CAD Ground Control GC1.1

More of the same? What's not to like…

by Roy Gregory

In the past few years, parallel clean grounds have become one of the big areas of improvement in system performance. Starting with massive and massively expensive options like the Tripoint products, or the folksy but still expensive Entreq units, the market has evolved and expanded at an astonishing rate, with products becoming increasingly effective and more affordable with each passing year. At the same time we've seen the emergence of a split between what we might term 'focussed' or 'single application' products and 'general solutions', larger products that target an entire system.

What isn't quite so widely appreciated is that each grounding solution and even each unit within a range has its own particular character and attributes, its own specific range of operation and effectiveness. So, in broad-brush terms I could describe the CAD (Computer Audio Design) Ground Control GC1 as working from the top down, where the Nordost QKore units operate from the bottom up. I could also describe the original GC1 as a 'focussed' product, intended to be narrowly targeted on a particular unit/noise source. Factor in the larger GC3 and the humungous GCR and you get a progressive shift towards wider bandwidth, full-system solutions. So that even a system with a GCR soaking up unwanted ground noise from its amplification, might still benefit from employing one or more GC1s on the digital electronics.

In fact, it was arguably CAD's elegant and cost effective GC1 that started the trend towards smarter, more compact and yes, more focussed grounding solutions. This narrow, deep yet stylish box has been an essential part of my system tuning toolbox since it first arrived. Not surprisingly, given its origin, it has an almost uncanny ability to absorb and dissipate the high-frequency noise and hash that emanates from digital components (but which can pollute entire systems) and that has made it indispensable when it comes to

optimising digital playback, whether streamed or from optical disc. Devoid of features, save the two 4mm banana sockets on its back panel, you might think that it looks expensive at first glance, but connect it to the signal ground of a digital component via its own, specially developed grounding cable, and you'll be shocked at the difference it makes to the sound.

Open wide...

When I hooked up the GC1 for the first time, it was something of a revelation. The improvement in immediacy and dynamic range were immediately obvious, the blacker background and increased focus equally apparent. Of course, a blacker background doesn't mean that much in itself. What matters is what it does to the music – and that was expressed in the improved dynamic discrimination and 'jump', the added sense of direction and purpose it brought to the performance. Upper harmonics were clearer, adding tonality and colour to strings and woodwind, creating a sweeter, more natural overall balance and a more developed acoustic space around the band or orchestra. The upshot was the addition of a healthy dose of musical enjoyment to an already existing system.

So what does the new, updated and improved GC1.1 bring to the party? In a word (or four) – more of the same. If you are already familiar with the GC1 then the GC1.1 simply brings the same benefits but more and better. Improvements in the performance of the all-important (and closely guarded) internal material, the medium tasked with dissipating that spurious HF energy, have increased both the GC1.1's capacity and bandwidth, meaning that it does more and does it further down the audio rang as well. Comparing the older unit directly with the new, the differences are immediately apparent. Playing Jordi Savall and the Concert des Nations' typically energetic recording of Mozart's *Symphony 41* (AliaVox AVSA9934) the GC1.1 delivers a more clearly defined and more naturally proportioned soundstage and perspective, greater instrumental colour and tonal density and a more coherent spatial/dimensional presentation. That's all indicative of the GC1.1's ability to absorb not just more spurious noise, but noise from across a broader bandwidth. The characteristically compact arrangement of the small orchestra (only 29 players) is crucial to the sense of energy and purpose in the playing, those all-important dynamic and tonal contrasts – and with the GC1.1 connected, the system captures (and portrays) it perfectly.

Give me space (and time)...

