

# Aromatherapy and audiophools

In most fields of electronics charging £120 for a short piece of wire with a plug at either end would not win you many customers. The audiophile, or rather audiophool, business is different; it turns the rules of business – and of science – apparently on their head.

Let me explain, for those of you unfamiliar with this fascinating market.

Successful retailing, they say, is the painless extraction of money from the pockets of satisfied customers. This is normally achieved by providing them with goods at competitive prices that meet their genuine needs.

Supplying audiophools is different; it's akin to selling aromatherapy essences, or those copper bracelets that combat rheumatism.

It's a profitable business too, with apparently rational adults – all men by the way; womankind is honourably exonerated – spending serious amounts of money on something they cannot see, cannot feel and cannot justify the cost of.

No scientific backup is offered for the claims made for the betterment of music. If these traders were selling patent medicines, they'd be outlawed within weeks, but in audiophool circles the Trades Descriptions Act appears not to apply.

Looking through current British hi-fi magazines I see vendors offering:

- mains plugs with rhodium-plated pins for better audio listening;
- 'sublime' glass platter mats for sheer three-dimensional detail resolution;
- overlay mats for realising better sound from CDs;
- interconnects (you mustn't call them connecting leads any more, oh no!) made from oxygen-free copper with crystals aligned in the direction of the music;
- other interconnects containing 'a particular inorganic chemical' to

improve sonic qualities;

- replacement capacitors of guaranteed 'musical' sound quality;
- long-grain pure silver wire for building better amplifiers.

The strange thing is that most audiophools are not ignorant peasants; far from it. To be duped in this way implies significant material achievement (put another way, deep pockets) and a maturity of personal development that properly appreciates high-end sound and musicality, if not music for its own sake.

Music has to be chosen very carefully of course; most audiophools are aggressively analogue and will not countenance those silver beer mats. A few, however, will embrace CDs – so long as these are the remastered gold substrate variety. In either case, whatever individual preference the audiophool once had for music is now subjugated since he now listens only to reference recordings, for facilitating participation in comparisons with other audiophools.

In all this pursuit of aural excellence, the established techniques developed and proven over the years by audio professionals are studiously ignored. So signal cables made of sensible, affordable copper are rejected in favour of sexier affairs made of pure silver – or else of refined virgin unobtainium.

Sensible, solid XLR connectors with contacts having large surface areas are abandoned for slender phono plugs with expensive gold plating. Proper balanced audio cables with a grounded lapped foil screen are ignored in favour of interference-prone twin-line.

Design logic counts for little in the equipment too. Even though MOVs for eliminating mains-borne transients are very cheap, it would not occur to the manufacturer of a £1500 CD player to build suppression into the device. Instead the solution is sold as an outboard add-on –

naturally with an audiophool seal of approval. Its price is a drop in a bucket compared with the price of the other toys so vendors are laughing all the way to the bank.

The effects of mains-related quackery may be positively dangerous too.

There's a story – it may be urban legend – of one audiophool who short-circuited his house fuses in order to reduce the internal resistance of the mains supply, thus improving his equipment's voltage regulation.

His house burned down.

Responsibility for perpetrating all this pseudo-science lies with the audiophool journals. An unhealthy collusion between advertisers and publishers perpetuates this aura of mystique, with few titles prepared to prejudice their revenue stream by exposing the emperor's new clothes.

Sanity still exists in some quarters of course, particularly in the letters department of this very journal. Anything to do with audio that's loopy or even slightly subjective soon gets knocked down to Earth here.

Some refreshing candour is also appearing in some of the Internet discussion groups for high-end audio; one pundit recently suggested that for genuine 'liquid sound' the only solution was to use mercury-filled speaker cables – and then devalued this advice by admitting this was an April Fool's joke.

But perhaps we should live and let live. If aromatherapists or other practitioners of fringe medicine can successfully relieve suffering and make the world a happier place, then why shouldn't audiophools enjoy their expensive pleasures too? It's easy to misjudge people anyway; some audiophools regard 'professionals' as cloth-eared cretins, who are too stupid and/or deaf to appreciate the audio art at the (superior) audiophool level.

Keep smiling! ■

Andrew Emmerson