



English Electric 8Switch

I'm not sure why it has taken so long for audio manufacturers to begin to take network switches seriously for the streamed audio chain – after all, dealers have been assembling relevant information for good practice for a while now, many realising that the configuration of a music streaming system and the choice of components may have a significant effect on sound quality. Aspects of audio network enhancement, though regarded by many pundits as snake oil, have been reported in HIFICRITIC. Substantive differences have been observed between a variety of network cables and switches, their power supply options where relevant, and associated vibration isolation measures.

Well known cable specialist The Chord Company has jumped headfirst into this market with a well-priced network switch at £500, marketed under the until now largely forgotten English Electric brand. Called the '8Switch', it's really compact, and thus easy to locate, with a custom-designed switch mode 12V plugtop power supply to match the switch and minimise possible interaction with the rest of the audio system. A linear supply is not recommended.

Many will recall the EE trademark of the English Electric company, its business largely predating technology which we now term electronics. EE was a massive engineering conglomerate and aircraft builder, its work including the Canberra bomber and Lightning fighter, Deltic and other locomotives sold worldwide, and assorted surface-to-air missiles. The EE trademark was up for sale, and Alan Gibb of The Chord Company felt that it still

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Specifications

English Electric 8switch

Type	Audiophile Dataswitch
Price	£449
Connections	8 RJ45 Ethernet ports
Power supply	External switch mode
Dimensions (WxHxD)	n/a

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had resonance with the UK engineering tradition and so acquired it for his new range of network products – yes, a range, as there will be more.

The 8Switch is, as the name suggests, an eight-port gigabit speed Ethernet switch jointly designed by Chord Company engineers, addressing known noise issues found with conventional ‘data’ switches and their power supplies. High precision clocks offer lower noise: this audio grade switch’s 0.1ppm frequency stability figure is indicative of very low noise, and hopefully reduced jitter. Extra power line buffering individually serves the clock and data switch sections, while in contrast to the lightweight casework of most switches, this one is machined-from-solid alloy with neatly designed anti-vibration feet – not the usual stick-on rubber bumps. Anti-jitter EMI countermeasures are also found inside the housing. Tiny LED pin lights adjacent to the ports signify fault, status, speed and ‘power on’, and a Chord Company C Stream cable is supplied.

Sound Quality

First tried at the remote location in my system, where the interface to the wireless network occurs, the 8Switch did well on clarity and imaging, but

was also marginally reticent on pace and rhythm and not quite so involving musically as my usual Cisco – though it may have needed more running in. But later, when installed at the ‘system’ end of my network, it took off in style. Note that the instruction to put the incoming LAN cable into the EE switch input ‘1’ is important: it will work otherwise, but sound quality may be reduced.

I enjoyed the upbeat performances, imbued with spacious, transparent, delicately detailed stereo images. Focus was strong, image depth was close to excellent, and the performance was as good on Classical as for Rock and Jazz. Some of my most detailed recordings were very well illuminated and listener fatigue was also very low. Bass was tuneful and was upbeat and entertaining. That soft fuzz in the high frequencies sometimes associated with jitter was almost entirely absent.

Conclusion

The EE 8Switch was a most welcome late arrival to this review party. Realistically priced, it really did deliver on its promise of better wired network sound. Careful design, matched with great build quality and finish, plus fine value for money, means it gets a HIFICRITIC **Best Buy** rating from me.

