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GUIDE TO CABLES, POWER PRODUCTS, ACCESSORIES, & MUSIC

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Music Interface Technologies™





The ORACLE MA-X2
Super High Definition Speaker Interface with
Multipole™ and A.P.M. Technology by MIT®

SD HD S/H D **Super HD**
Fractional
Articulation
Technology by MIT

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FROM THE Editor

Welcome to our latest free Buyer's Guide, brought to you by *The Absolute Sound* and *Hi-Fi Plus*. This Buyer's Guide is devoted to the all-important but often underestimated category of cables, interconnects, and power conditioners. This Guide also includes the very best music we've reviewed in the past year, along with some feature articles on what goes on behind the scenes in making a great-sounding music release.

In this issue you'll find a wide range of reviews, all the way from affordable entry-level cables, interconnects, and power cords to elaborate state-of-the-art products. Don't be overwhelmed by the vast array of choices; finding just the right cable for your system and budget is easier than you might think. A good place to start is the series of feature articles that kick off this Buyer's Guide—"Cable and Interconnect Glossary" defines all the jargon associated with cables, "How to Choose Cables and Interconnects" guides you through the cable-selection process, and "What to Listen For in Cables and Interconnects" explains the specific sonic qualities between good and poor cables.

If your system is hooked up with generic cables, hardware-store "speaker wire," and stock black power cords, your system is performing far below its potential. *Any* audio system can immediately sound better by improving the quality of the

cables. Although I've listened to literally hundreds of different cables and interconnects in my own system, a recent simple demonstration hit home just how important cables are in realizing a system's musical potential. The demonstration was in Transparent Audio's listening room, and the system included entry-level Rotel electronics and B&W 685 loudspeakers (\$650 per pair). We first listened with stock interconnects and speaker cables, and then replaced those with Transparent's The Link interconnects (\$85 per meter pair) and The Wave speaker cable (\$200 per 8' pair). The system suddenly became much more musically communicative and engaging. I was in for a second surprise; we replaced the stock power cords with Transparent's High-Performance Powerlink (\$125 each) and the system took another step up in sound quality.

This experience drives home three important points. First, replacing stock interconnects, speaker cables, and power cords can render a significant improvement in system performance. Second, even entry-level cables and power cords are a huge upgrade over stock units. Third, even a modest system can benefit from specialty cables.

Although most of you already know the value of quality cables and interconnects, if you haven't replaced your power cords and invested in a good AC conditioner, you're in for a pleasant surprise. Clean AC power is the foundation on which the rest of your system should be built. A good AC system will render blacker backgrounds, greater resolution of detail, a more spacious soundstage, and smoother textures.

Good listening.

Robert Harley

Click here to turn the page.

On the Horizon

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Upgrade your Custom **IEM's** with our
Silver Dragon V1 IEM Cable.



We offer a variety of custom headphone cables such as the Silver Dragon V1 IEM Headphone Cable to upgrade your custom IEM's. Examples include: JH Audio JH16 and JH13, LiveWires Custom Series, Unique Melody Miracles, 1964 Ears, Ultimate Ears UE18 Pro and UE11 Pro and Westone Elite Series ES3X just to name a few.

Hearing the difference is our specialty...
Here at Moon Audio.

Moon Audio designs and manufactures an entire line of custom audio cables for all of your high end audio needs. From Portable Headphone rigs to larger scale Home Theaters and Two Channel Audio, we create and design cables for almost any application.

We listen to your musical tastes, likes and dislikes, and customize a solution based on your feedback.

We are a manufacturer of high end Audio and Video cables as well as a Hi-Fi Audio retailer. Our niche is custom audio cables and high end headphone systems. All custom items are hand-built by our in house artisans individually to your specifications.

We take great pride in our workmanship and each piece is individually tested, inspected and polished before shipment. We hope you allow us the privilege to take you to the next level in your headphone listening experience.

Customized audio connections and solutions
Are our specialty.



Need to pull a Digital Signal from your iPad® or iTouch®?



Custom Mods
On All Types of Headphones



Need a Jitter Free digital transmission from your digital source?



Demanding Amplifiers
Look No Further.



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919-649-5018
moon-audio.com

ON THE HORIZON

Great New Cables And Accessories Coming Your Way

Neil Gader



Alpha Design Labs iD-30P Series iDock Cable

Alpha Design Labs uses Furutech's Pure Transmission Technology to create high-value, innovative designs that everyone can afford. In the age of personal, portable electronics everyone carries his music with him to connect to iDocks, headphone amps, home audio and even car systems. And there's no better sounding (or hip-looking) cables than the ADL iD-30P series that comes in three versions to make every important connection you need. They feature silver-plated (Alpha) OCC conductors (28AWG) for minimal transmission loss and 24k gold-plated USB A-type or 3.5mm stereo connectors, straight or angled. The cable achieves top-grade noise isolation using double-layer shielding—aluminum foil and tinned copper—in a RoHS-compliant sheath. The main conductors are treated with Furutech's (Alpha) Process—a deep cryogenic and demagnetizing treatment. The result is a wideband, colorful, and engaging sound that will appeal to audiophiles and music lovers alike.

Price: In three versions, 0.15m and 1m lengths, \$78-107. adl-av.com

Analysis-Plus Solo Crystal Oval-In Interconnect and Oval 8 Speaker Wire

Analysis-Plus' radically improved Solo Crystal Oval-In interconnect utilizes a new dielectric composition to improve speed and resolution. These interconnects are a perfect complement to either A-P's Silver Oval or Big Silver Oval speaker cables. Constructed of the same material (silver over a stabilizing strand of oxygen-free copper) as the Silver Oval, braided into A-P's patented hollow oval geometry, the interconnects are wrapped with an open braided shield for ultra-quiet, noise-free performance. These interconnects maintain the high-frequency components of the source. Available single-ended with locking RCA connectors or balanced with Neutrik XLR connectors.

Price: Interconnect, \$550/1m pr.

The newly developed Solo Crystal Oval 8 speaker cable are the ideal match with the Solo Crystal Oval-In interconnects or the more exotic Silver Crystal Oval-In. Oval 8 sports four 11-gauge continuous cast copper (solo crystal copper) conductors used in a proprietary braided hollow oval geometry. It is available in internal bi-wire or shotgun (two wires per connector) configurations. When the two wires are combined in the shotgun mode, it is equivalent to a robust 8-gauge conductor.

Price: \$2010/8' pr. analysis-plus.com

ON THE HORIZON

Audience Au24e Phono Cable

Audience has conducted considerable research into the electrical characteristics of phono cables and has concluded that given the different internal electrical characteristics of phono cartridges a single cable cannot serve as an optimal tonearm-to-phonostage interface. To that end, Audience offers vinyl lovers a choice of three impedance-matched phono cables. Each model is designed to carefully optimize the electrical characteristics of the cartridge to the cable and to preserve signal flow to the phonostage without detrimental influences. The models are: Low Z, for moving-coil cartridges with internal resistance up to 30 ohms; High Z, for moving-coil cartridges with internal resistance between 30 and 100 ohms; and MM, for all cartridges with internal resistance above 100 ohms which includes high-output moving-coil cartridges rated at 47k ohms and most moving-magnet or moving-iron models. All Audience phono cables are constructed using the highest purity oxygen-free continuous cast copper.

Price: MM, \$479-\$729; High/Low Z, \$1090-\$1295, depending on termination. audience-av.com



AudioQuest FireWire (IEEE 1394) Series

Whether your digital music files are stored on an external hard drive or you are connecting a computer to a FireWire DAC (digital-to-analog converter), using cables that do no harm to the original information package is a must. This is just as true for a compressed 128kbps MP3 file as it is for a 24-bit/96kHz uncompressed file. AudioQuest's new FireWire cables maintain the integrity of your music files however they're packaged. AudioQuest offers four models of low-distortion FireWire cable. All feature AudioQuest's proven design expertise featuring better metals, better geometry, and for the top-model Diamond AudioQuest's amazingly effective Dielectric-Bias System. All AudioQuest FireWire cables come in 6-to-6, 6-to-9, and 9-to-9 pin configurations.

Price: Forest at \$29 for 0.75m, culminating with Diamond at \$549 for 0.75m. audioquest.com



AudioQuest Bridges & Falls Analog Interconnects

Today's connected components require more than the venerable RCA connector. AudioQuest's answer is the Bridges & Falls series, seven new models of low-distortion interconnects that are optimized for analog playback but configurable to support a wide breadth of modern connectivity: Evergreen, Golden Gate, Big Sur, Sydney, Victoria, Yosemite, and Angel. In addition to a traditional RCA-to-RCA configuration, all Bridges & Falls series cables can be configured with Made for iPod-to-3.5mm male or female, and Made for iPod-to-RCA plugs. The Bridges & Falls series brings a startling number of AudioQuest's superior technologies and materials to new price points: better metals, superior geometry, and the company's exclusive Noise-Dissipation System. The upper four models employ Air-Tube Insulation, while the top three models use AudioQuest's effective Dielectric-Bias System.

Price: Evergreen at \$29 for a 1m pr., Angel at \$995 for a 1m pr. audioquest.com

ON THE HORIZON



Clarus Cables

Designed for the most discriminating audiophiles, Clarus Cables are made from the purest copper available. Known as PCOCC, Pure Copper by Ohno Continuous Casting, the characteristics of this single-crystal conductor include freedom from impurities, flexibility, corrosive-resistance, low electric resistance, non-crystal boundaries, making it an ideal material for the highest quality interconnect cables. Clarus Cables are designed with three distinctly different conductor types for bass, midrange, and high frequencies. Solid heavy-gauge conductors are used for bass, flat conductors for midrange, and spiral-ribbon conductors (with a non-conductive core) for high frequencies. The different conductor types are individually insulated to prevent coloration caused by interaction with adjacent frequency ranges. Through the use of these design and engineering concepts Clarus Cables dramatically improve clarity, openness, and transparency. Available in a full range of cable types and terminations, there are two levels of Clarus, Crimson, the best, and Aqua. Offering similar performance benefits Clarus Aqua is designed with slightly smaller wire gauges.

Price: Crimson, \$1000, meter pr., Aqua, \$500, meter pr.; Crimson, \$2200 8' pr.; Aqua, \$1100, 8' pr. claruscable.com

EnKlein Zephyr and Prairie Fire Interconnects

Zephyr is EnKlein's flagship high-purity silver interconnect, and is the smoothest and most detailed cable EnKlein produces. The construction is a uniform air dielectric with large distances between the parallel signal wires and a proprietary shield network. The shield network is designed to optimize signal preservation and transmission. The target for the network is any unwanted signal above 10Hz. Sixty Hertz AC power waves and digital noise conductance from source to amplifiers are virtually eliminated. The cables are made from solid premium-grade silver 20-gauge conductors, large air tubes, and a proprietary total envelope shield with integrated passive network. All terminations use premium materials. RCA uses 24-carat gold plating over a copper core. XLR's use a billet brass core with gold and rhodium over silver plating. Prairie Fire is EnKlein's premium copper interconnect cable, using premium Type 1 oxygen-free, long-grain conductors. Borrowing much of its technology from the flagship model, Zephyr, it uses the same terminations, the large air tubes, and EnKlein's proprietary total envelope shield.

Price: Zephyr Interconnect, \$2795/meter pr.; Prairie Fire Interconnect, \$1795/meter pr. enklein.com



ON THE HORIZON



Harmonic Technology Pro-11 and Pro-10 Reference Speaker cable

It's not easy to improve on success but Harmonic Technology has taken its Golden Ear Award winner, the Pro-11Plus speaker cable, and raised its performance to reference levels. Among the improvements are a redesigned geometry for the 11 AWG single crystal OCC copper. There's a more effective insulation, which now includes Teflon tape. An even more robust version is available in the Pro-10 Reference, which features heavier 10 AWG copper. Both are designed for single-wire only. Available terminations include spade, locking banana, and Z-type banana.

Price: Pro-11, \$750/8', \$100 per add'l ft; Pro-10, \$900/8', \$100 per add'l ft. harmonictech.com



MIT Super High Definition Speaker Interfaces

Prior to 2007, the thrust of MIT Cables' engineering focused on optimizing a cable's ability to transport an audio signal octave-to-octave. MIT then introduced Maximum Articulation Technology which built upon previous Oracle designs to include the optimization of harmonics outside the octave. More recently advanced laboratory test and measurement equipment enabled MIT to include Fractional Articulation Technology in the designs of its reference-level products. With F.A.T., interval optimization (the notes within the octave) was achieved improving the natural textures and density of music. MIT can now offer this technology in an entirely new product line, including Super High Definition Speaker Interfaces. For example the entry-level Matrix HD 28 Speaker Interface boasts 28 poles of articulation, while the Matrix HD 60 delivers the broadest range of features and performance in the lineup. Those seeking the ultimate can move up to Oracle Matrix SHD 120 Rev.2 or Oracle MA-X SHD Rev.2. Either permits the user to enable F.A.T. between high definition and super high definition with a simple switch selection.

Price (per 8' pr): HD 28, \$5999; HD 60, \$5999 (see review this issue); HD 90 Rev.1, \$11,999; SHD 120, \$23,999; MA-X, \$39,999. mitcables.com

ON THE HORIZON

Moon Audio Silver Dragon V1 IEM Cable

The Silver Dragon V1 IEM headphone cable is the baby brother to the Silver Dragon. It was designed as a drop-in replacement for use with In Ear Monitors (or IEMs) where light weight and flexibility are a must. The Silver Dragon IEM is a coaxial design using a 99.99998% UP-OCC stranded silver 26AWG center-conductor for the positive leg. The center-conductor uses the same Kevlar reinforcing as other Dragon cables. The left and right signal cables run parallel to each other resulting in a very low inductance. Signal jackets are polyethylene, and the cable is extremely flexible yet very resilient and resistant to flex failure. Plus, Moon's IEM cables are available with various source connection options as well as terminations to fit either JH Audio/Ultimate Ears/Westone monitors (same connector type fits all three) or Livewire monitors. Moon is also working to develop connection options for Shure, Sennheiser IE8, FitEars, and other earphones and in-ear monitors. Optional lengths available.

Price: \$175/48". moon-audio.com

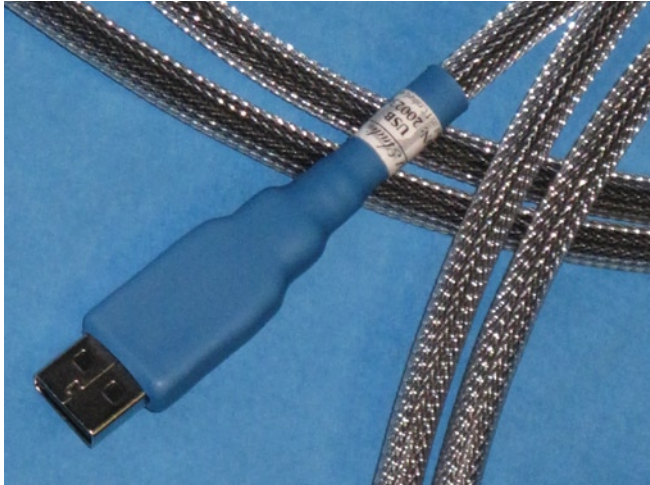


Nordost Sort Kones

Nordost's new resonance control solution is the Sort Kone—a directly coupled and mechanically tuned device that uses a sophisticated new approach to address the problem of supporting sensitive electronics. Sort Kones are designed to deal with mechanical energy generated internally by audio circuits and power supplies—vibrations that occur right where the fragile signal is and create timing errors that smear and distort the music. Sort Kones can be used in triplets, quartets, or even larger numbers. Thanks to their three-part construction, Sort Kones are available in four levels of performance; AS, aluminum post and base combined with a hardened steel coupling ball; AC, aluminum post and base in combination with an upgraded Si3N4 ceramic ball; BC, bronze post and base elements combined with a ceramic coupling ball; TC, titanium post and base in combination with the ceramic coupling ball for ultimate performance. (See review on p.63.)

Price, each: AS, \$65; AC, \$80; BC, \$135; TC, \$350. nordost.com

ON THE HORIZON



Purist Audio Design Ultra-high Performance USB Audio Cable

The Ultra-high Performance USB Audio Cable from Purist Audio is specifically designed for computer-audio applications. The high-resolution, high-speed design uses large-gauge copper conductors to allow for accurate signal transfer up to 5 meters compared with other computer USB cables, which are limited to a few meters. This allows computers to be located away from audio components without compromising performance. It also utilizes precision construction techniques including multiple-gauge copper conductors, Cryomag treatment, low-noise dielectrics, and double shielding that result in better resolution with a wider dynamic range and a richer, more natural sound compared with computer USB cables. The USB cable comes packaged in a handsome soft case. Configuration: USB A to USB B; Available Lengths: 1m to 5m.

Price: \$260/1m, \$30, each add'l half-meter.
puristaudiodesign.com

Quantum Resonant Technology Qx4

The Quantum Resonant Technology Qx4 is a sophisticated Scalar field generator, employing proprietary technology derived from research in the discipline of quantum mechanics that allows the ordering and stabilization of magnetic field effects—effects that are significant and widespread within and around high-quality audio and visual systems. Each component passing current will produce and also be affected by the multiple magnetic fields that result, not to mention the powerful permanent magnets employed in loudspeaker drive units. The QRT field generators are an effective, proven method of minimizing the sonic and visual impact of these stray fields. They've produced significant, repeatable, and measurable changes in the performance of hi-fi and visual display units under test. Their effects are cumulative and mutually supportive, meaning that the more Quantum units you use, the greater their impact. The Quantum Qx4s do not employ conventional filtering or regeneration techniques as used in other products. They do not limit peak current delivery. A less powerful version, the Qx2 is also available.

Price: Qx4, \$2699; Qx2 \$1799. quantumqrt.com



Quantum Resonant Technology Qb4 and Qb8

Quantum's QBASE distribution blocks are the heart and very basis of the high-quality AC supply that a system demands. Deceptively simple in appearance, the essence of the QBASE concept is a straight-line AC distribution path, combined with a star-earthed topology for connection to a clean ground. By eliminating any form of in-line filtering or active circuitry Quantum maintains the lowest possible AC supply impedance, while a tiny lift in the earth impedance of all but one of the output sockets routes the signal grounds directly to the center of the star and the clean earth terminal. Clearly identified on the casework, this Primary Earth socket is at the center of your system's performance, literally and metaphorically. It defines both the order in which you connect your components and also their listening priority in your musical enjoyment, allowing you to further optimize the performance of your primary sources.

Price: Qb8, \$1399; Qb4, \$849. quantumqrt.com

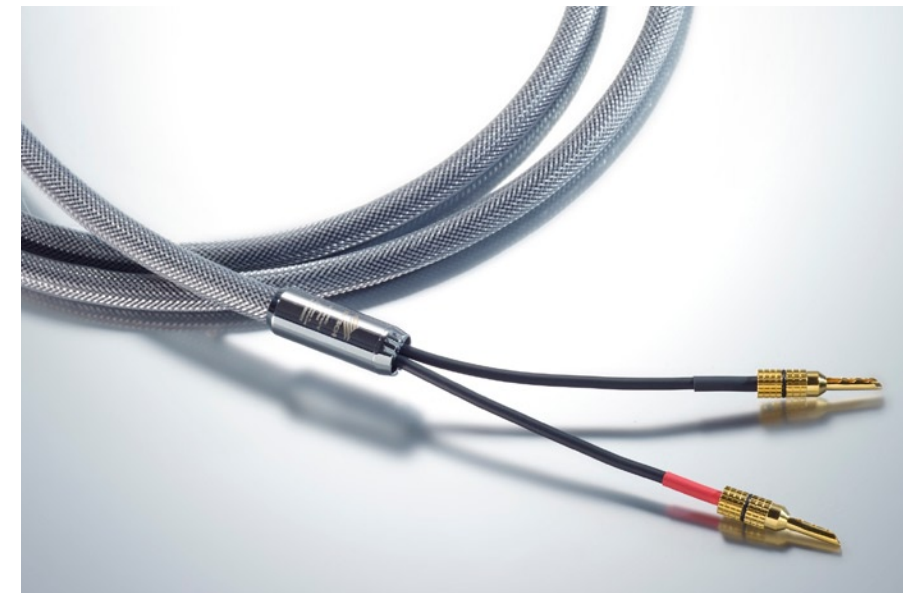
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Siltech Explorer Range and Crystal Cable GEM Range

The new Siltech Explorer and Crystal Cable GEM series are based on 6N Mono Crystal copper technology. Like all Siltech and Crystal Cable products, this is real science, not hype. Developed by Professor Dr. Ohno of the Chiba Institute of Technology in Japan, this technology is very different compared to the traditional extrusion process because it uses a cooled mould to produce a pure crystallised single copper conductor reaching a 6N purity or 99.99998%. The absence of defects associated with grain boundaries and impurities gives mono crystal unique properties including better conductivity. Also its lower oxygen content prevents cable oxidation. After a year of rigorous testing, Siltech and Crystal Cable felt confident they could use this revolutionary technology and couple it to their unique insulation material and assembly techniques. As always the fit and finish of the Explorer and GEM cables are exemplary.

Price: Interconnects from \$550-\$725 for 1m; speaker cable from \$1000-\$1500. Power cable \$600 for 2m. audioplusservices.com



Shunyata SideWinder VTX and Hydra HC power cords

Scientist Caelin Gabriel's proven ability to develop patented science and break-through measurement techniques has evolved an entire series of products that have few peers in performance and value. Creating a product that can significantly out-perform Shunyata's multiple-award winning Venom3 power cord required an enormous investment in Shunyata's own Dynamic Transient Current Measurement (DTCD Analysis) and accumulated knowledge of the key design elements that lead to optimal peak-current power transfer. The SideWinder power cord is the embodiment of Shunyata's success and advances in these areas. Raising the bar even further is Shunyata's Hydra HC (high-current) power cord, which delivers optimum measured peak-current performance, low electrical resistance, and, more importantly, uncompromising value. Featuring CA-101 cryogenic copper conductors, VTX (Virtual Tube) Conductors, and Shunyata SR-ZP connectors.

Price: Sidewinder VTX, \$495; Hydra HC, \$595. shunyata.com

ON THE HORIZON



Silver Circle Audio Pure Power One 5.0se

The Pure Power One 5.0se is a highly upgraded version of the already well-received Pure Power One 5.0. When Furutech released the GTX-D (G) receptacles, Silver Circle Audio discovered it to be the hands-down finest receptacle on the market. The question arose whether to offer the 5.0 with different receptacles or offer a completely new version. We opted for the new version. The other improvements incorporated include Supreme HiFi Tuning Fuses. Instead of commercially available ring terminals, we had high-grade copper-ring terminals treated with a double thickness of gold plating. The terminal block onto which all connections join now has copper jumpers, also treated with the same double thickness of gold plating. This ensures that the power path is overwhelmingly silver-plated copper, gold, and high-purity copper. All metals contained within the chassis are not just aerospace, but intergalactic vehicle approved. The faceplate is gold anodized 3/8" aluminum.

Price: Pure Power One 5.0se with Vesuvius power cord, \$7500; Pure Power One 5.0se w/3' DreamCatcher power cord, \$10,000. silvercircleaudio.com



Snake River Audio Signature Series cables

Snake River Audio's Signature Series upgrades the popular Cottonmouth and Mamushi wires with a new premium wiring configuration. Using a hybrid recipe of 24k gold, pure silver, and certified OFHC copper, these cables provide the absolute ultimate in quality and signal integrity. Additionally the Signature Series Mamushi employ magnets to provide enhanced signal isolation and integrity. Snake River Audio's superior construction quality means the Mamushi are built to last, and do not suffer the delicate and fragile nature of other magnetic style cables. Music aficionados and audiophiles will note the low loss, complete transparency, and image palpability of the Mamushi Signature Series. Mamushis are available for RCA, balanced XLR, power cables, and speaker connections. Signature Series Cottonmouth speaker cables will also be available in a bi-wire configuration (2 to 4).

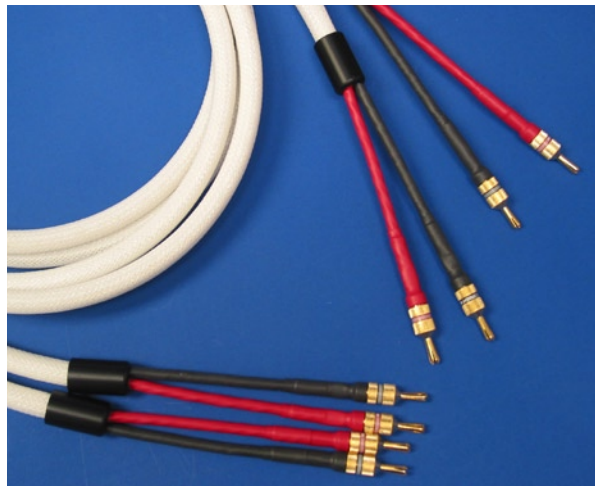
Price: Mamushi speaker, \$2099; interconnect, \$1849. Cottonmouth interconnect \$1699/1m; speaker, \$1949/3m. snakeriveraudio.com

ON THE HORIZON

Straight Wire Expressivo

Straight Wire Expressivo series of cables offers a unique, fresh design topology that enables reference-level performance at a reasonable cost. Using a combination of Compressed Conductor Technology (CCT) and Air Tube Suspension (ATS) coupled with equally select materials, Espresso cables employ four positive “air-suspended” 15AWG conductors of OFHC copper. Each cable is custom jacketed with a durable mesh that’s available in a choice of white, black, or gray at no additional charge. The sonic attributes of Espresso cables are broad in scope and application. Musical nuances, air, pace, and unrestrained dynamics come together to reveal a remarkably well-defined soundstage.

Price: Interconnect, \$300/meter pr. plus \$100 per add'l meter pr.; Speaker Cable, \$800 per 8' pr. plus \$80 per add'l ft. pr. straightwire.com



Synergistic Research; The Music Cable

The Music Cable is the world’s first plug-and-play solution for state-of-the-art computer audio. SR has taken the guess work out of creating breathtaking holographic sound from a Mac or PC as it combines a custom up-sampling 24-bit DAC capable of handling high-resolution files with advanced Synergistic Research technologies like PowerCell conditioning, Galileo Universal Cable Cell filtration, Active Shielded Element Tungsten interconnects hand-soldered directly to the custom 24-bit DAC board, and Active Tricon USB cables built right in for effortless sound right out of the box. And to make matching The Music Cable to your system easy, SR included its exclusive Enigma Tuning bullets to custom-tailor the sound of The Music Cable to compliment any system; simply experiment with the included Silver, Grey, and Black Enigma circuits and find the perfect match. The Compact design makes installation a snap, even in tight locations. Separately these technologies would retail for over \$7000.

Introductory price: \$3599 (120 volt U.S. version only).
synergisticresearch.com

Synergistic Research Active FireWire 800 and Tricon Active USB Cable

Synergistic Research’s new Active FireWire 800 cable was engineered to bridge the gap between state-of-the-art (expensive) SSD drives and affordable standard hard drives, thus delivering comparable performance with lower-cost drives. Also included are Synergistic Research’s exclusive Enigma Tuning Bullets that allow the user to fine-tune the overall sound of the cable from light to dark and even in between, depending on the Enigma Bullet selected.

Developed in conjunction with Synergistic Research’s new The Music Cable, the Tricon Active USB Cable significantly elevates the performance of any computer-to-USB DAC, according to SR’s Lead Designer Ted Denney. Reported benefits over SR’s standard Tricon USB cable are said to be a lower noise floor for enhanced resolution and smoother highs and improved soundstaging. Includes SR’s exclusive Black, Grey, and Silver Enigma Tuning Bullets. Active FireWire 800

Price: \$499 per 3', \$599 per 6', and \$699 per 10' run including one MPC power supply for Active Shielding. Tricon Active USB price: \$1200 per 1.25m. Each includes 3 Enigma Tuning Bullets an MPC power supply for Active Shielding. synergisticresearch.com

ON THE HORIZON



Transparent MusicLink Phono Cables

Transparent Audio offers phonograph cables for every type of music system from the most basic to the most sophisticated. Starting at \$195 for a one-meter pair, every Transparent MusicLink Phono Cable has custom-calibrated filter networks that reduce ultra-high-frequency noise. Transparent's technicians in Saco, Maine, craft each network using precisely prescribed filter-component values for the performance level and length of the cable. A moving-coil or moving-magnet phono cartridge produces extremely delicate and small audio signals. Removing ultra-high-frequency noise at this initial stage in the signal path reaps big sonic rewards. Expect greater dynamics and more low-level music and spatial information with Transparent's noise-reducing filter technology. RCA or XLR terminations are available on all MusicLink Phono Cables. Transparent also provides a premium DIN-to-RCA tonearm harness. Transparent's upgrade program allows Transparent Phono Cable owners to step up to the next performance level easily and affordably.

Price (depends on length and termination): MusicLink Ultra Phono Cable, \$1250; MusicLink Super Phono Cable, \$695; MusicLink Plus Phono Cable, \$360.

Coming soon: The all new MusicLink Phono, \$195. transparentcable.com

VooDoo Cable Stradivarius Cremona Edition Speaker Cable

Designed and engineered to reveal the ultimate level of sonic performance from the most exotic high-end audiophile loudspeakers, the Stradivarius Cremona Edition Speaker Cable offers full-range transparency, vivid soundstage imaging, and extremely accurate low-level detail. It's constructed of five discrete conductor groups made of pure silver and single-crystal copper conductors. Each conductor group is encapsulated in Teflon air-core dielectric and wound in a concentric lay to proprietary specification for an optimal balance of capacitance, inductive interaction, and coherent phase-linearity. To protect from EMI and RFI corruption there's a concentric active silver-plated copper shield that creates a dynamic induction field for accurate phase linearity. Available with cryogenically treated Cardas-Colver 6mm or 9mm rhodium-over-silver-plated high-purity copper billet spade, Furutech rhodium-plated angled banana, and WBT NextGen spade or banana termination.

Price: \$2500, 8' pr.; \$2750, 8' biwire pr. voodocable.net



VooDoo Cable Stradivarius Cremona Edition Interconnect Cable

The new Stradivarius Cremona Edition Interconnect is handcrafted with signal conductors made of cryogenically treated pure silver and single-crystal copper. Each conductor is encapsulated in oil-impregnated silk and Teflon dielectric. The signal conductors are wound to proprietary specification for accurate phase linearity with balanced inductance and capacitance. The conductors of the Stradivarius Interconnect are 100% protected from EMI and RFI by a concentric shield of silver-plated copper braid. The Stradivarius Cremona Edition single-ended interconnect is terminated with cryogenically treated Xhadow RCA connectors made of silver-plated billet-machined copper. Stradivarius Cremona Balanced Interconnect is built with Xhadow XLR connectors with pure silver contact pins.

Price: \$1500, 1m RCA; \$1650, 1m XLR. voodocable.net

ON THE HORIZON



Wireworld Platinum Electra Power Cords

Wireworld's newest flagship power conditioning cord is Platinum Electra. The complex design and composite insulation utilized in the cable were developed by comparing the prototypes to the pure sound of storage batteries, an essentially perfect power source. Platinum Electra's conductors are made of Ohno Continuous Cast solid silver for improved low-level resolution and dynamics. Platinum Electra also features newly developed connectors with contacts made of OCC silver, providing the lowest contact resistance of any power connectors available.

Price: \$2999/2m. wireworldcable.com

Wireworld Starlight USB 3.0 SuperSpeed Cable

Wireworld has announced what could be the first high-end cable in the USB 3.0 format. The Starlight USB 3.0 SuperSpeed cable is a flat and highly flexible cable that utilizes proprietary conductor geometry and upgraded materials to improve sound quality. To increase transmission speed and reduce jitter, Starlight's Symmetricon design utilizes twelve signal conductors in place of the nine conductors used in other USB 3.0 cables. The cable's oversized conductors are made of silver-clad oxygen-free copper, providing increased efficiency and natural tone quality. Another exclusive feature of the cable is an isolated power conductor for quieter power that improves signal purity. Starlight USB 3.0 cables are available in A-to-B and A-to-microB configurations in lengths of 0.5m to 5m.

Price: \$119/1m. wireworldcable.com



ON THE HORIZON

WyWires Gold Series

WyWires, recently announced an exclusive partnership with Bybee Technologies and now integrates Bybee Slipstream and Quantum Purifiers into all of its top-line Gold Series cables. This makes WyWires the only U.S.-based cable manufacturer using Bybee Technology for audio cables. Bybee's Slipstream and Quantum Purifiers were originally developed by Jack Bybee's team for the U.S. Navy, to assist in sonar detection. The formula still has classified status by the U.S. Department of Defense. The inclusion of the Bybee purifiers reduces system-induced electromagnetic noise to near zero, enabling improved soundstage presentation, greater image delineation, explosive dynamics, and enhanced nuance over the entire musical spectrum. WyWires Gold Series cables are crafted by hand and customized to each system. WyWires will continue to offer the classic Silver Series which started the revolution in air-dielectric Litz wire design. All components and materials are sourced in the U.S./EU.

Price: Gold interconnects, \$1349/4' pr.; speaker, \$3299/8'. Silver interconnects, \$849; speaker, \$1299; power cords, \$399. wywires.com



XLO UltraPlus™ Series Cables

Take a look at the XLO UltraPlus cable and pay close attention to the winding geometry. The Integrated Field-Balanced surface/diving winding technique minimizes frequency-related phase-shift by reducing the thickness of each conductor grouping. It ensures no wire has a “normal” position within the grouping, thus avoiding any “normal” phase-shift characteristics!

Topologically the cable has no surface or center and so frequency-related phase shift is effectively canceled. Very low capacitance and inductance also allows XLO cables to work with a wider range of components. UltraPlus is composed of PC-OCC—Pure Copper Ohno Continuous Cast wire. Characteristics of UltraPlus are its speed, openness, superb frequency extension, bass control, and a very attractive midrange.

Price: UltraPlus 1A RCA, \$212/1m; UltraPlus 2A XLR, \$250/1m; UltraPlus 4A Coax, \$120/1m; UltraPlus 4B AES/EBU, \$137. UltraPlus 3A Phono, \$850/1m; UltraPlus 10 Power, \$200. xloelectric.com

Cable and Interconnect Glossary

Robert Harley

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Cable: Often used to describe any wire in an audio system, “cable” more properly refers to the conductors between a power amplifier and a loudspeaker. Loudspeaker cables carry a high-current signal from the power amplifier to the loudspeaker.

Interconnect: Interconnects are the conductors that connect line-level signals in an audio system. The connection between source components (turntable, CD player, tuner, tape deck) and the preamplifier, and between the preamplifier and power amplifier, are made by interconnects.

Unbalanced Interconnect: An unbalanced interconnect has two conductors and is usually terminated with RCA plugs. Also called a single-ended interconnect.

Balanced Interconnect: A balanced interconnect has three conductors instead of two, and is terminated with 3-pin XLR connectors. Balanced interconnects are used only between components having balanced inputs and outputs.

Digital Interconnect: A single interconnect that carries a stereo digital audio signal in the S/PDIF format, usually from a CD transport, music server, or other digital source to a DAC.

USB Cable: A single cable that carries digital audio from a computer-based music server to a USB-capable DAC or a hard drive to a computer.

FireWire Cable: Also called IEEE1394, FireWire is a bi-directional interface that can carry high-resolution digital audio.

Bi-wiring: Bi-wiring is a method of connecting a power amplifier to a loudspeaker with two runs of cable instead of one.

RCA Plug and Jack: RCA plugs and jacks are the most common connection termination for unbalanced signals. Virtually all audio equipment has RCA jacks to accept the RCA plugs on unbalanced interconnects. RCA jacks are mounted on the audio component’s chassis; RCA plugs are the termination of unbalanced interconnects.

XLR Plug and Jack: XLR plugs are three-pin connectors terminating a balanced interconnect. XLR jacks are chassis-mounted connectors that accept XLR plugs.

Binding Post: Binding posts are terminations on power amplifiers and loudspeakers that provide connection points for loudspeaker cables.

Five-way Binding Post: A type of binding post that can accept bare wire, spade lugs, or banana plugs. Five-way posts are found on most power amplifiers and loudspeakers.

Spade Lug: A flat, pronged termination for loudspeaker cables. Spade lugs fit around power-amplifier and loudspeaker binding posts. The most popular kind of loudspeaker cable termination.

Banana Plug and Jack: Banana plugs are sometimes found on loudspeaker cables in place of spade lugs. Banana plugs will fit into five-way binding posts or banana jacks. Many European products use banana jacks on power amplifiers for loudspeaker connection.

AWG: American Wire Gauge: a measure of conductor thickness, usually in loudspeaker cables. The lower the AWG number, the thicker the wire. Lamp cord has an AWG of 18, usually referred to as “18 gauge.”

HDMI: An acronym for High-Definition Digital Multimedia Interface, HDMI was developed for home theater to carry high-definition video along with high-resolution digital audio in the same cable.

HOW TO CHOOSE CABLES AND INTERCONNECTS

Robert Harley

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Ideally, every component in the system—including cables and interconnects—should be absolutely neutral and impose no sonic signature on the music. As this is never the case, we are forced to select cables and interconnects with colorations that counteract the rest of the system’s colorations.

For example, if your system is a little on the bright and analytical side, mellow-sounding interconnects and cables can take the edge off the treble and let you enjoy the music more. If the bass is overpowering and fat, lean- and tight-sounding interconnects and cables can firm up and lean out the bass. A system lacking palpability and presence in the midrange can benefit from a forward-sounding cable.

Selecting cables and interconnects for their musical compatibility should be viewed as the final touch to your system. A furniture maker who has been using saws, planers, and rasps will finish his work with steel wool or very fine sandpaper. Treat cables and interconnects the same way—as the last tweak to nudge your system in the right direction, not as a Band-Aid for poorly chosen components.

Cables and interconnects won’t correct fundamental musical or electrical incompatibilities. For example, if you have a high-output-impedance power amplifier driving current-hungry

HOW TO CHOOSE CABLES AND INTERCONNECTS

loudspeakers, the bass will probably be soft and the dynamics constricted. Loudspeaker cables won't fix this problem. You might be able to ameliorate the soft bass with the right cable, but it's far better to fix the problem at the source—a better amplifier/loudspeaker match.

Good cables merely allow the system's components to perform at their highest level; they won't make a poor system or bad component match sound good. Start with a high-quality, well-chosen system and select cables and interconnects that allow that system to achieve its highest musical performance. Remember, a cable or interconnect can't actually effect an absolute improvement in the sound; the good ones merely do less harm.

A typical hi-fi system will need one pair of loudspeaker cables (two pairs for bi-wiring), one long pair of interconnects between the preamplifier and power amplifier, and several short interconnect pairs for connections between source components (such as a turntable or CD player) and the preamplifier.

