SoundStage!™
Product Review

GutWire Audio
MaxCon Power-Line Conditioner

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Review Summary

Sound

"Regardless of what I played, I found that the overall presentation seemed clearer with the MaxCon in my system, as if a small amount of smearing that I hadn't originally been aware of was removed."

Features

Machined and damped aircraft-grade-aluminum chassis; GutWire Electron Rectification Processing compensates "for instability of the AC current"; can be purchased with a choice of GutWire power cords.

Use

Only four outlets, so you'll have to use the MaxCon with select components or buy a second; no circuit breaker or surge protection.

Value

"The first conditioner that I've found to offer *real* improvement when used with big amps without sacrificing some level of their performance."

Power-line conditioners have come to the forefront of audio accessories, and with good reason. The amount of extraneous noise being jammed onto your trusty AC line by the plethora of devices that we now take for granted can be staggering. Consider that in my humble condominium building alone, my power gets polluted by some 165 other washers, dishwashers, refrigerators, computers, TVs and many, many other appliances and electronic goodies. You get the idea. The potential for signal-degrading noise to enter into your valuable audio system is huge, so using a line conditioner makes sense.

However, many people, myself included, have approached the concept of power conditioners with a touch of skepticism and doubt because of the often-negative sonic impact they can have on an audio system, sometimes brought about by their inability to pass suitable current to the gear in question, or because the devices themselves add their own level of coloration to the signal. This was largely the case with early devices of the breed; thankfully most if not all of these concerns have been banished by the current range of products on the market.

The introduction of the MaxCon power-line conditioner is perhaps a natural evolution for a company that made its name producing high-quality power cords, then branching into interconnects and speaker cables. One might have thought they would have progressed the other way around. However, GutWire chose to wait and work on a line conditioner that met their design criteria of offering little in the way of invasiveness and degradation to the AC line.

Inside the box

The MaxCon is a visually simple affair equipped with two filtered Hubbell HBL8200R 15-amp hospital-grade duplex outlets. The Furutech-supplied 15-amp IEC power inlet is of very high quality, being reportedly the only one of its type on the market with gold-plated terminals. The 11.5"L x 3"W x 3"D chassis of the MaxCon is rather less simple; it is made to extraordinary high levels of fit and finish from aircraft-grade aluminum, which is CNC milled to perfection and totally solid in every detail. I found the build quality to be absolutely top-notch.

The MaxCon is available in various combinations with GutWire power-cord offerings, from the entry-level Basic Clef ($899 USD), right up to the top-of-the-line X Clef ($2239). While not exactly inexpensive, the MaxCon falls somewhere into the middle ground of pricing for what's available in terms of power conditioning these

days. For this review, GutWire provided me with the new entry-level Basic Clef and also the middle-ground C Clef ($1239 for this combo) power cords to use with the MaxCon. The C Clef is also the power cord that left a highly favorable impression on me in my last exposure to the GutWire products.

GutWire has taken some rather elaborate steps to ensure that the MaxCon does not impede current transfer or inject any other deleterious effects into the AC. In order to compensate for instability of the AC current, GutWire employs a process called GERP (GutWire Electron Rectification Processing)—a purely passive filtering process—which uses no coils or transformers, therefore offering no transient delay, current limiting, or other sonic aberrations. The MaxCon is also internally wired with 16-gauge high-purity oxygen-free copper cable, each run being individually shielded for maximum RFI and EMI rejection. As with other GutWire products, all termination is by means of cold-welding, not soldering.

As a final but still important touch, GutWire has damped the entire chassis with special material to control any unwanted vibration and reduce resonance. Indeed, the unit yields a rather dead "thunk" sound when given a rap.

Context and use

The MaxCon saw use with my digital rig consisting of a Sonic Frontiers SFT-1 transport and Mark Levinson 360 D/A converter, as well as with my Blue Circle AG3000 preamp and BC8 mono amps. My system is wired with Gryphon Guideline Mk 2 balanced interconnects from DAC to preamp, and Transparent Balanced Music Link Super balanced from preamp to power amps. Speaker cables are biwire Transparent Music Wave Super. Speakers were B&W Nautilus 804s.

I've discovered that possibly the quickest method of finding out what impact a line conditioner is going to have on my system is to start with it on digital gear. For whatever reason, I tend to notice its impact—for better or worse—at this point in my system more than any other.

The MaxCon was quite a surprise. This deceptively simple-looking aluminum box had quite an impact on the overall presentation of my digital rig. The noise floor—good to begin with—dropped. This was highly evident on "Light My Fire" from Patricia Barber's *Modern Cool* [Premonition Records PREM-741-2], as the overall presentation became smoother and developed a tighter sense of focus. Barber's vocals took on a greater sense of purity, with better control of sibilance evident too.

Regardless of what I played, I found that the overall presentation seemed clearer with the MaxCon in my system, as if a small amount of smearing that I hadn't originally been aware of was removed. This didn't come at the expense of rounding off transients or dulling down the performance in any way. In fact, the lowered noise floor seemed to heighten the perceived microdynamics. Subtle information became more readily discernable in the bigger picture.

The other area of readily noticeable improvement came at the top end. Treble was more natural, less electronic-sounding, again in keeping with the overall perception that the MaxCon was removing a slight smearing. Bass performance, although not hugely affected, still reflected an improvement in articulation and clarity.

Power matters

Moving the MaxCon to my BC8 mono amps initially gave me a case of the heebie-jeebies. I'm one of those guys who feels big amps should get a healthy feeding of AC straight from the—preferably dedicated—AC outlet. Well, this is where I learned a lesson—that sometimes what we take for gospel isn't exactly the truth of the matter.

