

## Vertex AQ Pico

by Alan Sircom

**A**ny discussion of the Pico by Vertex AQ is ultimately as much about the philosophy of listening, as it is about audio electronics. The Pico blocks (and for that matter, the Jaya power filters) are absolutely core to the Vertex AQ ethos. They can be introduced to almost any system with no need to physically change anything else in the system, and if you ‘get’ what the Picos do to a system, the rest of the Vertex AQ systematic approach will fall quickly into place. If they don’t... maybe the whole systematic approach concept is not for you. Such is the Pico’s intrinsic property and relationship to Vertex AQ’s basic concepts.

Vertex AQ calls the Picos ‘Grounding Blocks’. That might make one mistake this concept for electrical grounding, or even acoustic grounding. The conventional electrical grounding remains untouched in the system for obvious not-wishing-to-die reasons. Similarly acoustic grounding is beyond the abilities of a little box, requiring instead rebuilding the whole house around the audio system. No, Pico is grounding in terms of radio frequency and vibration. The Pico create a safe exit pathway for these potentially deleterious intrusions upon our musical enjoyment, like a labyrinthine Pied Piper.

Microphony, radio-frequency, and electromagnetic interference are the sources of many a system’s poor performance, claims Vertex AQ. Vibration from a transformer, for example, can create microphonic effects in capacitors in the audio chain, and simply isolating that transformer, even to the point of placing it in its own separate chassis, can never entirely alleviate this source of microphony. Vertex

AQ believes this microphony can ultimately alter the waveform of the system’s audio signal, ‘smearing’ percussion and undermining phase integrity. Similarly, Vertex AQ’s in-house investigations point to RFI and EMI being able to undermine the overall transparency of the system, and with Wi-Fi and switch-mode power supplies springing up everywhere (not just in the audio chain), things are only getting worse! ▶

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- ▶ The Pico blocks, like all Vertex AQ components, are designed to overcome these twin problems afflicting audio systems. Put simply, they provide a grounding to sink microphony and RF/EM interference; Vertex AQ calls such devices ‘noise syphons’, and they are designed to ground vibration in the most vibration-inducing components – loudspeakers and transformers - and prevent that vibration from ringing up and down the system.

There are three flavours of Pico, and we had two of them. The first is the Pico Component Grounding Block, which features a pair of line-level sockets and some interconnects that you attach to unused line-level sockets on any source component or amplifier. The second is the Pico Binding Posts Grounding Block, which mount to the back of your amplifier or loudspeaker. Although it might be possible to use just one of these Binding Post blocks, by connecting one terminal of the left and right channel at the amp end, in reality most people will stump up for one Pico per channel, with the blocks sitting close to the loudspeakers.

Similarly, while you can share one Pico Component block between two audio devices, typically people will use a block for each component. In essence, the Picos contain an acoustic absorption labyrinth and various EMI and RFI reduction techniques. And note that the leads provided have matched acoustic properties and are sleeved with EMI reduction materials – they are very much part of the Pico technology and other leads should not be used. The missing device is the much larger ‘Six-Way’ Component Grounding Block, which as the name suggests goes from two line-level sockets to six separate grounding lines. We used a pair of Component and a pair of Binding Post Picos, and used them in systems appropriate to such a roll-out (a source, an integrated amplifier, and a pair of loudspeakers).

We also had a pair of Jaya mains filters in the mix. These are old favourites in the *Hi-Fi+* offices, and we won’t go too deep into their actions, except to say they are used next to the system on power sockets, rather than in the audio system chain. In a way, the actions of the Jaya and Pico are similar, in that they both stand outside the system and act inwards.

Interestingly, what we aren’t going to discuss at all is the systems to which these devices were connected. Let’s just leave it at ‘source, integrated amplifier, and a pair of loudspeakers’. The reason for this is manifold. I don’t wish to make people think that this applies to specific systems and not to others (I found through experimentation that the Pico/Jaya mix works universally, and that those who can’t, don’t, or won’t hear it, are unable to hear it on any equipment). In addition, I don’t want claims of ‘stacking the deck’ by making a system uniquely susceptible to the Pico and Jaya’s effects. Then, I don’t want this effect to be given some kind of price floor or price ceiling, reinforced by the equipment the Vertex AQ system was used with (if we put this with a system worth £x, there is a natural tendency for those with systems costing more than £x to think their systems are better, and the Pico/Jaya paring won’t improve performance, and those with systems less than £x will claim it’s ‘too rich for their blood’ – neither is the case). Perhaps most interestingly, the idea of reviewing the sound of a system without a system is oh, so very Zen Koan. ▶

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▶ As common with good equipment, but especially important in the case of Vertex AQ, the ‘short, sharp shock’ of quick-fire A-B demonstrations is not recommended. To some, this means an almost immediate rejection of the Vertex AQ concepts, on the grounds that if a change is too subtle to be heard in rapid A-B comparison, it doesn’t exist. End of story. Although there are counter-arguments to drawing all your conclusions from such snap judgements from auditory neuroscience, psychology, and signal detection theory, many are so firmly bonded to the rapid A-B switching test that no such other methodology will find traction. If you can get past the quick-fire A-B test, however, you may find the actions of the Pico and Jaya are a subtle, yet ultimately persuasive, force for good in your audio system.

