



# My audio system was reborn!

## Introducing Stirling Trayle, the audio systems optimization expert

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Unless you are new to Hi-Fi, you would know what makes up a good audio system is more than just equipment or cables. Setup and optimization are equally important. Many audiophiles understand the importance of optimization, but how many would put it on very high priority, even higher than equipment, in their checklist? Moreover, even if one knows that optimization is important, the know-how is often a big question mark.

What if audio system optimization is a paid service? Are you willing to spend money on service as much as you would spend on a piece of audio accessories or cables?

In the last Munich High End show in May 2019, I bumped into Roy Gregory, Editor of Audio Beat, Europe. He mentioned that he has a friend who is an expert in optimizing audio systems for his clients. His name is Stirling Trayle. What he does is optimizing system by means of servicing, calibration and positioning of audio components so that it performs as best as it could. In the process, Trayle will disassemble every single component from the system. He

will clean each of them in and out. Unless the chassis is too complicated to open, he will open it and remove dust inside too. He will deoxidize all the contact points carefully. Every Hi Fi rack will also be recalibrated and balanced. At the end, he will make sure all the components are placed on the rack absolutely levelled. After all, the distribution of components on the rack and the positions of loudspeakers are the key focuses.

Roy Gregory told me that Trayle has earned very good reputation in many countries. His clients include clients of Wilson Audio, Rockport, VTL, Sonus Faber etc. Wilson Audio is a special case here. They never let outsiders set up or calibrate their speakers for their clients because they don't want any unqualified personnel representing the company to ruin their reputation by providing setup/calibration service that does not meet the company's stringent standard. Trayle is the only exception. He is not an employee of Wilson Audio but he is recognized by Wilson Audio as an authorized professional to place speakers for Wilson Audio's clients.



Gregory asked me if I'm interested in trying out Stirling's service, free of charge. He has got sponsorship from Chris Leung of Audio Exotics to come to HK to provide a demonstration. The only "condition" for this service is to write a report describing my experience, whether good or bad, about the process. To be honest, I was very doubtful at first. I didn't know Trayle in person and how good he was. What if he spent two days at my home and ended with no positive result at all? This was certainly some risk I had to take. However, my second thought was that there have been a number of performance issues pending resolution in my system for a while. Before I come up with a solution, isn't it a good idea to have an expert to take a look for me and make some recommendations? Hence, I agreed to have Trayle to give me a demonstration.

It took various parties to spend quite an effort to arrange but eventually Trayle and I had the first phone conversation. Since he was in the United States, we discussed about my expectation of this "exercise" over a couple of long-distance calls. My position was very clear. I want to listen to music as if I were sitting at a concert hall. My sitting position should be about 6 rows from the stage.

"So, what you are telling me is that you want to have a relatively intimate distance from the orchestra. At the 6th row, you should have a strong sense of surrounding sound and the depth of the sound stage will not be as obvious as a seat far back in the concert hall." Trayle asked.

"Yes, that's correct. I hope to hear clearly how each of the instrument groups are distributed on the stage", I replied.

"No problem. Let's take this as our target then!" Trayle responded very confidently.

I was surprised by his response. How could one be so confident given that he did not know what my listening environment looks like or sounds like? As a matter of fact, my listening environment is very unconventional. It is a triangular sitting room. On the left-hand side of the listening

position, there is a big glass door to the balcony. The sitting room and dining room are connected through the right-hand side and there is no wall in between. In other words, the listening environment is asymmetric, which makes it challenging to place speakers.

### Prelude

One month before the exercise, Trayle told me that he always asked his clients to fill in a questionnaire so that he can gain a comprehensive understanding on every detail of the system. He asked me for the same. When I looked at the questionnaire, I almost fainted because I literally had to fill in everything about my system. This includes the brand and model of the equipment, cables, racks, platforms, and how the components are connected together. Even though I'm very familiar with my own system, I spent almost an hour to complete the questionnaire!

On 27 July 2019, Trayle brought several bags of tools with total weight of 65 lbs. to my apartment at 8:00am. That was the start time we agreed, and he arrived punctually. The first thing he did after coming in was to sit down and listen to my system. He tried to remember how it sounded because it would be the state of the system before optimization.