If the power amplifier is located near the loudspeakers, the loudspeaker cables will be short and the interconnects between the preamplifier and power amplifier will be long. Conversely, if the power amplifier is near the source components and preamplifier, the interconnects will be short and the loudspeaker cables long. There is no consensus among the experts about which method is preferable, but I use long interconnects and short loudspeaker cables. Ideally, interconnects and loudspeaker cables should be short, but that often isn't practical.

Once you've got a feel for how your system is—or will be—configured, make a list of the

interconnects and cables you'll need, and their lengths. Keep all lengths as short as possible, but allow some flexibility for moving loudspeakers, putting your preamp in a different space in the rack, or other possible changes. Although we want to keep the cables and interconnects short for the best sound, there's nothing worse than having interconnects 6" too short. After you've found the minimum length, add half a meter for flexibility.

Interconnects are often made in standard lengths of 1, 1.5, and 2 meters. These are long enough for source-to-preamplifier connections, but too short for many preamplifier-to-power-amplifier runs. These long runs are usually custom-made to a specific length. Similarly, loudspeaker cables are typically supplied in 8' or 10' pairs, but custom lengths are readily available. It's best to have the cable manufacturer terminate the cables (put spade lugs or banana plugs on loudspeaker cables, and RCA or XLR plugs on interconnects) rather than trying to do it yourself.

Concentrate your cable budget on the cables that matter most. The priority should be given to the sources you listen to most. For example, you may not care as much about the sound of your tuner as you do your DAC. Consequently, you should spend more on interconnects between the DAC and preamplifier than between the tuner and preamp. And because all your sources are connected to the power amplifier through the interconnect between the preamplifier and power amplifier, this link must be given a high priority. But any component—even an iPod's analog output—will benefit from good interconnects.

Should all your interconnects and loudspeaker cables be made by the same manufacturer? Or is

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it better to mix and match brands? There are two schools of thought on this issue. The first holds that an entire system with one brand of cable and interconnect is the best route. If one interconnect works well in your system, use it throughout. This argument also suggests that the cable designer made his interconnects and loudspeaker cables to work together to achieve the best possible sound.

The second school of thought holds that different brands are best. Because each cable or interconnect affects the sound in a certain way, using the same interconnect and cable throughout the system will only reinforce the cable's sonic signature. By using cables and interconnects from different manufacturers, the characteristic sonic signature of a cable won't be superimposed on the music by every interconnect.

This second theory has an analog in the recording world. Engineers will record through one brand of recording console, then mix the record through a different brand of console. They don't want to hear the console's sound in the final product, so they don't subject the signal to the same sonic signature twice.

My experience suggests that the only way to determine the best cable or interconnect for your system is to experiment and listen. In some cases, the best results will be achieved with all the interconnects and cables made by the same manufacturer. In others, a mix of different interconnects will work best. It's impossible to predict which cables will sound best in your system.

Most dealers will let you take home several cables at once to try in your system. Take advantage of these offers. Some mail-order

companies will send you many cables to try: you keep the ones you want to buy—if any—and return the others. Compare inexpensive cables with expensive ones—sometimes manufacturers have superb cables that sell for a fraction of the price of their top-of-the-line products.

If you're starting a system from scratch, selecting cables is more difficult than replacing one length in your system. Because different combinations of cables will produce different results, the possibilities are greatly increased. Moreover, you don't have a baseline reference against which to judge how good or bad a cable is. In this situation, the best way of getting the ideal cables for your system is your dealer's advice. Try the cables and interconnects he suggests, along with two other brands or models for comparison.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR IN CABLES AND INTERCONNECTS

Robert Harley

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Cables are best evaluated in the playback system in which they will be used. Not only is the sound of a cable partially system-dependent, but the sonic characteristics of a specific cable will work better musically in some systems than in others. Personal auditioning is the only way to evaluate cables and interconnects. Never be swayed by technical jargon about why one cable is better than another. Much of this is pure marketing hype, with little or no relevance to how the cable will perform

musically in your system. Trust your ears.

Fortunately, evaluating cables and interconnects is relatively simple; the levels are automatically matched between cables, and you don't have to be concerned about absolute-polarity reversal. One pitfall, however, is that cables and interconnects need time to break in before they sound their best. Before break-in, a cable often sounds bright, hard, fatiguing, congested, and lacking in soundstage depth. These characteristics often disappear after several hours' use, with days or weeks of use required for full break-in. You can't be sure, however, if the cable is inherently bright- and hard-sounding, or if it just needs breaking-in. Note that break-in wears off over time. Even if a cable has had significant use, after a long period of not being used it may not sound its best until you've put music through it for a few days.

With those cautions in mind, you're ready to evaluate cables and interconnects. Listen to the first interconnect for 15 minutes to half an hour, then replace it with the next candidate. One way of choosing between them is merely to ask yourself which interconnect allows you to enjoy the music more. You don't need to analyze what you're hearing; just pick the interconnect that makes you feel better.

The other method is to scrutinize what you're hearing from each interconnect and catalog the strengths and weaknesses. You'll often hear trade-offs between interconnects: one may have smoother treble and finer resolution than another, but less soundstage focus and transparency. Another common trade-off is between smoothness and resolution of detail: The smooth cable may lose some musical information, but

the high-resolution cable can sound analytical and bright. Again, careful auditioning in your own system is the only way to select the right cables and interconnects. Keep in mind, however, that a better cable can sometimes reveal flaws in the rest of your system. You should also know that cables and interconnects sound better after they have "settled in" for a few days.

Cables and interconnects can add some annoying distortions to the music. I've listed the most common sonic problems of cables and interconnects.

GRAINY AND HASHY TREBLE: Many cables overlay the treble with a coarse texture. The sound is rough rather than smooth and liquid.

BRIGHT AND METALLIC TREBLE: Cymbals sound like bursts of white noise rather than a brass-like shimmer. They also tend to splash across the soundstage rather than sounding like compact images. Sibilants (s and sh sounds on vocals) are emphasized, making the treble sound spitty. It's a bad sign if you suddenly notice more sibilance. The opposite condition is a dark and closed-in treble. The cable should sound open, airy, and extended in the treble without sounding overly bright, etched, or analytical.

HARD TEXTURES AND LACK OF LIQUIDITY: Listen for a glassy glare on solo piano in the upper registers. Similarly, massed voices can sound glazed and hard rather than liquid and richly textured.

LISTENING FATIGUE: A poor cable will quickly cause listening fatigue. The symptoms of

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR IN CABLES & INTERCONNECTS

listening fatigue are headache, a feeling of relief when the music is turned down or stopped, the need to do something other than listen to music, and the feeling that your ears are tightening up. This last condition is absolutely the worst thing any audio component can do. Good cables (in a good system) will let you listen at higher levels for longer periods of time. If a cable or interconnect causes listening fatigue, avoid it no matter what its other attributes.

LACK OF SPACE AND DEPTH: Using a recording with lots of natural depth and ambiance, listen for how the cable affects soundstage depth and the sense of instruments hanging in three-dimensional space. Cables also influence on the sense of image focus. Poor cables can also make the soundstage less transparent.

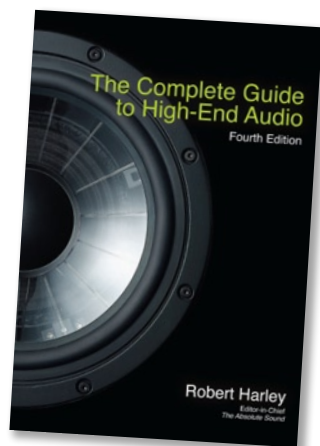
LOW RESOLUTION: Some cables and interconnects sound smooth, but they obscure the music's fine detail. Listen for low-level information and an instrument's inner detail. The opposite of smoothness is a cable that's "ruthlessly revealing" of every detail in the music, but in an unnatural way. Musical detail should be audible, but not hyped or exaggerated. The cable or interconnect should strike a balance between resolution of information and a sense of ease and smoothness.

MUSHY BASS OR POOR PITCH DEFINITION: A poor-quality cable or interconnect can make the bass slow, mushy, and lacking in pitch definition. With such a cable, the bottom end is soggy and fat rather than taut and articulate.

Low-frequency pitches are obscured, making the bass sound like a roar instead of being composed of individual notes.

CONSTRICTED DYNAMICS: Listen for the cable or interconnect's ability to portray the music's dynamic structure, on both small and large scales. For example, a guitar string's transient attack should be quick, with a dynamic edge. On a larger scale, orchestral climaxes should be powerful and have a sense of physical impact (if the rest of your system can portray this aspect of music).

I must reiterate that putting a highly colored cable or interconnect in your system to correct a problem in another component (a dark-sounding cable on a bright loudspeaker) isn't the best solution. Instead, use the money you would have spent on new cables toward better loudspeakers—then go cable shopping. Cables and interconnects shouldn't be Band-Aids; instead, cables should be the finishing touch to let the rest of your components perform at their highest level.



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EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

Cables & Interconnects

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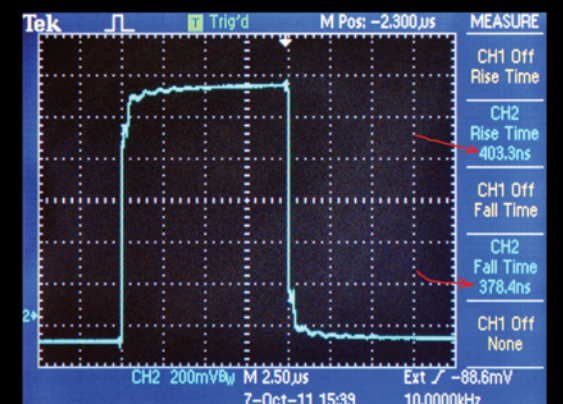
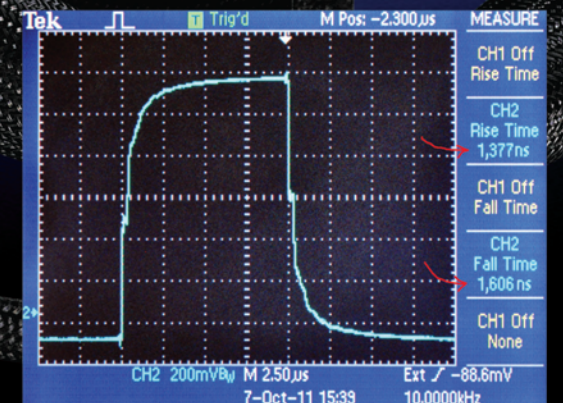
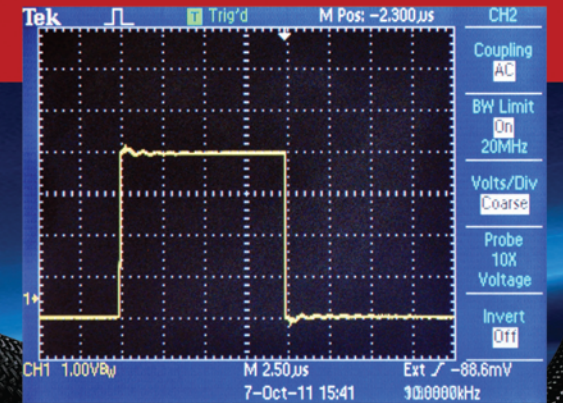
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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Transparent Audio The Link Interconnect and The Wave Loudspeaker Cable

Neil Gader



Transparent Audio, a gold standard in the high-end cable biz, has a reputation for designing wire on the cutting edge, like Opus MM2—an extreme cable and interconnect at out-of-this-world prices. But Transparent hasn't forgotten the rest of us Earth-bound audiophiles. I was urged to have a listen to one of Transparent's other extreme cables. Its extremely inexpensive ones—the \$85 The Link interconnect and the \$200 The Wave speaker cable.

Transparent's point-man, Brad O'Toole, described The Link/Wave as products that derive much of their design from elite cables farther up the food chain. All point-to-point soldering is lead-free and still done by hand in Maine. The cables use five-nines (99.999% pure) copper conductors in a twisted-pair configuration. Cable networks are less a source of controversy than they were a few years ago, and O'Toole pointed out their advantages. The first goal was to eliminate the antennae effect by shelving frequencies above 1MHz. This reduces noise and hash and removes "hardness" from the sound. Additionally, the cable can be calibrated to match electrical values regardless of length—for example, a long cable will have identical filter characteristics to a shorter one, so they sound essentially the same. Networks also help maintain a common family-voicing. Finally, the network will add some inductance which benefit the frequencies below 2kHz. Practically speaking, The Link/Wave cable is also physically consistent with the smaller-scale systems it's likely to be paired with. They're flexible enough to be easily routed through tight spaces and around tricky corners.

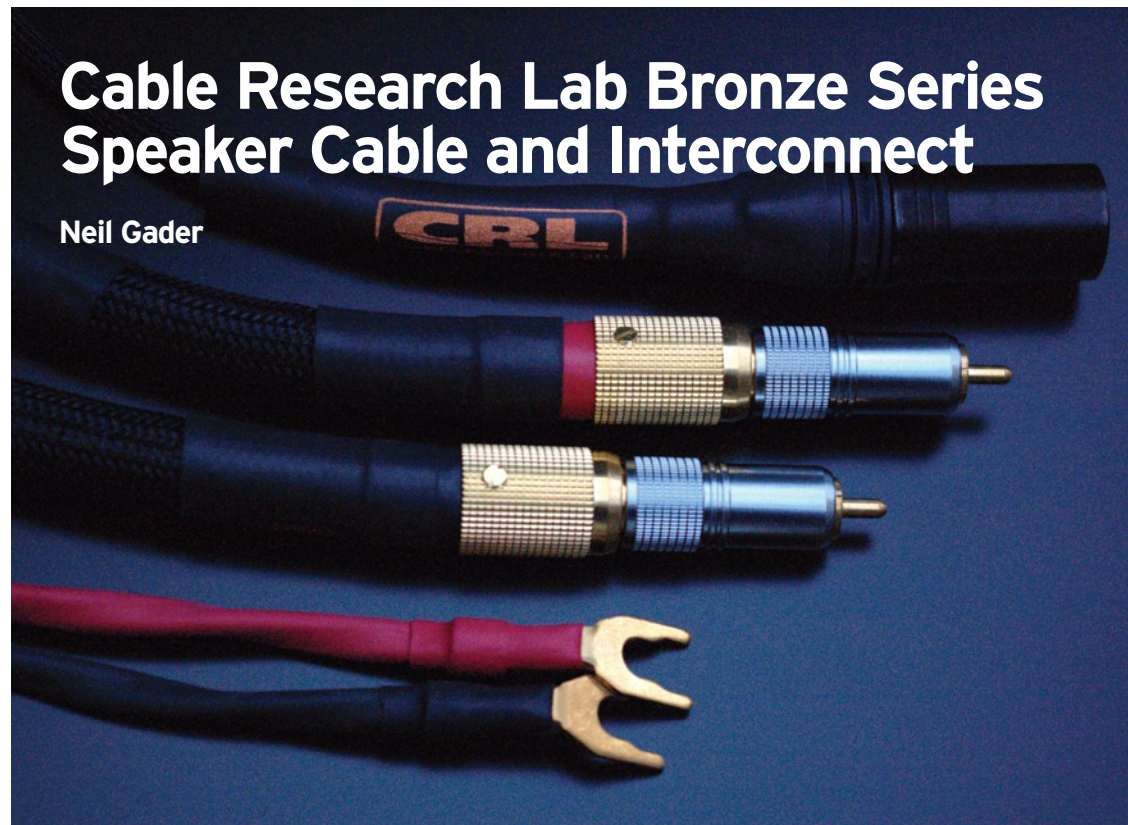
The temperament of The Link/Wave is easygoing,

unobtrusive, and elegantly balanced to the midrange—not going for too much extension on top or overly boosting the bottom. In my view, this is a good route to take. Less expensive systems often give up a bit of resolution and transparency at the frequency extremes, so a cable that slightly softens or rounds these rougher edges is merely being responsive to market realities. The Link/Wave throws a wide soundstage, if not an especially deep one. Imaging is very good and there's very little veiling of details. Low-frequency pitch and timbre were nothing short of remarkable. The only area where the cable exposes its modest origins is in its reproduction of the micro-dynamics of a recording. These tiny gradations are somewhat truncated creating a sensation of diminished pace and liveliness and a shallower sense of dimensionality—issues that arose during Mary Stallings' live version of "Sunday Kind Of Love" from Live At The Village Vanguard [MaxJazz]. If you're familiar with Transparent Audio's more elite offerings you'd have to conclude that in comparison The Link/The Wave are a little slow off the mark—lively but not instantaneously so.

From the start, my cruel plan to embarrass The Link and The Wave with top-flight cabling from the likes of Wireworld and Tara Labs and Synergistic Research was thwarted by sonic realities. The Link/Wave combo may not be a competitive match for these fine brands but at a tenth the price, it's shocking just how good they really are.

Believe it or not, nothing gives even a jaded old audio reviewer more pleasure than discovering a product that's not only really good but almost embarrassingly inexpensive. In the bang-for-your-buck segment The Link and The Wave are triple-threat wires—they're neutral, they're natural, and they're a no-brainer. **NG**

EQUIPMENT REPORT



In Issue 189 I reviewed the Cable Research Lab Silver speaker cables and interconnects. A relatively new company at the time, CRL took its inspiration from the work of Paul Weitzel and Winston Ma over a decade ago for a company then known as FIM cables. CRL began producing a new generation of these wires, redesigned and manufactured by a team led by Art Almstead, president of Twisted Pair Designs. Since then CRL has introduced a new, very expensive flagship cable, the Gold Series, but what intrigued me more was the debut of its Bronze Series cable. At \$895, the Bronze is actually a package deal—or, in CRL's word, a “bundle”—that includes a set of speaker cable, single- or bi-wire with your choice of terminations, in lengths up to twelve feet, and two pairs of interconnects up to three meters in length, once again terminated with your choice of RCA or XLR connectors. All of this for one price.

27 Guide to Cables, Power Products, Accessories, & Music

◀ PREVIOUS PAGE

CRL Bronze speaker cables use four 14-gauge stranded OFC copper conductors individually insulated with modified PVC dielectrics. The Bronze interconnect is a silver/copper hybrid design in a braided configuration—hybrid, as in a pair of solid-core silver conductors in Teflon insulation and a single-stranded OFC copper conductor in polyethylene insulation. All CRL cables are hand-terminated and use lead-free Wonder Solder. They are all U.S.A. built. Bronze cable is lightweight for easy handling, a nice change from many of the thick, unwieldy wires currently available.

"A bundle that gives you more than an earful of what many cutting-edge cables are doing."

Sonically, the Bronze Bundle shares many of the characteristics of the uptown CRL Silver. There is a strong family resemblance in its rich, smooth, dynamic midrange, and its low bass is extended and well-defined, though not as tight as it might be. A little cooler overall, its treble octaves integrate well with the rest of the frequency spectrum and on a track like Nils Lofgren's “Keith Don't Go” from *Acoustic Live*, the wires exhibit substantial vocal air—although they do not have the openness and dimensionality of Synergistic Tesla Apex or the extension of Wireworld Platinum Eclipse, both vastly more expensive wires. In contrast, the Bronze has a whiter, thinner treble texture that pinches harmonic resolution a hair. Very impressive, however, is the breadth of its soundstage during Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* [Argo]. The Bronze does an excellent job reproducing the rip and blat of trombones,

splashes of brass and winds, the piercing whistle of a piccolo, the oboe's nasality. On this disc image focus can be extraordinary, and though it's very good here, the Bronze still gives up some definition and resolving power. On the other hand, I don't know of a combination of cables at this price point that'll surpass it. My often-stated perspective is that the differences between reference-level wire and intelligently designed cables built to an affordable price point remain fairly subtle. Some reference-quality cables do have that inimitable quality of not being there—of leaving no fingerprints. With the Bronze, there is a slight but perceptible signature.

Readers often ask me where the *value* is in the high end. In the CRL Bronze, you'll find an example. It's a bundle that gives you more than an earful of what many cutting-edge cables are doing, without the price tag that comes with them. **tss**

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NEXT PAGE ▶

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval Speaker Cable

Neil Gader

These cables should come with a warning. Something like, “The Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval is one of the most ruthlessly honest speaker wires available.” The BSO won’t editorialize, EQ, or otherwise skew the sound of your current system. This caveat emptor is provided as a courtesy to those audiophiles seeking a quick tweak or refreshment of the sonic palette of their existing rig. Ain’t gonna happen. Don’t even consider begging. What the BSO will do—and in impressive fashion—is let you hear more of what you already have, for better or worse.

A little back story. Audiophiles know Analysis Plus by virtue of its audio and video cables. In fact, the thrust of this company’s work has been in the field of computer simulation. Like a high-tech trouble-shooter, Analysis Plus has created advanced models of ICs, engineered prototypes for piezoelectric dental teeth cleaners for a Taiwanese firm (dentistry, who knew?), designed shielding for MRI rooms, and modeled and designed electromagnetic shielding for antilock brake sensors for Ford. It also turns out that AP’s Big Silver Oval cable is something of a celebrity. NASA purchased sixty feet of this wire for a specific task where the requirement for rise time could not be fudged—in this instance carrying 120A current pulses at 80V. Not too shabby a credit to have in your resumé. Now, back to audio.

The Big Silver Oval is a nine-gauge cable in a coaxial configuration that features pure silver conductors over a stabilizing strand of oxygen-free copper (OFC). This structure is then woven around a structural dielectric that preserves the hollow-oval conductor geometry. Don’t be distracted by the unadorned look of the Big Silver O—it vouches for the fact that AP spends more quality time in the R&D lab tracking performance than chatting up interior designers. Its research has found that the hollow-oval configuration engages the conductor more uniformly and efficiently—a fact borne out by the wire’s very low resistance value even at the upper-frequency extremes where increased resistance and sluggish rise-time can roll-off the top end.

Some very expensive cabling was pulled from my system in order to clear a path for the Analysis

Plus, but from the very outset of my listening sessions I encountered nothing less than a natural, balanced, musical flow that was virtually undisturbed by treble edginess, harmonic losses, or transient smearing. Its overall sonic character

"I've never heard a better cable near this price—and that's the biggest plus of all."

was a relaxed one, exceedingly neutral with a hint of warmth and just a very slight transient softening in the treble. In this way the BSO is more akin to Synergistic Research Tesla Apex than Wireworld Platinum, both veteran references of mine. For example, in the opening bars of *The Wasps*

Overture by Vaughan Williams played by the LSO under Previn [RCA] it captured the earthy tonality of the ominous doublebass notes, as the string sections morph into a hive of wasps in an intense swirl of rapidly changing amplitudes. Time and again the BSO’s very rich and cohesive midrange and well-defined bass proved to be two of its foremost strengths..

Turning to one of my “big gun” direct-to-disc recordings, Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man* [Crystal Clear], the Atlanta Brass Ensemble was reproduced with lively transient action and dynamic thrust. The smooth top end offered good air and finely grained detail for the winds and cymbals. Bass drum impacts were fearsome in their intensity, while the array of kettledrums across the back of the stage had rock-solid specificity. This is a recording where most of us



EQUIPMENT REPORT - Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval Speaker Cable

will run out of loudspeaker before running out of wire capability.

That is why the appearance of the Wilson Audio Sophia 3 proved so fortuitous. Generally, after I've put in my time evaluating a component I put it aside a while. When I return to that product it's like I've mentally rebooted, and I find myself touching on areas that I might not have fully considered initially. Though I figured I'd gleaned the essence of the Big Silver Oval, the Sophia 3 presented a great opportunity to recheck my findings and further explore the issue of transparency and big-bore dynamics. The full-range nature of the Sophia was like manna from heaven for the Big Silver Oval wires. During *Carmen* the individual sections of the chorus (men, women and children) were well resolved, each occupying specific positions on stage, with the timbral energy and harmonics unique to each—a gravity that seemed to lighten or grow weightier depending on the chorus being featured—clearly reproduced. The imaging of each grouping was spectacular. What isn't always heard in its entirety, however, is the near subliminal low-level backdrop behind these images. It's the sense of the stage, and the hall's back wall that supports the music. Its effect is almost completely atmospheric and yet is essential to creating the reality of a live concert. It requires resolution at all levels to reveal the full extent of space and ambience in this recording. If the BSO didn't take me all the way there, like I perceive the reference Wireworld Platinum does, it got exceedingly close.

With no serious sonic missteps the BSO's subtractions are only of the most modest kind. During Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, for example, the bell of a trumpet doesn't quite open up fully in

the dynamic sense, suggesting a hint of top-end constriction. At the other extreme, a bowed bass viol misses the final bloom of resonance that should appear to surge up from beneath the floorboards like a rising tide. And were the strings

"A natural, balanced, musical flow undisturbed by treble edginess or transient smearing."

of the harp as individuated as possible? Not quite—they were just a little vague on low-level *pianissimos*. So, yes, some flagship wires will buy you even more ambient expression, dynamic explosiveness, and harmonic complexity. But first you have to make sure that all other system variables are just so—something to keep in mind when you wade into high end's heady waters.

The Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval is the kind of wire that touches all the areas that matter to me. Sure, I've heard cables that will better the Big Silver Oval by tiny margins here and there, but I've never heard a better cable near this price. It handily exceeded my expectations. And in my book, that's the biggest plus of all. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Price: \$1650/10 ft. pair (8 ft. pair, \$1350)

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COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE ON THE FORUM AT AVGUIDE.COM



Beauty, Brains, and Muscle!

I'm really proud of AudioQuest's new series of audio interconnect cable. I consider the essence of good design to be making rational and informed compromises, balancing all ingredients and compatibility requirements. It's not a perfect world ... if one isn't aware of imperfections and degradation, one can't design a superior product. The truly good-news is that the necessity to design cables which accommodate 3.5mm Mini-Phone plugs and 30-pin iPod/iPhone/iPad connectors in addition to RCA plugs, pushed me to create cables which are also significantly higher-performance than the larger cables they replace.

There are no new ingredients, there is no magic ... but I had the freedom to take everything that I have learned about cable and materials and apply it with the perspective I've worked 30+ years to achieve. All the tricks and most refined techniques are here: Superior conducting materials (LGC, PSC, PSC+, PSS Silver), Noise-Dissipation System, Air-Tubes, Double-Balanced Geometry, Dielectric-Bias System, Asymmetrical + & - conductors, Purple Copper and Red Copper Cold-Welded plugs, Direct-Silver Plating, etc.

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RCA 3.5mm Male 3.5mm Female iPod



EVERGREEN GOLDEN GATE BIG SUR SYDNEY VICTORIA YOSEMITE ANGEL

EQUIPMENT REPORT

AudioQuest Diamond USB Cable

Faceted, Polished, and Colorless

Robert Harley



The replacement of the S/PDIF interface by USB as the *de facto* standard for transmitting digital audio has been surprisingly rapid. Even more surprising is how variable in sound quality USB can be. No two implementations of the USB interface sound the same, with a huge performance gap between the best and the worst. The good news is that some talented high-end designers are addressing the problem, raising the bar in USB performance. The very best implementations are now very good indeed.

All these observations also apply to USB cables. There are larger sound quality differences between USB cables than between S/PDIF or AES/EBU cables. The generic USB cables designed for connecting computer peripherals are laughably bad: Even a \$40 entry-level USB cable designed for audio offers a huge leap in performance when compared with a generic USB.

So how good can a USB cable get? I discovered the answer to this question when I installed a 1.5m run of AudioQuest's top-of-the-line Diamond USB in my music-server system. It turns out that the state-of-the-art in USB cables, when combined with a state-of-the-art USB interface, can sound absolutely spectacular. My music server system is an iMac running iTunes and Pure Music driving a Berkeley Audio Design Alpha USB Interface and Alpha USB DAC (and later, Alpha DAC Series 2) digital-to-analog

converter. When I replaced an excellent \$80 USB cable with the Diamond USB (\$549 for 1m, \$695 for 1.5m) my system took a significant leap in sound quality. Diamond USB is quite expensive, but in the context of my system, well worth the price.

The cable is built from solid silver conductors—what AudioQuest calls “Perfect Surface Silver” (PSS) terminated with silver-plated connectors. AudioQuest's 72V Dielectric Bias System (DBS) applies 72V across the dielectric with a battery attached to the cable. A wire attached to the battery's positive terminal runs down the cable's length. The battery's negative terminal is connected to a shield around the conductors. Note that the battery's + and – terminals are not connected, so no current flows, which is why the battery will last for years. The idea is to “charge” the dielectric so that it performs optimally at all times, and with no break-in required.

AudioQuest's Diamond USB delivers exceptional resolution of detail, but at the same time is relaxed and easy-going. The cable presents a huge amount of information, from very low-level spatial cues, to inner timbral information that conveys the mechanism by which the instrument creates sound, to micro-dynamic nuances. The presentation is richly portrayed, like a finely woven tapestry. I simply heard more music after switching to Diamond USB. I've been listening to Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* in 176.4kHz/24-bit via Reference Recordings' HRx format for two years and know it well. After putting Diamond USB into the system, I heard even more very low-level information, particularly very quiet instruments at the back of the soundstage. The increased information density expanded the stage, particularly in depth. There was a heightened sense of a large acoustic replacing the smaller acoustic of my listening room. The increased resolution also made timbres more richly saturated and lifelike. Concomitantly, the presentation became gentler and smoother. The treble, in particular, was revelatory by virtue of the absence of hardness and glare. I could listen at higher volume without the sound affronting my ears. The presentation became more musically

vivid without becoming sonically vivid—a rare quality that I greatly value. It is this combination of resolution and ease that makes Diamond USB special.

When critics of premium audio cables complain about cable pricing, I suggest that they perform a simple test. Listen to the system for a couple of weeks with the expensive cable installed, and then replace the expensive cable with what they had been using, or with a lesser-quality cable. They should then ask themselves: “Am I willing to live without the qualities the better cable delivers?” I suspect that anyone who performs this test with Diamond USB won't want to take it out of his system. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Price: \$549 (1m); \$695 (1.5m)

AUDIOQUEST

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COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE ON THE FORUM AT [AVGUIDE.COM](#)

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Cardas Clear Cables

Alan Sircom

Cardas is not a cable company that comes out with a new product every few months. And it certainly doesn't add a new layer of cables on the top of its portfolio regularly. So, when Cardas Clear was first seen at the CES, there was a bit of a stir.

The thick, blue cable represents George Cardas' crowning achievement, and takes all the company's patented technologies found throughout Cardas' already-well-respected ranges of Litz-design cables to new levels. In essence, Clear uses the tried and trusted geometry of the Golden Reference cable, including "Golden Section," multi-gauge stranding in a symmetrical, helical, tri-axial design and "Constant-Q" construction, which places the smallest strands of the cable at the centre of the conductor to reduce stored energy and conductor resonance. Cable resonance is further reduced with what Cardas terms "controlled propagation" and "crossfield" construction, which means matching conductor to dielectric characteristics by using carefully computed strand layering.

What this means in simple terms is Cardas slowly builds up strand-upon-strand of increasingly larger low-eddy copper wire, until the inside of each conductor looks like a little copper nautilus shell in cross-section. This is then thrice-shielded and coated in its own dielectric and these conductors then form their own Golden Section layout, with Teflon pipes creating a useful dielectric of air.

Clear takes this already demanding construction to obsessive-compulsive levels. The geometry has been improved still further, to produce an ultra-fine tubular construction. It still retains the basic Cardas DNA, copper conductors, Teflon and air dielectric, rhodium-based connectors, but each and every aspect of the cable have been modified in the process.

Nothing is left to chance at Cardas. For the record, some companies buy cable off the shelf, some "roll their own," but Cardas takes the long route. The cables are actually drawn and annealed from copper rod using the company's own equipment —because most commercially available copper is not of sufficient quality to make it to high-end cables. Let's face it, any company so determined that it buys its own foundry to make its own cables, is going the distance; even Jamie Oliver doesn't go as far as owning his own farms. This wasn't enough for Clear, though. George Cardas went back to first principles, discovering new insights into metallurgy and the relationship between conductor and dielectric in the process.

Here's what I mean. Cardas traditionally uses its Eutectic solder to connect the loudspeaker cable to



EQUIPMENT REPORT - Cardas Clear Cables

the spade lug. Not so with Clear; instead, there's a new forging process, in which Cardas directly joins the lug to the cable by compression forging, which crimps metal on metal so powerfully it's almost impossible to think in terms of separate pieces of metal. Of course, this does make the spade lugs difficult to use in some quarters—they don't like WBT terminals, for example—but the connection is as good as it gets. The quality of connection in both the phono and air-sealed XLR plugs—all custom designs—is similarly uncompromising.

"George Cardas went back to first principles, discovering new insights into metallurgy and the relationship between conductor and dielectric in the process."

There's a high degree of consistency in Clear. The balanced and single-ended interconnects and the loudspeaker cable are functionally identical in sound. But that doesn't mean a "family" or "house" sound; instead, Clear sounds as close as you can get to having no sound.

That might sit almost uncomfortably for Cardas fans, at least at first. The cable range starts warm and entertaining, with an expansive soundstage, but not so strong in detail resolution, top end clarity, and dynamic range. As you climb the

Cardas ladder, so you get more of the good bits and less of the bad bits, but some have felt that even up the top end of the range, there's a bloom to the bass and upper mids that—while immensely attractive—deviates from absolute accuracy and does perceptibly slow the sound. Previously, even at the breathless end of the Cardas range, the cables traded pace for space; a big, luxuriant, and sublime soundstage, but at the expense of the sort of pace that would make the product appeal to Naim owners, for example.

Clear redraws the map. Although still musically insightful and expansive, this is a cable that is as neutral as they come. No more upper-mid softening, no more bass bloom, but a lot more dynamics and energy. This might come as a bit of shock for owners of top-end Cardas cables. It's a lot more accurate—still as entertaining as ever, but less warm. If you built a system with a lot of top-end energy and used Cardas' slight softening effect to compensate, Clear will expose that energy in full effect. In fairness, at the level where you'd use cables of Clear's status, you shouldn't be thinking of using cables as filters.

Clear helps increase the perceived speed of the overall sound, too. There are some cables that make a big thing of transients, making leading-edge transients appear so filled with attack they almost make the music sound like it's a couple of beats per minute faster. Of course, this isn't the case, but it's a common audible illusion, all the same. Cardas is not known for its speedy transients, but Clear redresses the balance. This is a faster cable than usually heard from Cardas, with leading-edge delivery that might even endear Clear to those who normally shy

SPECS & PRICING

<p>Cardas Clear Interconnect Outside Diameter: 10.2mm Dielectric Type: Teflon, Air RCA Capacitance: 16pf/ft XLR Capacitance: 8pf/ft Cable AWG: 25.5 Shield Type: 100% spiral x 2 and Teflon graphite composite Conductor Type: Matched Propagation, Golden Ratio, Constant Q, Crossfield, Pure Copper, Litz Connectors: Cardas custom SRCA or XLRs</p>	<p>Inductance: .0176uh/ft/loop Capacitance: 278pf/ft Bi Wire Option: No Cable AWG: 8 Conductor Type: Perfect Mirror Quadaxial Connectors: Forged spade lugs compression die forged to cable Price: \$4334/8' pair</p>
<p>Cardas Clear speaker cable Outside Diameter: 15.2mm Dielectric Type: Teflon®</p>	<p>CARDAS AUDIO, LTD 480 11th Street, SE Bandon, OR 97411 541-347-2484 cardas.com</p>

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away from its designs. I still maintain the Cardas/Naim connection is an unlikely one (in the past, Litz-construction speaker cables and Naim amps were a distinct no-no), but this has far more pace than previous Cardas cables.

Perhaps the biggest demonstration of Clear's superiority occurs when you take the cable *out* of the system. Other cables sound contrived by comparison—perhaps brighter in treble, seemingly deeper in bass, or faster overall. But these seem like sounds imposed upon the system; Clear genuinely sounds like there's no such imposition. Especially in bass depth.

Everything else either makes the system sound slightly light or slightly "tweaked" by comparison. Here, bass depth and definition are absolutely state of the art. Interestingly, Clear also seems to make other cables seem "noisy" by comparison, but when comparing side by side with lesser cables, pin-pointing the source or nature of that noise is functionally impossible. Nevertheless, when played to people with no vested interest in the matter, they talk (without prompting) about noise levels between Clear and other cables.

In the early days of hi-fi, cables simply didn't matter. Then they did. When people began



“The biggest demonstration of Clear’s superiority happens when you take the cable *out* of the system.”

to recognise the difference cables made, the guidelines at the time were to spend something between five and fifteen per cent of the total cost of the system on ancillaries like cables. Recently, all hell broke loose, and you can get a \$30,000 system sporting \$50,000 worth of cables. Cardas Clear makes a good case for moving back to that five-to-fifteen per cent rule.

Here’s why: If you have a good, but not expensive system and slot in Cardas Clear, the performance will improve, but only up to a point. You’ll come away impressed, but not mind-

boggled. Put the same cable into a system where it’s appropriately balanced and there will be at least a 75 per cent increase in boggling.

A good analogy here is HD television. If you sign up to an HDTV service and play the picture through an HD-ready 15” TV screen, you’ll see a small difference, but wonder what all the fuss is about. Replace that baby screen with a whopping great 50” plasma, and the difference between standard and high-definition pictures is easy to spot and even easier to justify.

If you are going through a radical series of upgrades, moving from a high-end to a very, very high-end system, Clear could be your first “super-serious” purchase. It’s like setting a neutral point of reference in the wiring, ticking off one of the many boxes in advance of the next series of big purchases. I’d guess Clear is unlikely to be many people’s first cable; they will have risen through the ranks. If so, there is a high likelihood that people will have had some experience with Cardas cables before. Clear represents the best of Cardas, so if you are already impressed with Cardas but want more, Clear could be the first “last upgrade” you make, sure in the knowledge that however high up the audiophile ladder you climb, Clear will be there, waiting for you to catch up. Little wonder that George Cardas considers this his “most enduring statement.” And it is—the level of uncompromising engineering that goes into this cable commands a lot of respect, even from the most cynical of cable sceptics.

But there’s more; there’s Clear Beyond. That’s a double-strength (eight conductors instead of four) speaker cable designed for bi-wiring, or serious shot-gunning, for the absolute pinnacle of performance. More about that in the next review. **tas**



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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Cardas Clear Beyond Loudspeaker Cables

Alan Sircom

Cardas Clear is an excellent loudspeaker cable. But if you want to bi-wire your loudspeakers—forget it! The "Perfect Mirror Quadaxial" litz construction of the standard Clear speaker cable cannot be configured that way. Which is where Clear Beyond comes in.

In simple terms, Clear Beyond is two Clears up one sleeve. Unfortunately, the simple terms are basically wrong. To make Beyond, George Cardas had to redesign the layout yet again, coming up with an octoaxial version of the Perfect Mirror design. Beyond features eight conductors, placed in mirror image bundles of four. Each bundle comprises nine inner and two outer layers of high-purity copper wires, separated by a Teflon dielectric. As befits a Litz design, each one of these strands is individually varnished, to limit oxidization and cut down on any naughty strand-to-strand interaction. With all that varnish to strip, making up Beyond is not easy.