But what is more important is the sense of space between notes and phrases. The GC1.1 uncovers another layer of temporal information, not just rendering that space far more accurately, but bringing a more purposeful precision to the timing and placement of notes and phrases, a greater sense of

direction, momentum and poise to the performance as a whole. Anybody who is familiar with Savall's fascinating, exciting and incredibly engaging cycle of Beethoven *Symphonies* (and if you aren't, you should definitely treat yourself) will immediately recognise the importance of this to not just the drama but the humour he brings to his intensely musical performances. Without those sudden shifts in musical density and tempo, those little rhythmic and expressive flourishes, this wouldn't be Jordi Savall. The GC1.1's ability to reveal precisely defined and placed musical energy simply makes it so much easier to hear, appreciate and enjoy what makes this music and this performance special.

The impact on vocals is just as significant., extending well beyond more natural, more recognisable tonality, well into the realms of diction and expression. Well-recorded voices – you can take your pick from Janis Ian, Eleanor McEvoy, Ella or any of a thousand others – take on a new presence and intimacy, gaining the ability to engage with and speak more directly to you. It's a fundamental shift in the expressive range of the system – and it's all good.

Outwardly identical to the GC1, the only way of telling the two units apart is the 1.1 designation on the rear panel.

Not just a one trick pony!

Once you hear what the GC1.1 does to a digital source, you wouldn't be human (at least – you wouldn't be an audiophile) if you didn't wonder just what it might do for the rest of the system. Connecting it to the ground terminal on the system's distribution block is extremely worthwhile, especially in a multi-source system. The sense of poise, clarity, musical purpose and increased dynamic range, presence and immediacy, will spread across your other sources too. This is another respect in which the GC1.1 is a more accomplished performer than the original model. Where the GC1's attributes really lent themselves to the digital domain, the 1.1's greater capability down through the midrange and upper bass makes it much more of an all-rounder. The extent of the improvement wrought on the system as a whole can't match a more focussed, single unit application, but the GC1.1 gets much closer than the GC1 ever did. In absolute terms you really need to deploy the greater capacity of a GC3 (or GCR) in this 'total system' role, but that means more money and if the GC1.1 is as far as the budget stretches, rest assured it will do a sterling job. In that regard, the GC1.1 has evolved into one of the very few products that really does have at least half a foot in both the 'focussed' and 'generalist' camps. It will also graduate to the more specialised digital application if and when funds allow the purchase of a second or larger unit. Talking of price, the GC1.1 costs $2,250 plus $350 for a grounding cable (both plus tax). Given its plug and play, try before you buy nature, that's a steal.

If you want to hear what the GC1.1 can do, I'd suggest that you try hooking it up to the ground terminal or an unused digital input on your DAC or CD player. After that, you can try shifting it to the ground terminal on your AC distribution block or line-stage. Because the noise it's dealing with will vary from system to system, so will the point of greatest impact, so a little experimentation pays dividends. Whether you ultimately opt for a focussed or more general

application will depend to some extent on the quality of the grounding in the system as a whole. The better that grounding (and, where possible, I'd always invest in the cost effective step of installing a parallel clean ground for the AC supply before spending money on dedicated grounding products) the more likely you'll be to opt for the more focussed approach. That decision is also affected by the option to hook up a second ground cable, so in a scenario with a single GC1.1 unit, it is worth trying a pair of cables, either to multiple digital pieces (the DAC and a transport or server) or to the DAC and line-stage. In a situation where you are adding a GC1.1 to an existing grounding arrangement, again, it's worth ringing the changes, but one place I've found the GC1.1 to work wonders is connected to a network switch and the ground post of the distribution block feeding the network components. Finally (and maybe we shouldn't tell CAD) the GC1.1 works beautifully in analogue systems, especially with phono-stages. In a true dual-mono unit – like CH Precision's P1 – the ability to run two leads, one to each channel is an added bonus and delivers a nice lift in performance over a single channel/single lead arrangement.

The arrival of the GC1.1 is as timely as it is welcome. If the GC1 was indispensible, the 1.1 more than fills its shoes, bring greater capability and versatility to what was already an excellent product. Try it: once you hook it up, I doubt very much you'll want to remove it.

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CAD Ground Control GC1.1 - $2,250 (plus tax)
Ground Control Cables - $350 each (plus tax)

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