

Isol-8 Powerline Extreme power distributor

Chris Frankland



There is a lot to think about when buying a hi-fi system. Every component of the system must be chosen with care, auditioned and carefully matched to the sound and level of performance of the other components.

That, I am afraid, also applies to the accessories that also make a key contribution to the overall quality of the system. These include interconnect cables between components and speakers, equipment/speaker stands and mains distribution blocks and cables. There are other accessories available to further tweak your system's performance, but the ones I have mentioned are the most crucial to get right.

It all starts with the mains and so to skimp on quality there will hold back the potential of your system, so it's worth choosing carefully.

One person who takes mains very seriously and knows how important it is to optimise your mains supply is Isol-8's Nic Poulson. You may know him from his other company, Trilog Audio Systems, which he set up in 1990. He designs their excellent amplifiers. He set up Isol-8 in 2000 to offer products that would help with poor mains supply and distribution and the Powerline Extreme distribution block I am reviewing here is the latest in his product line-up.

What's wrong with the mains?

Isol-8 say that your mains power is generally contaminated by the many other appliances plugged into it, DC components, harmonic distortion and radio frequency interference introduced to the grid by other users.

Your hi-fi components also add their own noise to the mains from their own power supplies and diode rectifiers. >>

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Isol-8 Powerline Extreme

» To combat this, Isol-8 offers a range of different Powerline products addressing different aspects of the problem, from DC blocking to the 'transmodal' filter technology that Isol-8 say is needed to remove the different types of noise on your mains.

The Powerline Extreme I am reviewing here, priced at £1,200, is top of the Powerline range and features surge protection, DC blocking and transmodal filtering, and also offers a high-current outlet for amplifiers/power amplifiers. The range starts with the Power Plus at £725, which has an earth line choke to deal with any RF in the system earth and signal ground, plus a single pole shunt filter to deal with any general noise. Next is the Ultra at £850, which is fully power conditioned and surge protected with a high-current outlet for amplifiers. It has transmodal filtering (see more on that later) to attenuate transmitted and induced noise without dumping it to ground. The Axis at £900 has DC blocking and surge protection but no transmodal filtering.

More than one type of noise

In his quest to clean up the mains supply for our hi-fi systems, Isol-8's Nic Poulson sets out to deal with two distinct types of noise that he believes adversely affect system performance and sound quality.

Many units, he says, have filters on the input to deal with what he identifies as Common Mode Noise, which can be picked up from radio and TV broadcasts or wi-fi transmitters. This type of noise, he says, can be dealt with easily by using a common mode inductor, which attenuates unwanted noise by using phase cancellation. But this filter does not deal with the other type of noise he is aiming to eradicate in the Powerline Extreme.

Poulson says that this other type of noise, which he refers to as Differential Mode Noise, is frequently ignored. This noise is generated from within your system components and is passed from one component to another. His transmodal filters are said to deal with both types of noise while keeping the earth clean.

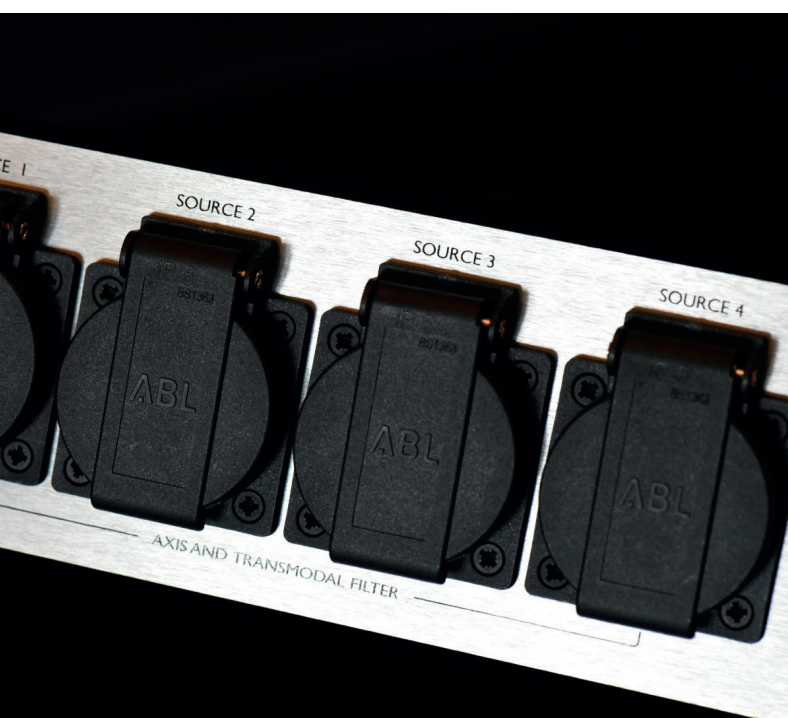
The Powerline Extreme also aims to block the DC that can get onto the mains from dimmer switches and computer power supplies, leaving the mains waveform clipped, distorted and asymmetrical. The Isol-8 block is said to rebalance the mains waveform and block DC without compromising current flow.