As with Clear before it, the compression-die-forged spades are beautifully finished and will last forever, but are slightly narrow. They work well with WBT connectors and most U.S. terminals, though.

Clear Beyond's advantage doesn't just lie in bringing bi-wiring to the Clear range. With Beyond, "shotgunning" (single-wired, with four conductors per side) is a very real option. This is how we decided to use it.

This is big boy stuff, designed for those lucky few to raise an already high-stakes game. If your system isn't at the bleeding edge of what audio can do, there's no point going Clear. But if your system has no works in progress and everything is as good as it gets, at that point Beyond kicks in. It gives you the sublime, extended top end, completely neutral midrange, and sonorous, natural hours-in-front-of-the-system magic of the Clears, but extends it further: a broader and deeper soundstage, smoother tops, and more integrated bottom octaves.

Paradoxically, the differences between Clear and Clear Beyond are hard to detect until you have

a system that is good enough to resolve them. At which point, they become patently obvious. In part, that is Beyond "getting out of the way" even more than Clear. But there's also something else—Beyond, like Clear before it, bestows on a system a sense of sonic beauty that isn't fake, just really lovely sounding. It manages to make things sound "better" without making them sound "fake," and Beyond does that best of all.

Clear offers an almost impossible task for Beyond—how do you improve on something that good? And in most systems, the difference between Clear and Clear Beyond will be masked by the limits of the system. But for those lucky few who have systems that impose next to no constraints...phew!+

SPECS & PRICING

External diameter: 23.7mm
 Dielectric Type: Teflon®, air
 Inductance: 0.01uH/ft/loop
 Capacitance: 446pF/ft
 Biwireable: Yes
 Effective cable AWG: 5-gauge
 Conductor Type: Perfect Mirror Octoaxial

U.S.

Price: \$8668/8' pair

CARDAS AUDIO, LTD

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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Shunyata Anaconda Interconnects and Loudspeaker Cables

Technology in the Service of Music

Robert Harley

Shunyata Research, a company known for its leading-edge AC power conditioners, claims to have discovered technology for preventing a common cause of distortion in signal cables. This technology, called *ETRON™* (pronounced "Zi-Tron") is incorporated in two new line-level interconnects and two loudspeaker cables, called Python and Anaconda, respectively. Shunyata suggests that these interconnects and cables outperform any interconnect and cable on the market, regardless of price. I received for evaluation several runs of the top-line Anaconda interconnects (\$2250 per meter pair) and a 2m run of Anaconda loudspeaker cable (\$3995). The Python is priced at \$1450 for a meter-pair of interconnects and \$2995 for a 2m run of loudspeaker cable. At press time, Shunyata announced the entry-level product in the line, the Cobra interconnect (\$995 per meter-pair) and Cobra loudspeaker cable (\$1995 for two meters). A line of AC cords using the same technology will be announced at this upcoming CES. Here's the theory behind the technology. It's well-known that a cable's dielectric (the insulating material surrounding the conductors) absorbs and releases energy in response to an alternating current traveling through the conductors. Specifically, the audio signal flowing through the conductor polarizes the dielectric. When the AC signal changes polarity, as it does 1000 times per second when carrying a 1000Hz sinewave, for example, the polarizing charge also changes polarity causing the charge stored in the dielectric to be released. This release of the dielectric charge induces a tiny current in the signal conductor, introducing distortion in the audio signal.



EQUIPMENT REPORT

- Shunyata Anaconda

Shunyata's solution to this phenomenon, for which it has multiple international patents pending, is to reduce the degree of dielectric polarization by neutralizing the charge between the signal conductor and the dielectric. This is realized by using a second conductor that surrounds the dielectric and then applying an electric signal to that conductor derived from the audio signal. The electric field generated by the conductor and the electric field generated by the shield cancel each other, resulting in virtually no charge in the dielectric. Unlike most shields that are terminated at one end to ground to shield the conductors from electromagnetic interference, the shield in the Anaconda isn't connected to anything except the "electric field compensation circuit," Shunyata's name for its circuit that applies the audio signal to the shield.

In addition to this new technology Python and Anaconda use the highest-purity copper available, called CDA 101. Shunyata is one of the few companies that buys ingots of pure CDA 101 (with certificates of authenticity) for use in its signal cables, AC cords, and AC power products. CDA 101 is the highest-purity copper available (the copper industry uses the CDA designation rather than the number of "9s" after the decimal point, such as 99.9999 pure). Rather than draw the wire in the conventional way that leaves the copper molecules randomly arranged, Shunyata uses a powerful electromagnet of its own design to force the copper to permanently align in a specific orientation while the copper is semi-molten. After the copper is drawn into wire it is cryogenically treated in Shunyata's own computer-controlled cryogenic tanks. The computer controls the slow decrease in temperature to -320 degrees F, and

later the slow increase back to room temperature. The atmosphere in the cryo tank is composed of a mix of inert gases developed by Shunyata specifically to enhance the effectiveness of the cryogenic process. This cryogenic process, which takes 72 hours, is performed on all conductors and connectors in every Shunyata product.

Since I installed Anaconda interconnects and loudspeaker cables about six months ago, they haven't left my system except for critical listening comparisons. In that time, I've had the \$200,000 "The Sonus faber" loudspeaker, the \$78,000 TAD Reference One, and the \$90,000 Focal Stella Utopia EM, along with world-class BAlabo and Constellation electronics through my listening room. Although that is lofty company, the Anacondas proved themselves fully up to this level of equipment.

The Anacondas have a wonderful ability to deliver music's transient information fully intact with zip, verve, and life. Although very "fast" sounding, the Anacondas are not the least bit etched. In fact, these cables seem to avoid introducing an artifact on steep leading-edge transients that makes attacks sound glassy and hard. Listen to solo piano music, for example, and you'll hear how the Anacondas reproduce the sudden explosive intensity of the hammers hitting the strings, but without the glare that causes your ears to "tighten up" for protection. Similarly, drums, percussion, acoustic guitar, and other transient-rich instruments are well served by the Anaconda's terrific transient fidelity. Correctly reproducing these instruments' dynamic envelopes goes a long way toward a sense of realism.

The Anacondas are equally adept at portraying large-scale dynamic contrasts. They maintain their outstanding clarity even during the most complex crescendos, and seem to "open up" the music's dynamic window. Overall dynamic range is extremely wide, with tremendous resolution of very fine detail coupled with seemingly limitless peaks. In between, these cables are capable of fine gradations of dynamic expression. Rather than presenting a few discrete levels of dynamics, the Anacondas render dynamics along a continuum that contributes to their overall musical engagement.

In addition to this excellent dynamic performance, the Anacondas have a very vivid and three-dimensional soundstage. They can make other interconnects and cables sound somewhat flat by comparison. These cables breathed life into the soundstage, separating image outlines from each other rather than congealing them, and with that quality came a greater sense of hearing music rather than a hi-fi system. Part of this spatial performance can be attributed to the Anacondas' vivid clarity and "see-through" transparency. That sense of haze overlaying the soundstage that we often hear from reproduced music is completely gone, replaced by a crystalline purity. I would even go so far as to call the Anacondas' clarity and transparency startling.

Tonally, the Anacondas are quite neutral, with a slight tendency toward midrange presence and treble extension. The soundstage starts a little in front of the speakers rather than behind, giving the presentation immediacy and palpability. The top end has a luminance and brilliance that brings out cymbals, the upper harmonics of strings, and

a sense of air, all without becoming overly bright. These are not cables and interconnects designed to flatter bright loudspeakers by softening the treble.

Although you could call these interconnects and cables "mid-priced" by today's standards for top-quality cables, they are anything but "mid-performers." Rather, they compete with any cable I've heard regardless of price, although some other cables have their own sets of virtues. Nonetheless, the Anaconda interconnects and loudspeaker cables offer reference-grade performance at a real-world price. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Anaconda interconnect

Terminations: RCA or XLR

Price: \$2250 (1m pair)

Anaconda loudspeaker cable

Terminations: Spade lugs

Price: \$3995 (2 meter pair)

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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Audience AU24e Interconnects & Cables

Alan Sircom

Many of the best-loved wires can deliver revelatory changes to the system sound, but such changes can also tend to give highly distinctive cables a strong character that can influence the overall sound. As a consequence, such wires are loved by some and hated by others. The flipside to this is cables that are designed to have almost no intrinsic character of their own. These don't get as strong a set of reactions from listeners, and don't get shouted about as much. The Audience AU24e interconnects and speaker cables are this second kind of cable, the neutral kind that gets under your skin over time.

The cables—both interconnect and speaker cable—are thin and flexible and worthy alternatives to the "thick as a baby's arm" wires. They are constructed from high-purity OHNO copper monocrystal conductors with simple polypropylene insulation, a cross-linked polyethylene jacket, and a braided outer sheath. The cables are supplied terminated and boxed... no off-the-reel cable layouts. There is a standard AU24 as well as the special 'e' edition, which adds about 20% to the basic AU24 price. Trouble is, not having tried the AU24 and Audience being tight-lipped about what goes on in the 'e'ification process (the sheath and terminations are very different, apparently), I don't know precisely whether that 20% premium gives 20% better sound. All I know is these AU24e cables are about as honest as cables get.

The Audience cables are not designed to work with the kind of components that rely on cables to enhance the sound of the system. The equipment needs to be of the best quality and extremely well matched to benefit from the Audience effect. At this point, they just let the equipment do its job properly, unimpeded by the cable itself. It's only when you hear this happening that you realise how genuinely rare such a scenario really is. There's a sense of level-headedness to the sound, which demands level-headed system design, but delivers the unvarnished, unimpeded truth. This really isn't easy to express without experiencing the effect directly, which is why the old "lifting a veil" cliché exists. Perhaps the best way is to liken AU24e to the way LS3/5a's and Quad ESL-57s perform...you get that jaw-dropping midrange clarity that makes speech

and instruments so much more intelligible, but sooner or later you start wishing for frequency extremes. The Audience cable "sound" is that jaw-dropping midrange, but *with* the frequency extremes.

Well, almost—the construction of the AU24e cables can undermine the performance in our RF-polluted world. Living in the big city, where I can find at least 15 WiFi networks and dozens of mobiles polling their nearest cell mates, the sound can be foreshortened, almost shut in (especially at higher listening levels) and not as nuanced during the busy evening hours. Granted, I discovered this by putting the cable through the worst-case scenario (powered up iPad resting on the cables, which were connected to the wireless Arcam rDAC). In many systems all you'll get is the natural sense of balance these cables bring. Better shielding would help, but possibly the cure is worse than the disease.

The AU24e cables more than stand their ground in a hugely contended market. In a system where balance is key, you could easily prefer these over any other cable out there, whatever the cost. If you want a cable system that strips away the artifice, Audience deserves an, er, audience.+



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3m pair AU24e loudspeaker cables \$1595

1m pair AU24e interconnect cables \$772

AUDIENCE

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EQUIPMENT REPORT



Crystal Cables Standard Diamond Cables

Alan Sircom

Crystal exposes the notion that bigger is better when it comes to hi-fi cables. Most of Crystal Cables are small, slim, and elegant silver designs that sound excellent right across the frequency spectrum, so that slice of folklore about bass weight being related to cable thickness is nonsense, too.

Standard Diamond is the latest Crystal Cable range. It's replacing the Standard range, but retains the annealed silver/gold wire. This means ultra-thin solid-core conductors, helically wound with Kapton insulators, a silver shield, and finally

wrapped in a Teflon sheath. The net result is a cable about as thick as a bass guitar string. It's finished off with a quality phono plug in the interconnect, but black plastic AC plugs and sockets (the more stratospheric cables have

Furutech connectors). The CrystalSpeak speaker cables have a screw-in connector at each end of the cable, allowing the user to change his terminations, or even potentially add extra length to the wire should need be. The interconnect and speaker cable are precisely the same size, while the power cords simply braid more cables into one bigger lead.

Crystal claims the thin layout and the silver-gold cable is effectively a zero-distortion design, with no cross-talk or microphony issues, and very low induction. Crystal also suggests this is down to focusing on limiting current-domain distortion instead of the voltage-domain issues worked on by most cable manufacturers.

The net result of this is a cable system that does wonders. It seems to raise the game of good audio into the high-end stakes, while not holding back truly high-end equipment. The big thing about the Crystal system is the sense of order it bestows on music. The precision, detail, and dynamics of your system are not impeded in any way, but the way these elements are tied together makes a huge difference and this is where the Crystal Standard Diamond cables shine. It's a very clean sound with a spring in its step in the upper registers and a lot of midrange charm, too, which perhaps is why it has become something of a darling with the valve amp fraternity.

It's very much a cable system, though. You should consider the cables to be a complete front-to-back solution. There's a sense of cool calm that the cables bestow upon the system that doesn't quite gel when used in tandem with other cables. It doesn't sound bad when used as the one and only Crystal cable, but the focus

you get when you Crystalise your whole system makes ultimately a lot more sense.

There's one more element that isn't covered here, the Bridge Diamond cable. This brings the low distortion sound of Crystal to any other cable, without undermining the sound of the cable you originally chose. But more on that in a later issue...

Finally, it's worth noting that when you invest in cables, packaging is important too. If you bought an expensive watch, you'd feel a little hard done if it turned up in a plastic bag, and similarly Crystal makes the whole buying decision seem that bit better justified thanks to some extraordinarily classy packaging. The cable sits in a velvet bag, inside a box inside another box, and authentication cards and documentation "case candy" all add to the cachet in no small amount. This Crystal then is an all-around package that is highly recommended for those who want to make their components sing as one. +

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2x3m CrystalSpeak Standard Diamond \$5150
 2x1m CrystalConnect Standard Diamond \$1450
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EQUIPMENT REPORT

AudioQuest Wildwood Loudspeaker Cable

Anthony H. Cordesman

I normally avoid reviewing speaker cables and interconnects. This is not because I believe they are unimportant. It is because the sonic nuances that tend to distinguish one good “wire” from another in a given price range are interactive and dependent on the interface between individual components. The electrical qualities of the wire itself—inductance, capacitance, resistance, impedance, materials, termination, etc.—all matter, but when they interact with variations in the same qualities in the things they are connecting, especially between amplifier and speaker, there is no way to be certain that the sonic nuances any given interconnect and speaker cable produce with one set of components will be the same with another.

This is particularly true if you mix and match your “wires,” rather than use the same brand and model of cables throughout your system. Mix-and-match can work out quite well, and produce superior sound in some systems, but you don’t have to be much of an operations analyst to realize that the wires that produce a synergistic mix in one system may be far less optimal in another system, and the more variables you add, the harder it is to predict the result.

I am particularly cautious about recommending the more expensive options in speaker cables and interconnects. The fact is that prices have risen to almost incredible extremes, and some top-of-the-line products seem designed more to sound different—or support some technical claim or “hype”—rather than to sound better. Sometimes such “wires” seem to be tweaked to have a filtration effect that results in more upper-

midrange or upper-octave energy, rather than more musical accuracy. The end result is that you may hear more “detail” than before, but not get more musical realism.

The upshot of trying to make a given wire/cable look more impressive can also be a product that is too thick or too rigid to easily connect to real-world electronics and speakers. I have used enough cables to know that you can get truly excellent sonic results with wires that bend easily, don’t lever the speaker terminals or RCA jacks into loosening up or breaking off, and have connectors small enough to fit on any speaker or to plug into the crowded mix of RCA jacks on the back of some preamps.

Rather than recommend a given brand or model, I normally recommend that audiophiles borrow thoroughly broken-in cables from a friend, or work with a dealer who will give out loaners rather than



insist on a final sale. If you care enough to make a truly major investment, you need to be able to spend enough time listening to the interconnects and speaker cables you are going to buy to be sure that their sound character is musically natural by the standard of a live performance and not a sound that is simply new and different, and whose coloration will become apparent once the novelty wears off.

Be warned. You almost always do hear something at least slightly different when you substitute a different cable, and you will hear some “detail” or “nuances” you don’t hear with your existing cable. The problem is that once you get over the initial impact of most such differences, they may fall into the “So what?” “Who cares?” or “Why pay more to make the sound worse?” categories. There are great wires out there, but differences don’t matter *unless they are both musically realistic and musically significant.*

“The Wildwoods have an added degree of clarity and better dynamics and air.”

I also advise you to listen to cheap cables as a way to make sure you really are hearing the valid differences you are being asked to invest in. You should always perform the zip cord, Radio Shack, or “Best Buy Cheapest Monster Cable” test. Do comparative listening using such cables, your existing set, and a possible upgrade.

Make sure that the more expensive option is really consistently better in every meaningful sonic respect, and don’t psych yourself out on the basis of questionable physics or meaningless hype. Above all, *listen* rather than read or look.

EQUIPMENT REPORT - AudioQuest Wildwood Loudspeaker Cable

Different features and more expensive materials and features like silver, Teflon, black boxes at the end of the cable, and fancy plugs or connectors can sometimes make a positive difference. They also can sound worse, not sound better, or lead to absurd prices. Putting cables on expensive little stands, using built in green lights, immersing them in water, demagnetizing non-magnetic materials, and cryogenic cooling have all been used by now-extinct brands that did not survive audiophile experience. In contrast, comparative listening to your existing wires, cheap control wires, and a possible new purchase, will then tell you whether the new, more expensive cable is really better and really worth the cost.

Don't get me wrong. Almost all of the serious audiophiles who follow my advice, and use the cheaper interconnects and speaker cables as controls—and who do treat most advertising hype as nonsensical garbage—still tell me later that they find that some mix of more expensive “wires” from the top manufacturers in the industry sound definitively better. Most upgrade to better and higher-priced cables over time. Patience and common sense will still lead you to invest in better interconnects and speaker cables.

Moreover, I should make it clear that I use some of the most expensive AudioQuest and Kimber cables available, and that I firmly believe they are worth it. They don't produce the ridiculous sonic miracles you read about in some reviews. No interconnect or speaker cable does. The sonic nuances you get for a larger investment are similar to those in active components. They produce diminishing returns with each increase

in price; the improvement-per-dollar in the top price cables in a given brand usually is relatively small compared to its more moderately price cables.

Moreover, the sonic differences between alternative brands and models are much smaller than the radical differences in their appearance, features, materials, and literature would indicate. The choices of what is best are also personal, and many of my colleagues and experienced audiophiles make different choices. I've also had excellent results with Cardas, Wireworld, MIT, and a number of other brands, and I can't tell you that you should choose AudioQuest or Kimber. All I can do is tell you that I have.

“The Wildwoods are one of the few cables I feel are outstanding enough to be worth reviewing.”

But, even after taking all of these caveats into consideration, I do want my favorite recordings of classical music—all of which are acoustic and most of which involve minimal mixing and dubbing—to sound as “live” and natural as possible. And sometime—just sometimes—a product does come along that is consistently outstanding in many different systems and deserves special attention in spite of all the problems in predicting how well a given cable will interact in a given system.

This is one reason I've chosen the Kimber Select series, and the AudioQuest interconnects and

speaker cables that use its Dielectric Bias System (DBS). AudioQuest has outdone itself with one of its new speaker cables. I've recently acquired a set of the AudioQuest Wildwood speaker cables. They are not cheap, but they have provided consistently exceptional performance when I have switched from radically different amplifiers from Cary, Conrad-Johnson, McIntosh, Pass, and Quad in my own and in a friend's system. They have been equally exceptional when I have used them with speakers as varied as the Quad 2905s, Vandersteen 5As, a pair of Apogee ribbons, Focal Electra 1007Be's, and Martin Logan Vantages. They also have been outstanding regardless of whether I used them in the bi-wired mode, or hooked them up with a single set of connectors.

They don't sound different; they do, however, have an added degree of clarity and better dynamics and air, and they clean up the top octaves without hardening the midrange and bass. On the bottom, they seem to blend power, low-frequency extension, and detail to the limit of the speaker and amplifier. The soundstage is also a bit better resolved, particularly if the recording has the illusion of layers of depth, or any kind of motion by the performers. Do they lift a thousand veils? Of course not! Are they just that bit more revealing in virtually every way than virtually all of the competition I've heard? Well, yes.

These improvements are also underpinned by design features that actually seem to make a difference. I've long been impressed by the sound of AudioQuest products that use its “Star Quad” and “Earth Feature” series. I've been particularly impressed by the fact they *always* seem to deliver

their best, rather than have a sound that changes slightly over time. The Wildwoods, however, gave me better bass depth and control that I have gotten from any other AudioQuest cable to date. They gave me superb detail and natural energy in ways that seemed nearly impervious to speaker load. They really did make enough real-world sonic difference, and revealed enough natural musical detail, to justify their cost.

I can't tell you that this means all of AudioQuest's technical claims are valid. I have found, however, that the discussion of cable theory on the AudioQuest Web site is well worth reading, and that its claims about the Wildwoods' design are borne out by the listening experience.

The Wildwoods' use the same counter-spiral conductor geometry in past top-of-the line AQ cables like Everest and Volcano. The difference is that the Wildwoods are essentially two

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U.S.

Price: \$9100, 6' pair;
\$9700, bi-wired 6' pair

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EQUIPMENT REPORT - AudioQuest Wildwood Loudspeaker Cable

separate speaker cables in one jacket, allowing for true bi-wire or single-wire use (when the two separate cables within the jacket are wound together to make one full-range speaker cable). The individual conductors are solid core, but are a mix of five different gauge sizes—21AWG, 20AWG, 19AWG, 17AWG, and 16AWG —because AudioQuest feels that every conductor size has its own unique sonic signature. Cumulatively, the overall gauge of Wildwood is 9AWG for each positive and negative leg.

“The Wildwoods reveal more of the music without altering it.”

As for material, I have never found that a given conductor or insulator provides the best or most consistent sound quality. Some of the pure silver cables I have heard have sounded worse than pure copper, and some have sounded better. The same has been true of differences in insulating materials. For the record, the Wildwoods mix both silver and copper. A total of 12 of the 16 conductors are solid Perfect Surface Silver while the other four conductors use AQ’s best copper, called “Perfect-Surface Copper.”

In contrast, I have been consistently impressed by the sound of the AudioQuests that have a “DBS” feature, and use a battery to polarize the cable. This feature has been upgraded in AudioQuest’s more expensive cables by adding a third DBS element within the cable. Instead of having a DBS anode in the center of the cable and a DBS

cathode on the outside of the conductor group, these cables now have three DBS elements: two DBS anodes on either side of a DBS cathode.

Let me again stress that I am not a designer or engineer and can’t validate the claims of any manufacturer, but AudioQuest does note that, “This intensifies the electrostatic field created across the insulation in a very meaningful way. The DBS field intensity created by using three elements is stronger than if we simply applied 144V (two by 72V DBS batteries) across the insulation...The DBS effect takes about two weeks to fully form once the battery is plugged in during assembly of the cable. If a battery is disconnected, it takes about a day or two for the charge to fully dissipate.”

In short, the Wildwoods have design features that may well explain why they do reveal more of the music, do so without altering it, and do so with a remarkably wide range of different amplifiers or speakers. Once again I must stress that no one can tell you which cable is right for you or your particular system. What I can say, however, is that the Wildwoods are one of the very few cables I feel are outstanding enough, consistently enough, to be worth reviewing. I strongly recommend you audition them, if you are willing to invest in the very best. **tas**



EQUIPMENT REPORT

MIT Oracle MA-X Loudspeaker Cable

Mad MAX?

Alan Sircom

When you contemplate spending over \$38,000 on a pair of loudspeaker cables, I would imagine several things pass through your mind. Assuming your purchase is controlled by your heart and head, rather than your gonads, even the wealthiest audiophile is likely to acknowledge that this is an awful lot of money for what are, in effect, two pieces of wire. Which, naturally enough, leads to a contemplation of value. Those of us with more mundane levels of disposable income might question whether the concept of value can even exist at such a price point; some will doubtless assert that it can't—even raising the possibility proves how out of touch the writer is. Obviously.

Well, it can't. Can it?

Context is important, of course, so for the purposes of this review, I assembled a system appropriate to the price of the cables. The front-end was a dCS Paganini 3-box CD/SACD player; amplification courtesy of the new David Berning ZOTL Pre One and ZH230 stereo power amp; loudspeakers were the Focal Scala Utopias. Mains and supports by MusicWorks, interconnects also by MIT, and the MIT Magnum

MA loudspeaker cables (around \$8999 a pair) for comparison purposes. So here was a system in which a \$38k pair of cables would not be an outrageous prospect, albeit the most expensive component in the system by some margin. Perhaps importantly, any meaningful upgrade to any of the source, amplification, or loudspeaker elements in this system would be likely to involve componentry costing upwards of \$38,000 in any event, so part of the exercise was to see what



EQUIPMENT REPORT - MIT Oracle MA-X Loudspeaker Cable

might happen if you were to take the less-obvious route and change the speaker cables, rather than any of the boxes.

As a hi-fi system improves, one notices certain things. First, it might be fairly gross changes to things like clarity, openness, soundstaging, and imaging. Then we might expect subtler, but no less important, improvements in dynamics, timing, timbre, and tunefulness. Assuming we can assemble a system which achieves all these things to a decent standard of performance, we've probably put together something which gets most things fairly right, most of the time. Going beyond this, I'd want to hear my music played on better instruments, by more skilful and talented musicians, preferably who are at their very best. These improvements are probably the subtlest of all but the rewards, if your system can deliver, are immeasurably important. Suddenly, music you hadn't previously appreciated becomes a vibrant, vital force and your world is enriched by the pleasure you take from it. And as for the stuff you liked already...

Diana Krall. What's not to like? *One Night in Paris* is probably the lovely Miss Krall at her absolute best. Pick a track, any track. "Deed I do" will indeed do, very nicely. Through the system above it is truly delightful: superb musicianship, exquisite timing with real pace and swing, wonderful atmosphere and mood—oh, to have been there on the night. But here's the thing, substituting the Magnum MA cables with the Oracle MA-X, the previous version is comprehensively outclassed. Suddenly, when Diana Krall sings the line "Do I love you? 'Deed I do," nobody is left in any doubt that 'deed she does. Before, it was just a cute line in a great jazz

number; now it's personal. Not only that, but we've moved from any old seat somewhere at the back to the best seat in the house. It's not particularly a spatial thing; any changes to the perception of soundstage dimensions are largely secondary to this effect. This is all about the connection to the music; all the goodness seems to be focussed onto the seat you're in. It's the reason why the best seats in an auditorium often cost half as much again as the second-best seats despite, often, not being closest to the action.

Another live album, this time Sting's *All This Time* and the track "Brand New Day." It's not even my favourite Sting track, but the version on this album has got something. It's the same sort of "something" the Diana Krall album has—great musicians, great music, and a chemistry which just comes together on the night (which is all the more astonishing when you realize it was recorded on the evening of September 11, 2001). With the Oracle MA-X cables in place, the track made me want to get up and dance—not something I'd recommend witnessing—which is a rare phenomenon indeed (I have no illusions about my abilities, so the impulse rarely occurs). Reinstalling the "regular" Magnum MA cables but upgrading the transport to the dCS Scarlatti was very instructive. It was immediately obvious that the Scarlatti is a significant step-up from the Paganini transport: detailed and involving, as if the music is being lit by warm sunshine rather than stage lighting. This was a sound I could covet. It has a degree of self-assurance not matched by the Paganini transport, a grainless, seamless, flawless presentation where everything is in proportion and nothing is overlooked. But, here's an odd thing: With the lesser transport but the

better cables, the music was more visceral and communicative—the urge to get up and dance was there in a way which it simply wasn't via the better transport with the lesser cables. Scarlatti + Magnum showed just how well Sting chooses his musicians, Paganini + Oracle showed how well they were playing the music.

Imagine a gorgeous girl with a fine mind and a private income. Now imagine a slightly less gorgeous girl, keep the fine mind but trade the income for a fantastic sense of humour and complementary musical tastes. It's the difference between the one you'd date and the one you'd marry. Unless you're shallow, obviously, but shallow people don't get really passionate about music so even if they buy this magazine, they've probably stopped reading this bit by now, anyway. And it's not a reflection on the Scarlatti transport, either: Scarlatti + Oracle creates the sort of magic most mortal men simply don't deserve. It's like marrying the girl and finding out she's an heiress after all.

As a habitual user of Nordost cables in my regular system and as, in some ways, MIT is the antithesis of the Nordost way of doing things, it would be fair to say that I haven't always found the MIT "house sound" to my personal taste. There is always a need for some mental shifting of gears. That said, whatever is in those boxes can bring about some remarkable benefits in the realms of timing and dynamics, compared to more conventional cables at similar prices, and I know many people (with somewhat saner budgets) who are happy to forego other attributes, such as sweetness or grainlessness, for a taste of what MIT brings to the party. Some criticise MIT's bass as over-exposed or dominant, others point to a

lack of sophistication in the higher frequencies. If part of the budget goes into the boxes, there's less left over for the cable itself, they argue. MIT's fans reply that these are hi-fi differences, not musical ones, that a great pianist, playing an indifferent piano, will produce a more captivating performance than an indifferent pianist on even the best piano.

They have a point, and to be fair, by the time you reach the upper reaches of the MIT range, such hi-fi considerations are less perceptible anyway. It might help to think of music as being made up of two elements: information and energy. The information bit tells you which instrument is being played, at what pitch, and for how long. The energy bit isn't just how loud, but also the dynamic shifts, the subtle but deliberate manipulation of timing, the inflections and mannerisms which tell you this is being performed by a person, not some sort of musical automaton. The Oracle MA-X cable seems to manage both information and energy better than anything else I've heard in a system up to now; it simply makes it easier to perceive the amount of effort the musicians put into their playing.

A recent, and valued, addition to my collection is Joanna Macgregor and the Britten Sinfonia's

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Price: Oracle MA-X Rev 2, \$34,999; version Rev 2 HD, \$37,999 single-wire and \$39,999 biwire

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EQUIPMENT REPORT - MIT Oracle MA-X Loudspeaker Cable

Live in Buenos Aires [Warner Classics & Jazz 2564 68475-9]. The first three tracks are the Bach Concerto for keyboard and strings in D minor. We all know versions of Bach keyboard music where the performer plays the piano as if it were a harpsichord or clavier, including some of the great exponents of the oeuvre and, sure, the delicacy of touch and finesse can produce some captivating performances. But to my mind, if it's authenticity you're after, play the music on the instruments it was written for. If you're going to play a modern piano, exploit the capabilities of the instrument; don't pretend it's something else. Joanna Macgregor and the Britten Sinfonia would seem to agree. She plays the piano with a physicality rare in female performers of my experience; her performances clearly involve her shoulders, as well as wrists and elbows. I was reminded of performances by John Ogdon, a man not afraid to apply his considerable mass to his playing.

The interesting thing that came out of this particular Bach performance was not just that the Oracle MA-X cable portrayed the assertiveness of the playing so well, but that when the orchestra played quietly, it was possible to appreciate the "held-back" qualities of their playing; there was a sense of restraint, a pent-up potency which was being deliberately and skilfully kept in check, not merely a bit of quiet playing. If you ever listen to sacred choral music by, say, Poulenc or Fauré, the sound of massed voices singing with barely perceptible loudness is immensely affecting, precisely because of the intensity which such restraint can evoke. Composers and orchestras wouldn't employ large choirs to make a small noise if they could get the same result out of a

handful of people. If it just sounds quiet, you've probably missed the point. And it is that point which the Oracles are so good at getting across.

The other side of the same coin is shown by the last track on the same album. A keyboard transcription of Astor Piazzolla's *Libertango*, played at full-throttle by Ms Macgregor. Except that, through the Oracles, it isn't. The Magnum MA cable gives a hugely impressive rendition, tight, fast, and dynamic. At the end, the audience erupts into rapturous applause and you are there with them, breathless, amazed, and delighted. Played again through the Oracle MA-X cables, it is suddenly much more apparent that this is no hell-bent, pedal-to-the-metal rendition, but a considered and measured interpretation. There is light and shade, even within the rollicking ride she takes us on, sections which are scarcely less loud, but the energy has nevertheless diminished. And clearly, deliberately so. This ability to discern subtlety where you least expected it—more than that, to have it shown to you when you weren't looking for it—is something I'd not heard in the system before. I'm quite sure the original performance expressed this subtlety and is partly what had the audience so clearly and raucously on their feet. They weren't merely applauding Joanna Macgregor's ability to beat a piano into submission; they were applauding her extraordinary ability to wring out one of those performances of a lifetime, while doing it.

There are hi-fi benefits, most assuredly. Soundstaging is extraordinarily accomplished and convincing: images are wide, deep, stable, and consistent; instruments gain solidity and substance; there is an overall sense of "presence" which eludes many systems, regardless of price.

Take the opening track, "Prelude," on the second part of *Aerial* from Kate Bush; its birdsong suddenly gains a sense of place, a feeling that this is truly open-air, real-life birdsong. There is a palpable sense of open space. Most systems create their sense of space from the subtle reverberant cues from the surroundings. Open air spaces are devoid of such cues, so it is all the more remarkable that the Oracle MA-X manages to convey a more perceptible sense of landscape than the Magnum MA.

To describe these attributes in such hi-fi terms, however, risks missing the point. They are important, even vital, effects and the better they are realized, the easier it is for our brains to suspend disbelief and experience the music. So what really makes the Oracle MA-X loudspeaker cables work, for me, is that they allow the system to disappear, and the music to flood out. It is as though, once that part of my brain which is responsible for reconstructing the illusion of music is allowed to relax, it becomes able to discriminate those elements of a performance which it was too busy to appreciate when it was having to sustain the impression of music-making. You might think of it as a reduced requirement for error-correction within the brain. Whatever it is, and however it is achieved, I am in no doubt that the addition of the Oracle MA-X loudspeaker cables takes a system forward to an extent which is entirely consistent with the asking price.

The Oracle MA-X has another trick, and that is its adjustable articulation. The output end of each box carries a pair of rotary switches with five different positions. One is labelled "Bass" the other "Treble," and they permit the user to adjust the level of articulation in the lower or upper

frequency ranges, to compensate for differing equipment or just personal taste. The effect is a little like a subtle and particularly well-executed tone control. Increased articulation in the treble brings high-frequency information a little to the fore; decreased articulation in the bass makes the lower registers recede slightly. In the system used for this review, the "flat" midway position was generally preferred, but the overall effect was to allow a level of adjustability to the tonal balance without causing obvious degradation of the signal, or intelligibility of the music, which conventional tone controls tend to introduce.

So, was I convinced? Yes, entirely. I haven't compared the MIT Oracle MA-X against any other *über-cable*; this isn't that sort of review. But I have come away from my time with the Oracle quite sure that this is one extremely important element of a high-end system, and one which pulls its weight, financially. The cost difference between Oracle and a lesser cable is comparable to the cost difference between a top-of-the-range high-end CD source and a mid-range high-end model. Both bring significant benefits to the system, but both do different things. If you can afford either, you can probably afford both, and you almost certainly should. One, without the other, is not complete. Which you give the higher priority to is something you can only answer for yourself, but I freely admit, I was surprised at the extra level of vital, musical communication brought about by the introduction of the Oracle MA-X into a system I'd previously thought of as, pretty much, as good as it gets. **tas**

EQUIPMENT REPORT - MIT Oracle MA-X Loudspeaker Cable

SO, WHAT'S IN THE BOXES?

MIT cables are distinguished by having boxes fitted in the line of the cable. The least expensive cables, whether interconnects or loudspeaker cables, come equipped with boxes the size of a small bar of chocolate; the more you pay, the bigger the boxes. The Magnum MA loudspeaker cables boast boxes the size (and weight) of a house brick, the Oracle MA-X's boxes are bigger than many monoblock amplifiers. (At least, with MIT, you can see some of what you have paid for.) How the boxes work is something of a trade secret, but various white papers on the MIT Web site do help to explain the rationale behind their use.

In effect, MIT argues that signal propagation down a cable varies with frequency. The “skin effect” of radio-frequency transmissions (which propagate almost entirely down the surface of a conductor) is fairly well-known, but MIT explains that even at audio frequencies the signal uses different thicknesses of the cable at different frequencies. So low bass (which is close to DC) travels down the cable using most of its cross-section, whereas upper treble (which is closer to low-frequency radio transmissions than to DC) penetrates only part way down from the skin of the conductor.

This affects not only the measured resistance of the cable, but also those reactive properties such as inductance and capacitance, and these properties therefore are understood to be frequency-dependent to an extent which is audible. These reactive properties mean that the phase relationship between low and high frequencies is distorted, leading to smear, time domain distortions, and, to use MIT's preferred term, a loss of articulation.

The boxes contain passive networks which compensate for this by “re-timing” the signal so that the low frequencies arrive at their destination properly synchronised with the high frequencies. These networks can be thought of as similar to filter networks, except that, being passive, the signal does not pass through them. Each network, or “pole” of articulation, deals with a particular frequency band. The better the cable, the more poles of articulation and the bigger the box. More poles means each pole can deal with a narrower frequency range and can be more precisely tailored.

In the MA series, MIT has developed networks which also preserve the harmonic structure within tones, so that the normal consonant and dissonant harmonics in a note retain their proper relationships to each other and the amplitudes of any given harmonic more closely resemble those of the original tone. What this means, in effect, is that the tonal differences between, say, an oboe and a cello playing the same note, are down to the interrelationships between the various harmonics which make up the note. MIT argues that most cables affect the amplitude, and subtly adjust the frequencies of these harmonics, to the detriment of the sound. The MA technology is designed to minimise that distortion.

Because the boxes are such a large part of the budget in any MIT product, the price depends rather less on the length of the cable than it does in more conventional interconnects and loudspeaker cables. **AS**



EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



Acoustic Zen Technologies Tsunami II and Gargantua II Power Cords

\$350 and \$1488

The Gargantua II is well named. At \$1488, it is hardly an accessory, but it surprised SR by revealing in her reference system a new level of its native sweet clarity. SR uses the \$350 Tsunami II with less-expensive gear and in her small system. Both cords have the nice habit of clarifying delicate highs, deepening perceived bass, and opening up and airing out the soundstage.

acousticzen.com



Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval Speaker Cable

\$1350/8-foot pr.

Brimming with resolution, tonal honesty, and dynamic life, constructed of pure silver over a stabilizing strand of OFC woven into AP's patented hollow-oval geometry in an oval-coaxial configuration, this is not a cable you listen to, but rather listen through. Music simply flows; tonality is earthy; harmonics align; images and soundstage conform.