He picked some reference tracks from the CDs he brought with him. I also picked a few myself too. Here are my selected tracks: Carol Kidd's "All My Tomorrow"(AKCD005), Schubert Piano Trios played by Beaux Arts Trio (Philips 475-7571), "Gateways" conducted by Yu Long (DG483-6606) and an infamous percussion album from Hok-man Yim (Master of Chinese Percussion II).

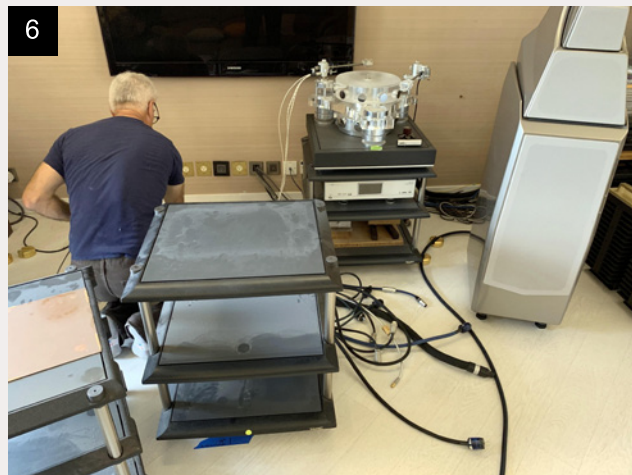
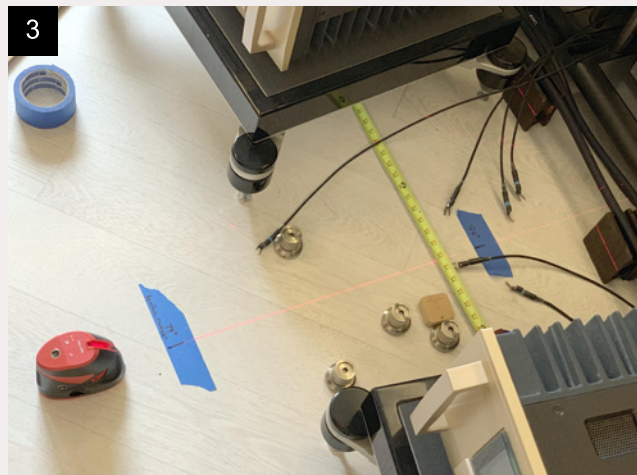
We spent almost two hours listening to music together. We also changed the phase setting in each track and identified the differences. At last, we discovered that two pieces of ASI resonators actually fell off without being noticed. We fixed them immediately, of course. (Pic.1)





## Comprehensive Clean Up

After established the reference, Trayle kicked off the optimization process. First, he used a laser line level to locate the center line of the system (Pic.2). He used plastic tape to record its location (Pic.3). He also recorded the precise location and the toe in angles of the speakers. After then, Trayle started unplugging all the cables and removing all the components from the racks one by one (Pic.4). Those racks are no exception. Some of them got dissembled completely and some were partially dissembled (Pic.5,6). Immediately after that, Trayle straightened every power cable and interconnect very carefully (Pic.7). He also spent considerable efforts in removing dust and spraying anti-static cleansing fluid (Nordost ECO 3X) onto the chassis of each component. In fact, he did not only clean components and cables but also racks and even the floor (Pic.8). He emphasized that, dust attracts static electricity. Static







electricity has a lot of interference to the system. Therefore, he recommends audiophiles perform cleaning from time to time and keep dust away from the system.

### The wall outlets

As soon as the cleaning exercise was finished, Trayle proceeded to overhauling the power supply. For each of the power outlet for the Hi Fi system, he measured voltage and checked if the AC from all the outlets are in phase. One interesting thing Trayle did was that he measured the stray voltage of the ground. He got a reading of 0.3V. Ideally, the voltage should be less than 0.1V. "So there is stray voltage higher than your recommended threshold in the ground apparently. What can I do about it?" I asked. "Although ground potential below 0.1V would be ideal, 0.3V is not too bad. Unfortunately, there is no way you could reduce it as ground potential is not something you can control." Trayle replied.(Pic.9)

Before noon on the first day, Trayle managed to tighten every screw in all the Hi Fi racks and make sure every shelf be completely levelled.(Pic.10) Each contact point of the audio cables has been cleaned using special cleansing fluid.(Pic.11,12)