Initially after plugging my amps into the MaxCon, I thought that something was missing from the sound. In truth, after more extended listening, I came to realize that what was missing was that same small but noticeable amount of grain that had initially led to heightened sense of excitement without the MaxCon. With this grain now effectively gone, my BC8s took flight, soaring to new levels of clarity and focus.

Willie Nelson's duet with Kid Rock on "Last Stand in Open Country" from *The Great Divide* [Universal 586231] begs to be listened to at substantial volume levels. With the MaxCon on the BC8s, I found I wanted to listen to this track *even louder*; and with the reduction of grain, this track took on new levels of punch and impact. Willie's and Kid Rock's vocals were wonderfully separated out from the punchy backing rhythm track and guitar

licks. This track went a long way toward alleviating my fears that the MaxCon would choke the amps' ability to dig deep and work hard when needed.

Similarly, quieter passages now seemed, well, quieter. By this I'm not just implying the difference in micro- and macro-level presentation, but also that the background seemed blacker, allowing the presentation to stand in more bold relief. A wonderful example of this is "Cold Cold Heart" from Norah Jones' *Come Away with Me* [Blue Note 7243 5 32088 2 0]. Jones' voice just blossomed from a seemingly infinitely black background, while the piano seemed almost delicate and fragile in accompaniment. Bass response was also assisted, with a subtle but again still noticeable improvement noted in terms of tautness and articulation, similar to the change I noted while the MaxCon was used with my digital components.

Comparison

My long-term power conditioner has been the AudioPrism Foundation II ($540), which I've always used primarily with my source components and preamp. Although I have used it with my amplifiers too, I've always somehow found myself migrating back to using it only with the front-end of my system, perhaps due to a subconscious feeling that it always seemed to contribute more appropriately at that end of the chain.

Both the MaxCon and the Foundation II offer a similar level of noise reduction in the overall presentation; however, the MaxCon seemed to have the edge in reducing the aforementioned touch of smearing going on in the upper registers, adding more in the way of focus and stability to the sonic presentation. Ultimately, it was on my BC8s that the MaxCon proved its worth over the AudioPrism. With the amplifiers, the Foundation II, while no slouch in assisting with lowering the perceived background-noise level, just didn't offer the same level of refinement as that of the MaxCon in terms of cleaning up the upper registers.

One area of functionality that the AudioPrism Foundation II does offer over the MaxCon is the accommodation of more equipment, with eight dedicated outlets offered for digital, sources, and high-current amplifiers, versus the four non-specific outlets on the MaxCon. In addition, the Foundation II offers a circuit breaker in case of overload or surge on the line. The MaxCon offers no such function (or surge protection for that matter).

Ultimately, in my own configuration I settled on using the AudioPrism up front for source and preamp and the MaxCon with the amplifiers, largely due to the fact that the MaxCon is the first conditioner that I've found to offer *real* improvement when used with big amps without sacrificing some level of their performance.

Conclusion

While not inexpensive, the GutWire MaxCon power-line conditioner offers a high level of performance in an easy-to-manage, compact chassis. Limited only by having four outlets available, it is nevertheless a reasonably priced option if you have a system with few components or are willing to use it with only amplifiers, for example. I would suggest either the GutWire C Clef or Power Clef SE cords as minimums for current-hungry amplifiers. Use of the Basic Clef and other models would certainly fill the bill for source components.

While the MaxCon won't solve all of an audio system's perceived problems, it will help a good system reveal more of its ultimate capabilities. In the case of my Blue Circle BC8 amps, it was *the* accessory to help them realize more of their full potential; and with both amps and digital gear, it subtracted the grunge without killing the music. Maximum consonance, indeed.

Company Info

Gutwire Audio MaxCon Power-Line Conditioner
Price: $899 USD with Basic Clef power cord;
other GutWire power cords available at increased cost.
Warranty: Lifetime for original owner.

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GutWire's Basic Clef

As a companion to the MaxCon line conditioner, GutWire sent along both the new Basic Clef ($199 per 65" length) and C Clef ($549 per 65" length) power cords. In my last foray with the GutWire products, the C Clef made a strong impression for its exceptional price:performance ratio, so GutWire thought it only wise to include one in the package of goodies this time around, feeling it would be a good benchmark for me to reference the performance of the new Basic Clef.

The yellow-sheathed Basic Clef is the only power cord in the GutWire lineup that doesn't use Wattgate connectors. To bring this model in at its price point, GutWire chose to use the Schurter 15-amp IEC connector in a smaller .65"-diameter cable format. While still using a Hubbell 6255 AC connector and high-purity oxygen-free copper for its conductors, the Basic Clef lacks the higher-priced models' proprietary wire treatments. Using correspondingly fewer smaller conductors and a reduced level of shielding has managed to bring the price down but still keep the Basic Clef a GutWire product through and through. Still, there is the ability to float the outer-shield ground, which is a feature of all GutWire power cords and some of the company's interconnects too.

While I'm still biased toward the prowess of the C Clef cord, the Basic Clef is a welcome addition to the GutWire product line. It offers an excellent level of noise rejection for the money, giving the partnering component a sense of balance and refinement. Bass performance is also firmed up, with good control evident. The greatest selling point, however, is the reduction in haze in the treble range and overall sense of improvement imparted versus a stock power cord. While not sounding quite as open as the C Clef or quite as authoritative in the bass, the Basic Clef still manages to be a viable upgrade, particularly at such an attractive price point.

Using the Basic Clef with the MaxCon made a good case for use with source components, particularly since you could pass the Basic Clef to another component and upgrade the power cord on the MaxCon as funds permit, thereby achieving a two-fold upgrade for the price of one additional power cord. While I'm comfortable giving the nod to the Basic Clef for source components, if you're looking for a power cord for your power amp or perhaps have more money to spend, consider the C Clef. It's the neglected middle child of the GutWire line, and as such deserves your attention.

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