No snake oil here—the high end needs more of this level of honest performance at a reasonable price.

analysis-plus.com (215)



Argentum Acoustics Proteus 14 Power Cord

\$499

The Proteus 14 offers a ripe and expressive low-end, wonderful low level details in all their specificity, and a fine soundstage which only narrowed slightly in comparison with reference standard power cords. Congestion and dynamic compression are held to a minimum. It conveys very good overall harmonics, a strong density factor, and is neither overly sibilant nor under-done tonally. Compelling performance from a cord that satisfies nearly every criteria.

argentumacoustics.com



Audience Au24e

\$990, 1m RCA interconnect; \$1595, 1m XLR interconnect; \$2195, 3.0m speaker cable

These thin, flexible unassuming-looking loudspeaker cables are the antidote to the “frozen garden hose” cables that are difficult to work with and impose a sound of their own. Made from high-purity Ohno copper monocrystals with a polypropylene insulation and cross-linked polyethylene jacked in a braided outer sheath, Au24 is about as honest a cable as you can buy. These are not cables with a specific sonic signature intended to “fix” problems elsewhere in the system, but to allow sources, amplifiers, and loudspeakers to fully express themselves.

audience-av.com (163)

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



AudioQuest Forest USB Cable

0.75m, \$29; 1.5m, \$35

For those on a tight budget, Forest is a large upgrade over a generic USB cable that was never designed for audio. Compared to standard USB cables, Forest offers a larger and more dimensional soundstage, more liquid and lifelike timbres, and greater transparency.

audioquest.com (Not reviewed)



AudioQuest Carbon USB Cable

0.75m, \$119; 1.5m, \$159

One of the go-to USB cables for computer-audio fans and highly recommended by USB pioneer and guru Gordon Rankin of Wavelength Audio, the Carbon is neutral without sounding bleached, dynamic without sounding piercing, detailed without sounding analytical.

audioquest.com (Review forthcoming)



AudioQuest Diamond USB Cable

0.75m, \$549; 1.5m, \$695

This *über*-expensive USB cable is simply revelatory in its combination of ease and refinement on one hand, and resolution and transparency on the other. Although capable of resolving the finest detail, Diamond USB has a relaxed quality that fosters deep musical involvement. RH tried it in his state-of-the-art music server system and it immediately became his reference. Expensive, but worth it in high-end systems.

audioquest.com (Reviewed in this issue)



AudioQuest Columbia/DBS Interconnect and CV-8/DBS Speaker Cable

Interconnect: \$495/1m
Speaker: \$800/8-foot pr.

The entry-level interconnect for AudioQuest's battery-powered DBS (dielectric bias system) technology, the Columbia's highs are well-defined yet sweet-sounding; its bass is taut yet possesses plenty of weight, warmth, and three-dimensionality. Though not the last word in transparency, the Columbias do a great job of balancing clarity and smoothness. Likewise, AudioQuest's least-expensive battery-powered speaker cable, the CV-8, offers well-defined and nicely weighted bass, a neutral midrange with a hint of warmth, clear edgeless highs, and truly excellent soundstaging.

audioquest.com (147)

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



AudioQuest Wild Blue Yonder and WEL Signature Interconnects/Meteor Speaker Cable

\$4500/1m; \$7500/1m; \$5250/8-foot pr.

AudioQuest's new Wild Blue Yonder and top-of-the-line WEL Signature interconnects feature plugs that are custom-machined from pure copper then silver-plated. The Perfect-Surface Silver conductors are bonded to the plugs using a cold-welding technique. Both interconnects use Teflon Air-Tubes (a low-dielectric absorption design). AudioQuest's 72V Dielectric Bias System keeps the interconnects sounding their best at all times. Meteor is the second from the top of the AudioQuest line, and uses solid Perfect Surface Silver conductors throughout. RH's references.

audioquest.com



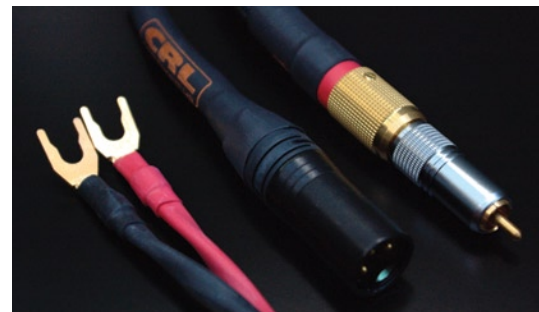
Cable Research Lab Silver Cable and Interconnect

Interconnect: \$2149/1m (RCA), \$2299/2m (RCA) Speaker: \$2425/8-foot pr.

Power cords: \$1299/1.5m

Classic cabling that stays out of the way of the signal never goes out of style. In spite of CRL's serpentine look, its construction quality, materials, and terminations are superb. Easy to maneuver, it is also one of the more easygoing and natural sounding cables we've heard, with solid dynamics, soundstaging, and harmonic detailing. A "stealth" cable that deserves serious attention.

cableresearchlab.com (189)



Cable Research Lab Bronze Series Package

\$1299

More than mere cable, it's a "bundle" that includes speaker cable (up to 12') and two pairs of interconnects (up to 3m). You choose the terminations, even bi-wire or single wire. Sonically, the Bronze bears a strong resemblance to CRL Silver in richness, smoothness, midrange dynamics, and soundstaging. Low bass has solid extension though it's not as oil-drum-tight as it might be. A slightly cooler signature prevails, and there is a slight, perceptible softening at the extremes. This bundle combines sonics and value that are tough to match.

cableresearchlab.com (211)



Cardas Clear

\$4334/8' pr.

This thick blue cable represents George Cardas' crowning achievement, and takes all the company's patented technologies found on Cardas already well-respected ranges of Litz-design cables to new performance levels. The balanced and single-ended interconnects and the loudspeaker cable are functionally identical in sound. But that doesn't mean a 'family' or 'house' sound; instead Clear sounds as close as you can get to having no sound. Bass depth and definition is absolutely state of the art. Eclipsed in performance only by Cardas' Clear Beyond.

cardas.com

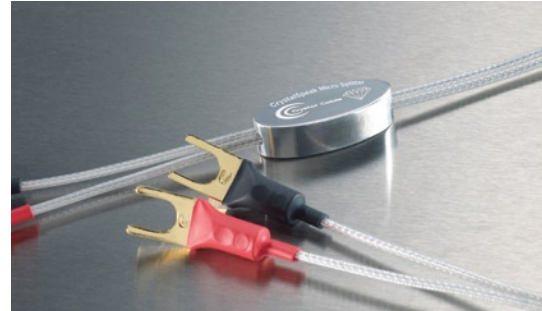
EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



Cardas Clear Beyond

\$8668 8' pair

George Cardas took the technology and elaborate construction of Clear to its ultimate realization in Clear Beyond. Where Clear used four conductors, Clear Beyond features eight. These conductors are meticulously built up using multi-gauge strands in "Golden Section" symmetrical tri-axial design which places the smallest strands at the cable center. The larger strands are built up on this core until the inside of each conductor looks like a copper nautilus shell in cross section. Clear Beyond's eight conductors can be used to bi-wire your loudspeakers or "shotgun" bi-wiring. cardas.com



Crystal Cable CrystalConnect Micro Interconnect/ Crystal-Speak Micro Speaker Cable

CrystalSpeak Diamond speaker cable \$5150/3m; CrystalConnect interconnect, \$1450/m, \$2800/2m; CrystalPower power cord, \$1200/1.5m, \$1475/2m

Clean, composed and transparent, the jewel-like Crystal Micro cables offer an open soundstage where images snap into focus and music is conveyed with a turbine-like smoothness. Even some softness in the bass and a bit of forwardness in the treble don't diminish one of the most transparent cables NG has heard. Unique splitter rings allow easy change-out of terminations or bi-wire upgrades.

crystalcable.com (164)



Furutech Reference III and Evolution Interconnect and Cables

Reference III Interconnect: \$1622/1.2m (XLR), \$1421/1.2m (RCA)

Reference III Speaker: \$1934/3m

Reference III Power: \$1488 Evolution Interconnect: \$943/1.2m (XLR), \$825/1.2m (RCA)

Evolution Speaker: \$985/3m

Furutech uses cryogenically treated, ultra-high-purity, OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) single-crystal copper conductors in both its mid-priced Evolution and premium-priced Reference III audio cables. The top models offer better connectors, superior dielectric materials, and passive EMI-absorption filters made from GC-303 (and EMI-absorbent material developed by 3M Company). Furutech's cables have great transparency and purity, plus an uncanny ability to block out noise, hash, and grunge.

furutech.com (173)



Harmonic Technology Magic Link Two Interconnect

\$850/1m (RCA); \$900/1m (XLR)

With improved clarity and articulation over Harmonic Tech's more affordable Pro Silway line, the Magic Link Two consistently yields smooth, extended highs, a delightfully full and natural midrange, and solid bass. You may find other pricier interconnects that excel in one specific area or another, but when it comes to overall system synergy, this is one cable you'll be "wearing" like a favorite pair of shoes.

harmonictech.com

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



Harmonic Technology Magic Reference II SE Power Cord

\$1699

Designed for use primarily with front-end components, the Reference II SE delivers tremendous clarity, smoothness, and definition across the entire frequency spectrum, and does so without constricting dynamics or softening the treble. Built-in noise filter acts as an AC conditioner to remove line noise.

harmonictech.com



Harmonic Technology Pro-11 + Speaker Cable

\$575/8-foot pr.

The TechPro-11+ is sensual, romantic, and highly present with vocals, with full rich body and a slight forwardness. There's a distinct sweetness in the upper octaves that, once experienced, makes it tough to live without. Soundstage reproduction is also a strong suit, as the full weight and breadth of an orchestra seem to laterally expand with this wire.

harmonictech.com (146)



Kimber Kable Hero Interconnect/8TC and 12TC Speaker Cable

Interconnect: \$210/1m

Speaker: 8TC: \$416/8-foot pr.; 12TC: \$630/8-foot pr.

Yielding only a tiny bit in control, top-end transparency, and detailing to PS's reference, Hero's bass lives up to its name, prodigious in amplitude and definition. Dead neutral, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in an essentially grain-free presentation. The 8TC speaker cable has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft, ideally mediating detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts within a very realistic, holographic soundstage.

www.kimber.com (138, 146)



Kimber Kable PK-10AG Power Cord

\$400/6 feet

The PK-10AG picks up where the mean green original Palladian leaves off but in a more malleable, far less costly package. The Kimber is an exemplar of the heavy hitting power cord—high output, energy and dynamics. It has a richer thicker midrange with an emphasis on soundstage depth not unlike the topflight Palladian although not as wide open on vocals. But for bass extension and sustain it is deserving of some of the highest marks. Nicely detailed and uncompressed with only vague remnants of treble peakiness, the PK-10AG exemplifies an open, colorful, high density sound that places it near the top of any survey.

www.kimber.com (208)

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



MIT Oracle Matrix 50 Interconnect

\$4999/1m pr.

Making use of technology derived from MIT's top-line Oracle MA-X interconnect, the Oracle Matrix 50 is designed to match the specific input impedance of whatever gear it is connected to via an adjustable three-position impedance switch. When impedance is set properly, the 50 performs exactly as advertised—increasing transparency, neutrality, transient speed, and low-level resolution by optimizing the interconnect/component interface. Lighter in weight than previous Oracle interconnects, the Matrix 50 is the perfect option for those of you looking for MIT MA-X sound quality at a far more affordable price.

mitcables.com



MIT Oracle Matrix HD 90, 100, 120 Speaker Cables

\$9999, \$14,999, \$21,999/8-foot pr.

By means of MIT's new F.A.T. (Fractional Articulation Technology), Oracle Matrix speaker cables improve transient response and resolution with the turn of a built-in switch that engages more "poles of articulation" within their CNC-milled T6 aluminum "network" boxes. In their "High-Definition" position, the Matrices are, indeed, capable of very high resolution and transparency to sources, while also preserving the colorlessly neutral tonal palette that MIT has long been known for. One of a handful of ultra-high-end cables that can tell you precisely what your amp/speaker interface is adding to or subtracting from the source.

mitcables.com



MIT MA-X, Rev 2

\$37,999 single-wire and \$39,999 bi-wire/8' pair

Going into his review (printed on p. 40 and ff.), *Hi-Fi's* editor, Alan Sircom, was a little uncertain about whether the new passive networks for timing and articulation built into MIT's flaship speaker cable would affect the sound positively. Was he impressed by MIT's technology? The answer is: "Yes, entirely." AS came away from his time with the Oracle quite thoroughly convinced that MA-X cable is one (extremely important) element of a high-end system which pulls its weight, financially and sonically. "I freely admit," said he, "I was surprised at the extra level of vital, musical communication brought about by the introduction of the Oracle MA-X into a system I'd previously thought of as, pretty much, as good as it gets." 'Nuff said. mitcables.com



Purist Audio Design Dominus Interconnect and Speaker Cable

Interconnect: \$5250/1m Speaker: \$10,980/1.5m

The all-silver Dominus is very detailed, very dynamic, very rich. Less open than Nordost Valhalla and darker in balance, it is also quieter, and because of its fluid-damped construction, virtually immune to floorborne and airborne vibration.

www.puristaudiodesign.com

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



Rega Couple Interconnect

\$195/1m

The Couple offers plenty of upper midrange/treble detail, with fine resolution of textures, yet without exaggerated transients or edginess. Its bass is tight and punchy, and it is wonderfully neutral throughout the midrange. While it doesn't offer the almost "luminous" midrange quality you'll hear in some very expensive cables, its essential neutrality makes a fine substitute for a "pennies-on-the-dollar" price.

soundorg.com (AVguide.com, 10/2003)



Shunyata Anaconda Interconnects/Loudspeaker Cables

Interconnects: \$2500/1m pr.
Speaker: \$3500/2.5m pr.

Don't be fooled by the less-than-stratospheric price of these new interconnects and loudspeaker cables from Shunyata; they compete with, and in many ways exceed, the performance of the world's best cables regardless of price. They have a startling vividness and immediacy without being forward or analytical, tremendous soundstage dimensionality, great timbral liquidity, and the ability to convey very fine recorded details. A reference-quality interconnect and cable at a real-world price.

shunyata.com (Reviewed in this issue)



Shunyata Python Alpha Helix CX Power Cord

\$1195

As RH put it in his review, "the idea that a power cord comes at the end of a very long power-transmission system is purely one of perspective. From the amplifier's point of view the power cord is the first few feet of the power-deliver system." With the Python, expect greatly improved transparency, soundstaging, tighter focus, and air, "fostering a greater impression of hearing an actual instrument in an acoustic space."

shunyata.com (164)



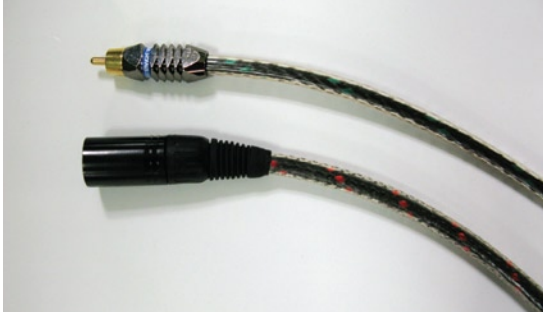
Shunyata Venom 3 Power Cord

\$99

Shunyata's entry-level is a quantum leap over the standard, no-name cord. Flexible and UL-approved, Venom 3 adds transient pop and image stability, opens the soundstage, and peels away the veiling that inhibits transparency and resolution. A bit forward in character, the Venom 3 provides an excitement that really lights up the soundstage. Although low-level dynamics and deep bass could use further refinement, Venom 3 is an audiophile-level product that makes it fun to spend less.

shunyata.com (208)

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS

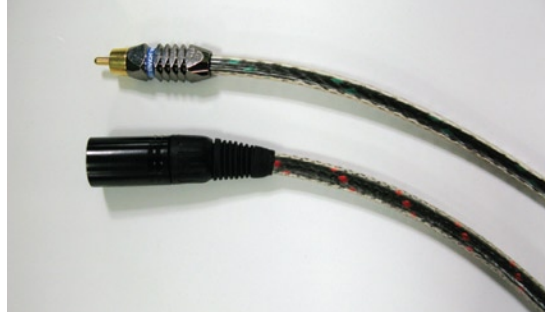


Straightwire Info-Link AES/ EBU or Coaxial Digital Cable

\$220/1m, \$280/1.5m

This reasonably priced digital cable offers a host of virtues, including high transparency to the source, spacious soundstaging, a treble that is open and detailed without sounding analytical, and wide dynamics. A bargain.

straightwire.com



Straightwire USB- Link USB Cable

\$50/1m, \$60/1.5m

This well-made, great-sounding USB cable is a relative bargain, delivering outstanding dynamics, timbral fidelity, and transparency.

straightwire.com

dynamic

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the absolute sound 2011 editors' choice awards

the absolute sound 2009 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARDS

WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION 2010 USB CABLE OF THE YEAR

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS

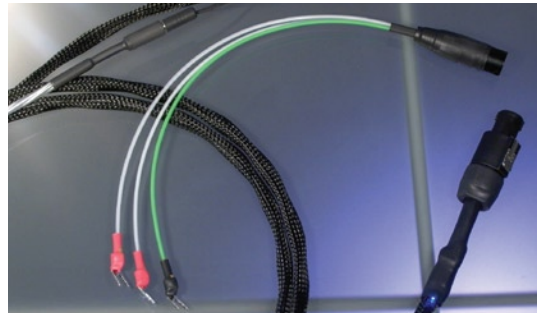


Synergistic Research Precision AC Basik Power Cord

\$250

There's was no denying the family resemblance to Synergistic's flagship Tesla Hologram—from the penetrating dynamics, to the finer gradations of low level resolution. The Precision AC Basik strode through all genres of music with much of the same panache as that reference power cord. Tonally just a bit cooler, its strengths were evidenced in the way it imparted the depth of orchestral section layers, its taste for ambience and its lively and extended bass response. There was just a hint of added sibilance but overall you'd have to conclude that Synergistic may well have outdone itself on the value side and at a mere \$250 will end up picking its own pockets.

synergisticresearch.com

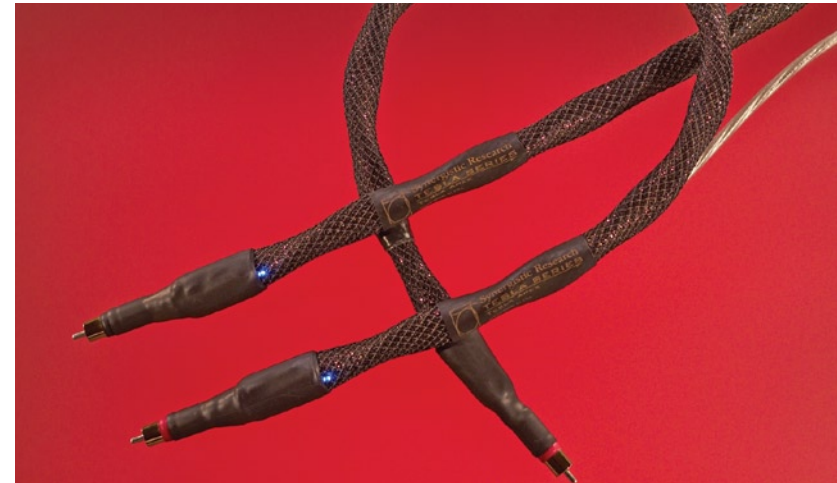


Synergistic Tesla LE REL Spec Subwoofer 1

\$660/3m

Pricy but potent, these inspired subwoofers cables are specifically optimized for REL subwoofers and include REL-specified Neutrik connectors. They improved the inherent musicality and pitch precision of the Britannia B3 in every instance—the lowered noise floor yields more detail, an enhanced sense of space, and expanded ambience retrieval.

synergisticresearch.com (163)



Synergistic Research Tesla Series Interconnect and Speaker Cable

Accelerator Interconnect: \$1400/1m

Accelerator Speaker: \$1700/8-foot pr.

Precision Reference Interconnect: \$2600/1m Precision Reference Speaker: \$3800/8-foot pr.

Apex Interconnect: \$3600/1m

Apex Speaker: \$6400/8-foot pr.

Some of the most transparent cable at any price. A splendid balance of detail, romantic richness, and Grand Canyon-like soundstaging that is magnified as you move upward through the line. The top-of-the-line Apex, however, is the real low-level resolution master, mining details and harmonic shadings like few wires NG has heard to date.

synergisticresearch.com (171)

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



Synergistic Research Galileo Series Interconnect and Speaker Cable

Speaker Cable: \$55,000/11-foot pr.

Interconnect: \$33,000/2.5 meter pr.

Though Synergistic Research isn't known for marketing expensive *über*-cables, the Galileo Series of interconnect and speaker cable is the exception. Entirely hand-made in the U.S. (each pair of speaker cables takes better than nine days to build and involves several hundred point-to-point hand-soldered connections), Galileo is kind of like an "exploded view" of a typical cable or interconnect. Rather than bundling individual or stranded wires in a single unwieldy, interactive group, Synergistic has suspended individual "strings" of different wire (gold, silver, platinum, and copper/silver alloy), each built in different thicknesses and geometries, between two actively shielded "EM Cells," into which the "strings" are plugged via the gold standard of wiring interfaces—ultra-pricey LEMO connectors. How does Galileo sound? Even by the highest of high-end standards these cables and interconnects are extraordinary: Neutral, dynamic, detailed, natural, with truly immense soundstaging and, perhaps, the lowest noise floor of any cable/interconnect JV has auditioned. Top contenders for the state of the art, they are JV's references.

synergisticresearch.com (208)



Transparent Audio The Link Interconnect, The Wave Speaker Cable, High-Performance Powerlink AC cord, PowerWave 8 AC Conditioner

The Link: \$85/meter

The Wave: \$200/8' pr.

Performance Powerlink: \$125

PowerWave 8: \$995

Although we have experience only with Transparent's lower-priced offerings (at the moment), what we've heard has been extremely impressive. The \$85 The Link interconnect brings more than a taste of high-end interconnects to an entry-level price. Similarly, the \$180 The Wave speaker cable is a bargain, offering superior tonality, wider dynamics, and a more open soundstage. The \$105 High-Performance Powerlink AC cable is a vast improvement over stock AC cords, and just might be the most cost-effective upgrade possible in an entry-level system. The Powerwave 8 conditioner is also an extremely cost-effective upgrade, rendering wider dynamics, smoother timbres, and a greater sense of musical involvement.

transparentcable.com

EDITORS' CHOICE: INTERCONNECTS, CABLES, AND POWER CORDS



Wireworld Platinum Eclipse Interconnects and Speaker Cable

\$3000/1m; Speaker \$16,400/8' pr.

When Wireworld's David Salz builds a new reference cable it's worth taking note. With Ohno Continuous Cast pure silver conductors, and trick carbon fiber connector shells sporting silver contacts sonics are fluid, naturalistic and exceptionally detailed. Not inexpensive but so transparent you'll simply forget they're there.

wireworldcable.com



Wireworld Electra 5.2 Power Cord

\$360

Wireworld's line of power cords breaks with the conventional wisdom that says power cords need to be thick and unwieldy in order to impress. Not true. The mid-priced Electra 5.2 is a defiantly flat profile, they're lightweight, and competitive with elite power cords costing many times their price. They possess a full bodied, high density sound with a rich midrange and naturalistic top end. Pliable enough to negotiate corners make them a major advancement for today's well-groomed media rooms.

wireworldcable.com



*Purist Audio Design
Celebrating 25 Years*



*Connecting You
to the Music*



EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

Power Conditioners & Cords

THIS SECTION
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Synergistic Research

1992 to 2012 20 years of innovation through technology

Patent pending Active Tranquility Base conditions signal *inside* components- debut CES 2012

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Baker's Dozen

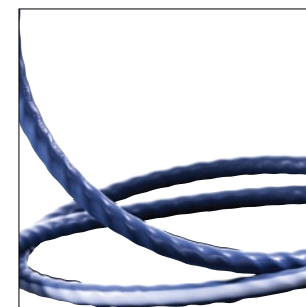
13 Power Cords \$500 and Under

Neil Gader

There is no easier improvement to an audio system than upgrading from the original equipment power cord. Unplug the old, plug in the new, and listen. It's a good reason why this segment of the market is so competitive and why every cable company wants a piece of the action. And why, in my view, power cords were crying out for a listening survey. The premise was: Keep it simple. I'd use a reasonably priced, conventional setup—an integrated amp and CD player—that's two power cords. I'd listen, note the differences, compare to a reference pair of power cords, and then move on to the next pair. The price cutoff was established at \$500 or less—which kept the cost within the realm of a reasonable upgrade. I left it to the invited manufacturers to send a pair of cords of their choosing within that price range.

Note that this is not a discussion about power-cord technology or philosophy. Manufacturer claims about the superiority of a given cable geometry or dielectric are set forth at the companies' Web sites for all to read and investigate further. This survey only summarizes my listening conclusions based upon a single reference system. For that reference system, I used the Audio Research CD-5 compact disc player and the Audio Research DSi200 amplifier. Both excellent, high-resolution components that, as you will read, reveal any systemic differences. The power cord reference was the \$2600 Synergistic Research Tesla Hologram D for the digital source and the \$1800 Precision AC for the amp. I'm intimately familiar with these cords and they've performed at a high level with the finest of associated gear. They are the champs at maintaining a seamless curtain of ambient sound across the stage, and their combination of pace, delicacy, micro-dynamic nuance, and low-level timbral details has always been winning.

Going into this survey my general impressions regarding power cords were that, compared with interconnects and speaker cable, their sonic virtues were less conspicuous and they did not create the same marked differences in tonal balance. These impressions held (relatively) true throughout the survey (although output level was another issue altogether, with various cables showing some remarkable variations). Mostly, the different cords tended to reframe the sonic tableau by either expanding or contracting the boundaries of the soundstage in width, depth, and focus. In essence they tended to speak the same language but with different accents and inflections. The largest single factor that distinguished one cord from another tended to be immersiveness. I'd call it a density factor, an aspect that envelopes the listener in a dimensional soundstage—the sense of music being reproduced as fully saturated dynamically and tonally. I will reference this factor throughout the survey. In alphabetical order, let's begin.



EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

Acoustic Zen Tsunami

\$350

The Tsunami ran smoothly down the middle of this pack in terms of overall performance and sonic character. It possessed a modestly lighter balance, with a forceful midrange that marks it as just a degree or so cooler in presentation. Its strengths were its smooth mids and solid soundstage depth and dimensionality. Its treble range was properly detailed yet just a bit dry, so that during Jennifer Warnes' "Lights of Lousianne" there was a small amount of brightening on the leading edges of the accordion. I thought it could have been a touch sweeter and airier on top, but to be fair none of the cords matched the survey reference in that regard. Bass response was very good although the Tsunami couldn't quite reproduce the full extension or resonant timbre of the talking-drums in Warnes' "Way Down Deep." And there was also an aura of micro-dynamic restraint during violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter's reading of Korngold's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra [DG]. It handled the larger scale of complex symphonic orchestrations with aplomb and very little image congestion. While competitive with most of the other cords, it couldn't quite match the low-level resolving power of the survey reference, and it gave up just a shred of transparency and that immersive density factor to the very best in this survey. Overall and with only minor subtractions, this was a very satisfying power cord—one that established solid benchmarks for the rest of the pack.

Acoustic Zen Tsunami

Conductor: 10 AWG OCC 6N Zero Crystal Copper

Insulation: CL3 rating PE and two center Teflon tubing with air-twisting geometry Teflon tape, copper braided shielding.

Connector: AC plug and IEC plug custom made gold-plated OCC copper

Price: \$350 (858) 487-1988 acousticzen.com

60 [Guide to Cables, Power Products, Accessories, & Music](#)

Audience powerChords

\$482

From note-one it became abundantly clear that in many ways the Audience was nipping at the heels of the survey's reference cord. Music seemed to emerge from a profoundly quiet and orderly soundstage and to take on a more vivid presence and ambience. Imbued with a cleanly defined and deeply dimensional soundstage the Audience also offered the bass clarity, weight, and pitch resolution that placed it at or near the top of the pack. On a track like Rosanne Cash's "God Is In The Roses" there was a sense that the air around images had dissipated somewhat, but it was still close to the survey reference in this regard. The feeling of transient speed and sustain from the guitar during this same track was enormously satisfying. In fact, except for the slight treble congestion and somewhat laid-back overall presentation—a trait that I clocked with many of these cords—there was little deviation from tonal neutrality. I found that only a handful of cords approached the reference in creating black-quiet backgrounds—an element pivotal to revealing music's micro-dynamic charms. In this area especially, the Audience was one of the standouts of the survey.

Audience powerChords

Conductor: 10 AWG high purity stranded OFC

Insulation: Flexible PVC

Connector: Wattgate IEC and plug

Price: \$482 (5ft)

(760) 471-0202

audience-av.com

AudioQuest NRG-4

\$350

The AudioQuest NRG-4 was impressive in the workmanlike and honest manner it went about its job. Modest in appearance, almost electro-retro with its cloth-like jacketing, it was definitely midrange in balance, like the Tsunami. It's a signature that suffuses a singer's voice, male or female, with tangible tonal richness and physical weight. There was little out of joint here, and only a slightly lighter overall feel tended to lend it much character at all. The NRG-4 had a delicacy and clarity in the lower half of the treble that enlivened piano harmonics and brass ensembles. It began to narrow in the upper-reaches of the treble, but this was a minor subtraction. The NRG-4 had excellent dimensionality with good lateral presentation and an exceedingly well-focused center soundstage. A sense of modest micro-dynamic compression of the deep bass seemed to limit its slam, but this subtraction was more than made up for by a sense of speed and pace that was rhythmically very satisfying. String section layering was smooth and clean, although inner detail of violin *pizzicatos* during the Anne-Sophie Mutter Korngold lacked the finer delineation and decay of the reference. Although it didn't throw a big sonic image, its density factor, soundstaging performance, and dimensionality were very good, indeed. An excellent all-around performer that sweats the smaller stuff.

AudioQuest NRG-4

Conductor: Solid PSC conductors in a self shielding

counter-spiral with two RF stoppers filters to block radio frequencies

Price: \$350

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EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

Harmonic Technology Fantasy AC10SE

\$500

Harmonic Technology has produced a high-output cable that seems to magically raise the volume level—a trait that was likely emphasized by its forward-leaning, highly charged presentation. Bass response in general was very tight, perhaps too much so. But, during the Copland *Fanfare*, dynamics and transient attack were nothing short of exhilarating. Although very smooth and extended in the upper registers, the Fantasy’s treble never quite opened up completely, diminishing air and harmonics with high-pitched percussion, winds, and strings. The soundstage also didn’t have the expansive spread of the survey reference so that during the Anne-Sophie Mutter performance of the Saint-Saëns, the orchestra doesn’t have quite the ambient wingspan that I’m use to hearing from this track. And as explosive as the Fantasy is in the macro sense, it doesn’t throw as much light into the micro-interiors of the soundstage. Thus during the “North Dakota” duet between Lyle Lovett and Ricki Lee Jones the interplay of their vocals had softer transient edges and a small degree of veiling. While other cords may offer superior low-level refinement, the Fantasy was explosively musical.

Harmonic Technology Fantasy AC10SE

Conductor: 6N copper

Insulation: PE insulation

Connector: Furutech

Price: \$500

(858) 486-8386

harmonictech.com

Furutech Absolute Power 18P

\$352

The Absolute Power 18P won high marks and virtually matched the reference in output. It always made me consider backing off the volume a dB or so. Output aside, its general character was slightly laid-back, almost easy-going to the point of relaxation—a trait I ascribe to a darker tonal balance and a softening of micro-dynamics. My only reservation was a reduction of back-to-front dimensionality during Yo Yo Ma’s “1A”—a characteristic that left soundstage layering just a bit flat and made the three-dimensional acoustic of the venue less enveloping. Similarly the spread across the soundstage for the three instruments (cello, bass, fiddle) narrowed slightly making it a little more difficult to follow the interplay of the musicians. However, its excellent bass and iron-fisted control made following acoustic or electric bass lines and rock rhythm sections a breeze. During Diane Reeves’ “One for My Baby,” I felt micro-dynamic energy waver and dip a bit in terms of outright immediacy—heard as a modest shortfall of liveliness and transient impact. And during some of the more electric passages from pianist Evgeny Kissin’s performance of “The Lark,” traces of congestion dampened the piano’s notes. A solid performance that still only lands it midpack in this tough field.

Furutech Absolute Power 18P

Conductor: Alpha OCC

Insulation: PE with Teflon

Connector: Furutech, rhodium-plated

Price: \$352

(323) 466-9694

www.furutech.com

Kimber Kable PK-10AG

\$371

Years ago, Kimber Kable’s original PK10 Palladian was a jaw-dropper, with revelatory soundstaging, dimensionality, and openness. The PK-10AG picks up where the mean green Palladian left off but in a more malleable, far less costly package. And once again, it connected with me. Dianne Reeves’ cover of “How High The Moon” was reproduced with a very open and detailed signature. The Kimber nicely captured the weight and resonance of Reeves’ full-bodied voice in much the same way it reproduced the resonant and throaty timbre of Pieter Wispelwey’s cello during Bruch’s *Kol Nidre*. On a track like Holly Cole’s “Heart of Saturday Night,” the Kimber was an exemplar of the heavy-hitting power cord—high output, energy, and dynamics. It had a rich dense midrange with an emphasis on soundstage depth—not unlike Kimber’s topflight Palladian, although not as wide-open on vocals as the survey reference. But for bass extension and sustain it is deserving of some of the highest marks in the survey. Thus for rock music, it provided a rich heavy beat, even slightly overripe depending on your system, but nicely detailed and uncompressed. Compared with the reference there were touches of treble peakiness. The PK10 offered an open, colorful, high-density sound that placed it near the top of this survey.

Kimber Kable PK-10AG

Conductor: 10AWG copper/

“spiral lay” or traditional twist

Insulation: Chroma-free TPE

Connector: Wattgate AG connectors, UL approved

Price: \$370

(801) 621-5530

kimber.com

Purist Audio Musaeus Praesto

\$360

As it turned out the Purist Audio Musaeus Praesto was the first cord plucked out of its box and dropped into the deep end of this survey. It set a standard that was often matched throughout these listening sessions of transparency and delicacy in the midrange, with a lighter overall balance and very good upper-frequency air. At the outset, it didn’t exhibit any tonal balance anomalies, but later on I did note a slightly subtractive character when it portrayed Pieter Wispelwey’s cello during the *Kol Nidre* with a little less woody resonance, making the instrument not quite as darkly mysterious. During Holly Cole’s “Heart of Saturday Night,” there was a little hint of midrange presence lift, a characteristic that probably bolstered the impression of enhanced transient speed (transients seemed to burst forth from the accompanying guitar and pedal steel). The Purist didn’t seem quite as substantial in orchestral weight and lacked the dramatic depth and ambience retrieval of some of the contenders in this field. Although it didn’t quite match the lower-octave bloom and slam of the survey reference during the Copland “Fanfare,” this cord won high marks for low-level resolution, dynamic energy, and a general lack of congestion—attributes that kept the Purist Audio in the thick of the running.

Purist Audio Musaeus Presto

Conductor: Stranded 14AWG copper OFC

Geometry: Twisted

Shielding: Aluminized foil layer

Insulation: Polyvinyl chloride

Connector: Wattgate, screw termination, UL approved

Price: \$360

(979) 265-5114

puristaudiodesign.com

EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

Shunyata Venom3

\$95

If there was a ringer in this field, the Venom was it, providing much of the density factor and dimensional qualities of some of the pricier cords. Only a bit of image definition and focus escaped it, and only a hint of image constriction deprived the Venom of the last iota of realism. Tonally it was little darker overall but with a very rich signature—so much so that after much listening I finally had to concede that there wasn't a lean bone in the Venom's slithery body. However, transient attack was a tick slower and Venom didn't quite have the depth of the reference. As a result the Venom3 sounded a bit more forward but its sound also provided an exciting experience that really lit up the low-level dynamics during the Rutter *Requiem* chorale. In this instance the layering was finely graduated and the decaying organ pedal points sustained nicely. Wispelwey's cello was wonderfully resonant while the orchestral sections remained relatively well focused rather than congealing together in soup of timbral generalities. As good as the Venom was, however, I still felt that during Anne-Sophie Mutter's Korngold the cellos and doublebasses were not quite as well defined and darkly forbidding in weight. Inner detail was good if not the final word in refinement. But for less than a hundred bucks, I had to ask myself, is Shunyata on a mission to embarrass everyone?

Shunyata Venom3

Conductor: 12AWG conductors, OFC, twist-link geometry
Insulation: TPE dielectric
Connector: Phosphor bronze contacts, medical-grade AC Connector 100% RFI/EMI shielding, UL approved
Price: \$95 (360) 598-9935 shunyata.com

Synergistic Research Precision AC Basik

\$250

The kid brother to the survey's reference, the Synergistic Precision AC Basik strode through all genres of music with much of the same panache as the survey reference. Tonally just a bit cooler than its Hologram cousin, its strengths were evidenced in the way it imparted depth to orchestral sections, its retrieval of ambience, and its lively and extended bass response—bigger in fact than that of the Wireworld and Kimber. In many ways Basik veered very close to the survey reference; the critical differences lay in the fact that it didn't sort out inner voices as neatly as the reference, whose greatest strength is a lack of background noise, which allowed instruments to materialize from the authentic acoustic silence of the venue rather than from an electronic glaze overlaying the presentation. The Basik was, indeed, quiet, but like every other cord in this survey couldn't quite match the reference benchmark. Still, in every other way there was no denying the family resemblance of the Precision AC Basik—from its penetrating dynamics, to its finer gradations of low-level detail, to its immersive density factor. There was just a hint of added sibilance during Dianne Reeves' "One For My Baby," but overall I'd have to conclude that, like Shunyata with its Venom 3, the Synergistic team may well have outdone itself on the value side with Basik and, at \$250, ended up picking its own pockets.

Synergistic Research Precision AC Basik

Conductor: 14 AWG, quantum-tunneled copper, proprietary geometry, highly shielded
Insulation: Modified PE
Connector: Synergistic G07, quantum-tunneled
Price: \$250 (949) 476-0000 synergisticresearch.com

Tara Labs RSC Prime

\$500

Don't be fooled by the plain-Jane, black wrapper of the Tara Labs RSC (Rectangular Solid Core) Prime. It may look like a stock OEM power cord but its performance was superb. Both fluid and immersive it delivers a big, dense sound in both timbre and bass definition. Although there's a good amount of midrange warmth, its character in the upper octaves was a bit drier and brighter than the survey reference. Fortunately, it was largely free of upper-frequency peakiness. On Mutter's violin, the RSC's voicing was smooth and refined, with one of the sweetest and most open upper registers in the survey. With its slight forwardness and quick-footed personality, it's a cord that can do rock or classical. Image or soundstage congestion was slight even in the the most complex orchestral passages, but there were some instances where I felt the immediacy factor could be bettered. For example, in the hands of the reference power cord I could follow in detail the rippling air of Mutter's vibrato and nearly feel the brushes along the drumhead of the snare during "One For My Baby." With the Tara (and to a degree all of the survey's power cords), this kind of low-level resolution was difficult to match. All in all, a power cord with no significant weakness.