Quality

You only have to pick up the Powerline Extreme to feel the quality of build it offers. The top plate is made from anodised 6mm CNC-machined aluminium, so it is non-magnetic and anti-resonant. The IEC output sockets have hinged covers and conform to IP54. Inside you will find high-quality silver-plated copper wiring with PTFE insulation.

There was a time I can remember when no one really thought about sorting out the mains supply. For a long time, people eyed distribution blocks and filters with suspicion, but now any self-respecting retailer will suggest you invest in one to get the best out of your system.

Of course, everyone's mains is going to be different. If you live in the countryside with miles between you and your neighbours, the quality of your mains will be different to someone living in a densely-populated city. I have always found a good mains filter/distribution block to be worthwhile, so I suggest asking to borrow one from your retailer to try at home.





It allows you to hear greater detail and subtlety in your music, conveyed the rhythmic ebb and flow of it better and puts more space around the musicians.

» Let your ears make the choice

To see what the Powerline Extreme could do, I plugged it into my system at home. This comprises an Audio Note TT3/PSU/Arm Two/lo1 turntable/arm/cartridge, Audio Note CDT Five CD transport with a DAC 5 Special and Fyne Audio Vintage 10 speakers. To see how the Isol-8 block worked with different amplifiers, I tried it with two – the 125W Chord Electronics Ultima integrated transistor amp and the 8W Audio Note Meishu Tonmeister single-ended valve amp.

Isol-8 also make a range of IsoLink mains cables, but these were not supplied for this review, so I used MusicWorks Revive Ultra II cables for each component. A standard IEC cable was used from the wall outlet to the Powerline Extreme itself.

In order to assess the Powerline Extreme's value for money, I had another well-respected mains block at around the same price for comparison. But I started out comparing it with a standard, four-way block you'd typically find in a DIY superstore or electrical shop.

First I played the track Best Road I've Known from Canadian guitarist/singer/songwriter Stephen Fearing's 2025 CD *The Empathist*. I noticed immediately how the piano was more open and detailed using the Isol-8 block, while the bass line was more solid and tuneful. Fearing's voice was much more open and easy to follow and you could hear the inflections and phrasing that make his style unmistakable much more clearly with the Isol-8. It was also easier to follow what the dobro was playing, while drums and percussion were more syncopated and alive. In short, the difference between using the Isol-8 and the bog-standard DIY block was night and day.

Turning to a track I know inside out, namely 'Sunny Side of the Street' from jazz pianist/singer/songwriter Ben Sidran, the difference in sound quality between the two blocks was also huge. On the Isol-8, the sax on the intro was far cleaner and clearer, the bass line was tighter and moved better, while Sidran's vocals were more expressive and open. His DX7 synth was also better voiced with more leading-edge sparkle. Drums were tighter and more dynamic and along with a more articulate and agile bass line, the Isol-8 block really made the track jump rhythmically. It all fell flat when I switched back to the DIY block.

Once more round the block

So it could beat a block that was more than £1,000 cheaper, but what about something at a similar price. Well, to find out I reached for the superb Christian McBride LP *Conversations* and the track 'It's Your Thing', where he duets (vocally and on bass) with Dee Dee Bridgewater.

Using the Isol-8 block, I felt his acoustic bass had more power and moved better with greater oomph when he gave it a good slap. Bridgewater's sassy vocals more open and expressive and simply had more 'sass'. And when McBride's fingers really flew on the bass, the Isol-8 kept up better and let me more easily appreciate his virtuosity.

Sticking with vinyl, I spun up the track Sun Pillars from the excellent album *Stream* from pianist/composer Fergus McCreadie. His piano was more open and had more space around it using the Isol-8 with its lower registers conveyed with more heft. Stephen Henderson's amazingly delicate and sensitive drum play was also more convincingly conveyed with greater insights into the subtlety and skill of his technique. The bass line too was also more agile and solid on the Isol-8.

Compelling

I have to say that the Isol-8 Powerline Extreme exceeded my already high expectations. It was such an improvement over a bog-standard DIY mains block that I would not hesitate for a moment to say it is more than worth the extra thousand-odd pounds. No question!

The fact that it also convincingly outperformed another rival block that was actually a tad more expensive, underlines what a great piece of kit the Powerline Extreme is. It allows you to hear greater detail and subtlety in your music, conveyed the rhythmic ebb and flow of it better and puts more space around the musicians, allowing you to better appreciate their skill and talent.

I heartily recommend the Isol-8 Powerline Extreme and recommend you give it a try if you are in the market for a mains solution at this price point. +

Technical specifications

Type: S5-way mains filtering and distribution block with earth line choke, shunt filter, transmodal filter, surge protection and DC filtering

Input: 10A IEC socket

Outputs: 4 x standard 13amp sockets, 1 x high-current 13amp output

Dimensions (HxWxD): 6.8 x 50.5 x 8.8cm

Weight: 3.4kg

Price: £1,200 €1,495 \$1,495

Manufacturer Isol-8

🌐 isol-8.co.uk 📞 +44 (0)1789 641186