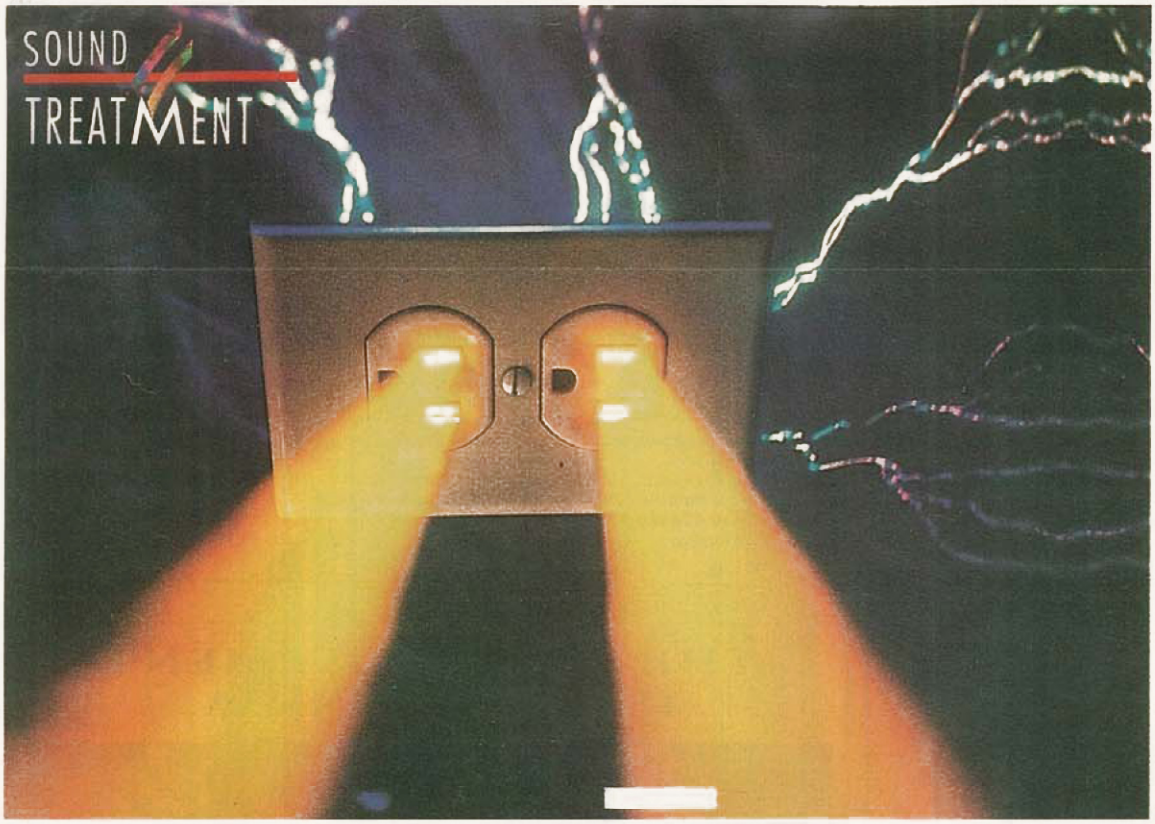

High-fidelity Unplugged

Like everything else in life, sound too is all about how you connect, writes SANJIV MALVI, elaborating on the various cabling methods one can use to preserve the integrity of sound

In the world of high-fidelity there are no absolutes. For the audiophile it is important to realise that there is no such concept as the best. The entire audio process is very personalised. This is so because personal likes and dislikes play an important role. Some people like their music loud, some like it soft, while some prefer treble over bass and so on. Thus it is incorrect to assume that any particular audio set-up is the best. However there are many tips that will help improve the overall performance of your audio set-up. Audio set-ups can be of the 'Low end ', 'Middle end ' and 'High end', in general. A 'High end' set-up is naturally expensive, it will consist of high quality equipment and has to be set up correctly.

It is interesting to note that the polarity of the AC power supply plays a vital role. This may come as a major surprise to many. It also sounds absurd. Audiophiles spend a lot of money, on 'AC Line Conditioners'. This piece of equipment is used to clear up and stabilize the AC power input into your system. Along with the correct polarity, it makes a great difference to your sound. To begin with, a very good quality AC receptacle, which ensures good contact, with your equipment plugs, will go a long way. Ensuring correct polarity involves a simple procedure. It requires a simple multimeter. Disconnect all components, set the multimeter to the AC volts position. Connect the positive lead to a metal part of the power amplifier and the negative lead to an earth ground. This earth ground could be any nearby electrical earthing in the house. Turn the amplifier on. Wait for a minute. Note the reading in the meter. Reverse the AC power plug of the amplifier. Take the reading again. The lower of the two readings indicates the correct polarity.

If your equipment has a 3-pin plug, use a 3-pin to 2-pin converter. This procedure can be used for all components of your system. Digital hardware like CD players show a remarkable improvement of sound when the correct polarity is used. Line conditioners, like the power wedge, are widely used.

Interconnecting cables and speaker cables are very crucial as well, in improving the quality of your audio set-up. Interconnecting cables are used to connect the amplifier to the pre-amplifier and the cassette deck, CD player, turn-table to the pre-amplifier. Speaker cables are used to connect the speakers to the power amplifier. As a general rule short lengths of all cables are preferred. The standard length of interconnecting cables is about a metre. It can cost anything from Rs 20 to Rs 100,000 per metre length. Better the quality of cables used, lesser is the alteration of the electrical sound signal transmitted. Since preserving the integrity of the sound is so vital, it is always a good idea to invest in good cables. Interconnecting cables by Straight Wire, Kimber Kable and speaker cables by Monster Cables are well-known brands.

Correct placement of individual components like cassette deck, CD player, pre-amplifier and power amplifier with respect to each other goes a long way to improve sound quality. The power amplifier must be placed as near the speakers as possible. This reduces the length of speaker cables needed. The turn-table and CD player in particular must be kept out of the sound field, on platforms that isolate or evacuate the vibrational energy created by the music. It is advisable to place 'Source Components' like cassette decks, CD players, turn-tables at least three feet away from sensitive 'Amplification devices' like pre-amplifiers. Always segregate the AC power chords from the audio signal carrying interconnecting cables. This will reduce noise and hum. Try to have the least number of bends in your connecting cables. It is not a good idea to coil up extra lengths of wire. Last but not the least, make sure that all connections are solid and contact areas are clean. Heavy wires must be strain relieved, so that the chassis and wire connectors are not overly stressed by the weight of heavy cables.

These tips are applicable to all kinds of audio set-ups. However 'High end' audio systems being sensitive can benefit the most by the correct application of these tips . Next week we will look at 'speaker placement ' and take a peek into the listening room.