TARA Labs RSC Prime

Conductor: Rectangular solid core conductors
Insulation: TARA Labs' proprietary Aero-PE
Connector: Wattgate wall plug and IEC
Price: \$500
 (541) 488-6465
 taralabs.com

Wireworld Electra 5.2

\$360

Whatever smarts Wireworld uses to brew its speaker wire must've filtered into its power-cord recipe. Like its elite Platinum and mid-line Eclipse cabling, Electra has no tonal dips or peaks. The result is an even and immersive energy that places this cord up with the best in this survey. In fact, its powerful dynamic character, and its composure with thickly layered orchestral material, brought to mind the Kimber Palladian PK10. Images were not as widely spread as I would have wished, but no apologies were needed here either. With a vocalist like Jennifer Warnes the Wireworld offered a velvety warmth and weight that grounded the singer's body to the soundstage. However, I found that in comparison to the survey reference Holly Cole's vocal during "Jersey Girl" was skewed to a slightly cooler temperature, and I noted a very modest veiling on low-level percussion cues. The widely detailed soundstage was very impressive. Although there was little congestion *per se*, the Wireworld seemed at a slight loss, in comparison to the survey reference, when it came to sorting out the full harmonic and imaging complexities of a high-revving orchestra, but on the whole it struck a fluid balance of resolution and natural weight. The Electra's flat physical profile made these power cords among the easiest to handle. Though the Wireworld didn't quite equal the preternatural silence and immersiveness of the survey reference, this is still a cord that struck all the right notes.

Wireworld Electra 5.2

Conductor: Silver-clad copper-alloy contacts
Insulation: Composilex **Connector:** Silver-clad brass contacts
Price: \$360 (954) 680-3848 wireworldcable.com

EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords Under \$500

VooDoo Ultra Wave and Vector Dragon

\$375 and \$425

Voodoo specifies the Ultra Wave for analog power and the Vector Dragon for digital front ends. Since both were within the survey's price cap and would likely be offered to customers in this configuration, we tried both. The Voodoos were high-output cords with a forward sound and hint of a darker tonality that placed Pieter Wispelwey's cello nearer the edge of the stage than in a mid-stage central pocket. In that vein orchestral layering and soundstage cues were well defined, but I found the soundstage a hint narrower and not quite as immersive or as dimensional as the survey reference. Occasionally on a track like Jennifer Warnes' "If It Be Your Will," bass could sound slightly overripe and the vocal less rooted, but overall this was a very well integrated performer with music always sounding of-a-piece. More impressive was its reproduction of tracks from Clark Terry's *One On One* and the soundtrack to *Good Night and Good Luck* where transient energy and speed are key elements that really pace the percussion and rhythm sections and impart a realism and liveliness to this pure acoustic music. The track "Misty" produced a gorgeous piano sound that was both warm and naturalistic—dynamic rather than hard or icy. The VooDoos captured the player's touch—a feat that made it a near match for the survey reference in micro-dynamics. Add to that a sumptuous low end and the net result was a visceral performance with many satisfying qualities.

VooDoo Cable Ultra Wave

Conductor: 10 AWG silver-plated copper/concentric geometry

Insulation: Teflon and polyethylene dielectric/polyethylene-mesh jacketing

Connector: Wattgate 320i IEC and Hubbell 5266 AC Plug

Price: \$375 (510) 535-9464 voodoocable.net

VooDoo Cable Vector Dragon

Conductor: 10 AWG silver-plated copper/helical geometry

Insulation: Teflon and polyethylene dielectric/polyethylene-mesh jacketing

Connector: Wattgate 320i IEC and Hubbell 5266 AC plug

Price: \$425 (510) 535-9464 voodoocable.net

Conclusion

My view is that power cords serve the system in much the way speaker cables and interconnects do—by honing and polishing areas of resolution that the owner considers a little soft, dull, sharp, or rough around the edges. That said, in terms of straight-line performance, clearly this was a tightly grouped collection—tighter even than my descriptions allowed. As alluring as it is to anoint a single "Best" in a survey, when it comes to wires so much is dependent on their synergy with associated system components that these impressions will better serve you as a guide to narrowing down your choices to a select two or three for audition. After that, your own ears won't lead you wrong. tbs

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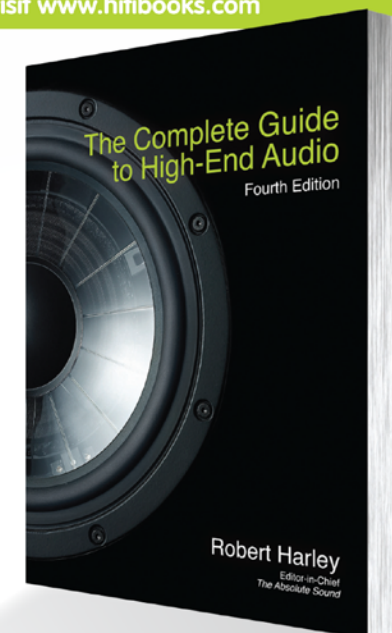
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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Audience Au24 powerChord

Alpha Dog

Neil Gader

In all honesty, the AC power cord survey I conducted in Issue 208 turned out to be a kind of mind-blowing experience. I expected differences among these cables but not to the extent that I observed. In that article I referenced a density factor—an enveloping mix of harmonic and dynamic saturation—that each cord conveyed to varying degrees. In my summary I stated that “they [all] tended to speak the same language but with different accents and inflections.” Shortly after completion of that piece, Audience offered me its premium Au24 powerChord for review. After my experience with these mid-priced cords, I was intrigued.

The Au24 powerChord is a low-resistance, low-impedance, unshielded design that uses 684 strands of high-purity Ohno mono-crystal copper that equates to 10 AWG for the entire cord. WattGate IEC/plugs are standard equipment, though other connectors are also available. The Au24 is very flexible, which means easy handling and potentially less damage to conductors.

In tonal color, there’s a lighter cast to the Audience’s balance that gives Shelby Lynne’s “Just A Little Lovin’” vocal firm image definition, and a little quicker attack on the steady high-hat transients on this track. The Audience—and this is subtle, mind you—hones in on instruments with a highly discerning focus that tends to resolve images and preserve micro-detail and micro-contrasts more clearly. The Audience shares much in common with my long-time

references (my references during the survey as well), the Synergistic Research Tesla Hologram. For example, during Mark Cohn’s “Ghost Train,” both cords have a smooth open top-end and an effortless flow of energy in the midband. During the Holst Suite No. 2 with the Dallas Wind Symphony [Reference Recordings], the Audience in particular evoked a more forward signature and an immediacy that seemed to “push” wind instruments into the hall. Only in the bottom octave did the Synergistic distance itself from the Audience. It was a shade denser, more extended, and harmonically more complex in the bass during Janis Ian’s “In The Winter” from the terrific LP reissue of *Between The Lines* [Boxstar/ABC].

Eugene Kissin’s solo piano on *Pictures at an Exhibition* [RCA] was most revealing of the subtle

distinctions between the Au24 powerChord and my reference AC cord. It called to mind the contrasting sonorities of pianos manufactured by Böesendorfer, Bechstein, and Steinway—the weightier more somber notes from one, the more brilliantly illuminated voicings from another. Seen in that light the Audience portrayed rapid single note lines with slightly better articulation, crisply struck and succinct. The Synergistic seemed a bit slower, more throaty, and summoned a hint more harmonic bloom, as if the hammers had a bit more felt on them.

The Audience’s signature hinges on being a top-down inside player, capturing a breath more air off a baritone sax mouthpiece on *ReVisions* [Chesky], and a little more air when Joni Mitchell soars above the treble clef on *Blue* [Reprise]. In contrast, the reference cord’s largely bottom-up macro approach leans more to the seductive, spatial aspects of the performance. Interestingly in soundstage cues the Audience paints a more vivid soundstage in width and image spread, while the Synergistic demonstrates stronger front-to-back dimensionality. It’s like looking at the same canvas in an art museum from slightly different perspectives.

The Audience Au24 powerChord is a superb



AC cord—an alpha cord in a virtual dead heat with another alpha cord. It was a performance that I could liken to the archery contest in *Robin Hood* where the Sheriff’s reigning champion strikes a bullseye followed by our hero who splits the presumptive winning arrow down the middle. Different approaches, yet on balance it really was that close. But, for this audience of one, it was a feat that sure struck a bold chord in me. **tbs**

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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Synergistic Research Tesla PowerCell 10 SE AC Conditioner

No Tradeoffs

Jacob Heilbrunn



A few years ago at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, Synergistic's Ted Denney III ushered Neil Gader and me into a small, dark hotel room that featured his latest Tesla cables, which used active shielding sourced via a complement of different tubes. Different tubes shouldn't have affected the sound, but, of course, they did. After that experience, I went on to try some of Synergistic's REL subwoofer cables, which added to the potency of the RELs, and not by a small margin.

So when the chance came up to try Synergistic's latest power conditioner, I bit. Having tried a fair number of conditioners over the year, I've become less enamored of them the more I've used them. The pluses and minuses almost always seem to balance out in the end. Sure, there's the initial excitement of hearing a few notes that weren't there before or a blacker background. But then reality begins to intrude. Weren't the highs a little more extended before I put conditioner X into my system? And so on. If it was just a matter of tradeoffs, it really didn't seem to be worth the outlay. Recent exposure to the latest conditioners from Audience and PS Audio suggested, however, that matters have begun to change for the better.

The \$5000 Tesla PowerCell 10 SE, which is supplied with Synergistic's top-of-the-line Tesla Precision AC cord, thus offered another chance to see if the conditioning field has continued to advance. Unlike many conditioners, it doesn't feature chokes or transformers. The chassis, Synergistic says,

EQUIPMENT REPORT - Synergistic Research Tesla PowerCell 10 SE AC Conditioner



is electromagnetically inert, but on the inside it conditions the electricity by subjecting it to various electromagnetic fields. The power cord for the unit also allows for active shielding. The unit is said to be non-current-limiting—which many conditioner manufacturers say, but which often turns out not to be the case—and is lightweight, making it easy to move around. Nor does it have an on-off switch. You simply use its locking power cord and plug it into the wall. It's best to have any equipment you intend to use with it turned off before you plug it in. After letting it burn in for two weeks, I inserted it into my system, adding one component at a time.

The difference was surprisingly dramatic. The Einstein preamplifier I've been using recently is quite dynamic, but can be a little astringent at

times. The Synergistic PowerCell immediately offered a warmer and more relaxed presentation. It also made the Wilson MAXX 3 loudspeakers sound more elegant, particularly in the highs. By comparison, the sound before I added the PowerCell seemed somewhat disjointed. In addition, the conditioner endowed intricate passages with greater resolution, helping to delineate musical lines more clearly. Overall, the PowerCell had a holistic effect, drawing me further into the music.

One of the Tesla's most palpable improvements was its ability to open up the soundstage. On Simone Dinnerstein's intriguing recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* [Telarc], which features a reconditioned Steinway Model D concert grand played in the town council of Hull in Northeast England, it was easier to hear both the reverberations of the piano within the concert hall and its rich, earthy sound, closer almost to a Bösendorfer than a Steinway. The sound of the felt hammer hitting the string was also more articulate. As always, such clarity may be something of a double-edged sword—recordings provide a lens into music-making that a concert hall simply will not offer, further proof, I think, that it's very tricky to compare CDs with live music. But honest to gosh, I almost swear you can hear the aged quality of the wood.

The ability of the PowerCell to help disentangle complicated passages was underscored by a wonderful piece, W.L. Thompson's "There's A Great Day Coming" [Gala], which is played by six trumpeters led by the New York Philharmonic's Philip Smith. There was no suppression of dynamics; if anything the PowerCell conveyed a greater sense of authority and body. The

burnished sound of six trumpets popping up seemingly out of nowhere was quite striking. In fact, I would say that it was the closest reproduction of the actual sound of a trumpet that I've heard.

But the most striking improvement rendered by the PowerCell was the ease with which the music unfolded. The presentation simply seemed more relaxed and self-assured. On Angela Hewitt's recording of Bach's *English Suites* [Hyperion SACD], for example, the piano simply sounded less constricted and compressed than it had previously. The graceful, composed nature of her playing emerged more fully.

Was the PowerCell, however, blurring transients? Not to my ear. I can see that not everyone will gravitate to the PowerCell. If your system tends to the warm, lush, rich side, you might not welcome the extra dollop of plushness that the PowerCell provides. But I wouldn't consider my overall system, given the number of tubes in it, on the dry side, even when using solid-state amplification. To my mind, the fuller presentation of the PowerCell was more authentic. What's more, the PowerCell really does seem to be non-current-limiting—it does not choke amplifiers, which, generally, are best run directly into the wall.

Perhaps the performance of the PowerCell shouldn't be surprising. The blunt fact is that the electricity flowing into most homes is pretty wretched. I have gone to some lengths to try and improve it by, among other things, installing a dedicated, active grounding rod, as well as a separate Isoclean breaker box and a number of dedicated lines running from it. Even

special wall outlets can make an improvement. But there's always more to be had.

Conditioning makes a lot of sense, but the rub has always been that it often seems to subtract as much as it adds. Still, my sense is that it's hard to go too wrong with the PowerCell 10 SE. It ably improved the performance of a number of components and is simplicity itself to use. No doubt conditioners will continue to improve in coming years, and they seem to represent something of a black art. But the PowerCell represents a startling and welcome advance, suggesting that the inventive mind of Ted Denney continues to seek new ways to enrich musical reproduction. It would be too much to say that the PowerCell 10 SE provides a romantic presentation, but it may well win your heart. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

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Weight: 18.5 lbs.

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EQUIPMENT REPORT

Shunyata Research Hydra Talos and Triton Power Conditioners

Game-Changers

Kirk Midtskog

There is probably no other segment of the specialty audio market that generates more frustration, even disdain, than “power products.” We have accepted, however begrudgingly, that some aftermarket upgrades can improve sonic performance: signal cables, audio racks and speaker stands, vibration-control devices, power cords, room-correction products or treatments, etc. Must we also concern ourselves with cleaning up the AC power? Well...it can help. A lot more than I thought.

Considering the high prices of many high-end audio items, the Shunyata Research Talos and Triton power conditioners must justify their asking prices of \$2995 and \$4995, respectively, on the basis of performance. I know, I know. We are talking about a box that scrubs AC power. As something of a skeptic going in, I was fairly confident that my 20-amp dedicated AC circuits would not really need much help. Besides, my impressions of power conditioners gleaned over several years were similar to that of many other’s—*mixed*. The cliché about two steps forward and one step back summed up my experience with units from various manufacturers—including an early version of Shunyata’s own Hydra 8.

The current two models represent a significant advancement in Shunyata’s approach, according to Caelin Gabriel, the creator of all Shunyata merchandise. I do not know about the technology of previous Hydra models, nor am I an electrical engineer, so I cannot speak to the various differences between the current models and past Shunyata efforts or to the engineering of Shunyata’s gear. The whole field of power conditioners is somewhat plagued with “official explanations” for a product’s superiority, which, too often, just end up frustrating consumers. I tend to focus on sonic performance, reliability, and viability rather than a particular topology or design philosophy.

What I can pass on about the design of the Talos

and Triton is that Mr. Gabriel has studied for years how to reduce power-line noise without impeding power delivery, and takes a highly systematic approach to solving the problem that involves a great deal of measurement. There are three important features unique to the new Shunyata units. First, they use a tiny encased network (called a Multi-Phase-Differential Array) designed to cancel out (without the use of capacitors) thirty targeted noise products generated by the power supplies of electronic devices on all three power legs—hot, neutral, and ground. Second, all conductive materials that connect to the main “zero-point” buss system are made of the same brass alloy to reduce spurious interactions between different metals. Third, there are three large cylinders, one for each power leg, through which each leg passes and, in so doing, contacts a relatively large amount of a high-frequency noise-reducing compound, ZrCa 2000. Other than offering eight outlets compared to the Talos’

six, the Triton has these additional features: larger (and heavier) ZrCa 2000 cylinders; heavier-gauge custom-made VTX (hollow-core) wire; a heavier (double) gauge buss bar; and, finally, two MPDA networks instead of one. The Triton also has a nicer faceplate. Both units have a standard IEC C20 (20-amp) inlet, which requires an IEC C19 power cord. Shunyata supplied a full set of Anaconda power cords and signal cables.

When listening for sonic results, I noticed that the Talos and Triton performed better when left in use for about a day after they have been unplugged for a few days. The pattern emerged in my system and surfaced again at a friend’s house. When I left a Talos with him for four days, he commented that he was able to hear much more positive effects after at least a day of use. This may handicap the Shunyata units a little bit in quick “shootouts.” Mind you, I heard positive things from the Talos and Triton from the start, but they both improved when allowed to run a day or two.



EQUIPMENT REPORT - Shunyata Research Power Conditioners

I found the experience with both Shunyata power units to be revelatory. The positive qualities they bring to bear go beyond the minutiae of finer leading edges and truer tone colors and textures brought about by lowering the noise floor. Those things are, in fact, much improved by the Talos and Triton, but the real benefit comes when those attributes, and others, improve the music-playback experience on the whole. To sum up some of the other sonic improvements, the Shunyata units (I will compare the two shortly) seem to allow notes to emerge from a quieter background a bit sooner and continue a bit longer before they decay back into that background. The distinctive character of instruments and voices *in an acoustic space* is more clearly rendered. Subtle shadings of intensity that musicians use to create emotional identification or meaning come through with greater ease. Individual images and the soundstage itself acquire newfound depth and texture. Different musical moods seem to develop more readily and with greater contrast. All this from *merely* cleaning up the AC power quality.

On Tord Gustavsen Trio's *Being There* [ECM], "Draw Near" has some subtle passages that can come across, on certain systems, as dull in a moody, Scandinavian, Third Stream way—an acquired taste, one could say (rather like Aquavit). The music can sound flat, both artistically and dimensionally. Playing the same cut with the Talos on a friend's Ayre K-5xeMP and Rogue Stereo 90 system made the instruments take on greater depth and texture. Gustavsen's touch on the piano created subtle dynamic shadings, which seemed to propel the piece forward with a restrained intensity that made the performance more interesting. That theme of creating greater

image density and soundstage depth stayed the same no matter the speakers or electronics (or cabling). My solid-state system sounded more liquid and three-dimensional, acquiring some of the positive attributes of fine tube gear. Edgy CDs sounded more relaxed and less ragged, and truly fine CDs sounded more like SACDs. Good LPs also sounded better than usual. No matter the recording or the gear, the Talos and Triton significantly improved the sonic performance.

Neither unit was dependent on an all-Shunyata setup to perform well. In fact, if I had to choose where to allocate power-related upgrade funds (in a four-device system) between Shunyata Anaconda power cords or a Talos/Triton unit, I would buy a Talos/Triton—at least in the context of the Wegrzyn Copper Slam power cords I have on hand. Both Shunyata units imparted greater sonic improvements than switching from my Wegrzyn 15-amp power cords to all Shunyata Anaconda power cords (without a Talos or Triton). The Anaconda power cords are fantastic, much better than the Wegrzyn, but at about \$2000 each Anacondas will add up to an appreciable amount if you need a few of them. The best segment of the power chain in which to place the highest-quality power cord is between the wall and the Talos/Triton, although a \$750 Shunyata Black Mamba HC 20-amp cord still delivered a great deal of the Talos/Triton magic. No doubt about it, though, adding the whole Shunyata treatment (all-Anaconda power cords, Anaconda signal cables, and a Talos or Triton) ratchets up performance significantly.

The Triton did not inhibit bass response or restrict dynamic impact. I heard no negatives, here. I played a few heavy bass and dynamically

charged cuts with everything plugged into one dedicated circuit, then played the same cuts with the same electronics plugged into the Triton (plugged into the same circuit). No restriction. If I were pressed into a corner about whether the Talos may have differed from the Triton in this regard, I would concede that the Triton had a *slim* edge in bass density over the Talos, but no difference in dynamic impact. I am not convinced that everyone's system would draw attention to this, though.

Other differences are apparent. The Triton comes across as even better at reducing the background haze that affects music playback. By means of greater image solidity and soundstage depth, more venue cues, and subtler sonic details, the Triton allowed my system to sound even more lifelike than the Talos did, with more of a relaxed, non-electronic quality. Both units gave the music the chance to unfold more completely over time (and with more information), revealing more clearly

what makes instruments sound like themselves. The Triton has an even greater degree of this calm, free-flowing feeling, which is somewhat similar to the way some people describe the difference between the more up-tempo sound of an unbalanced (RCA) circuit compared to the seemingly more relaxed sound of a fully-balanced (XLR) circuit. The construction differences between the Talos and the Triton amount to significant performance differences, in my view. Caelin Gabriel mentioned that the Talos will deliver about 80% of the Triton's performance. I think that assessment understates the Triton's abilities. I would put the Talos at about 65% of the Triton.

I found the positive impacts of the Talos and Triton to be extensive. Even if you think your system has really hit its stride, you just might be pleasantly surprised by how much more overall performance can be had by adding a Talos or, especially, a Triton. Highly recommended. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

Hydra Triton

Outlets: Eight

Power rating: 2400W (125 VAC)

Price: \$4995 (requires a C-19 20A power cord)

Hydra Talos

Outlets: Six

Power rating: 2400W (125 VAC)

Price: \$2995 (requires a C-19, 20A power cord)

SHUNYATA RESEARCH

26273 Twelve Trees Lane, Suite D
Poulsbo, WA 98370
(360) 598-9935
www.shunyata.com

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog source: Basis Debut V turntable with Vector 4 tonearm, Benz-Micro LP-S cartridge

Digital source: Ayre C-5xeMP
Phonostage preamp: Ayre P-5xe

Linestage preamp: Ayre K-1xe

Integrated amp: Hegel H200

Power amplifier: Gamut M-200 monos

Speakers: Dynaudio Confidence C1, Aerial 7T

Cables: Shunyata Anaconda signal cables and power

cords, Wegrzyn power cords

Room Treatments: PrimeAcoustic Z-foam panels and DIY panels

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[www.theabsolutesound.com](#)

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Quantum QB 6 AC Conditioner and Nordost Sort Kones Isolation Devices

Chris Thomas

For years it was cables, but these days there is little that rattles the cage of the committed audio puritan like power conditioners and equipment-support cones. Reviews of either are almost bound to elicit a rise in blood pressure and a trip to the keyboard to fire off an indignant e-mail to some audio forum or other. As for tiny, resonating metal bowls that sit on the wall? Don't even go there. Personally I think it is better to keep an open mind, at least until you have had a listen. If you consider your electronics and speakers as just part of the overall installation, then providing them with the best environment in which to perform is the way to keep a system working at the top of its curve. I am talking about system-building here, which is a simple strategy aimed at releasing the full musical potential of your hi-fi by giving it the power quality, equipment support, and cabling advantages to do just that.

Quantum Resonant Technology (QRT) has close links with Nordost, which also distributes its products. It designs and manufactures interesting and unusual power conditioners, although exactly how their “field generator” technology works has always been beyond my scientific understanding. My ears, however, tell me that musically it does work, though with such products there will always be claims that the King has no clothes. That's a fine and healthy

situation because when I first became involved in audio there were some prominent and respected pundits who insisted that all turntables sounded the same and the only differences between them were to be found on the spec sheet. It is perhaps fortunate that not everybody subscribed to those views. Time changes all things.

Nordost has recently introduced a range of individual equipment supports that they call Sort Kones. “Sort” means black in Danish,



EQUIPMENT REPORT - Quantum QB 6 AC Conditioner and Nordost Sort Kones Isolation Devices

though this refers to the nature of the musical backgrounds they achieve rather than their color. They are considerably more sophisticated in construction than the old Pulsar Points, with different design aims. Sort Kones come in various material combinations and can best be described as resonance-control devices. Internally they incorporate a mechanically tuned, loosely coupled, three-element design. A circular base with a cut-out houses a coupling ball supporting a pivot post that rises upwards to make direct contact with the equipment via a soft curved edge. The whole unit is contained within a black casing marked on the outside with the particular configuration of metals. There are four different types available. The AS comprises an aluminium post and base with a steel ball; the AC adds a silicon-nitride ceramic ball; the BC utilises a bronze post and base, while the most expensive, the TC, comprises a titanium post and base separated by a ceramic ball. These can all be employed in groups of three, four, or even greater numbers. For this review I limited myself to the AS and TC versions. Sort Kones are about 58mm in height, which means that, where shelf space is tight, they may be impractical. Why are they so tall? The ratio between the Sort Kones' height and their base-width is not arbitrary and the constructional elements, especially the dimensions, are absolutely critical to the performance of both the Nordost and Quantum products.

QRT can supply their new Qbase mains distribution block in optional plug configurations for U.S., UK, and European markets. These have no Quantum technology inside them. Initially I found this puzzling before I understood that the

Qbase is one component of a modular system. Including Quantum in the package would have increased its cost considerably, and individual or collective Quantum units can always be added later. But there is also the issue of placement to consider. Where the power distribution block would tend to sit outside or at the periphery of the system to allow for cable dressing the Quantum units must be sited physically at its heart to be at their most influential. This is an in-line power distribution block containing no active components and certainly no filtering. The star-earthed system has the marked preamp outlet firmly at its centre. A very small lift in the earth impedance of every socket, except this one, routes the earth both to the center of the star and also to the external connector fitted for use with supplementary grounding, like a sunken copper rod in the yard. As with Nordost, it became clear when speaking to Quantum that the QBase is also a mechanically tuned device. Even the size and shape of the small raised lip the unit sits on has been carefully chosen and in many ways mirrors the prominent base contact edge of the Sort Kones. It is superbly finished and not surprisingly incorporates Nordost cabling internally.

I decided to look at both the Sort Kones and the Qb6 (six-outlet) distribution block together. I did not want to just slip them into my home system because of the confusing interactions that would certainly occur between them and the extensive resonance control technology that I already use. To this end I thought it most informative to assemble a "clean" system using an entirely different set of components and incorporate the Qbase and Sort Kones in stages. I used an Ayre C-5xe mp multidisc CD player and a pair of Focal's

Diablo Utopia loudspeakers on their own stands. The amplifier choice was admittedly unusual. I chose a Carat A57 integrated amplifier because it is a very good low-cost amplifier that would never usually be deemed an adequate partner for the Focals. But I wanted to see how far the influence of the QRT and Nordost components could lift the system generally and the amplifier in particular toward a musical viability that I certainly doubted at the outset. To level the playing field even more I sat the electronics on two acrylic sheets straight onto the floor to remove the influence of another support system and used Chord Company Rumour cabling.

Obviously I listened to a lot of music over the period of the review, but I want to illustrate the way things progressed by highlighting Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong's *Ella and Louis* CD (Verve) and the track "Moonlight In Vermont." This is a great recording, dating from 1956, produced by Norman Granz with only a high level of tape hiss to betray its age. Now, I confess I can listen to Ella any time and enjoy her. Even on an AM station in the car, her tone, warmth, and beautiful phrasing will always fascinate me. So even with a cold system unceremoniously strewn on the floor I needed no convincing as to her greatness. She embraces and dominates this song by making the lyric, pace, and the phrasing all her own. With the untreated system the tape hiss was painfully prominent though, and she sounded like a small woman, singing from her throat, through her nose, while Oscar Peterson's piano played a distinctly background role of fiddly embellishment rather than being involved in the song's progression. Armstrong's trumpet was thin, sour, shrill, and uncomfortable.

It made me want to turn the volume down and see what was on TV. The Diablo's tweeter gave the instrument full rein and also ensured that the glaringly obvious tape hiss became annoyingly intrusive as listening progressed. Evaluating this system at this stage I would say that the balance was wrong and that the amplifier was way out of its depth. I certainly couldn't have lived with it as it was. It promised much but cruelly failed to deliver anything approaching a satisfying musical performance. Time for the first change then, so the Qbase was installed using the standard mains leads that are supplied with the equipment. The sound immediately took a massive leap upwards in quality. There was new solidity and more powerful resolution, as if a serious amplifier upgrade had occurred. Now there was a feeling of weight to the piano that took a step forward to

SPECS & PRICING

Quantum Resonant Technology QB6 Distribution Block	\$65 ea.; AC (Aluminum with Ceramic coupling bearing), \$80 ea.; BC (Bronze with Ceramic coupling bearing), \$135 ea.; TC (Titanium with Ceramic coupling bearing), \$350 ea. nordost.com
Available with U.S., Schuko, Aus, or UK sockets Qx4 \$2699; Qx2, \$1799; Qb8, \$1399; Qb4, \$849; Qv2,\$350.00 quantumqrt.com	
Nordost Sort Kones	AS (Aluminum with Steel coupling bearing),

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www.theabsolutesound.com

EQUIPMENT REPORT - Quantum QB 6 AC Conditioner and Nordost Sort Kones Isolation Devices

become part of the song. Ella's vocal was still a bit breathy though, though now with a tonal richness and depth that were previously absent. The rasp of Louis' trumpet no longer had me reaching for the volume control, but it was still astringent and came as a shock every time it burst in. Overall the improvements were hardly subtle, and the system now had a feeling of musical harmony that it never got close to before. So I began to add Sort Kones. I started with the basic AC models and slipped three beneath the Ayre CD player. First I felt the weight to ascertain where the transformer was, and mounted one Kone directly beneath

it and then balanced the unit with two others. OK, the tape hiss was still there but it seemed to have detached itself from the music, making it easier to ignore. The body of the sound had increased still further, and separation was much improved. The Qbase had brought a growing feeling of Ella's phrasing, and the addition of the Kones firmly established that she has amazing breath control. I installed another three AC Kones beneath the amplifier using the same positioning method and the system sounded unrecognisable from earlier. Now that beryllium tweeter became an asset instead of a liability. The trumpet still

had enormous impact when it arrived, but now it was part of the flavour of the song and it too had grown in color and tone. It was still strident, but no longer painful. Oscar Peterson was now doing a lot more work. Earlier he was embellishing with floral lines but now his chords were underpinning and lighting the shape and direction of the song. His playing is a joy and so beautifully tasteful. The noise floor dropped and that tape hiss was becoming less and less noticeable.

At this stage I spent quite a while fiddling with positioning the Kones and found that this is critical to the performance you can wring from the components. I tried using four and then five under both CD player and amplifier. Up to five you can achieve really noticeable improvements with positional experimentation, but I have to warn you not to rush this as it can become confusing and three Kones do look more elegant. It was time to swap the AC Kones for the Titanium-shafted variety. Wow, the improvements were much greater than I had expected and Nordost's prophesy of black backgrounds was coming true. The sheer range of that amazing voice now had a gentle sweetness, and the drops and rises in pitch had a fascination of their own. The magic was coming from deep within her. The tonal inflections and way she shapes her words, flowing some into each other, leaving others resonating by themselves brought home with a bang why she was one of the greatest female singers ever. Now you can appreciate that her tasteful vibrato, gently caressing and modulating the tails of the lyric, is nothing short of magnificent because, at this level, you become very aware of her breathing and physicality. The music itself had grown, but, in true Nordost tradition, it was also obvious that

the system's presence and balance had also become a lot more full on. The aluminium/ceramic Kones are good, but the titanium ones are way better in every way. Slipping four inverted TC Kones between the floor and the speaker's stand bases detached the soundstage from within the confines of the Diablos and stretched the depth too, bringing Ella even closer while knitting the band together as a firmer, more concentrated unit.

Then finally I hooked the yard earth to its dedicated connector on the Qbase. The tape hiss magically fell away and the noise floor went with it. The system was now a million miles from where it started, and the amplifier seems more than up to the job I doubted it was capable of. Then I started to disassemble the system to check the results backwards. I removed the Qbase first and the music immediately began to unravel. It became very clear that this is the rock on which the other improvements are founded. I started with a great song, ill served by an audio system and ended up with a real performance—and that was a massive leap to take. Remember that all this was without the aid of any dedicated racks or superior cabling. The Qbase is something of a bargain because system building from the power socket not only works but I believe is fundamental and a really worthwhile musical asset to systems of all levels, even more so if you have a dedicated external earth. The Qbase has replaced the Thor in my own system. The AC Sort Kones too are excellent and will musically pay back their modest cost. The TC versions are expensive but the improvements they bring are not subtle. These are things you need to hear for yourself. **tas**



EDITORS' CHOICE: POWER CONDITIONERS



Audience aR2p/ aR12/aR12TS

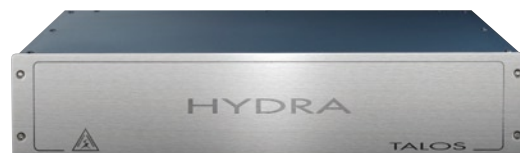
\$695/\$4995/\$8995

The aR2p, Audience's compact, dual-outlet power conditioner is based on the massive twelve-outlet versions of which Audience is rightly proud. Used with a CD player its enhancement of soundstaging, dimensionality, and depth can be profound. Further up the Audience food chain are the twelve-outlet heavy-hitters. The aR12p was found to be an extremely effective conditioner, capable of delivering significant improvements in bass definition and depth, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. Its build-quality is nothing short of exemplary.

At the top of the hill is the aR-12T (T for Teflon caps). HP considers the sonic difference the 12T renders (compared to plugging gear straight into a wall outlet) like that between a Blu-ray disc and a regular DVD. So great was the increase in clarity that it "lifted the Audience aR12T conditioner into the realm of the rare." The top-of-the-line aR12TS version takes the performance to another level, and should be considered in the top rank of all AC conditioners. (The aR12TS not yet reviewed, but is part of RH's reference system.) AR 2p also available in Teflon-cap version for \$1600.

audience-av.com (162, 179, 186)

73 [Guide to Cables, Power Products, Accessories, & Music](#)



Shunyata Hydra Triton and Talos

\$4995/\$2995

The Hydra Triton and Talos represent a ground-up redesign of the already terrific Hydra V-Ray. They both use new technologies that reduce noise, isolate components from each other, and provide a high-current connection to your AC power line. The new technology includes a small circuit board containing an array of micro-filters that use more than 30 elements, massive cylindrical tubes containing a noise-reduction compound, and a solid-brass buss system for power distribution. These new products extend the traditional Shunyata virtues of lowering background noise, increasing low-level resolution, and reducing grain. Robert Harley used the V-Ray in his system for four years; the Triton and Talos are now indispensable components of his reference system.

shunyata.com (Reviewed in this issue)

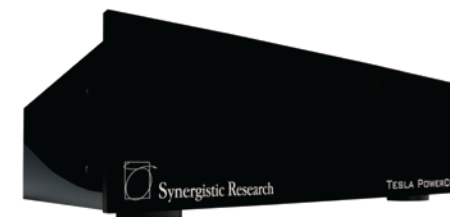


Silver Circle Audio Pure Power One 5.0 Isolation Transformer

\$4999

Unlike most devices designed to improve the AC powering of an audio system, the Silver Circle Audio Pure Power One 5.0 is an isolation transformer. This beautifully built, heavy-duty product removes grunge on the AC line. It has eight inputs and can easily supply enough current for massive power amplifiers. The sonic result is digital that no longer sounds glassy and brittle in the highs; fundamentals in the midbass acquire uncolored definition and punch.

silvercircleaudio.com (Review pending)



Synergistic Tesla PowerCell 10 SE

\$5000

As a skeptic about power conditioners, JHb was pleasantly surprised by the improvements in imaging and dynamics rendered by the Synergistic Power Cell. Unlike many of its brethren (no need to mention them by name, the offenders know who they are), the PowerCell did not appear to limit current. Instead, it offers even blacker backgrounds and lowered grit and distortion. Particularly noteworthy were the smoother treble and improved suppleness of musical lines. The PowerCell is pleasingly lightweight and attractive. Synergistic head honcho and lead designer Ted Denney III, it must be said, continues to advance the state of the art when it comes to filtering electricity. As with all conditioners, however, auditioning the Synergistic in your own system is a must, as the quality of electricity varies markedly from home to home.

synergisticresearch.com (192)



EQUIPMENT REVIEWS

Accessories

ACCESSORIES

Moon Audio Silver Dragon LOD iPod-to-Amplifier Cable

Tom Martin



These days there are specialty cables for everything, and the mobile audiophile has to wonder if it is all in the interest of better, more accurate sound. Certainly there are cables that make an audible difference, and sometimes an audible improvement. But there are also cables that seem unnecessary, especially if you are on a budget. For this first listen, note that the Moon Audio LOD cables belong in the former group: i.e., they make a difference you can really hear.

Moon Audio has produced a cable for the iPod and iPhone that goes beyond normal cable benefits. This one effectively makes significant changes in the analog circuitry involved in the traditional iPod/iPhone-to-headphone-amp signal path. Recognizing that this statement might seem a bit misleading, allow me to explain.

Most iPod-to-amp cables are designed

to plug in to the headphone outputs of the iPod, but not so the Moon Audio Silver Dragon iPod LOD (Line Out Dock) cables. No sir, these cables plug into the big multi-pin connector at the base of the iPod, and they deliberately bypass the iPod's earphone/headphone amplifier circuits altogether. Thus, you get what traditional audiophiles would call a "line out" connection. This means, of course,

ACCESSORIES - Moon Audio Silver Dragon LOD iPod-to-Amplifier Cable

that you have to use an external amplifier (not a bad idea anyway) when using the LOD cable. It also should mean better sound, because you don't have all that extra and unnecessary iPod circuitry adding distortion. After all, why run audio signals through two amps if you don't have to? But sound should also be better in the sense that with the LOD cable you will, more or less by definition, be using a higher-quality amplifier.

Moon Audio offers two versions of its LOD cables: the Silver Dragon LOD cable, Version 3 (\$95 for a 6-inch model), and the Silver Dragon IEM LOD cable, Version 3 (\$65 for a 6-inch model). Moon Audio builds cable to order, so you can—for a reasonable fee—have your LOD cables made up in just about any practical length you'd like.

Silver Dragon LOD

In simple terms, the Silver Dragon LOD cable is intended for higher-end applications (often in desktop audio contexts), and therefore uses exotic, ultra high-quality signal wires optimized for sound quality, but consequently quite thick and stiff. Moon Audio offers this description of the LOD cable configuration:

- “The cable uses 4 x 99.99998% UP-OCC silver 24AWG Teflon insulated stranded conductors. We have improved the conductors' properties over the previous Version 2 cable. These conductors are free from impurities and have virtually no crystal boundaries. The conductors have almost no distortion compared to ordinary silver conductors.”
- “Each conductor is made up of a special varyingly sized stranded geometry. The silver

strands are mixed with Kevlar strands to reinforce the conductor, making it stronger overall and less prone to failure due to the harsh constant flexing of a portable system. The conductors are then surrounded by cotton and a thin layer of Teflon tape.”

- “(The Silver Dragon LOD cable) is protected by a 100% coverage silver-plated copper shield and placed in a polyethylene jacket for further protection.”
- “To improve (the cable's) flexibility we are no longer using a Techflex jacketing as we did with our previous versions.”
- “A variety of connection options are available for your downstream connection. Such as the mini plug, RCA, XLR, and a whole host of others. We custom build these in house to your connection specification.”
- “The cable can be used in either a single-ended or balanced design. The wire is soldered to a connectors using high-quality Cardas silver solder.”

