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It's important to know that there are many opinions about what is "good" or "correct" when it comes to sound and music reproduction. I personally use the Tune Method and rate it as the single most important method for evaluating the quality of music and speech reproduction. Not only is it a very simple and accurate method, it's also a common reference for me and my customers: If you are using this method you can be certain that the products and services that I offer make your system sound better. The method is best learnt by personal demonstration, but some people seem to get the hang of it just by following the instructions below.

The Tune Method

The Tune Method is a method for comparing two things against each other and determine which of the two performs best in musical terms. It can be two pieces of electronic equipment, two speaker positions in a room, two mains leads or any other part of a sound reproducing system or listening environment. When doing comparisons, you should never change more than one parameter at a time. If you do, it will be very difficult to draw any conclusions from the outcome of your comparison.

There is not much to discuss regarding the result, it's just a matter of Better or Worse. There may of course be other aspects of the sound that can be debated, but the outcome of a properly executed Tune Method comparison is always as simple as "this is more in tune than that".

The idea is that by focusing on your understanding of the music - or more specifically the melody or tune of the song - you are not distracted by details, the general sound character or other more subjective perceptions of the sound. The result of using the Tune Method can therefore be regarded as a short cut to what your opinion would be if you had listened to the two alternatives for a very long time. This is because your ears gradually get used to a certain sound, but what really determines how much you will enjoy your system is how easy it is for your brain to understand and appreciate the music being played.

Sound character is something very subjective, but whether the music is in tune or not is **not** subjective. What few people know is that sound systems perform very different in terms of how well they reproduce the

music in tune. And a system that is in tune can strongly communicate the emotional content of the music, give the listener a much more intense experience and will not cause listening fatigue.

How to do it

The method is not unlike the way some musicians tune their instruments. Imagine a skilled guitar player tuning his guitar by plucking three strings in succession: E, A, D.

He repeats the tones in his head to get an internal "reference" and focuses his hearing: E, A, D. He then changes the tension of the D string very slightly and plucks them again: E, A, D. Was that more in tune? Yes, that is more like it! If he isn't quite sure, he goes back to the first setting and compares it with the second. While the actual tuning of the instrument requires skill and experience, the difference between when the strings are in tune or not can be heard by almost anyone. The Tune Method therefore requires no "golden ear"! It is easily learned by anyone who can manage to focus on the music rather than the sound of the system.

In the version of this method adapted to hifi comparisons, you make comparisons using an A-A-B method while actively following or singing along with the tune of the song:

- * Play on component A while following or singing along to the main tune of the music. Play no more than about 10 to 20 seconds, because this amount of music is easiest to remember correctly.
- * Repeat the 10-20 seconds on component A (because it is usually a little easier to follow the tune the second time you hear it).
- * Now play the 10-20 seconds on component B.

Was it, with B, easier to follow or sing along with the tune or was it more difficult?

Did you feel that the melody was more "in tune" with B than with A?

Could you feel how other instruments (drums or percussion for example) were helping you to follow the tune (then B is better!) or were they slightly distracting or playing on their own? (Then A is better).

If you were feeling "yeah, that's how it goes!" the last time, then B is better. If you became puzzled and no longer really sure how the tune goes, it might indicate that A is better but you will perhaps have to do it again.

The better a system is at reproducing music and speech, the less your brain has to work to understand the message. The result is more enjoyment and lower stress levels. Therefore, a system that performs well in Tune Method terms is a system that is immediately enjoyable, that will broaden your taste in music (or movies) and will be used very often.

For the Tune Method comparison, you can use almost any type of music, with any type of instruments. It is, however, preferable if the song starts more or less immediately with a clearly distinguishable melody. Use each song for no more than a couple of comparisons, after that it will usually be easier with a new song.

It can often be easier to compare with songs that you have never heard before, otherwise you will already have the tune inside your head and that does not make the comparison any easier. Beware of old favourites! It is also strongly recommended to **stay away from audiophile recordings** and records that are supposed to sound sweet and nice. Music that is noisy and/or has been recorded with low quality can often be much easier to compare with. This is because your focus then shifts from the nice sound to what the musicians are trying to communicate.

Also, do stay on roughly the same spot in the room while you're listening. Which spot is irrelevant as long as it is the same on all three occasions (A, A and B). Many people find it easiest to use the Tune Method while standing **outside the room** that the music is being played in. This might appear strange, but when listening from another room, the fine details of the sound are less distracting and the focus is therefore shifted towards the fundamental qualities of the music.

Relaxed and focused

Whenever you start feeling tired, stop and do something else for a while. It's essential to feel relaxed and at ease when doing these comparisons. If you are not, you won't be able to focus on the music, which will tend to make you judge more by "feeling" – a method that also works sometimes, but not as reliably. Since you need to be relaxed and focused, the Tune Method is much more difficult to perform in so called blind tests. Any situation where you feel that someone is judging your performance will increase your stress levels and diminish your ability to focus on the music.

Please note, however, that blind tests can be arranged in a way that gives you full control over the music, the volume and the switching between A and B. When this is the case, the Tune Method works great and I regularly use such blind tests when developing new products.

With some practice, the Tune Method is very easy to use and the results are consistent and repeatable. It is also interesting to note that people who often disagree about sound quality almost always come to the same conclusions when they start using this method.

Common questions

The most common question I have received when demonstrating the Tune Method is this: Isn't it easier to follow the tune on a system which delivers less information? In other words; do systems that lack detail perform better when performing Tune Method comparisons?

The answer is no. It can easily be demonstrated that reducing the amount of information from a well performing system results in the tune being more difficult to follow. One of the simplest things is to remove a low frequency speaker, such as a properly installed subwoofer, from the system. This makes the system perform worse and the tune becomes more difficult to follow. The same thing happens when removing a very high frequency driver. It can also be shown that it is far easier to follow the tune while listening to the live performance of an artist than it is when listening to a recording of the same performance. Our hearing is made to perceive and analyse natural sounds. The less distorted the sounds are, the easier it is for our brains to interpret the information. And the more you will enjoy the music!