent upgrade! What surprised me even more was the powerful loading of the platforms. We had put on it a super heavy turntable, the 98kg Acoustic Signature Invictus JR. for more than one month, and the back and side boards showed no sign of deformation. I had to

emphasize the 4 platform supports were just hanged to the side boards, they could be loosened with a single push. They only made use of the surface to support the platforms. I could see that these accessories were of no common construction.



A Masterpiece

To my limited experience on racks, most of them were metallic and solid. But I found the suspension system of this rack was made of specific ABS with elastic material in the centre. There should be a reason for that, and I asked Dirk about it. The supports were made with 3D printing technology. Dirk tried various materials and adjusted the printing parameters (temperature and grating angles of each layer). After numerous trials they finally mastered the technique to produce a rigid but not too heavy outer shell. The springs were also custom-made. Dirk expected heavy loading in his first design, and he started looking for a manufacturer to produce them. He insisted using extra strong steel and he adjusted the property of the spring to ensure its resonance frequency was lower than 10Hz. Since the resonance is at very low frequency, it wouldn't affect the stability of the rack. Dirk continued to explain the construction of the side boards. To thoroughly eliminate vibrations, they had developed a special elastomer which was different from the old one. Each side board was comprised of 3 layers of different wooden boards.

To sum up, SMD Ambitious MK2 is a completely new product from Thixar. Not only the back, support and side boards are specially made, even the platforms have different construction from their Silence and Silence Plus. From this rack I can realize how deep Dirk understands Resonance. This is his masterpiece, at least I think it is.

Listening to Music but not Sound Effect

After SMD Ambitious MK2 has moved into our audition room, all who learned about its price had their mouth wide opened, but also admitted it had the best musical effect. For me, the performance of SMD Ambitious MK2 resembles that of the active platform, Silencer-iZ. Not 100%, of course, but at least 30 to 40%. Recently, I had listened to many vinyl records. Of all source equipment, the turntable, tonearm and cartridge were most direct and true in picking up signals. Our readers who have read my recent reviews should know I had detailed descriptions on recordings and environment of the recording venues. I paid special attentions in distinguishing phase relationships on speakers and how they were affected by vibrations, that also showed how pure the sound was. I could feel that SMD Ambitious MK2 gave me much help on the evaluation. In the past two months, many engineers and people from the industry visited us, they all said the sound images were very precise, the sound effect was as if they were there. They were most impressed on listening to < Balluchon > , the 33 rpm vinyl brought to us by Haruo Ushio and Reiji Asakura. When the first song was played, the clear and beautiful piano emerged out of the space between the speakers, the dynamics and playing was so natural! After a smooth introduction, the drums burst out, the drum sticks lightly hitting on the cymbals and the vividness of the double bass really grasped my attention. The bass was not only bouncy, the high density and resonance of the body reflected a lively image. When listening to music, I thought it very important that the listener could feel what the artist felt, or enter the world of the composer through the music. I believed everyone present was deeply involved in the music, and that was more than enough.

Conclusion

After using it for two weeks, Lincoln decided to keep SMD Ambitious MK2 and I supported with no reservation. I had two reasons for doing this. Firstly, it helped me to recognize the strength of an audio equipment quickly; secondly, it helped to bring out the best from our reference gears. So, it would be unreasonable to send it back to Dirk. Yes, I know! For over HK\$180,000, it would be difficult to persuade any audiophile to buy one for his own use. I could only say, when I recalled that strong layers of basses, the lofty, gorgeous pipe organ, and those instruments hanging in the mid-air..., how could I say no? 🎧

