



ZWO



In search of lost music

Subbase Audio tackles the topic of "Clean power" with an unexpectedly different approach.

Eight instruments fill a room. They are pouring out delicate vibrations and carefully measured energy. Behind them people are listening to each other and perhaps even with each other. The Consortium Classicum is playing Franz Schubert's Octet. Chamber music in an oversized format, almost as long as Beethoven's Ninth, but also in the figurative sense: this is quite simply great music. (CD, MDG 3010768-2). The label's typical aesthetic sound comes to the fore: the recording location has real presence, the interplay is well captured and there is no spotlight on individual musicians in exposed passages. It feels like a concert hall where the sounds blend naturally, rather than a studio recording where the instruments are often sharply juxtaposed in barely overlapping segments. The CD came out in 1997. I've had it for about as long and played it in many combinations of systems. That makes it a kind of reference for me. But it doesn't sound typically audiophile. Now, with the Vividus Zwo in my collection, nothing spectacular happens but there is something decisively different. Everything seems even more authentic. The five string instruments and the horn, bassoon and clarinet are all stable and clearly delineated. The separation from the background is more successful than ever. Whereby "background" doesn't really hit the nail on the head. It's more about the relationship between the instruments and the space, which is traced more clearly. The image gains depth, but not in an exaggerated way; rather, the spatial boundaries emerge more sharply at the sides and the rear. And then there are the timbres. I find them more realistic than ever. Despite the somewhat velvety sound that characterises most MDG CDs, the Detmold recordings never sound colourful or even garish, thanks to the deep purring of the double bass, the combination of metal and warmth in the horn and the vividness of the clarinet, this special mixture of the focussing hardness of the grenadilla wood, and the flexibility of Dieter Klöcker's playing. With the Vividus Zwo in in my collection, this recording whose unpretentious transparency I have always appreciated, is even more nuanced. Eight musicians - a single sound cosmos.

Why does the Vividus Zwo hang in my system at all? In my article on the Audionet Watt I touched on the subject of "grounding"





(*image hifi* 1/2022). Thereupon a reader told me about his experiences with the MMGA grounding plug and a ground box from Subbase Audio. So I gave them a call.

But some situations turn out to be different than expected. Thomas Schlipper had moved on in the meantime and had just opened a new chapter with his Vividus Zwo. A pre-production model was ready. Did I want to try it out? Of course I did. So I travelled to the Vellbrüggen estate and spent a few hours in the Subbase Audio listening room. From then on, for me, the Vividus Zwo was THE central topic of discussion, because how the developer has gradually cleaned up the sound in his system (which included speakers from Kroma and electronics from CH Precision), through elements like the Vividus Zwo and the MMGA plug, was so inspiring that I really wanted to talk about it. Every step made it sound less artificial, less and less noisy, more focussed, simply

cleaner. I found Thomas Schlipper to be a person who, in everything he does at Subbase Audio, is in search of the original quality of the music signal. He is not interested in tuning in the sense of adapting the sound to a particular taste, but in purism: i.e. making the sound as free from distorting influences as possible. But are we still grounding in the case of the Vividus Zwo? In German, we could speak of "optimised grounding". This has been playing an increasingly important role in (ultra) high-end audio for some years now. Perhaps our sensitivity has grown, or our problems, or our knowledge, or all of them combined. It's about more than consistent grounding, as I experienced with the system of mains cables plus distributor from Audio Optimum, for example (*image hifi* 3/2019), and also about more than synchronising the device grounds of a CD player and amplifier as in the Bridge Audio chain (*image hifi* 4/2014). Thomas Schlipper told me of an extreme example. A dealer friend of his had three grounding



Players

Turntable: Transrotor Orfeo Doppio with TMD bearing **Tone arms:** SME 3500, VPI JMW 12.5 **Pickup:** Transrotor Figaro, Audio-Technica VM 540 ML **Phono preamplifier:** SAC Entrata Disco **SACD player/DAC:** Marantz SA-11 S3 **Integrated amplifier:** YBA Genesis IA3 **Speakers:** Q Acoustics Concept 500 **Cables:** Mainly HMS Gran Finale, but also Colours of Sound "White Bird" **Accessories:** LAB 12 Gordian mains filter, Aqvox Switch SE, Solid-Tech rack, self-built turntable console, record cleaning machine from Pro-Ject, outer ring from Josef Will, wall sockets and fuses from Groneberg

tubes installed - six, nine and twelve metres long and deep into the ground. An investment that you would be unlikely to consider privately. But it supposedly paid off with a deep black and quiet sound.