Silver Dragon IEM LOD

The Silver Dragon IEM (in-ear monitor) LOD cable, in turn, also uses very high quality, though admittedly less exotic, signal wires that offer, by design, a good compromise between improved sound quality and excellent physical flexibility. In short, the IEM LOD cable is intended for applications where users will want to strap their iPods to a companion portable headphone amp and will therefore need a signal cable that can accommodate a sharp, 180-degree bend in order to plug into the amp. Moon Audio highlights the following construction details that define the IEM LOD cable:

- “The cable uses 2 x 99.99998% UP-OCC silver 26AWG insulated stranded conductors as the central positive leg of the cables. Each central conductor is surrounded by an externally wrapped negative conductor. By using a coaxial design, we were able to create great flexibility and a small footprint. The conductors' purity is the same as its big brother's. And thus these conductors are free from impurities and have virtually no crystal boundaries as well. The conductors have almost no distortion compared to ordinary silver conductors.”
- “The center conductors are made up of a special varyingly sized stranded geometry.”

First Listen: How Do LOD Cables Sound?

We used the NuForce Icon Mobile amplifier, the Beats By Dr. Dre Solo HD headphones, and the Apple iPhone 4 for our initial trials, using both versions of Moon's LOD cables.

How does the Silver Dragon LOD affect sound quality? Simply put, musical transients are better delineated. You hear transients with more accurate articulation, yet without artifacts that would suggest added distortion. Of course, one place you hear this most often is on high-frequency percussion instruments like cymbals. There, you experience a more open, natural, and dynamic sound. A second benefit comes through greater resolution of ambient sounds, particularly as transients die away. This benefit is particularly important for giving a sense of a real venue being involved. Finally, and most intriguing to me, bass has better definition. Presumably this is because bass—particularly plucked bass—has plenty of harmonic content and this is affected the same

way other upper frequencies are.

As for the differences between the two different LOD cables, I have to say the full-on LOD cable takes what the IEM LOD cable does (compared with the very nice non-LOD-type signal cable that NuForce supplies) and ups the magnitude of transient improvement by about 50%. Once again I noticed the difference on bass transients as much as on high frequencies.

I will also add that there could be a “season to taste” element in choosing between the two cables. The Solo HD headphones can use as much resolution enhancement as you can provide, but some brighter, more splashy-sounding headphones or earphones might potentially pair better with the somewhat softer-sound IEM LOD model.

Finally, let me note that the sonic improvements I've described are subtle, but real. Those of you who believe that reviewers are on LSD, and who believe that wires can't possibly make a difference, might not be persuaded by the Silver Dragons.

But those of you who have tried accessories to good effect will want to check out these Moon Audio cables. They offer a meaningful improvement for a very small price. **tas**

ACCESSORIES



Stillpoints Ultra

Robert Harley

I'd be a rich man if I had a nickel for every time an accessories manufacturer told me that his product would make a "dramatic" or "jaw-dropping" improvement in my system. Adding accessories usually renders a marginal improvement in sound—an improvement that is not always commensurate with the asking price. In my experience, accessories tinker at the margins rather than fundamentally influence a system's sound.

So it was natural that I regarded the claims of Stillpoints' Bruce Jacobs with a wary—and weary—eye. Jacobs suggested that replacing the spikes beneath my Focal Stella Utopia EM loudspeakers with Stillpoints Ultra feet would result in a "shocking" improvement in sound quality. There's only so much time in a day, but I gave the Stillpoints a try largely because

my neighbor, Rick Brown of Hi-Fi One, is so enthusiastic about all Stillpoints products. (Rick sells a few very select lines of esoteric gear, is a great listener, and gets terrific sound at his place.)

The Stillpoints Ultra is a cylindrical metal structure with a threaded insert on one end and a concave surface on the other. The threaded insert

accepts an adapter, also made by Stillpoints, that screws into the bottom of your particular loudspeaker in place of the stock spikes. You must specify your loudspeaker so that you get the correct adapters. When the Ultra is placed under components, such as a power amplifier, you simply forego the adapters and allow the component to rest on the Ultra's flat top surface.

The Ultra appears to have two parts: the main cylindrical structure and a loose-fitting "cap" on the end. It is actually composed of ten internal components that form an elaborate vibration-dissipation system. The internal structure includes tiny ceramic bearings that dissipate micro-vibrations. The Ultra is a two-way device, meaning that it dissipates vibration entering from either direction (from the floor or from the component resting on the Ultra). Moreover, there is no vertical path for vibration through the Ultra. This device is the highest implementation of Stillpoints' technology, which is reflected in the price—\$900 for a set of four. An aluminum version, identical in every way except for the metal, is \$640 for a set of four. According to Stillpoints, stainless-steel more quickly dissipates vibrational energy. Less expensive versions have fewer internal energy-dissipating components. Stillpoints products are designed and made in Wisconsin.

I replaced the hefty stock Focal spikes with Stillpoints Ultras, sat back, and was shocked by what I heard. With the Stillpoints, the soundstage opened up with greater width, depth, and bloom around images. The sound became even more detached from the loudspeakers, with a greater solidity of images between and around the Focals. On the familiar "Diamonds on the Souls

of Her Shoes" from Paul Simon's *Graceland*, the spread of voices in the unaccompanied opening passage extended more widely, and the sense of the voices hanging in three-dimensional space increased. The impression of height was more tangible, adding to the increased perception of a three-dimensional soundstage in front of me.

The bass improved to a similar degree. The bottom end became tauter, better defined, and cleaner. The Stillpoints made the midbass a bit leaner, but more articulate. The improved midbass conferred greater clarity in the midrange, as well as in the bottom octave, where very low bass notes were more audible and defined once the midbass was better controlled. Bass dynamics were also improved; notes seemed to start and stop more quickly, giving the presentation greater dynamic agility and conveying more of the musicians' dynamic expression.

Finally, replacing the stock spikes with Stillpoints make the background "blacker" and quieter, allowing greater clarity and resolution of very low-level information. Sounds that had been somewhat undifferentiated with the stock feet became vividly clear. For example, percussion instruments that produce a series of very fine transients (shakers and guiros, for examples) sounded much more real with the reduction in transient blurring. Moreover, it was much easier to identify exactly how the instrument produced its sound. All this added up to a more lifelike reproduction.

At \$1800 for a set of eight Ultra Stainless-Steel feet, these devices are not inexpensive. Nonetheless, in the context of a high-end system they provide a huge sonic return on the investment. **tas**

Editors' Choice: Accessories

AcousTech Electronic Stylus Force Gauge \$99.95

acousticsounds.com

Getting the most out of any turntable requires an accurate vertical tracking force setting—and yes, kids, you can easily hear changes as slight as a tenth of a gram. Not only is AcousTech's new gauge a relative bargain; it is small, has a backlit display, is incredibly easy to use, measures weights from 0.001 to 5.000 grams at the height of an LP's surface, and is said to be accurate to within ± 0.002 grams.

Aesthetix ABCD-1MC Cartridge Demagnetizer \$199

musicalsurrroundings.com

This battery-operated device sends a special signal through your moving-coil cartridge, removing stray magnetism in the coils. Used every two weeks or so, the ABCD-1 will restore tone colors and soundstage clarity. For use only on moving coils.

Analogue Productions: The Ultimate Analogue Test LP \$39.99

acousticsounds.com

Amazingly well-conceived as well as manufactured to the highest standards, *The Ultimate Analogue Test LP* is the new reference in test discs. It's loaded with useful test signals that are encoded with high precision, and the record is pressed on 180-gram virgin vinyl.

ASC Tube Traps \$498-\$2638

tubetrap.com

Unless you have a professionally designed and treated room, Tube Traps from Acoustic Sciences Corporation are absolutely indispensable to improving your system's sound. They are able to solve a wide range of acoustic problems with strategic placement and orientation. Boomy bass can be cured with a pair of 16" Full Rounds in the corners behind the loudspeakers. Placed along the sidewalls between you and the loudspeakers, Tube Traps kill unwanted sidewall reflections, prevent flutter echo, and aid in diffusion. A single Tube Trap in the center of the wall behind the loudspeakers can expand soundstage depth. There are lots

of questionable acoustic products on the market, but Tube Traps are the real deal. RH has used Tube Traps continuously for the past 21 years.

AudioQuest BPW Binding-Post Wrench \$9.99

audioquest.com

AudioQuest's binding-post wrench, featuring durable metal socket-inserts, eliminates the need for a bulky socket set. This compact double-ended nut driver, small enough to slip into a shirt or pants pocket, fits 7/16" and 1/2" binding posts. Essential for tightening down speaker cables to speakers and amps.

AudioQuest Anti-Static Record Brush \$20

audioquest.com

What's the best way to keep clean records clean without attracting dust particles? One of our favorite methods is to use AudioQuest's anti-static record brush, whose bristles are made up of "over a million polished carbon fibers." A swing-down brush guard doubles as a bristle cleaner to prevent dirt build-up.

Auralex Acoustics Studiofoam Wedges Price varies

auralex.com

If you've logged much time in home recording studios, odds are that you've already seen and heard Auralex Studiofoam Wedges in action. Studiofoam is highly absorptive, and therefore can be just the ticket for taming slap echoes or audible comb-filtering effects that can result when listeners are seated too close to the back walls of their listening spaces.

Avid Level 45: 45RPM Adapter and Bubble Level \$100

musicdirect.com

This two-piece kit combines a precision machined-steel 45-rpm adaptor with a high-quality bubble level. The level sits atop the 45rpm-adaptor, which together weigh 180 grams—exactly the same as a high quality LP for accurate leveling.

A/V Room Service Ltd. Metu Acoustic Panels and Corner Traps Price depends on configuration (but affordable)

avroomservice.com

Although the set of Metus that came to JV—and that he now depends on—came in a particularly unattractive Fudgsicle brown, these wall-hanging, cloth-faced, rectangular acoustic panels (mounted to wooden backboards) and cloth-faced corner traps can be precisely color-matched to your paint scheme or be made to look like framed art of any kind (from posters to paintings). Designed by Jim Varney, who did the acoustical treatment of Robert Harley's room, they are the real deal—precisely calibrated room treatments that use a patent-pending adjustable diaphragmatic/sound absorptive technology to reliably reduce all sorts of colorations—more effectively than any other wall-mounted room treatment JV has tried.

Blu-Tack Adhesive Putty \$10

The original acoustic putty and adhesive from Bostik of England that damps resonances and mechanically couples a compact speaker to the top plate of its stand. Sonically you'll hear tighter bass and improved image. Considered "a flexible semi-liquid that behaves like a solid" it also offers a safety bonus by preventing a stand-mounted speaker from being inadvertently toppled.

Caig Pro Gold G100L Treatment \$21.99

caig.com

Caig's ProGold G100L has long been the go-to lubricant for cleaning, preserving, and conditioning all electrical connections. Packaged in a handy dispenser bottle with a little applicator-brush built into the cap, it can and should be used for any junction (short of an AC wall socket) where a metal connector (like the male RCA plugs of your interconnects) is plugged into a metal socket (like the female RCA plugs of your preamp, amp, or CD player).

Cardas RCA Caps \$49.99 (set of 12)

cardas.com

Pop these RCA shorting plugs into your preamplifier's unused inputs and you'll hear a blacker background, more micro-dynamic detail, and an overall cleaner sound.

Cent-tech SPL Meter \$40

An indispensable and fun sound-intensity meter for confirming channel balance (especially helpful for hi-res multichannel), adjusting subwoofers, checking peak settings, optimizing EQ settings, or just verifying that you're endangering your hearing. With seven SPL ranges, A and C weightings, slow- and fast-response peak measurements, and average noise levels.

Clearaudio Spirit Level \$60

musicalsurrroundings.com

Turntables sound their best when they are level—something careful listeners will want to check at set-up time and verify periodically. (Remember: Furniture and floors sometimes settle a bit over time.) Use a good multi-axis spirit level such as this

Editors' Choice: Accessories

one from Clearaudio to keep your table on the level.

Clearaudio Strobe-disc and Strobe Light

\$60 and \$180

musicalsurrroundings.com

Featuring grooves that create the additional stylus drag necessary to accurately measure your turntable's speed—while at the same time doubling as a cartridge break-in device—Clearaudio's Strobe-disc and Strobe Light are great tools for the serious vinyl junkie.

Composite Products Carbon-Fiber Cones

\$75 (3-Pack)

composite.com

Made from layers of carbon-fiber cloth bonded into a solid with epoxy, the Composite Products Carbon-Fiber Cones are extremely stiff and well damped. Place a set under a component to reduce and damp vibrations.

Echo Busters

\$175 and up

www.acousticsounds.com

The cool thing about Echo Busters, as well as most other room treatment, is you don't

have to buy the whole shebang at once. SK recommends starting off with a couple of Bass Busters or maybe just a set of Corner Busters. The effect is dramatic and cumulative, and you can add on as your budget allows.

Feickert Adjust+

\$350

feickert.com

If you've ever wondered whether you've gotten your cartridge's azimuth just right and, thereby, maximized channel separation, here's a solution that doesn't entail an oscilloscope or guesses by mirror. Dr. Feickert—he who makes that fabulous cartridge-alignment protractor—has come up with a nifty bit of software (PC-only) that will tell you when azimuth is dead on (and all sorts of other useful things about your cartridge, turntable, and phonostage, including table speed).

Feickert Universal Protractor

\$250

feickert.com

Feickert's invaluable protractor includes a white disc with markings on each side—for

Baerwald and Lofgren geometries and 50 and 60Hz strobe patterns—an impressively machined aluminum measuring device that turns accurately measuring stylus to pivot distances from hair-pulling frustration to child's play, and a step-by-step instruction booklet that makes fine-tuning your cartridge's geometry a remarkably easy procedure.

Fosgate Fozgometer

\$250

musicalsurrroundings.com

Adjusting for correct cartridge azimuth (axial tilt) is the bane of an audiophile's beleaguered eyeballs. However, the Fozgometer, Jim Fosgate's ingenious and fairly priced Azimuth Range Meter, is designed for even the most astigmatic among us. Used in conjunction with the *Ultimate Analog Test Disc LP* [Analogue Prod:AAPT-1], it diagnoses azimuth irregularities by accurately reading channel separation and channel balance, as well as signal direction. Nicely finished with a large readable meter. Operation is a snap. A battery-operated essential.

Furutech LP Flattener

\$1890

furutech.com

Expensive, but worth it if you have a large LP collection. Just put a slightly warped LP into the Flattener and the gentle heating and pressing action restores an LP to perfect flatness.

Furutech deMag

\$2375

furutech.com

What's that you say, demagnetize vinyl—a plastic? Yes, it seems that the pigment added to the plastic contains small amounts of ferrous material that magnetizes vinyl LPs. A quick 20-second zap to each side of an LP results in audible improvements to noise floor, dynamic range, and perceived resolution. The same goes for optical media, including DVDs, and evidently cables and power cords, too.

Gryphon Exorcist Demagnetizer

\$230

acousticsounds.com

These nifty devices are designed to do the same thing (one system-wide, the other for phono cartridges): Rid audio gear of magnetic build-up. The size

of a remote control, the Exorcist hooks up to your preamp's aux or line input, while you plug your arm leads into the Black Exorcist. Audible results include less glare and hash, tighter bass, and greater perceived detail and musical integration.

Hannl Aragon

\$3995

eliteavdist.com

Though pricey, this German-made LP cleaner has a small footprint, is relatively cool-looking, and features an infinitely variable-speed platter, which allows you to choose a faster speed for fluid application and scrubbing, and a very slow speed for the vacuum process, and a platter that rotates both directions, which is useful with LPs that need a thorough scrubbing.

Lyra SPT Stylus Cleaner

\$45

immediasound.com

Mission accomplished. Puts the fluid where it belongs. Lyra's formulation scrubs each precious stylus clean without globing on and ultimately reducing the compliance of the cantilever. A tiny angled brush is included.

Marigo White 3mm Tuning Dots

\$35 (set of 12)

These tiny, adhesive, constrained-layer resonance-control "dots" provide an effective bit of damping to tubes or signal connectors that may see airborne or floorborne vibration, even if isolated on stands. Also useful on the headshells of tonearms or, judiciously applied, on the top of phono cartridges.

Mobile Fidelity Rice Inner Sleeves

\$20 (50-pack)

musicdirect.com

A precious collection of LPs is only as good as its scratch-free surfaces. Offered for decades, Mobile Fidelity's familiar rice paper-style inner sleeves are renowned for their anti-static properties that avoid drawing dust and grit into the delicate grooves. They remain the archival sleeves to beat.

Mobile Fidelity Record Brush

\$20

musicdirect.com

The Mobile Fidelity record brush is the next-best-thing to a record-cleaning machine. It works with

dry records for a quick dust-off before dropping the stylus, as well as with a liquid for deeper cleaning. The well-designed handle makes it easy to use, and to top it off, the Mobile Fidelity Record Brush is inexpensive.

Mye Sound Stands

Price varies with model

myesound.com

These aftermarket stand/braces designed for Maggie dipole loudspeakers have no downside, according to reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn—only up. Punchier, tauter bass, quieter backgrounds, cleaner mids and highs, increased snap and speed, less smearing and fuzziness are just a few of the benefits.

RPG Diffusor Systems B.A.D. (Binary Amplitude Diffusor) Panels

Price varies

rpginc.com

RPG's B.A.D. panels are thin absorptive diffuser panels that can help tame problem room acoustics without quashing dynamics or swallowing midrange and high-frequency details. The design of B.A.D. panels is deceptively simple, but their effects can be remarkable.

www.theabsolutesound.com

Editors' Choice: Accessories

In rooms treated with B.A.D. panels, speakers often exhibit lower coloration, more focused imaging, and deeper soundstages.

Sanus SF26 Steel Foundation Speaker Stands **\$170/pair**

www.shakti-innovations.com

Sanus' thoughtfully designed and beautifully executed SF series speaker stands do everything you could want a good set of stands to do, and at a price that makes sense. Strong, rigid, and resonance-free, they include provisions for installing sand or lead-shot damping, and are easy to assemble.

Shakti Electro-Magnetic Stabilizer Stone **\$230**

www.shakti-innovations.com

Ben Piazza's Shakti Stones employ "proprietary noise reduction circuitry to absorb and dissipate electromagnetic interference (EMI) and radio frequency interference (RFI)." In other words, nobody's quite sure how they work, but work they do when placed over the transformers of amps, preamps, and other electronics, reducing noise and enriching timbre.

Shakti Hallographs

\$1195/pair

shakti.com

Master of the inexplicable, Shakti's Ben Piazza has followed up on his magic "Shakti stones" with yet another impossible-to-explain-but-effective-claimed item, the Hallographs. With direct-radiating or omni speakers, these large, rotatable, free-standing, tuning-fork-shaped items work some kind of voodoo when placed in the corners of a room (behind the speakers), masking chaotic wall reflections and "clarifying" the soundfield (just as Shakti says they do).

Shelter Carbon-Fiber Cartridge Screws

\$190 (8mm x 2mm in sets of two); \$200(10mm)

axissaudio.com

Precision is the name of the game when it comes to cartridge setup. The carbon-fiber cartridge screws from Shelter are not only low in resonance but the rigid, precision threading means they are less likely to strip a headshell or cartridge. Cheap insurance for that extra special rig. Includes two polycarbonate nuts.

Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators

\$110 (4-Pack) or \$295 for a set of 12 (Mini Elevators are \$95 for a set of 12)

shunyata.com

Most people agree that elevating interconnects, cables, and power cords off the floor (and away from vibration and each other) is a good idea, but Shunyata argues that using an electrical insulator to do this creates a relative static charge differential between the cable and floor. When an electrical signal is sent through the cable, the signal can become distorted or inter-modulated by this static charge. The materials used in Shunyata's elevators prevent this static buildup. The net result is an audibly cleaner signal.

Shure SFG-2 Stylus Force Gauge

\$20

shure.com

Although ultimately not accurate as the best digital gauges, the classic "teeter-totter" Shure is simple to use, cheap, and does the trick very nicely.

Spin-Clean Record Cleaning System

\$79.99

spincleanrecordwasher.com

The Spin-Clean System is a pure manual design—nothing to plug in. A little elbow grease and fresh air do all the work. Fill the taxicab-yellow basin with distilled water, add a capful of the cleaning solution, and spin the record between the brushes. Ambient air and a couple of swirls of the supplied lint-free cotton cloths do the rest. It's also a truly green product, totally off the grid. And the results speak for themselves—clean surfaces mean less noise and more fully resolved music. For lighter duty it's tough to beat.

Stillpoints Vibration Control Cones (3-Pack)

\$300

stillpoints.us

When placed under components these sturdy ball-bearing equipped cones, which actually use two layers of ball-bearings—and a large ceramic bearing and a second tier of balls inside the cone that the ceramic bearing sits on—convert vertical motion into horizontal motion and resonant energy into heat.

Symposium Acoustics Fat Padz

\$119

symposiumusa.com

Kind of like Rollerblock Jr.'s in a single unit, Symposium's Fat Padz employ constrained-layer damping to turn resonant energy into heat. Ideal for supporting lightweight equipment like preamps and CD players.

Symposium Acoustics

Rollerblock Jr.

\$225 (set of 4)

symposiumusa.com

A set of Rollerblock Jr. gives you four top and bottom units and four tungsten-steel ball-bearings, which are then combined to make "Double Stacked" isolator/coupler sandwiches.

Every top and bottom block is constructed of black-anodized, aircraft-alloy aluminum with a special cup in each into which the tungsten-steel ball-bearing is inserted. Ingeniously combining tectonic and constrained-layer damping, the Rollerblocks are, when placed under even heavy components among the most highly effective resonance-control devices on the market.

Townshend Seismic Sinks

\$400-\$900 (depending on weight capacity)

townshendaudio.com

Townshend Seismic Sinks are air-bladder-suspended isolation platforms, available in several sizes and weights to accommodate a wide variety of components. Setup is straightforward and easy. Because the Sinks act as filters (around 2–4Hz), they isolate far better than cones, which allow vibrations to be transmitted directly to the chassis. The Sinks are exceptionally effective with non-suspended turntables.

Tributaries T12 power strip

\$120

tributariescable.com

The T12 is the perfect power manager for the low-current demands of a nest of transformers and peripherals. Equipped with three rows of four outlets, most rotate 90 degrees so that plugs can lie flat along the floor. Meanwhile LEDs indicate operation, grounding, and protection status. Offering plenty of surge suppression and noise filtering for AC power as well as signal-line protection for telecomm, network, and cable, it's

a bargain for its segment. Various cords included.

UltraBit Platinum Disc Treatment

\$65

ultrabitplatinum.com

A spritz of UltraBit Platinum on a CD renders a surprising increase in smoothness, resolution, and soundstage size.

Vibrapods

\$5.99 each

vibrapod.com

Vibrapods are small, flexible vinyl pucks that can transform a system. They're numbered by their weight-bearing loads: Put them under speakers and electronics and hear bass extension and smoother highs. At four for \$25, who says great tweaks have to be expensive? Just out, Vibrapod Cones—use them as standalone footers or combine with Vibrapods to get even more out of your system.

VPI 16.5 Record Cleaner Bundle w/Fluids, Brushes and Sleeves

\$550

vpiindustries.com

All vinyl lovers need a record-cleaning machine, and there's

Editors' Choice Accessories

no greater “bang for the buck” in cleaners than VPI’s classic 16.5. Simple to use and highly effective, the 16.5 produces quieter surfaces from even heavily soiled LPs. The Bundle adds two bottles of Mobile Fidelity cleaning fluid, a Mobile Fidelity Record Brush, and 100 inner sleeves for just \$10 more than the 16.5.

VPI Typhoon Record Cleaner \$2200

vpiindustries.com

A good record cleaner is a vital tool for any good record collection. The Typhoon is the best combination of price, convenience, and effective cleaning AHC has yet found. Noise levels have been reduced since the early production runs, fluid control is excellent, operation is quick and reliable, and it is a pleasure to use.

Walker Audio Prelude Quartet Record Cleaning System \$215

walkeraudio.com

There are many excellent record-cleaning solutions out there, but this one, developed by analog guru Lloyd Walker,

is superb. Designed to work in conjunction with most record-cleaning machines, the four-step Prelude system (which involves the manual application of two enzyme-based cleaning solutions and two ultra-pure rinses, each followed by machine vacuuming) really does reveal details that have gone unheard beneath layers of dust and wear. Though the Prelude procedure is a bit time-consuming, no machine-applied cleaning solutions can compare.

Walker Audio Silver Speaker Jumpers \$325 (set of four conductors)

walkeraudio.com

These 6" solid silver conductors (with 1/4" solid silver spades) are perfect for two-piece speaker systems that require a jumper between a bass module and a mid/treble “head” unit.

Walker Audio Valid Points Super Tuning Kit \$575

walkeraudio.com

Valid Points, Walker’s massive version of tiptoes, are sensationally effective under most components, particularly when used with Walker

Resonance Control discs, which, themselves, can have a salubrious effect on components under or on top of which they are placed.

Xtreme AV Quicksilver Contact Enhancer \$90

This 100% silver contact enhancer has been cryogenically treated to produce the optimum conductive surfaces for audio signal connections. Works on RCA jacks, tube sockets, AC cords, and cartridge pins. Comes with a complete kit of cleaning tools.

Zerodust Stylus Cleaner \$69

Not a fluid or brush-based stylus cleaner, the Zerodust uses a polymer bubble that gathers stylus dust and debris onto its ultra-soft surface. A winning alternative for those concerned with overusing liquid cleaners that can leave residues and build up over time. Zerodust can be cleaned with tap water and a magnifier is included.

www.theabsolutesound.com

Brass studs isolate speaker from vibration

Pillars can be filled with shot or sand for exceptional stability

The ultimate level in sound.

Raise your AV system’s acoustic performance with SANUS Foundations® Ultimate Series speaker stands. Our quest for the sweetest sound began with a custom base, designed to reduce vibrations. Next came a support of three large-diameter steel pillars for added weight and resistance to vibration. We finished with an ultra-heavy-gauge steel top plate complete with brass isolation studs. The result is clean, clear sound for ultimate audio perfection.

www.sanus.com

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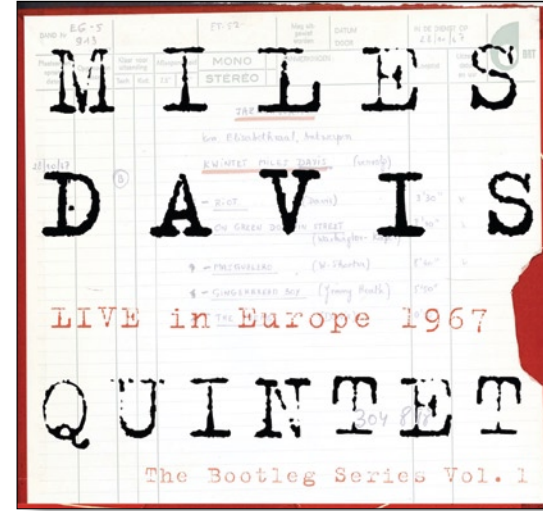
High-tech poly-mineral composite base reduces vibration

Cork damping rings absorb acoustic resonance

Neoprene gaskets isolate speaker from ambient room vibration

High-strength custom carpet spikes create stability

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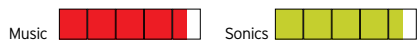
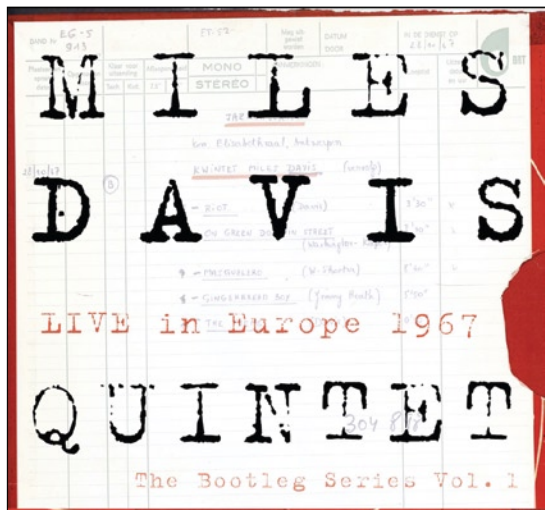


Music

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Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Compact Disc



Miles Davis Quintet: *Live in Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1*. Legacy.

Miles completists may already have these recordings, which have been circulated in bootleg form for years. Culled from original state-owned television and radio sources documenting festival appearances in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and Sweden, this super-sounding three-CD set (with a bonus DVD of concerts in Karlsruhe, Germany, and Stockholm, Sweden) is being made commercially available for the first time.

This exemplary unit, regarded by history as Miles Davis' second classic quintet, was solidified in September, 1964, when Wayne Shorter joined the band, replacing Sam Rivers, who had briefly taken over the tenor sax chair from George Coleman in the quintet. This outfit was first documented on the live *Miles in Berlin*, recorded on September 25 at the Berlin Philharmonie. Their first studio recording together, the landmark *E.S.P.*, came four months later in January,

1965. And while this new unit established an almost immediate chemistry on the bandstand, their extraordinary rapport continued to deepen with subsequent recordings like *Live at the Plugged Nickel* (recorded December 22-23, 1965), *Miles Smiles* (recorded October 24-25, 1966), and *Sorcerer* (recorded May, 1967). By the time they left for a European tour in late October of 1967, Miles and his fiery young charges were hitting on all cylinders, naturally striding away from hard bop while moving toward the avant garde with an uncanny groupthink.

What instantly registers on these repeated renditions of tunes like "Agitation" (from *E.S.P.*), Wayne Shorter's "Footprints," Jimmy Heath's "Gingerbread Boy" (from *Miles Smiles*), and "Masqualero" (from *Sorcerer*) is the sheer supersonic speed and manic intensity of the playing. It's as if they collectively took things up a couple of notches from the studio versions while opening up the form with their rhythmically elastic, shape-shifting tendencies. Drummer Tony Williams, just shy of 22 at the time of these recordings, fuels the proceedings with relentlessly probing, polyrhythmic attacks and lightning-quick hands on the kit. Pianist Herbie Hancock pulls the harmonies apart like taffy on these vehicles (his sparse playing and inventive voice leadings behind Davis's trumpet on ballads like Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight" and "I Fall

In Love Too Easily" are particularly arresting) while Ron Carter's zen-like restraint on bass is like the eye of this musical hurricane. Tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter, the most original voice on his instrument in the wake of John Coltrane, provides crackling vitality with his oblique improvisations while playing the puckish foil to Miles on the front line.

The quintet's fearless reinventing of familiar themes like "No Blues" and "On Green Dolphin Street" along with their hyper-kinetic readings of "Gingerbread Boy" (each wildly different from concert to concert) amounts to a perfect primer for what the late, eminent critic Whitney Balliet called "the sound of surprise."

1968's *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, with its introduction of electric piano and electric bass, along with a significant nod to Jimi Hendrix on "Mademoiselle Mabry," would mark the beginning of a new phase for Miles that would lead to *In A Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, igniting the 70s fusion movement. But on this George Wein-produced "Newport Jazz Festival in Europe" tour, Miles still had one foot in the bebop camp while his young charges were urgently pushing him to explore new musical territory.

Bill Milkowski

Further Listening: Miles Davis: *Live at the Plugged Nickel*; Wayne Shorter: *Footprints Live!*



Marc Ribot: *Silent Movies*. Pi Recordings.

Except for a few unobtrusive overdubs, *Silent Movies* is a solo jazz guitar record that casts a quiet but powerful spell. The tempos are slow, the playing sparse, the mood somber. The "compulsory distortion, rude chords, and gypsy phraseology" Tom Waits once associated with Marc Ribot have been replaced with a more straightforward and intimate approach. There's also a whiff of nostalgia to *Silent Movies*. On "Radio," where the music sounds like it's playing through a cheap old radio, the zither-like guitar recalls "The Third Man Theme." And Ribot's reading of the only non-original cut, "Sous Le Ciel De Paris," will resonate with Edith Piaf fans.

Ribot's guitar has an electric-acoustic vintage sound that fits perfectly the nostalgic theme of silent movies. Producer JD Foster went to great lengths to recreate a single-mike effect by recording the electric hollow body guitar (a Gibson ES-175) so that you hear both amp and instrument. I'm impressed by the sound of *Silent Movies* as well as the consistency—every composition and performance is memorable—and the fact that, although solo guitar records are plentiful, this album doesn't remind me of any of them. Jeff Wilson

Further Listening: Ribot: *Solo Guitar Works of Frantz Casseus; The Prosthetic Cubans*

Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Compact Disc



Hiromi: *Voice*. Telarc.

In the 1960s, the term “energy music” was sometimes used as an alternative description of “free jazz.” In the following decade, it could be applied to the approach of the most intense jazz-rock groups. Hiromi Uehara—a 32-year-old Japanese acoustic pianist and electric keyboardist who has been recording simply as Hiromi since her 2003 Telarc debut, *Another Mind*—is a kindred spirit to fusion pioneer Chick Corea and his 70s Return to Forever band. But her classical training and her affection for such acoustic jazz piano forebears as Oscar Peterson and Ahmad Jamal allow her to move fluidly between categories as she maintains her forceful style.

On *Voice*, her seventh album, Hiromi’s energy shines like never before. Much credit goes to Michael Bishop’s recording, which pushes the piano, synths, bass, drums,

and cymbals right into your room where their presence—sharp-edged or rounded and burnished at exactly the right moments—pulsates against the silence. But *Voice* is more than one of best-engineered piano records this side of ECM; it is an hour of virtually nonstop excitement, rising to peak after peak, capped by a perfectly placed five-minute denouement that allows your burning ears to cool down.


For some listeners, the in-your-face technical facility of Hiromi and her new collaborators—veterans Anthony Jackson (who has snapped bass for Paul Simon, Steely Dan, Chick Corea, Al DiMeola, and many others) and drummer Simon Phillips (an exacting powerhouse heard with Judas Priest, Toto, The Who, and Stanley Clarke)—might get in the way of the music. Indeed, this is a power trio that owes its precision more to the prog-rock of King Crimson and Yes than to the delicacy of Bill Evans. But its mathematical discipline, evident in the breakneck unisons on almost every tune, provides a failsafe chassis for each song and keeps the wheels from falling off when the G-force hits five or six.

The title track opens the album deceptively, in an elegiac mood with Hiromi hitting spare piano chords and single notes at a dirge-like tempo. Then, after a pause for suspense, one note hammers like a telegraph key and leads to chunky chords interlocked

with the bass, a rush of cymbals, and an emphatic roll across the tom-tom drums—and we’re off to the races. Your heart pounds as the tension builds, and you’re left breathless at the stop-on-a-dime ending.

The dynamics are similar on most of the next eight original pieces, although the trio applies them to a variety of genre references: acoustic hard bop (“Flashback”), funk with wah-wah synthesizer growls (“Now or Never”), romantic crossover balladry (“Temptation”), and Spanish-tinged epic-movie music (“Labyrinth”). Even the questing solo piano feature, “Haze,” solidifies into a towering fortress. It’s unusual to think of Beethoven as offering a breather, but the famous *adagio cantabile* from his Piano Sonata No. 8, *Patbetique*, does just that at album’s end, and it’s much needed after the blockbuster “Delusion” and its door-slaming finish. Hiromi gets bluesy on *Patbetique*, hints at eruption, and then pulls back as Phillips’ brushes and Jackson’s ringing bass notes buoy her stair-step climb to a close that lets you put your jaw back in place for a smile of relief and satisfaction. **Derk Richardson**

Further Listening: Hiromi: *Time Control*; The Bad Plus: *Prog*



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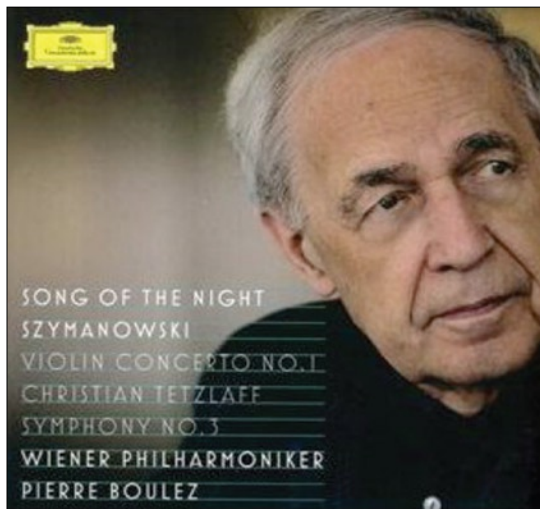
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Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Compact Disc



Szymanowski: Violin Concerto No. 1; Symphony No. 3. Christian Tetzlaff, violin; Vienna Philharmonic, Pierre Boulez. DG.

Boulez first heard the music of Karol Szymanowski as a teenager, but never championed it until now. *Tant pis*. His accounts of both works are simply gorgeous. He shows an immediate affinity for the Concerto's idiom (its opening measures must surely have reminded him of *Le chant du rossignol*). Once the violin enters, we get a whiff of Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*, and we're off. This is as hedonistic as music can get, and the Philharmoniker eat it up. The solo part is magnificently realized. The engineers give Tetzlaff just a little boost, but the perspective is that of an ideal seat in the center of the Musikverein, a few rows back from the stage. The Third Symphony, the last overripe fruit to fall from Szymanowski's tree, is played to perfection and sensationally well recorded via what appears to be a minimal mike setup that allows this glorious orchestra and its hall to do the work. The acoustic of the Musikverein has never been better captured. Despite the DG label, everything was done by a team from Austrian Radio—producer, recording engineer, assistant engineers, and editors. Perhaps there's a lesson in this. **Ted Libbey**

Further Listening: Szymanowski: *Orchestral Works* (Naxos); *Violin Pieces* (Hoelscher/EMI)



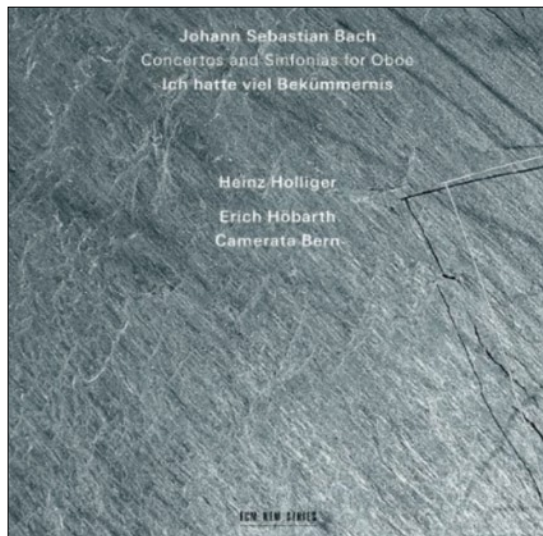
Bach on a Steinway. Jeffrey Biegel. Steinway.

Steinway & Sons, one of the most venerable brands on the planet, makes an auspicious debut as a record label with this recording of keyboard works played—tastefully and with appropriate ornamentation—on a 1980 Steinway D by the enterprising pianist/composer/arranger Jeffrey Biegel. As a performer, Biegel is no narrow specialist. He has previously recorded material ranging from Mozart sonatas to the preludes of César Cui to Leroy Anderson's Piano Concerto. Moreover, he's championed such present-day Americans as Bill Bolcom, Lowell Liebermann, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. All of which makes this venture particularly interesting, since in attempting to be stylistically informed Biegel is treating Bach, too, as a contemporary, just as any serious interpreter should.