The methodology selected by Vertex AQ to test any of their products is different to quick-fire A-B, then, but every bit as repeatable. It involves inserting the relevant Vertex AQ product or products into your system for a couple of weeks or more, not focusing on how that product has changed or shaped the sound, or even how your musical listening has changed during the period the Vertex AQ equipment is in place. Then, when the time comes to remove the equipment, at that point listen critically to how your system sounds. If, in the process, you find the removal of components you find the system has changed its performance, and you don’t like what you hear, you have taken your first step toward the systematic approach promoted by the likes of Vertex AQ. Over time, this ‘evaluate on removal’ methodology becomes both intrinsic to the way you select equipment, and gets a little quicker.

Of course, this typically means a good working relationship with a friendly dealer, because you can’t assess this kind of systemic change to audio evaluation in a demonstration room, or even on a weekend’s loan. You need, at least at first, to be able to borrow these components for weeks rather than hours, to see how they work, and whether they have an influence on your own listening.

If you are receptive to hearing what Pico can do, just what can it do? Strangely, it isn’t system dependent. It makes your system ‘straighten up and fly right’, and does so by bringing it more into line with what’s commonly considered good sound. I think the majority of systems could be considered ‘mostly good’, otherwise they wouldn’t be put together as systems.

They are just slightly off-kilter, and that off-kilter performance often gets worse as we try to compensate by spending our way out of a crisis. Pico attempts to put that off-kilter sound back on track, and the effect is cumulative; more Pico boxes, more course correction. Add the Jayas and the correction increases still further.

To paraphrase the adverts for Berocca effervescent vitamineral supplements that periodically spring up on UK television screens, “Your system, but on a really good day!” This is why you are faced with a system review without a system, because Pico’s effect is convergent. Systems with a spot of brightness are slightly less bright. Those that are a little lead-footed get a little faster and tighter. Sibilant loudspeakers don’t focus on the sibilance as much as they used to.

This applies across the board. Although many systems are ‘mostly good’, few are ‘all good’, and most could do with some subtle rebalancing in a way. Whether it’s to get rid of that slight upper bass thickness, giving the soundstage a little bit more separation, or increasing the overall detail levels slightly, most of our systems need a tune up at times. And that’s precisely what Pico boxes offer.

How profound you find the change brought about from Pico boxes seems in part dependent on the perception of the user. In a way, the action is a little like a drug that has an effect stronger than placebo, but its effect is moderated by the user’s belief in the efficacy of the drug. This sounds impossible, but is commonly considered to be how diazepam works. Some will hear huge differences in using Pico boxes, some will hear ‘nuanced’ differences, but most will hear differences unless they are resolutely determined not to.

What you may need to do after spending some time listening to the Pico boxes in place, and especially if you use them with the Jayas, is reposition your loudspeakers. This is because the Vertex AQ effect is frequently one of letting your system work unconstrained; not held back by the amplifier’s grip (or lack thereof) on the bass drivers, or the drivers interaction with room and system. You may find you end up bringing your loudspeakers slightly further into the room, as if the room can suddenly ‘handle’ a little more bass energy.

This adjustment to the speaker position for optimum bass can make the Vertex AQ overall re-thinking process seem fundamentally at odds with some people’s system design ▶

criteria. Some will come to terms with this and discover in the process that they had gone off on an audiophile tangent some years previously. Others will find the process too disruptive.

It might sound counter-intuitive, but spending money on devices like Pico and Jaya could save you money elsewhere. The Vertex AQ approach largely does away with component upgrades, and endless tonal 'patching up' from using cables as tone controls. Eventually, of course, you will end up changing electronic components or loudspeakers in the system, but with this approach firmly locked into your noodle, the chances of making yet another series of poor decisions are minimised. You can still upgrade, but you upgrade less, and you upgrade wisely. In the process, you might spend a lot on Vertex AQ and Leading Edge products, but this should all cost less than rebuilding your system over and over again.

Vertex AQ's Pico is an easy upgrade to make, because it doesn't involve any unplugging of existing components, just adding Picos to components and loudspeakers. Similarly, adding Jaya power boxes involves nothing more than plugging them into an adjacent power socket, without changing anything else in the system. Just because they are easy to fit, though, doesn't make Vertex AQ's improvements any less significant. Try the Picos for a week or two, and you may just find yourself taking a first step toward a whole new audio paradigm! +

## PRICES AND CONTACT DETAILS

Vertex AQ Pico Component Grounding Block

Price: £399

Vertex AQ Pico Binding Post Grounding Block

Price: £799

Vertex AQ HiRez Jaya power filter

Price: £1,165

Manufactured by: Vertex AQ

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