The DIY scene and some manufacturers have been experimenting with copper plates and tourmaline for years. Thomas Schlipper takes a different approach. He wants to clean the electrical signal mechanically. Sounds absurd? I thought so too, but then I remembered the Eichmann power cables. The company has become known for its low-metal plugs (bullet plugs) and is not known for any form of charlatanism. A specially moulded aluminium strand was used as a resonator in their Express Power AC. The mechanical-acoustic component was designed to allow the clean mains frequency of 50 Hertz to pass through and bring "dirty frequencies" into line. In terms of sound, the Express Power AC was utterly convincing (*image hifi* 2/2008). Subbase Audio is therefore neither the first nor the only company to optimise power through resonance tuning. We can therefore forget the voodoo card that some people like to pull out when it comes to ideas beyond conventional audiophile medicine: especially so because Thomas Schlipper is always willing to explain his actions and back them up with scientific arguments. What does this look like in practice? The Vividus Zwo has no need of a power socket, but it does need an earth connection to all devices in the system. It is often sufficient to replace a housing screw with a copper screw from Subbase Audio and connect the Vividus cable. Thomas Schlipper provides customised support for exotic thread sizes and other problems. There is always a solution, he assures us.

And then you have to adjust your own expectations. The stereo panorama does not become larger, but more coherent. The music



An interview with Thomas Schlipper from Subbase Audio

Heinz Gelking: I realise that the ground is relevant as a reference point for the audio signal. That's why most developers focus on consistent grounding. But as a rule, they work towards the protective conductor or grounding. That said, the Vividus Zwo has no connection at all. Why not?

Thomas Schlipper: No, I'm not pursuing any grounding concept with the Vividus Zwo, nor do I touch the function of the protective conductor - after all, it is essential for safety. The Vividus Zwo works like a bypass: It collects the potential currents on all the devices connected to it and feeds them into a resonance tuning process.

Heinz Gelking: Where does the scepticism come from about concepts that optimise the connection to the house earthing? They are obvious. And tried and tested ...

Thomas Schlipper: Yes, but we must not forget that the earthing connection does not function like a diode and only releases high-frequency interference. The path is also open in the opposite direction! And because the earth's surface in densely populated areas is contaminated to a depth of three metres by the foundation or ring earth electrodes of the houses and the corresponding earth currents as well as the mobile phone network, good earthing and grounding has a positive effect. But depending on the intensity of the load, it can also create new problems in the system. I fear that there is a widespread belief that potential currents and high-frequency interference can somehow be dissipated, filtered out or eliminated. In my opinion, this is a basic mistake because all power supply units within a system constantly generate new potential currents that are exchanged between the devices. So you can never completely get rid of the potential currents and other high-frequency inputs. That's why I want to influence them in such a way that they no longer interfere with the sound.

Heinz Gelking: Through resonance tuning? The word was used earlier. How is that supposed to work? The problem is electrical, so how can the solution be mechanical?

Thomas Schlipper: Yes, it's confusing at first. But if you change perspective or simply reverse it, it no longer sounds so puzzling. The fact that hi-fi devices and loudspeakers sound better when carefully positioned is something that every audiophile has probably already experienced. In these cases, we already have a mechanical effect on the electrical current or signal current, with a sonic effect. This is also well documented scientifically under the term "microphonics". It works the same the other way round.

Heinz Gelking: Well, we can see how kinetic energy is turned into an electrical signal when we play back records, but what about mechanics for filtering an electrical current?



Thomas Schlipper: No, that's a misunderstanding. I don't filter. I did that with the predecessor model of the Vividus. Filtering only ever works in a defined frequency range, but not with broadband. And it takes something away - energy, for example. The concepts of Vividus and Vividus Zwo are very different from each other in this respect. With the Vividus Zwo, I clean the current via a mechanical coupling. "Clean" means tuned to the resonance, harmonised, regulated in such a way that HF interference and other noise components no longer interfere with the system.

Heinz Gelking: How did you come up with the idea?

Thomas Schlipper: The idea came from two sources. Some time ago I tried out a power strip called PSD from the S.I.N. Audio Boutique for three weeks. The PSD uses resonance tuning to convert unwanted frequencies into harmonic frequencies. There are no electrical components or filters in the power path. I was so impressed by the power strip that I bought it and have since

sold it. It soon occurred to me that I could pursue a similar approach to resonance tuning and harmonisation with my Subbase écho LS, which I developed in 2006, and that this would actually provide me with a technology that could possibly be further developed for current shapers. That said, I did not focus on the incoming current, but instead considered the system as a complex system of different devices that exchange signals with each other. The exchange concerns not only the signals, but also unwanted interference in the potential current. I deliberately focussed on the housing masses and not the masses of the signal conductors.

Heinz Gelking: Why should the quality of the cable connections between the devices and the Vividus Zwo still play a role? Isn't a bell wire enough? It's not about the music signal.

Thomas Schlipper: That's too simplistic. The pure function can be produced using simple cables, but cables and Vividus Zwo together naturally form a capacitor. Parameters such as resistance also have an effect. In terms of sound flat silver conductors in oil-soaked silk have proved to be best. Two of these cables, fitted with fork terminals, are therefore always included in the pack.

Heinz Gelking: What are you prepared to reveal about the technology of the Vividus Zwo here? The housing is so hermetically sealed that it was impossible for our photographer to take pictures inside.