The repertoire—the Toccatas in D Minor and E Minor, the Partita in C Minor, the French Suite in G, and two preludes and fugues from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I—lends itself well to Biegel's speculative approach, in which the use of dynamics is every bit as appealing and astute as the embellishment. Recorded in the wonderful hall at SUNY Purchase and produced and engineered by the veteran Steven Epstein, the disc is a sonic gem. Available from arkivmusic.com. **TL**

Further Listening: Bach: *Goldberg Variations* (Perahia); Cui: *Preludes* (Biegel)

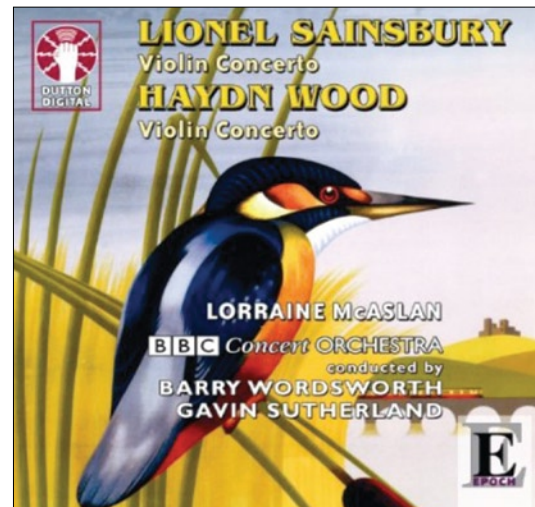
Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Compact Disc



Bach: *Ich hatte viel Bekummernis: Concertos and Sinfonias for Oboe.* Heinz Holliger, oboe; Camerata Bern, Erich Hobarth. ECM.

When I was about 12, a friend of my dad's gave me Christopher Hogwood's recording of Bach's *Brandenburg* Concertos; though I hear spotty intonation when I listen now, the bright sound and fresh playing won me completely, and I've been hooked on classical music ever since. Only a few times since has a Baroque disc come along that's rejuvenated and charmed me so—and this one has, even despite its title (“I Was Much Beset with Care”). The C Minor Concerto is the Double Concerto with violin; the others are reconstructions (the A Major is most often performed on harpsichord). The D Minor uses the famous Arioso as the middle movement, and the ornaments especially are winsome. There's also Alessandro Marcello's D Minor Concerto, and three sinfonias from Bach's cantatas interspersed throughout. The phrasing is expressive but not maudlin, and the tempos are judiciously chosen. The first movement of the Marcello gets a little bogged down, but Camerata Bern's playing in the second is smoother, not stilted like I Musici's in the earlier Holliger recording. The sound is almost cheerful in and of itself. **Stephen Estep**

Further Listening: Heinz Holliger Edition (Brilliant Classics box set)



Sainsbury and Wood: Violin Concertos. Lorraine McAslan; BBC Orchestra; Wordsworth, Sutherland. Dutton.

Romanticism has proved more durable than seemed possible a half-century ago, when the brutal violence and icy pointillism of Pierre Boulez were all the rage and Samuel Barber was considered as passé as ornate Victorian furniture. But romantic music, with its gorgeous melody, rhapsodic expansiveness, sumptuous orchestration, and ardent emotion—though it never really left—is not only back, it's back in style. Witness the 1989 Violin Concerto of Englishman Lionel Sainsbury (born 1958). The idiom is that of Dvorak and Elgar, gently updated by Walton. Its discmate, though written sixty years earlier, the 1928 Concerto in A Minor by Haydn Wood, is only just a bit more old-fashioned. Both are skillfully crafted and ample in proportions, with lots of passion, solo display, and melodic flights that take the violin soaring above the orchestral ferment below. This is music that will make you breathe deeper and remember with fond regret the misspent days of your long-ago youth. Dutton's is the first recording of both concertos, and it's hard to see how these glorious performances (with stellar playing by Lorraine McAslan) and the vivid, spacious, natural sonics could be bettered. **Mark Lehman**

Further Listening: Rozsa: Violin Concerto (Heifetz); Barber: Violin Concerto (Stern)

Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Compact Disc



Bruce Springsteen. *The Promise*. Columbia (2 CDs).

This two-CD, 21-track collection (plus a hidden track) gathers songs cast aside during the marathon recording sessions that spawned *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street band's epic 1978 album that helped seal their place in rock history. At the time *Darkness* was recorded, Springsteen had been involved in lengthy court battles after a management deal went sour. With three years away from the charts, Springsteen's pen found plenty of inspiration.

Darkness, one of the greatest rock albums of all time, found the then-27-year-old Springsteen wrestling with the fame that followed in the wake of 1975's *Born to Run* (he had been touted in *Rolling Stone* as the next Bob Dylan), as well as the harsh realities of adulthood and his emerging role as a bandleader.

"*Darkness* was my 'samurai' record," Springsteen has said, "stripped to the frame and ready to rumble."

These lost sessions—the detritus of *Darkness*—include a pair of popular songs that had been rejected by the Boss as too commercial: "Because the Night," which he gave to Patti Smith, and "Fire," which became a Top 10 hit for the Pointer Sisters. But, more importantly, these tracks trace the historic rock influences that fueled Springsteen's early career. The first three tracks alone—"Racing in the Street ('78)," "Gotta Get that Feeling," and "Outside Looking In"—encapsulate the nascent history of rock 'n' roll, echoing the sounds of Buddy Holly, Phil Spector, and Roy Orbison. Tucked away in the studio during endless nights, Springsteen, first and foremost a fan and astute student of rock, often imbued these songs and the others with Orbison's *bel canto* drama and the innocent sentimentality of doo-wop, even as he trolled the record stores during the day for the latest punk singles.

You can hear his penchant for backseat serenades in such cast-off songs as "Rendezvous" and "Candy's Boy" (a companion to "Candy's Room," which did make the final cut on *Darkness*). Solid Springsteen, yes, but these songs—in which girls, cars, and a restless spirit play a central role—pale in comparison to the mighty metaphors

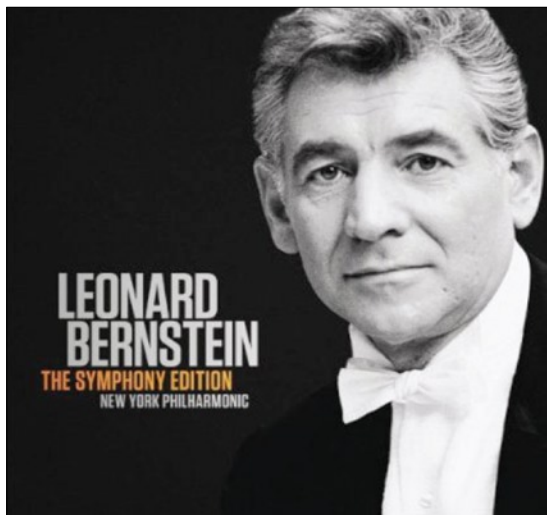
and elevated angst of "Adam Raised a Cain" and the mature adolescent anthem "The Promised Land," classic songs that found Springsteen reaching creatively while expressing the depths of his own soul.

Still, *The Promise* is loaded with great material: what's not to love about the youthful joy of "Ain't Good Enough for You," the snarling swagger of "It's a Shame," or the lush beauty of "Breakaway"? Certainly a lesser artist would have mined this treasure trove—and the previously unreleased songs that found their way onto 1999's *Tracks*—to fill out several albums. But Springsteen, a prolific songwriter and rapidly maturing artist, kept driving forward. The resulting *Darkness* proved a tightly programmed portrait of Springsteen, circa 1978, but *The Promise* gives fans a chance to visit the Boss's creative cul de sacs.

One final note: a few of the remastered tracks on *The Promise* have been sweetened in the studio, but by-and-large, these songs are presented just the way that Springsteen and producer Bob Clearmountain intended.GC

Further Listening: Bruce Springsteen: *The Promise: The Darkness on the Edge of Town Story* (six-disc box set); *Tracks* (four-disc box set)

Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Compact Disc



Leonard Bernstein: *The Symphony Edition*. Sony (60 CDs).

The latest in Sony's continual repackaging of its Bernstein holdings, this blockbuster portrays the conductor as a world-striding interpreter of symphonies: 60 CDs in an LP-sized case containing most of his Columbia (aka CBS or Sony) studio recordings with the New York Philharmonic—107 works, including seven complete cycles (Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Sibelius, Bernstein, plus all Haydn's *Paris* and *London* Symphonies). Recommendation is a no-brainer: \$97—\$1.62 per CD!—from Amazon; it's a better value than any bargain label's, especially since these are performances by one of the greatest conductor/orchestra partnerships in history. I can't think of another conductor whose recorded legacy could yield comparable breadth, depth, stylistic command,

interpretive genius, and orchestral brilliance in the symphonic literature from Haydn to Bernstein's own contributions to the form.

That's the good news. But why only one each of symphonies he recorded more than once for Columbia? Compleat collectors want everything, and Bernstein often radically varied his interpretations. Despite lots of empty space in the oversize booklet, documentation is skimpy (requiring checks of previous releases to determine which recordings of duplicated works were chosen), while the absence of anything about the music is a disgrace. Nor does Sony specify which remasterings are used, though happily sonics are *substantially* improved over the LP originals.

Most of the core literature is here, conspicuous exceptions being no Bruckner except the Ninth, nothing British save Vaughan Williams' Fourth, and no Rachmaninoff at all. Many off-the-beaten-path items, however, are here, including superb readings of Goldmark's *Rustic Wedding*, Roussel's Third, Chavez's *Sinfonia India*, etc. I went immediately past recordings long and justly celebrated—Mahler, Haydn, and Schumann cycles; Thirds by Beethoven, Copland, Nielsen, Harris, and Schuman; Fifths by Nielsen, Shostakovich, and Sibelius—to Dvorak's *New World*, tremendous in Bernstein's cumulative sweep and drive.

The New York Beethoven cycle had languished on my shelves, especially once the Vienna one appeared. Big mistake: these vigorous, purposeful readings positively brim with life and vitality (like the revelatory *Eroica*, and a Second I've never heard bettered). The Brahms and

Tchaikovsky cycles are similarly red-blooded and muscular, worlds away from the dark, brooding DG recordings. In general, the New York Philharmonic decade finds Bernstein a faster, leaner, more fiery, volatile, and joyous conductor than the grander, weightier, more introspective, and heavily expressive globe-trotting maestro of his last decade.

Bernstein's Mozart is here more straightforwardly energetic than insightful, and several performances remain controversial—an overheated (though terrifically exciting) Franck, a Prokofiev Fifth freighted with Mahlerian angst, an overwrought Dvorak Seventh, a Sibelius Second that trowels on the rhetoric. But these are exceptions, the rule being the electrifying rest of the Sibelius cycle; or Vaughan Williams' Fourth, a powerfully edgy, abrasive reading; or *Symphony of Psalms*, gloriously personal and deeply expressive, Bernstein's restrained romanticism very different from Stravinsky's own austere recording. Yet after hearing him do the work in concert, the composer himself exclaimed, "Wow!"—an apt response to most of these performances. **Paul Seydor**

Further Listening: Bernstein's Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Mahler

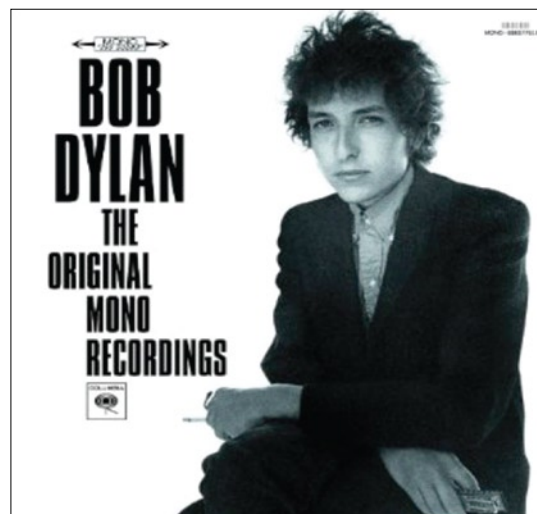
Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Compact Disc



Bartók: The String Quartets. Juilliard Quartet. Sony (3 CDs).

There was a time when the Bartók quartets were the toughest challenge a string quartet could face, and when no one played them as well as the Juilliard Quartet. Yet the foursome's pathbreaking stereo recording of the complete set for Columbia Masterworks has until now never been reissued on widely-available CD. Thanks to ArkivMusic, this extraordinary document of a great ensemble blazing away at great music is now back in the catalog, a reminder of the revolutionary impact both the music and these performers had on the 20th century. Recorded at Columbia's 30th Street studio in May and September of 1963, having been honed to perfection in the crucible of performance, these accounts still sound "hot" 47 years later, still convey how edgy and exotic Bartók's idiom remained nearly two decades after his death. For the Juilliards the recording was a *tour de force*. As for Bartók...well, this was how the six quartets truly entered the repertory, and how my generation came to know them. The sound, outstanding for the time, is dry, close-miked, and analytic—typical of Columbia's engineering during the 1960s and ideal for this music, allowing the listener to hear everything right down to the page turns. Available from arkivmusic.com. TL

Further Listening: Bartók: Quartets (Emerson/DG); Ives: Quartets (Juilliard/Arkiv)



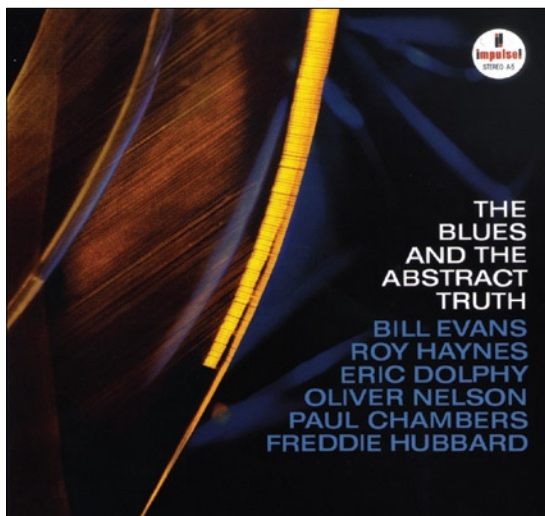
Bob Dylan: The Original Mono Recordings. Legacy (9 CDs).

Early Dylan just *sounds* better in mono, making this CD box set the holy grail of Dylan audiophilia. The eight reissues—from his 1962 eponymous debut through 1967's *John Wesley Harding*—feature the original monaural mixes. Gone is the weird stereo separation that split voice, guitar, and harmonica into an unnaturally wide soundstage. Restored is the punchy bass that had been reduced in the original stereo mixes (and carried over to the first CDs) to meet limitations of early- to mid-60s stereo cartridge technology. Also, there are numerous subtle differences between these mono discs and the original stereo releases, and even some non-US mono versions, which exhibited alterations in track length, musical pitch, tempo, edits, fades, reverb levels, and other elements.

Sonically, these mono discs were mixed in the 60s to boost the impact of singles on AM radio. So even the electric band recordings, from *Bringing It All Back Home* on, benefit from added warmth and focus. *Blonde and Blonde* (restored to its two-CD format), especially, is much deeper. And *John Wesley Harding* has never sounded better. Dylan spent a lot of time supervising the original mono mixes, and these reissues accurately reflect his intentions. GC

Further Listening: Dylan: *The Witmark Demos: 1962-1964, Bootleg Series, Vol. 9*

Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Compact Disc



Four (Among Many) Terrific Impulse Hybrid SACD Reissues from Analogue Productions

Analogue Productions' SACDs are some of its best-selling items, and the company simultaneously releases most of its reissue titles—be they Elvis, Nat “King” Cole, Blue Note, Verve, or in this case Impulse jazz—on SACD as well as 45rpm vinyl. Here’s a look at four (of over two dozen) currently available.

In 1962 Count Basie reassembled the small band he’d first recorded with back in 1936. The resulting *Count Basie And The Kansas City 7*, though steeped in classic, straight-ahead jazz, doesn’t sound dated but thoroughly timeless. These guys knew how to swing. “Oh, Lady, Be Good” kicks off with Basie’s spry piano, Sonny Payne’s whisper-soft brushwork, and Ed Jones’ meaty bass. Things really begin to cook when the ensemble—Frank Foster and Eric Dixon on tenor sax (and, on some tunes, flute), Thad Jones on trumpet, and Freddie Green on guitar—joins the conversation. The stage has been set for the remaining seven numbers, including the classic “Shoe Shine Boy.”

The sonics here are quite fine. Basie’s piano is bright, solid, natural-sounding, and dead center; the textured bass, softly strummed guitar, and laid-back drums are to the right, with the rich and brassy horns arrayed on the left. Dynamics are lively if not super-wide, and there’s a good sense of air and immediacy to the sound, but only a vague impression of depth.

Also from 1962, *Duke Ellington Meets Coleman Hawkins* swings, too, but with a much funkier, more bluesy, almost primal feeling. “Limbo Jazz” is one of those Ellington tunes that’s pure chicken-shack, big-boned fun. The band repeats the theme for several moments until Hawkins sweeps in with his muscular, round-toned tenor. An especially atmospheric “Mood

Indigo” finds Hawkins spinning a full-throated solo as rich as butterscotch; “You Dirty Dog” has a sassy attitude and also features the great Johnny Hodges on alto; “Self Portrait (Of The Bean)” is a mellow ballad highlighting Hawkins’ lyrical side; and the closer, “The Ricitic,” dances to a Latin beat and features the lovely violin of Ray Nance.

The sound isn’t quite as pure as on the Basie disc, but in some ways it’s more lifelike. The soundstage is more unified and less left/right; there’s a terrific sense of air and interaction among the instruments, with a stronger sense of depth; and the dynamic range, like the music, is freer-flowing.

Still going strong at 85, Roy Haynes is one of jazz’s tastiest drummers. His quartet’s *Out Of The Afternoon*—another 1962 recording that better exemplifies Impulse’s “New Wave of Jazz” tagline—is an absolute gem. Featuring the immensely talented Roland Kirk (this was before he added Rahsaan) on tenor sax, manzello (similar to alto), and strich (a sort of elongated soprano sporting a large bell), C flute, and nose flute (often, of course, blowing several at once), the ever-musical Tommy Flanagan on piano, and the less-known but outstanding Henry Grimes on bass, this disc sizzles, surprises, and delights from start to finish.

The sound is equally remarkable. Haynes’ drums crackle throughout—his nickname was Snap Crackle—and Van Gelder (who engineered each of these sessions) captured every nuance of tone, texture, color, air, dynamics, and presence in the room. Flanagan’s piano and Grimes’ bass are subtly woven into the overall flow of each tune, as opposed to standing out in any way, and Kirk’s extraordinary array of kaleidoscopically colored instruments is beautifully captured.

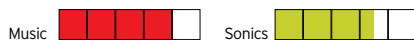
Whew, talk about an array of talent. For 1961’s *The Blues And The Abstract Truth*, composer Oliver Nelson

assembled Eric Dolphy (alto sax, flute), Freddie Hubbard (trumpet), Bill Evans (piano), Paul Chambers (bass), and George Barrow (baritone sax), with Nelson himself on alto and tenor saxes, and Haynes again behind the drum kit.

This famously great and great-sounding outing is a monument of recorded jazz. Like Miles’ *Kind of Blue*, it features some of the most original writing, gorgeous and simpatico ensemble playing, and virtuoso improvisations ever put on tape. Also like that most famous jazz record, *The Blues And The Abstract Truth* invites you into a world of its own making.

It has also been reissued many times, and this edition (though I’ve not heard the 45rpm vinyl) bests my not-at-all-bad Impulse CD by a country mile. The palate of tone colors is absolutely breathtaking, the dynamic range free and wide. The instruments are arrayed across a transparent and seamless soundstage, with near-perfect tonal balance and an immediacy I have never before encountered. **Wayne Garcia**

Further Listening: Charles Mingus: *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*; John Coltrane: *Coltrane (Analogue Productions SACD and 45rpm LP)*



Count Basie And The Kansas City 7.



Duke Ellington Meets Coleman Hawkins.

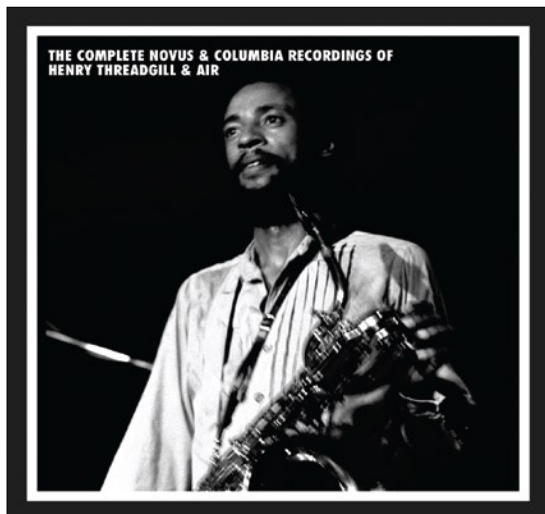


Roy Haynes Quartet: Out Of The Afternoon.



Oliver Nelson Sextet: The Blues And The Abstract Truth.

Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Compact Disc



The Complete Novus & Columbia Recordings of Henry Threadgill & Air. Mosaic (8 CDs).

Henry Threadgill hasn't fomented the kind of jazz revolution that Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, or Ornette Coleman did. Nor is he regarded as the fountainhead of a movement like pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, the founding father of Chicago's avant-garde Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. But as this magnificent eight-CD box set makes abundantly clear, the iconoclastic flutist, composer, and bandleader has repeatedly reinvented his own music with unpredictable moves that set him apart as an utter original.

Born in Chicago, Threadgill worked with Abrams as an early member of the AACM and launched his career in earnest after serving in Vietnam and returning to Chicago in 1969. His first band of import was Air, with bassist Fred Hopkins and drummer Steve McCall.

This collection picks up seven years into the Air story, in 1978, and catches the trio in full swing, reprising two New York studio albums, *Open Air Suit* and *Airlure*, and the live festival recording *Montreux Suisse Air*. The original line-up, which lasted until 1982, distinguished itself as the premiere jazz trio of its era. McCall (who died in 1989), Hopkins (who passed in 1999), and Threadgill (still going strong at 66) enjoyed the kind of instinctive interplay associated with the great piano trios led by Bill Evans and Keith Jarrett.

Whether playing Threadgill originals, collective improvisations, or muscular arrangements of early jazz classics by Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton, Air pumped energy and excitement into every rhythmic twist, every harmonic surprise, and every melodic curlicue. A marching band quality characterizes some of the meters, but the beats are never simple. When Threadgill hammers on his homemade hubkaphone (a percussion rack of hubcaps), the polyrhythms reach fever pitch. And his trade-offs between flute and alto, tenor, and baritone sax add an orchestral versatility: John Philip Sousa meets Sun Ra.

In 1979, Threadgill began channelling Air's supercharged sensibility into complex projects with such names as X-75 (reeds, voice, basses), Sextett (with seven players on reeds, brass, cello, bass, and percussion), Carry the Day, (featuring acoustic and electric guitars, violin, French horn, and tubas), and Make a Move (bringing in fretless electric bass, accordion, and harmonium). Carry the Day and Make a Move made some of the most intriguing music of the 1990s and led logically to Zooid, Threadgill's brilliant group of the past decade. (Zooid's *This Brings Us To, Volume 1* was reviewed in Issue 198).

Threadgill has experimented radically. Dozens of established and rising stars of post-modern jazz—

including Joseph Jarman, Frank Lacy, Amina Claudine Myers, Brandon Ross, and Myra Melford—have moved through his groups, each adding a distinctive voice. But the leader's singular vision generates an aesthetic consistency that's astounding, whether the temperament is playful or somber, whether the feel is funky or classical. Like the work of Duke Ellington or Charles Mingus, it should all be thought of as "Threadgill music" rather than jazz.

The sonics of so many different sessions have been brought onto a relatively level listening field. If the Air tracks breathe most freely, many of the larger band performances have a more-tightly-focused-ensemble coziness and warmth. DR

Further Listening: *Threadgill/Zooid: This Brings Us To, Volume II; Complete Remastered Recordings on Black Saint and Soul Note*

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Ten Best Reissues on CD



John Carter & Bobby Bradford. Mosaic Select (3 CDs).

This box celebrates one of the best, and most seriously underrated, musical partnerships of the postmodern era. Both John Carter and Bobby Bradford were Texans who relocated to Los Angeles, and both worked early on with Ornette Coleman (Carter back in Fort Worth in the late 40s, in fact). The group they co-led in the 60s and early 70s made two LPs for the Revelation label and two for Flying Dutchman. This set is devoted to the Revelation material, and presents previously unheard music from the time of the LP sessions along with a stunning, never-before-released audiophile recording made in 1979 (at Westlake Studios, where Stevie Wonder recorded *Innervisions* a few years earlier). This consists of two solo tracks and three incredible pieces on which Carter's clarinet and Bradford's trumpet seem to explore every sort of duo playing imaginable, in turn challenging, supporting, complementing, and anticipating one another. As two later live records in this same vein are held in particularly high esteem, this session will be warmly received. Many listeners will be even happier with the four extra tracks recorded at the time of the 1969 freebop masterpiece *Seeking*, but really the whole package is great from the first note to the last. **Duck Baker**

Further Listening: Carter & Bradford: *Tandem 1*; Carter: *Castles of Ghana*



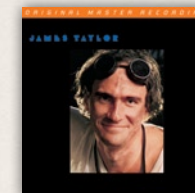
Beck
Sea Change



Grateful Dead
Live/Dead



Carole King
Carnegie Hall Concert



James Taylor
Dad Loves His Work



The Cars
The Cars



Billy Joel
Piano Man



Tony Bennett
...In San Francisco



R.E.M.
Lives Rich Pageant



Little Feat
Waiting For Columbus



Marvin Gaye
What's Going On



Elvis Costello
This Years Model



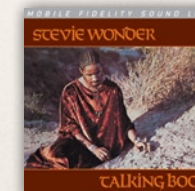
The Pixies
Doolittle



Frank Sinatra
Nice 'N' Easy



Frank Sinatra
Sinatra at the Sands



Stevie Wonder
Talking Book



The B-52's
The B-52's



Rod Stewart
Every Picture Tells A Story



Lynyrd Skynyrd
Street Survivors



The Beach Boys
Pet Sounds



Keb' Mo'
Keb' Mo'



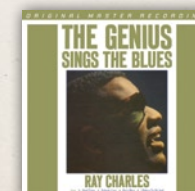
The Band
Music From Big Pink



Bob Dylan
The Basement Tapes



Stevie Ray Vaughan
Couldn't Stand the Weather



Ray Charles
Genius Sings the Blues



Santana
Abraxas

Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Vinyl



Die Röhre—The Tube. Works by Corelli, Biber, Vivaldi, Boccherini, and Sammartini. Stuttgarter Kammerorchester. Tacet (LP).



Vivaldi: The Four Seasons. Daniel Gaede, violin; Polish Chamber Orchestra. Tacet (LP).



Beethoven: Symphony No. 6. Polish Chamber Orchestra, Wojciech Rajski. Tacet (LP).



Dvořák: String Sextet. Auryn Quartet plus Christian Altenburger and Patrick Demenga. Tacet (LP).

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Talk about a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde situation. The German label Tacet, in business since 1989, has released CDs, SACDs, DVD-As, and vinyl records. On the one hand, Tacet is responsible for the Worst Recording Idea Ever, its “Moving Real Surround Sound” methodology, a multichannel technique involving changes in the position of instruments according to the whim of the producer. On the other, the label has made about two dozen “Tube Only” recordings—tubed microphones and amplifiers are exclusively employed—and Tacet is justifiably proud of what’s been accomplished with (as its Web site puts it in tentatively-translated English) “this slightly nostalgic outstanding technology.” Ten of these *Transistorfrei* recordings have been issued as 180-gram LPs. As newly-recorded classical vinyl is quite rare, I’m happy to report that the four considered here are all worthwhile.

The Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra is the same group founded by Karl Münchinger 65 years ago, the ensemble whose 1960 recording of Pachelbel’s Canon helped make that piece as painfully ubiquitous as it is today. On *The Tube*—a decidedly unhelpful title for an album of Baroque instrumental works—the SCO, led by concertmaster Benjamin Hudson, programs a concerto grosso by Arcangelo Corelli, a symphony by Giovanni Battista Sammartini, and the brief *Concerto alla Rustica* of Antonio Vivaldi. Also heard are two intriguing, odder compositions. *La Musica Notturna delle strade di Madrid*, by Luigi Boccherini, convincingly evokes the aural environment of a Spanish evening—a tinkling guitar, a stately minuet, a military procession. Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber’s *Battalia à 10*, composed in 1673, includes a movement in which eight popular songs, in different keys and meters, are superimposed to generate an aural fabric that resembles Charles Ives at his most mischievous.

The reproduction of string sonorities on this 1999 recording is exquisite. Listen, for example, to the extended passage in the Biber work for violin and double bass, the latter with a piece of paper placed on the strings to better evoke a rumbling drum. There’s a natural spatiality as plucked notes bloom into the performance space realistically.

Too many of the countless versions of *The Four Seasons* reduce these ever-popular concertos to a kind of aural wallpaper. Here, if the occasional distinctive detail is glossed over—I miss the hiccup-like hitch to the rhythm that begins the main theme of “Autumn’s” third movement—for the most part, violinist Daniel Gaede and the Polish Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra respond discerningly to Vivaldi’s representations of the changing seasons with nuanced shading of color and mood. The opening of “Summer” (“Languor caused by the heat”) is palpably torporific and the middle movement of “Spring” (“The sleeping drunkard”) is rendered with the requisite wooziness. “Winter” begins with evocative icy shivers. The sound of the instruments is again beautifully textured.

The performance of Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony from Wojciech Rajski and the PCPO, if not revelatory, is stylistically apt and effectively paced with careful attention to dynamic gradations. Some will want an earthier approach to the *Pastorale*—the third movement’s country dance isn’t especially bumptious and the storm that follows seems more like a rain delay at the ballpark than a wind-swept deluge. The finale comes off as merely cheery, rather than a soulful prayer of thanksgiving. But the opening Allegro glides by amiably and “By the Brook” does suggest a peaceful view of the countryside though the half-closed eyes of a post-prandial napper.

Andreas Spreer, Tacet’s founder and the producer

of all four of these LPs, has heroically recorded the Beethoven with just two Neumann M 49 microphones. This provides natural balances and scaling of individual instrumental images but, predictably, the recording is lacking in low-end weight.

The newest recording, taped in November of 2010, is the Dvořák disc. The Auryn Quartet has been operating with the same four musicians for over a quarter century and Spreer has been recording them since 2000. They are joined here by an extra violist and cellist for a luxuriantly Romantic reading of Dvořák’s most richly scored chamber piece. It’s a top-notch performance, though not especially Czech in the more folklorish sections; the third movement *Furiant* is a bit underinflected. Ensemble playing, intonation, and blend are superb.

For the Sextet, Spreer has abandoned his beloved Neumanns for ten Microtech tube microphones. (The Microtech Gefell company was actually started by Georg Neumann during the Second World War.) Tacet once more delivers gorgeous, warm string sound with plenty of tonal detail. Violas are nicely differentiated from violins, even though the recording isn’t especially close-up. Superbly quiet pressings on all four titles.

Further Listening: Bach: *Brandenburg Concertos* (Tacet LPs); *Danses Anciennes de Hongrie* (Harmonia Mundi LP)

Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Vinyl



Rova Saxophone Quartet and John Zorn: *The Receiving Surfaces*. Metalanguage (LP).

It doesn't always begin in the hive, with reeds buzzing in swarms like hornets riling up one another before jetting into wide-open spaces upon discovery of an exit. But it usually gets there at some point when Rova Saxophone Quartet is playing. It happens about midway through the nearly eight-minute "Arc Fuse," the opening track on side A of *The Receiving Surfaces*; again about three-quarters into the subsequent 11-minute "Helicoid"; intermittently on side B's seven-minute opener "Saddle Scroll Song"; and from just about the get-go on the 11½-minute concert-concluding "Arc Fuse 2." The hive is a marvelous place to lose oneself in the sonic swirl, provided that you find the stings of dissonance and the jostling, random rhythmic feel of free improvisation as satisfying as the lilting melodies and steady beats of

more conventional music.

This limited edition LP—only 300 copies were pressed on 180-gram vinyl—was released on June 4, 2011, to celebrate the 33rd anniversary of Rova's first concert on February 4, 1978. With more than three decades of exploration under its ample collective belt, Rova must continually push to develop new strategies and avoid repetition. Inviting longtime compatriot John Zorn to play with the Bay Area quartet at Yoshi's in San Francisco in August 2010 proved a smart way to goose the proceedings to another level. (The ensemble's extensive list of past collaborators includes Sam Rivers, Steve Lacy, Anthony Braxton, Dave Douglas, Fred Frith, Wadada Leo Smith, Satako Fujii, the Nels Cline Singers, Carla Kihlstedt, DJ Olive, and many more.)

The New York-based Zorn—the MacArthur genius and gadfly known for, among other things, his Masada compositions and ensembles, his Tzadik record label, and his nonprofit experimental-music performance space, The Stone—added alto sax to the Rova lineup of Larry Ochs (tenor), Steve Adams (alto and soprano), Jon Raskin (baritone), and Bruce Ackley (soprano). The resulting Rova-Zorn quintet is a wonder to the ears. Superb miking and mixing clearly place each player, right to left, across a slightly narrower-than-a-nightclub soundstage. You can easily identify the sounds coming from every horn, each creating a boggling variety of blurps and toots and honks under astonishingly virtuosic finger and breath control. Again, thanks to the precise engineering, you can practically peer through the roughest textures when a reed is overblown and feel the tight blasts of air against your cheek when a note is popped.

There is something at once old-fashioned and futuristic about this music, as if it's being pumped to life by a grand steampunk contraption out of *The Wild Wild*

West. The players' commitment to achieving oneness of intention, while insistently expressing their individuality, means constant transmogrification. At one point in "Arc Fuse 2" Raskin's baritone sounds like an acoustic bass, and the other, higher-pitched saxophones, in their elegant found harmonies, approximate a string quartet. Then, the ensemble suspends itself like a mobile of revolving breaths.

There are just as many of these exquisite moments of calm, spacious beauty in this live performance as there are shrill squeals and dizzying vortices of ecstatic noise. And they all emerge from a hive mind that invites and repays open and alert listening. DR

Further Listening: Rova Saxophone Quartet: *Planetary*; John Zorn: *Cobra*



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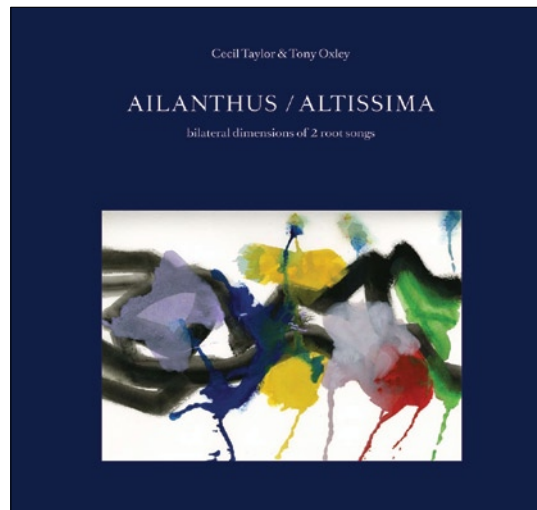


Music Sonics

Pat Metheny: *What's It All About*. Nonesuch (2 LPs).

Occasionally, Pat Metheny goes “into the cave” and emerges with some personal statement that goes against the grain of his more commercial instincts. Sometimes it’s something so uncompromising and off-putting, as in the case of his harshly dissonant skronkfest *Zero Tolerance for Silence*, that it appears to be a bid for career suicide. Or it might be something visionary with a grandiose sweep, like last year’s sprawling one-man show, *Orchestrion*. This time out, it’s something so intimate and stunningly beautiful it would appear the boy from Lee’s Summit, Missouri, has been touched by angels. A sublime revue of relaxed solo guitar interpretations of familiar and fetching pop melodies from the 60s (“Cherish,” “Alfie,” “Rainy Days and Sundays,” “And I Love Her”), *What’s It All About* has Metheny performing on a warm-sounding baritone guitar that allows him to cover his own bass lines, lending a rich, orchestral texture to the proceedings. And he makes Zen-like use of space with his amazing 42-string Picasso guitar on a stirring interpretation of “The Sound of Silence.” With strategically placed microphones in a resonant space, and just a hint of reverb, this is also one of the most gorgeous recordings of the year. **BM**

Further Listening: Pat Metheny: *One Quiet Night*; *Jim Hall & Pat Metheny*



Music Sonics

Cecil Taylor and Tony Oxley: *Ailanthus / Altissima*. Triple Point (2 LPs).

One response to the increasingly difficult problem of marketing recorded music is the production of high-quality LPs in limited-run sets that specifically target collectors. Some of the best jazz coming out today falls into this high-end category, and the beautifully packaged *Ailanthus/Altissima* proves the point. In addition to excellent sound quality and pressings, it boasts a handsome booklet devoted to Taylor’s idiosyncratic poems, and prints of Oxley’s engaging paintings. The music is drawn from a week-long 2008 engagement at the Village Vanguard that provided a rare opportunity for Taylor to perform in the U.S. with Oxley, an English drummer based in Germany, who plays only with his own, specially modified drum kit. One of the most relentless pianists who ever lived, Taylor virtually assaults the keyboard to produce a volcanic flow of cascading, criss-crossing lines, which leave the listener all but exhausted. But in recent years he has shown much more willingness to interject space and even a rhapsodic lyricism into his improvisations. This tendency allows Oxley to really prove his worth, and he reacts and responds to, and anticipates the pianist in what is more collaboration than accompaniment. Available from triplepointrecords.com. **DB**

Further Listening: Taylor: *Conquistador*; *Silent Tongues*

Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Vinyl



Alison Krauss: *Paper Airplane*. Rounder (LP and CD).

Owing to her *Raising Sand* collaboration with Robert Plant becoming something of a cultural phenomenon, that Alison Krauss and her superb Union Station band haven't released a new album together in seven years seems, well, impossible. But them's the facts. So let it be said that on *Paper Airplane*, all parties acquit themselves spectacularly well in their reunion moment. On the one hand, the album is standard AK+US fare: the singer's dulcet voice is as eerie and haunting as ever, and her fiddling above reproach; Jerry Douglas (dobro), Barry Bales (bass), Ron Block (banjo), and Dan Tyminski (guitar, vocals) assert their primacy among roots bands with frequent dazzling displays of virtuosity and good taste in serving the songs and the singer. And what songs! Robert Lee Castleman, a Krauss favorite, contributes the title track, a dense, swirling cry of abject loneliness with a piercing Douglas dobro solo. From Richard Thompson comes "Dimming of the Day," a doom-laden heartbreaker with Celtic overtones; and from Peter Rowan, the evocative "Dustbowl Children," which allows Tyminski's rough-hewn vocal to stand in for those forlorn, wandering Okies. Sparkling production—clean, robust instruments, the voices immaculately framed—caps a bona fide Krauss classic.

