

Critical Mass Systems CenterStage^{2M} footer

by Alan Sircom

A couple of years ago, I heard the Critical Mass Systems CenterStage². These clever feet took the longest time to work their craft, in fact often sounding truly awful for a few days before turning into something consistently remarkable. When the new CenterStage^{2M} (hereafter, referred to as 'CS^{2M}') arrived, I mistakenly thought that perhaps the change would speed up that process of working with the product. I was wrong; you need to devote a week to 10 days of things sounding just plain 'wrong' before they go so very, very right.

Aside from the change to the name on the side of each foot, there are few clues as to what's changed from the outside. Inside, things are different. In developing the original, it became clear that what applied to making electronics sound superb didn't quite work so well for loudspeakers. Ultimately,

where making gasket material down to one-thousandth of an inch tolerances was fine for electronics, the loudspeakers required tolerances an order of magnitude tighter... and when that sort of gasket tolerance was reapplied to the devices sitting under audio electronics, the improvement was so significant the CS^{2M} was born.

Of course, it's not quite that simple. I spoke to Joseph Lavrencik, the sharp-of-mind guy behind Critical Mass Systems. He suggested that "The original CS² was finalised using an additive approach; keep adding material until there was just enough grip to control the soundstage. CS^{2M} was developed using a subtractive approach; remove material until images were solidly layered and musically accurate." This proved not to be a subtle change, he says, adding that, "Using this approach, we could actually move the centre image backward and forward in space until the detail was precisely ►



“The big change is a considerably more holographic sound, coupled to a sense of balance and order that makes the system seem less ‘untamed’.”

- correct relative to the size and ‘weight’ of the ancillary images across a broad spectrum of music.”

The basic operation of the original CS² holds with the CS^{2M}. They act to mitigate surface-borne vibration, while cancelling out their own potential to add noise. The long wait while they make things sound worse is because – as Critical Mass Systems suggests – they transfer entropy out of the component itself. Once in a state of equilibrium, they stay that way, which brings me to my biggest problem with both the CS² and CS^{2M}; the impatient box-swappers of audio will seldom give themselves ten days grace to let the system deroogelate itself (no real terms exist for this process, so I knitted my own). And those of us who have a high review churn rate will get to enjoy what the CS^{2M} can do to an entire system about once or twice a year.

Here’s the deal. If you have a good system on a well-built equipment table and using ‘honest’ neutral cables, put the right sized CS^{2M} footers under one or more components, then wait a week to ten days to let them do their thing. If your system sports any kind of tweaks, strip it back to basics before you try the CS^{2M}. You probably won’t be able to spend a week to ten days without listening, so you might find your system moving between sounding focused excellent and sounding, er, like it sunk a bottle of port the night before and isn’t feeling too skippy right now. Anyone used to running in Naim amps will feel right at home here. After a few days, the amplitude of those good/bad oscillations begins to get smaller, and it now varies between how the system used to sound and how it will ultimately end up sounding.

And how it ends up sounding is very good indeed. The big change is a considerably more holographic sound, coupled to a sense of balance and order that makes the system seem less ‘untamed’ by comparison to the raw products. This is no small change; it’s like your electronics just took a very big step up in performance, and while it’s unlikely that someone is ever going to use a set of feet that cost more than the thing that sits on those feet, it works extremely well across the board. My go-to Primare I35 Prisma is a perfect example; partnering it with four 0.8 feet works out at about 1/3rd the cost of the amplifier. That might seem like a bitter pill to swallow, but if you try it, the level of improvement in terms of soundstage space, refinement and focus to the sound make it an easy choice.

Of course, the better the system, the more elegant the sound and the wider the soundstage, but the improvement seems consistent from product to product and those with smaller price tags can sometimes have a surprising amount to give.

Comparisons between old and new are inherently complicated here; you essentially need to listen to your system with the originals, log that sound away for ten days before you compare it to the new feet. There is no provision for A-B swaps, especially as the product seems to hold its equilibrium state for as long as a day or so after being removed from either set of feet. Nevertheless, despite the inherent hiatus involved, it’s clear that the CS^{2M} does all the things the CS² does and does them better. Often a lot better. The sound has greater dimensionality and weight; it’s also even calmer than before.

Maybe the oddest thing about the difference between the two is the way it makes you feel toward the music being played; both make your system more relaxing sounding, but CS^{2M} makes that a more reflective process. Music is a cerebral, yet impassioned experience through both sets of feet, but where this was a ‘refinement’ process with CS², it’s a ‘refinement and contemplative’ process. Beethoven has a calming, blood-pressure lowering effect on me at the best of times, but with the CS^{2M} it made me even less inclined to chew through the restraints.

Critical Mass Systems made something truly remarkable with the Center Stage² and with the Center Stage^{2M}, the bar gets raised still further. ‘M’ takes your system to the Max! ➕

PRICES AND CONTACT DETAILS

Center Stage^{2M} 0.8 (20×38mm): £275 per foot

Center Stage^{2M} 1.0 (35×38mm): £525 per foot

Center Stage^{2M} 1.5 (38×51mm): £775 per foot

Manufacturer: Critical Mass Systems

URL: criticalmasssystems.com

UK Distributor: Select Audio

URL: selectaudio.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1900 601954