Thomas Schlipper: And that's deliberate. Not out of secrecy, but because the resonance tuning via various parameters is done by me personally once and for all. The Vividus Zwo represents an overall composition, adjusted by ear. It is then sealed and no changes should or must ever be made again. In this respect, the concept is sustainable. It does not age and does not break down. Electronic components are not included.

Heinz Gelking: What's inside?

Thomas Schlipper: The currents are channelled through carbon plates, which in turn are connected to various precious woods and metals. Shielding made of mu-metal and metal and the tightening torques of screws also play a role. Not to speak of the integrity of the housing itself, which is milled from a block of aluminium. The basis for everything is our subbase écho-technology.

Heinz Gelking: Do you pursue an ideal sound?

Thomas Schlipper: For me, the ideal system is like an instrument that amplifies the sound but has no sound of its own. Energy, colours, rhythms, interactions and flow - everything should unfold so authentically that the brain doesn't have to compensate for any mistakes and you can experience the music in its purest form.

Heinz Gelking: Thank you very much for the interview.



Cables connect the housing masses of all components to the Vividus Zwo. Two of the blue ones with flat silver conductors in oil-soaked silk, are included in the delivery package. The green Signature version uses other materials, including fine gold (999); it was not yet available for us to test. All cables are customised by Subbase Audio assembled as required, for example with spade lugs. The easiest way to do this is to replace a housing screw with a copper-plated one and screw the fork lug onto it. Attaching an earthing terminal is also conceivable. "There's always a solution," promises Thomas Schlipper

doesn't get louder, but the internal dynamic differentiation increases.

The colours do not become brighter, but more credible. The cross-check shows that Vividus Zwo debunks certain sound characteristics as artefacts to which we have become accustomed. When I removed the Vividus Zwo from the system for a time I had to concentrate more in order to understand the texts from Arnold Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* declaimed by Marianne Pousseur. At the same time, delicate tones from the piano, flute and violin had more difficulty disentangling themselves from

the fog of interference and sounded more fuzzy. The highly esteemed recording with Ensemble Musique Oblique and Philippe Herreweghe (CD, HMA 1951390) sounded a touch mushier and more nervous, less finely developed and less focussed. This is certainly "big-time whinging", because my Gordian from LAB 12 certainly had a positive effect on the sig-

nal purity. But even in this constellation the Vividus Zwo still made a difference (I simply treated the mains filter as a component and connected it to the Vividus Zwo). Another practical tip: it's worth connecting even small peripheral devices like the Aqvox Switch SE, which even has an earthing terminal, to the Vividus Zwo.

The Vividus Zwo fulfils exactly what Thomas Schlipper promises. You can delve deeper into the music

because it dissipates the background noise. It doesn't focus on specific points, but improves the entire system. Needless to say this comes at a hefty price. It's not my job to defend it. But, to draw a comparison, you could get a beautiful instrument made by a master violin maker or a branded piano made in Europe for 12,000 euros. But I understand the reason. Fine materials, processed with a rigorous demand for perfection, plus a sales and dealer

margin, not to mention a profit for the manufacturer and a payoff for the development work. Thomas Schlipper explained that even if he did cut back on production quality this would hardly reduce the price (and that the processing is in part relevant to the sound, for example the fully milled housing). Looking at my components, most of which cost around 4000 euros new, I can simply forget about buying a Vividus Zwo. It would be about as appropriate for my room as a glass of champagne and oysters in the standing area of a football stadium. Nonetheless, the Vividus Zwo has provided me with hi-fi and musical experiences that

I will not forget in a hurry. And I'm not writing this review simply for myself. Some of our readers have much more sophisticated equipment in their collections - it's easy to lay out 50,000 euros or 100,000 euros quickly if you can, and it's much better value than buying a sports car. All the same I would recommend anyone who has already found a satisfactory acoustic solution to give Vividus Zwo a try. It can round off an exquisite set of equipment and fulfil audiophile yearnings far beyond typical hifi criteria.

By the way I should mention that the word "Zwo" is not colloquial German for "Two", but in this case stands for "a further level of optimisation". Spot on. All in all, having listened to the results and getting

used to them over a long test period, I can say that this is equipment of the highest class and indispensable for connoisseurs. It's a good thing that, due to the usual Christmas stress for amateur musicians, I shall be rehearsing a lot in the coming weeks and will have very little time to listen to music. But during the turn of the year I shall try to get used to the normal level of my equipment without the help of Vividus Zwo. It won't be easy.

Power Treatment Subbase Audio Vividus Zwo

Principle: Power treatment by combining the housing masses, mechanical coupling and resonance tuning (without filter effect, without its own power connection) **Delivery package:** Vividus Zwo with two Vividus cables (192 cm); other Vividus cables with 120 cm - 1200 Euro, 150 cm - 1560 Euro, 192 cm - 1950 Euro (lengths up to 500 cm possible) **Dimensions (B/H/T):** 25/12/15 cm **Weight:** 7 kg **Guarantee:** 5 years **Price:** 11970 Euro

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