David McGee

Further Listening: Carrie Hassler & Hard Rain: *CHHr2*; Valerie Smith & Liberty Pike: *No Summer Storm*



Black Dub. *Jive* (LP and CD).

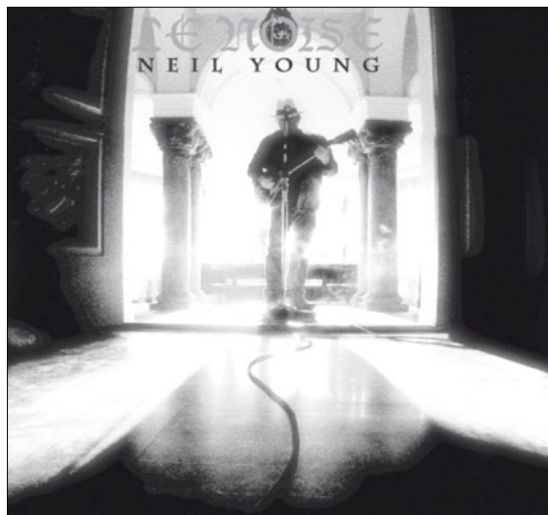
Black Dub's self-titled debut album imaginatively combines 60s-style psychedelic guitar riffs with reggae-tinged blues, female soul singing, and gospel music. With Daniel Lanois on guitar, Trixie Whitley on lead vocals and keyboard, Brian Blade on drums, and Daryl Johnson on bass, the group generates a unique blend of passion, energy, and light. Whitley's jazzy alto swoops and soars, the rhythm section is beyond tight (listen to Blade's hi-hat!), and Lanois lays down some of the best guitar work this side of wherever Hendrix is calling home these days.

No matter which facet of Lanois' work you prefer, *Black Dub* covers it. Jamaican dub beats inspire "Silverado." Atmospheric instrumentals reverberate through "Ring the Alarm" and "Slow Baby." "Love Lives" pairs sweet lyrics and vocals with echo effects. "Last Time" samples a vocal sermon by Blade's minister father, then adds in harmonies and funk. "Surely" is a bluesy torch song recorded in a single take. The gospel-tinged "Canaan" features an unforgettable chorus, full of yearning and hope: "How far am I from Canaan, how far am I from joy?"

Lanois says he believes that people seek music that's soulful, heartfelt, and meaningful. On all three counts, *Black Dub* delivers. **Sherri Lehman**

Further Listening: Lanois: *Acadie*; *Sling Blade* (film music)

Ten Best New Releases from 2011 on Vinyl



Neil Young: *Le Noise*. Reprise (180-gram LP and CD).

Neil Young has long had a talent for writing lyrics that are elusive yet compelling. Although many of the lines in “Tell Me Why” from *After the Gold Rush* elude me, that doesn’t make it less powerful—and when he sings “I am lonely but you can free me/All in the way that you smile” the sudden clarity has all the more impact. Lyrically his new release, *Le Noise*, is so straightforward it may catch you off guard. This is a time for reckoning, for looking back without flinching, for admitting mistakes and for hanging on to what’s left. With music this personal, it makes sense that Neil recorded his first studio album that’s completely solo: it’s just him and a guitar.

Le Noise isn’t, however, a “return to his folk roots”—far from it, actually. With the exception of two cuts Neil

uses an electric guitar, and by the time he’s run through “Walk With Me,” “Sign of Love,” and “Someone’s Gonna Rescue You,” it’s clear he wants to make a lot of (le) noise. Never mind that these opening songs are about love and relationships and the lyrics often unabashedly romantic; this is a rock and roll album with a huge, symphonic sound, all from one guitar and one voice. Daniel Lanois, who’s worked with U2, Bob Dylan, and Peter Gabriel, produced the record, and at times Neil sounds like he’s not in Lanois’ studio but in a coliseum. On these and the other electric songs Neil’s attack and the layered and expansive sound of his guitar are compelling—especially impressive on the 180-gram vinyl version of *Le Noise*. The vocals are a different matter, however. The heavy reverb and delay often seem excessive. They also seem like a distraction to Neil, who sometimes seems overly seduced by the wall of sound he and Lanois create.

There are two acoustic guitar cuts on the record. “Peaceful Valley Boulevard” casts a dark eye on America’s past and future—but the melody and the guitar playing are gorgeous. On this cut, though, the vocal treatment seems especially inappropriate. It’s one thing to electronically alter the vocals over an electric backdrop, but why over an acoustic one? The vocals sound more natural on the other acoustic track, the Spanish-tinged “Love and War,” one of the highlights of the record. Again the guitar work is memorable, with a warm sound that shines on vinyl.

The trippy vocal treatment is most effective on a detailed account of Neil’s drug use over the years. The strongest cut on the album, “The Hitchhiker,” may also be the most depressing—and if the worst is over, anxiety remains: “Many years have come and gone like friends and enemies/I tried to leave my past behind but it’s catching up with me/I don’t know how I’m

standing here, living in my life/I’m thankful for my children, and my faithful wife.” Although I have issues with the sound, that sense of honesty and vulnerability helps make *Le Noise* a return to form for a major if inconsistent artist. **JW**

Further Listening: Neil Young: *Live at Massey Hall 1971*; Bob Dylan: *Time Out of Mind*

Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Vinyl



Rod Stewart: *Gasoline Alley*; *Every Picture Tells a Story*. Mobile Fidelity (LP).

Occasionally, when writing a music review, I have a strong hunch that some readers will be so excited to discover something's been released that my review is almost superfluous—just knowing the record *exists* will send them to the record store (or online, as the case may be). That's how I feel about the two Rod Stewart LPs coming out on Mobile Fidelity's new Silver Label Vinyl Series. If you were going to pick two back-to-back Rod records to give the audiophile vinyl treatment, I'm not sure you could do better than *Gasoline Alley* and *Every Picture Tells a Story*. Before he jumped on all the wrong 1970s and 1980s bandwagons, there was Rod Stewart in all his glory. We can squabble about whether certain records demand a reassessment—artistically a previous MFSL Rod Stewart reissue, *Blondes Have More*

Fun, certainly falls far short of his earlier work, for instance—but these two new LP reissues breathe the most rarefied of air.

Both albums belong to a period when Rod Stewart lived a double life. *Faces* was known for its loose and scrappy approach and received more praise after they folded than before. On Rod's solo albums band members were more likely to break out acoustic guitars and mandolins to play music that was never going to sound overly pretty because—well, think of the singer. Rod's solo work might have also have been overlooked initially were it not for “Maggie May” from *Every Picture Tells a Story*. Because of that song, *Every Picture* outsold *Gasoline Alley* many times over, yet these LPs are very much of a piece, covering the same ground in similar ways. Both include gospel, folk, blues, soul, covers of lesser-known Dylan songs—just about anything rootsy his crew would play in a way that managed to sound both off-the-cuff and solid.

There's no question the MoFi versions of these LPs have greater clarity than the originals—in fact, the difference is quite pronounced. On both albums the cross-stitching of acoustic guitars and mandolins is revealed in all its intricacy, and the bass lines are much more distinct.

This is not to say that the MoFis are the final word, however. During back-to-back playbacks of the title track to *Every Picture*, a friend and I nearly fell out of our seats when round two—the original pressing—came roaring out of the speakers with a life that original early 1970s rock pressings sometimes have in spades, not because they're audiophile but because (partially) engineers knew enough to boost the volume levels in order to help obfuscate recording flaws. Listening to the MoFi recordings is closer to hearing the music from behind glass—but that ain't all bad. By itself, the detail

in Dylan's “Only a Hobo” and “Tomorrow is Such a Long Time” was enough to convince me that revisiting these classics was worth all the fuss.

So which version should you own? To some extent that depends on your preferences. Me, I want both. On Saturday nights I can relive my rowdy youth with the originals, and on Sunday mornings the MoFis can give me a clearer picture of what made this music click. Early Rod Stewart always had a rough-cut quality, but as the MoFi recordings reveal more than the originals, there was also a high level of artistry underneath the surface. **JW**

Further Listening: *Faces*: *First Step*; Jeff Beck Group: *Truth*

Ten Best Reissues on Vinyl

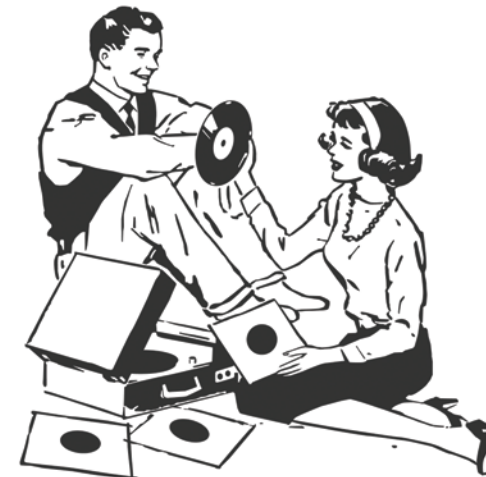


Music  Sonics 

Santana: *Caravanserai*. Speakers Corner (LP).

Philosophical and musical differences created such a volatile atmosphere around the time Santana recorded *Caravanserai* that lineup changes seemed nonstop. Musically the chemistry among band members remained, however, as did the Latin fire, the rhythm section still scorching as the band pursued a more jazz-oriented approach. Capturing *Caravanserai*'s expansive yet detailed sound was no easy task, and in some respects—the way Tom Rutley's acoustic bass cuts through, for example—the result was impressive. Yet the sound was sometimes muddy, and high-quality original pressings were not a given. Fortunately, Speakers Corner's remastered *Caravanserai* sounds cleaner and sharper than the original. The incidental percussion on "Eternal Caravan of Reincarnation" is more audible and well-defined, and Michael Shrieve's cymbals much more crisp on "Song of The Wind." It's not just high-frequency minutia that distinguish this release, however, as the potent shimmering wall of sound announcing "All the Love in the Universe" makes clear. Perhaps the best-sounding track is "La Fuente del Ritmo," where Carlos Santana's staccato guitar jabs give way to a highly spatial approach, newcomer Tom Coster's electric piano evokes McCoy Tyner, and another newcomer, Armando Peraza, attacks the bongos with rare intensity. **JW**

Further Listening: Antonio Carlos Jobim: *Stone Flower*; Lonnie Liston Smith: *Astral Traveling*



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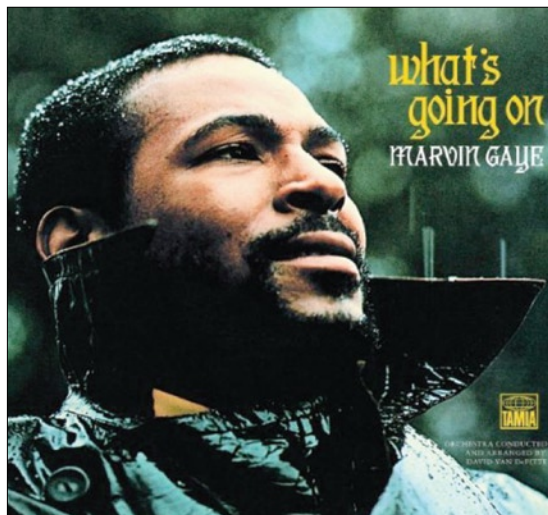
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Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Vinyl



Marvin Gaye: *What's Going On*—40th Anniversary Edition. (Universal/Motown) (LP and CDs) .

Asked why he had written the songs on the 1971 concept album *What's Going On*, soul singer and composer Marvin Gaye told labelmate Smokey Robinson that the inspiration had come from a higher power. “I was just God’s instrument,” he said. “God did all the work.” Forty years later, Universal/Motown has released an expanded edition that, for many, will be nothing short of revelatory.

The 12x12-inch portfolio includes two CDs, featuring the original album remastered, plus 28 bonus tracks (12 previously unreleased), and an LP (the first vinyl issue of the rare Detroit Mix). The discs hold a previously unreleased stripped-down version of the “What’s Going On” single and several rare funk

instrumentals that foreshadow *Let’s Get It On*, as well as a colorful booklet with essays and rare photos. *What’s Going On*—one of the best soul music recordings to come out of Detroit—is a still compelling soul opera with a profound meditation on life and splashes of jazz instrumentation (compliments of the Funk Brothers). It offers a sweeping, street-level view of the horror of war and its impact on families, inner cities in turmoil, drug abuse, child welfare, and the environment in decline—subjects that sadly are still only too relevant after 40 more years of neglect. But *What’s Going On* is also about hope and faith and the promise of social and personal redemption.

Those rare funk jams are interesting, but the real gem is the earthy Detroit Mix—the original version of the album minus vocal layering, keyboard overdubs, and other production techniques added in L.A. just two weeks before the album’s release (a CD Deluxe Edition). The differences are significant—the Detroit Mix production is sparse, the strings are less prominent, and there’s less sweetening overall. On Side 1, James Jamerson and Bob Babbitt’s soulful bass lines can be heard as connecting passages that were muted or absent on the final mix. In the junkie lament “Flying High (in the Friendly Sky),” Gaye’s background vocals are brought to the fore, emphasizing the call-and-response aspect of the songs. “Mercy Mercy Me (the Ecology)” sounds more contemplative and the song’s melodramatic coda is considerably subdued. As a result, these songs float wistfully on Gaye’s socially conscious lamentations and bring the work closer to the singer/songwriter convention.

On Side 2, the changes are evident from the get-go: the opening track, “Right On,” feels jazzier and more swinging. The piano, bass, and flute are more

prominent, and the gimmicky ratcheted percussion, which dominates the final version, is placed lower in the mix, as are the strings. The track has a warm, inviting, intimate feel.

On “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler),” the closing track, the pumping bass line that drove the final mix is hushed. Fittingly, the song trails off with an extended take on the solitary conga beat, rather than the startlingly dramatic hosanna ending of the final version, allowing the song, not the production, to make the final statement.

Two powerful and unique versions of a great soul-music album, enhanced by a handful of assorted rarities—that’s what’s going on. **GC**

Further Listening: Donny Hathaway: *Extension of a Man*; Curtis Mayfield: *Superfly* (soundtrack)

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Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Vinyl



Grateful Dead: *The Warner Brothers Studio Albums*. Rhino (five 180-gram LPs).

The Grateful Dead released five studio albums in a three-and-a-half-year span from March 1967 through November 1970. During that time the band morphed from a folk- and blues-based covers band into a highly experimental outfit known for long jams—as well as poster-children for San Francisco’s psychedelic scene—and then again into highly skilled songwriters and a surprisingly tight ensemble that, if not exactly like their friends Crosby, Still, and Nash, could even harmonize. The culmination of this period saw them release two beloved LPs that circled back to their folksy roots—one of them good, the other a masterwork.

It’s quite a musical legacy as well as one recorded diary of the band (the other, of course, is found in the Dead’s many live recordings). To coincide with the

40th Anniversary of the end of that stretch Rhino has packaged these records—*The Grateful Dead*, *Anthem Of The Sun*, *Aoxomoxoa*, *Workingman’s Dead*, and *American Beauty*—into a handsome box-set. Each LP’s cover has been meticulously reproduced, the 180-gram vinyl pressed at RTI from freshly-cut lacquers mastered from the original analog tapes by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Studios, and a full-size booklet with a few never-before-published photos with brief but informative liner notes by Blair Jackson included. Also in the box are a poster and a 7”-single reissue of “Dark Star”/“Born Cross-eyed.”

The sound of this set of course varies from record to record, but it’s excellent overall, and at times a revelation. Alas, I don’t own original issues of all of these for direct comparison, only *The Grateful Dead* and *Workingman’s Dead*. My copy of *American Beauty* is MoFi’s very fine, remarkably rich sounding 1978 release. *Anthem* and *Aoxomoxoa* appear to be from the late-70s; and I also have on hand Rhino’s fine-sounding CD box-set, *The Golden Road*. (Also note that for the first time since shortly after their initial release, *Anthem Of The Sun* and *Aoxomoxoa* are presented again on vinyl in their original mixes.)

The Grateful Dead, though almost quaint at times, and not representative of the Dead live at this period, has a newfound energy and drive. *Anthem*, with its deeply layered mix of live and studio tracks—all penned by the band—captures the Dead’s on-stage presence, but goes beyond with a swirling, off-kilter vibe that succeeds in conveying a dizzying, psychedelic experience. *Aoxomoxoa* reflects the band’s increasing songwriting skills, and its flowering collaboration with lyricist Robert Hunter. Side One alone is mini-masterpiece, and only the bizarre “What’s Become Of The Baby” falls flat. *Workingman’s Dead* does an about-face: goodbye psychedelia, hello

country-roots (and cocaine). *American Beauty* speaks for itself.

As one might guess, the initial releases of the first album and *Workingman’s Dead* sound closest to these new pressings. That said, close is no cigar. Especially when it comes to focus, overall clarity, balance, dynamic punch, and bottom-end weight, which are hallmarks of Rhino’s reissues. As to Phil Lesh’s marvelous and important bass playing—the clarity of line, and his round, almost creamy tone—is one of the great joys of this new set. These new LPs knock the others, including the CD box, right off my shelf. **WG**

Further Listening: Grateful Dead: *Live Dead; Europe '72*

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Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Vinyl



Jennifer Warnes: *The Well*. Impex (two 45rpm LPs).

Jennifer Warnes is one of the most underrated pop singers of her generation. Her albums, though few and far between, brim with melody and craft—and lyrics both intelligent and emotionally weighted. *The Well* was originally released in 2001 but time hasn't dulled its spirit. Along with the title track, standouts include "Patriot's Dream" in duet with Arlo Guthrie, a stunning cover of Tom Waits' "Invitation To the Blues," and Dylan's classic "Born In Time." The songs are lovingly produced, inventively orchestrated, and stocked with a who's who of studio musicians. But Warnes' expressive vocals overshadow all. She's a singer who asks a lot of her gifts, always searching for finer degrees of nuance and dynamics like a painter mixing color on a palette. The reissue from Impex Records (staffed by former Cisco émigrés) is a model for the premium LP industry. Its two-disc 45rpm 180-gram pressings are presented in an individually numbered wood box with a twelve-page, large format booklet that includes notes and lyrics. Bernie Grundman presided over the all-tube remastering. Sonically this about as good as it gets from a studio-bred multi-track—fabulous acoustic textures, deep bass, and awesome ambience. A vinyl-lover's dream come true. **Neil Gader**

Further Listening: Mary Chapin-Carpenter: *Come on, Come On*; Linda Ronstadt: *Heart Like A Wheel*



Julie London: *Julie Is Her Name*. Boxstar (two 45rpm 180-gram LPs).

She had the twin gifts of naturalness and perfection. She could sing as Eve might have in the Garden of Eden: no artifice, no professional tricks, no mannerisms, the voice every woman would have in a perfect world, the ultimate in art concealing art. And her control of intonation has been seldom equaled, in either popular or classical realms: it was perfection itself.

Her singing was intrinsically intimate: she sang close to the microphone (Telefunken here), seldom at full voice. Her approach was understatement, the songs as pure music with minimal rhetoric. For those who appreciate the style, I most definitely among them, she is the one and only, the incomparable, the unforgettable.

This is a two-record 45rpm reissue of her first (mono) LP (it was on Liberty), which included her career-defining hit (3 million sold in 1956!) "Cry me a River." Boxstar's reissues are superbly made, with extremely quiet surfaces (Paul Seydor adds his bravo for this) and the freedom from distortion that make well-cut 45rpm discs supreme over 33 1/3—as close to the sound of the original tape as imaginable. This is Julie London as you always wished you could hear her, in truly beautiful sound. Don't miss it. **Robert E. Greene**

Further Listening: London: *Lonely Girl*; *Julie Is Her Name Vol. II*

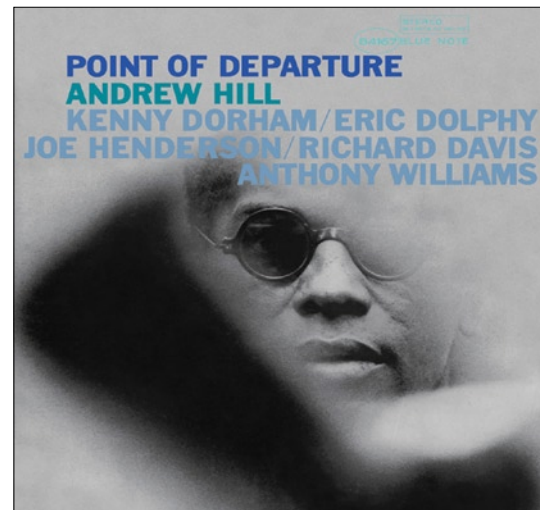
Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Vinyl



Bill Evans at Town Hall. Speakers Corner (LP).

This is a state-of-the-art, 180-gram vinyl reissue of one of the most significant records by one of the most influential of all jazz pianists. That really should be enough, but in the case of Bill Evans it's never that simple; while many of his fans hold him up as the greatest keyboard player in all jazz history, a significant minority see him as the most overrated, and moderate views on the subject are rare. Evans' approach was somewhat cerebral compared to the sheer force and incredible melodic invention of Bud Powell (Evans' own idol), but it was fresh, strikingly original and, when everything was working, produced deeply affecting music. This 1965 release captured his first concert appearance in New York, and one can sense the deep concentration of Evans, trio-mates Chuck Israels and Arnold Wise, and the 1500-strong audience. Four standards demonstrate Evan's mastery of harmonic and melodic variation, as well as the ability of bassist Israels and drummer Wise to underpin things beautifully. But the crowning accomplishment is the lengthy, unaccompanied "Solo—In Memory of His Father, Harry L. Evans," a performance that shows how gutsy this master of impressionism could be. **DB**

Further Listening: Bill Evans: *Everybody Digs Bill Evans*; *Waltz For Debby*



Andrew Hill: *Point Of Departure*. Music Matters (two LPs).

Andrew Hill's funky yet lyrical piano playing and intricately beautiful compositions seized the attentions of Blue Note's Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff. The pair recorded material for four LPs before the first, *Black Fire*, was released in 1963. 1965's *Point Of Departure* was certainly a peak session for Hill, who was joined by an especially fine and simpatico band: Kenny Dorham (trumpet), Eric Dolphy (alto sax, flute, bass clarinet), Joe Henderson (tenor sax), Richard Davis (bass), and Tony Williams (drums). Hill cited Williams as an especially freeing force. And from the start there's no doubt about the then 19-year-old's contributions not simply as a timekeeper but as a truly musical drummer. Dolphy—certainly one of jazz's most original voices—is another key, pushing the boundaries of musical expression throughout this five-track set, no matter what instrument he's playing. But what makes tunes such as "Refuge," "New Monastery," and "Dedication" so memorable is the ensemble work of all involved. In sum: a seminal release from the Blue Note catalog. The sound is superb, with a large soundstage, striking immediacy, and terrific dynamic scaling, and the range of tone colors—from Dolphy alone—richly layered and gorgeous. **WG**

Further Listening: Andrew Hill: *Time Lines*; Eric Dolphy: *Out To Lunch* (Music Matters)

Ten Best Reissues from 2011 on Vinyl



Shostakovich: Piano Concerto No. 2. Bernstein, New York Philharmonic. Columbia/Impex (LP).

Composed in 1957 for his son Maxim's graduation recital, the Second Piano Concerto is regarded by some as one of Shostakovich's lesser works. Shostakovich himself said that it had "no redeeming artistic merits." Nonetheless, he performed it often and recorded it on LP, leading many to conclude that his harsh appraisal was actually a swipe at the Soviet establishment, for whom "redeeming artistic merit" was music that expressed socialist ideals.

A patriotic tract the Second Piano Concerto is certainly not. What it is—and what makes so many of us love it—is droll and high-spirited and, in the great second movement *Andante*, ravishingly beautiful. As with so much of Shostakovich's music there is an element of satire in the opening and closing *Allegros*, where the piano capers against military drum tattoos and joins in a closing march (with high-flying piccolo). But it is that sad, slow, gorgeous *Andante* that makes the work so treasurable. It may be the most beautiful music Shostakovich ever wrote.

I know of no other performance as magically "right" as this one from Bernstein, who not only conducts but plays the piano part. The sound here is even better—fuller, warmer—than on the original Columbia. Jonathan Valin

Further Listening: Shostakovich: First Symphony (Martinon); Prokofiev: First Violin Concerto (Milstein)



Prokofiev: Third Piano Concerto. Martha Argerich; Berlin Philharmonic, Abbado. DG/Clearaudio (LP).

Prokofiev's great Third Piano Concerto has been Martha Argerich's signature piece since she won piano competitions with it at the age of 16 in 1957. If you're used to Bryon Janis' reading on Mercury or have never heard Argerich play Prokofiev, you're in for a shock. The only other artist I can think of who played the Third with this kind of energy at this breakneck tempo was Prokofiev himself, and Prokofiev's performance is all speed and slop. Despite its power and pace, Argerich's is far more agile, deeply thought out, and various—built upon the precise articulation of rhythmic and dynamic contrasts. Be they *fortississimo* or *pianississimo*, *presto* or *adagio*, every note, every chord, every bravura run and leaping flourish is sounded with passion and precision. It's as if Argerich is uttering one long, complex, fully articulate sentence in one long thrilling breath. Abbado and the Berlin Phil keep up with her, though it often seems (as it often does with distinctive pianists in distinctive performances) as if Argerich is conducting as well as soloing. Full credit goes to DG's engineers, whose close miking of the piano perfectly serves the clarity of line and muscular poetry of Argerich's sensational reading. A must-own disc. JV

Further Listening: Prokofiev: Violin Sonatas (Kremer, Argerich); Liszt: First Piano Concerto (Argerich)

Resurrecting Musical Treasures

A Survey of Vinyl Reissue Labels

Wayne Garcia

Although the world's economic blues continue to suppress sales of high-end audio gear, it seems that audiophiles are still able (and willing) to spend their hard-earned cash on music—and especially on titles released on premium-grade vinyl (though SACD sales, I'm told, also remain strong). While \$20 to \$50 per platter can add up fast, splurging on a few as-good-or-better-than-ever sounding favorites remains a relatively affordable indulgence that arguably gets to the heart of our hobby in a way that even the sexiest new component can't.

Given that the already hot audiophile reissue market is getting even hotter, we thought it would be fun—and we trust enlightening—to profile the currently active major players, gather insights into how they operate, and give you a preview of what's coming 'round the bend. With the exception of readers who

subscribe to both TAS and *The Wall Street Journal*, most of us are going to have to make some hard decisions about what not to buy.



Acoustic Sounds/Analogue Productions

On December 3 of last year the now quarter-century-old Acoustic Sounds began moving from the 18,000 square-foot former grocery store it bought in 2004 into three buildings that, when measured together, total a staggering 70,000 square feet. “Our old space seemed way too big when we bought it,” explained owner Chad Kassem in his thick-as-gumbo Louisiana drawl. “We’d spent a small fortune outfitting it, and now we’re doing it all over again.”

But Acoustic Sounds isn't simply growing; it's taking a major leap forward. “We'll have twenty-thousand square feet of sound rooms, a twenty-eight-thousand-square-foot warehouse that can accommodate three 18-wheelers at a time, and a twenty-one-thousand-square-foot pressing plant.”

While opening a new state-of-the-art record-pressing facility might seem like folly—and make no mistake, it is a very serious commitment—to Kassem the move is as natural as breathing. “It's the next step in controlling the quality and timing of our releases,” he emphasized. And when you reflect on the company's history, it makes perfect sense.

Acoustic Sounds was born in 1986 as a mail-order trading post for audiophile LPs as that format was being squashed by the CD revolution. In 1992 Kassem launched the Analogue Productions label by reissuing Stokowski's Vanguard recording of Virgil Thomson's *The Plow That Broke The Plains* on high-quality vinyl. Since then Acoustic Sounds has become a major mail-order source for music on all formats, as well as for high-end audio components and accessories. It's also pioneered the limited-edition two-disc 45-rpm craze, built a recording studio (Blue Heaven), and is now in the business of pressing vinyl discs.

Part of Kassem's decision to press records is related to the one downside of the ongoing vinyl renaissance. With not only small reissue labels lined up but also majors such as Warner and Columbia, the best existing plants—RTI in this country, and Palais in Germany—can't keep up with demand. But Kassem isn't interested in simply pressing quality LPs in a time frame that suits his schedule; he aims, as he put it, “to bring records into the 21st Century.”

To achieve his vision, Kassem hired the two guys he identified as the best in the business: Gary Salstorm and

Mark Huggert from the legendary Wakefield Pressing facility. Salstorm is in charge of plating; Huggert is the man who has modified and maintains the presses. Of which there are three—one from Southern Made Tools (what RTI uses), an Alpha Toollex (what Palais uses), and an ancient Firebuilt manual press that was found in L.A. What will be exciting to see (and hear) will be the results this group gets from its efforts (the first pressings were scheduled for release in March) because in addition to rebuilding these LP presses from the bottom up, including spiffy new paint jobs, Huggert is implementing several modifications that should achieve Kassem's desire to create the next generation of the vinyl LP.

Without disclosing all the details, Chad did mention two innovations that should result in quieter pressings. One is a temperature probe, accurate to within one degree, that lets the operator know the precise time to release freshly minted vinyl from the die. (Standard water-based thermocouple designs can vary in temperature by as much as plus-or-minus fifteen degrees, which can lead to overheated—and thus, noisier—vinyl.) The other is as simple—and seemingly obvious—as decoupling the power-supply and drive unit from the body of a press. “They shake like crazy,” said Chad, and placing them on damping units on the floor greatly reduces the racket (think of the way so many turntables separate the motor from the chassis to minimize unwanted vibrations, but on a much larger scale).

As to upcoming releases, expect to see Stevie Ray Vaughan box sets on 33.3 and 45-rpm vinyl, 25 Verve titles on 45-rpm and SACD, and 45s of Muddy Waters' *Folk Singer* and *The Allman Brothers Band At Fillmore East*.

Finally, as you have probably heard, Acoustic

Resurrecting Musical Treasures

Sounds recently purchased Classic Records. “You know,” said Chad, “Aside from the name, which I think is a good one, the inventory that we’re selling through, and the Clarity Vinyl, I’m not sure where this project will go—though there are plenty of titles I would like to re-license.” At one time Classic would have occupied a prominent place in this report. Now, we’ll have to wait and see.



IMPEX

“I’m a true hobbyist, enthusiast, and retro-geek,” IMPEX’s Robert Pincus proudly admitted in a recent conversation.

Although the name may be a new one, the IMPEX label rose from the ashes of CISCO Music, which over the course of twenty years released more than 150 titles on LP, CD, and SACD. Some of these, such as the *Three Blind Mice* jazz series, were great sounding recordings of okay but not outstanding jazz. Others, such as CISCO’s reissue of Capitol’s recording of Milstein playing the Dvorák and Glazunov Violin Concertos, or Joan Baez’s *Farewell Angelina* [Vanguard], were wonderful reissues of excellent titles that greatly enhance our music collections.

As with many of us, Pincus’ vinyl obsession was triggered by his first high-end turntable purchase. As a high school senior he scored a Luxman PD-300. “That was the day I went crazy for LPs,” he said. “But the quality of classical records in general sucked back then, so I started collecting blue-label Angels, Columbia six-eyes, and RCA Shaded Dogs—before we knew to call them that.”

Fast-forward to the late 90s. At the time CISCO was focused on importing the Japanese *Three Blind*

Mice titles as well as 180-gram classical selections from King Super Analogue. Pincus was hired to oversee its reissue branch, and shortly thereafter secured rights to the above-mentioned Milstein recording and a little-known performance of Mozart’s Symphony No. 35 by Thomas Nee and the New Hampshire Festival Orchestra. “That’s still my favorite 35th,” recalls Pincus, “and we bought the tape to release the record. As to the Milstein, I’m proud of that because most classical catalogs had already been mined to death.”

It was this enthusiast’s vision that led CISCO to debut at CES with two obscure classical albums that, although they didn’t generate a lot of revenue, nevertheless got more people to hear recordings that few knew about. That same spirit and core group of players is now overseeing the IMPEX label: Owner Abey Fonn, Robert Pincus, who continues to select titles and oversee all details of the reissue process, and Robert Sliger, who helps Pincus consider titles and who also coordinates cover art reproduction.

To set things straight, Pincus explained that CISCO’s U.S. division was forced to shut down because its sister company in Japan—an 11-store retail chain with worldwide distribution that specialized in dance music—closed its door when rap and hip-hop albums were no longer selling to a generation that downloads its tunes. That was October of 2008. It didn’t take long for Pincus and Fonn to realize that their reissue business was something that they not only knew how to do, but was also something they loved and were good at. IMPEX was announced in December of 2009, and since then it’s released its first six titles: Dave Brubeck’s *Time Further Out* and Willie Nelson’s *Red-Headed Stranger*, which I’ve reviewed in these pages, on 180-gram LP; Jennifer Warnes’ *Famous Blue Raincoat*, *The Hunter*, and *The Well* (on gold CD); and Gary Karr’s *Adagio*

D’Albinoni on 180-gram 45rpm vinyl. Forthcoming releases include a gold CD edition of *Belafonte Sings The Blues*, 180-gram LPs of Bernstein conducting Ravel’s G Major and Shostakovich’s Second Piano Concertos, Billy Joel’s *52nd Street*, and an unspecified Miles Davis Columbia title.



MOBILE FIDELITY
SOUND LAB
moving fidelity

I penned a lengthy feature on Mobile Fidelity back in Issue 199, so I’ll write but a brief recap of this venerable label’s history here. Founded in 1977 by Brad Miller and Herb Belkin, Mobile Fidelity began as a sound effects label that released Miller’s spectacular once-popular, on-location recordings of locomotives and thunderstorms. Along the way master engineer extraordinaire Stan Ricker became involved, applying the half-speed mastering techniques he’d developed for quadraphonic LPs to MoFi’s stereo pressings. Moving away from impressive but outmoded demo material, Mobile Fidelity soon began reissuing popular music titles such as Steely Dan’s *Katy Lied*, Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side Of The Moon*, Beatles, Stones, and Sinatra box sets, and in the process became famous for its half-speed remastering process and “Original Master Recording” banner.

Mobile Fidelity proved to be highly adaptable over the years, releasing a deep, and in many cases highly collectible catalog of music on both LP and CD, and holding its own with start-up competitors such as Analogue Productions and Classic Records. Due to a

domino effect beyond its control, MoFi went bankrupt in 1999, but was soon purchased by Music Direct’s Jim Davis, who reassembled the original team—Ricker remains on as consultant—and hired Tim de Paravicini to hot-rod its tape machines, boards, and all cutting equipment. The result is that MoFi releases sound better than ever. The company’s resurgence is also resulting in another wave of outstanding reissues—if you’ve yet to do so, check out its exceptional string of recent Sinatra releases.

But according to the company’s Josh Bizar, obtaining the rights to top titles is tougher than ever. “It’s not like it was in the 1980s when Mobile Fidelity could just call up Abbey Road and have all the Beatles masters shipped to our studio in northern California. Moving a mastertape has gotten a lot more complicated. If it wasn’t for our longstanding relationships with the majors, we would never get our hands on mastertapes.” And, given the poor economic times and stronger-than-ever competition, Bizar points out that “we’ve seen customer expectations increase. Prices for audiophile records are high, and they expect dead-quiet, flat pressings. The bottom line is that sales of Mobile Fidelity vinyl shows no sign of slowing whatsoever.”

A few new releases for the year include titles from Ray Charles (see review last issue), Tony Bennett, Billy Joel, James Taylor, Carole King, Foreigner, and more Frank Sinatra. And later in the year Gram Parsons, Stevie Wonder, Rod Stewart, and a two LP 45-rpm edition of Elvis Costello’s *Get Happy!!*

Finally, the company just launched the Mobile Fidelity Silver Label, whose releases will be mastered and cut by the same team on the same equipment as MoFi’s regular titles, and the LPs will be plated and pressed at RTI on standard-weight audiophile-grade vinyl. Starting

Resurrecting Musical Treasures

at \$22.99, the Silver Label will release a wider and more diverse range of records. Bizar enthused: “The sound quality of the first test pressings has been stunning. We look forward to hearing what you and your readers think about these new titles.”



Mosaic

Although this piece focuses on LP reissue labels, and takes an admittedly partisan view toward vinyl's ongoing popularity, most labels herein are not exclusively releasing LPs, and may not be quite so romantic about them as I am. This is, after all, still business.

Take, for example, the highly respected jazz specialist, Mosaic. Founded in 1983 at the dawn of the CD-era, Mosaic began releasing its “complete” series of boxed sets on vinyl because initially, at least, that's all there was. As founding partner Michael Cuscuna (who continues to consult on title choices, quality of the masters, and artwork/photos for the label) recently told me, “When CDs came in, the majors gobbled up all the plant capacity and were hesitant to grant us (and others) CD rights to what we had [already reissued] because they had yet to decide what they were going to do with their catalogs. We started putting out CDs around 1989-90. The format grew quickly, and it was essential to our survival.”

Although Mosaic's limited-edition sets were highly sought after, Cuscuna recalled the period when “vinyl started selling less and less, even though we switched to 180-gram and had great pressings from RTI. The additional cost of creating two sets of masters, and then ordering 500 LP sets that would just trickle out, began to threaten the survival of our business, and we had to let vinyl go.” The exceptions Cuscuna points

out were the Miles Davis sets that he and Bob Belden produced for Sony Legacy. “They gave us vinyl rights, and everything sounded so much better than the original LP[s] that it made sense to do those.”

Putting things in perspective, Cuscuna opined that the vinyl market isn't really all that red-hot, but appears to be because of a small, die-hard, and growing audience. “If the record business were still healthy and expanding,” he added, “the major labels would never have noticed vinyl. As it is, they are losing interest because the numbers are small.”

Although Mosaic no longer issues simultaneous LP and CD sets because that would be too costly, it does continue to issue LPs. “For example,” cites Cuscuna, “it occurred to me that the Columbia tapes of *Thelonious Monk At The It Club* had never properly been issued on LP. Only half of the material was issued on mediocre vinyl in the 80s. A definitive CD set was out on Sony and I felt a newly mixed analog audiophile pressing would be welcomed. The secret is to do meaningful projects that are small in price and size.” As to Mosaic's plans for 2011, expect *The Complete Atlantic Studio Recordings of the Modern Jazz Quartet* (1956-64), unissued recent sessions by the Sam Rivers Big Band, a Mosaic Select release of Lucky Thompson sessions for ABC-Paramount and Polydor, and an unspecified Coleman Hawkins set.



Music Matters

Since I first wrote about Music Matters in a feature that appeared in Issue 180, the company known for its superb sounding and meticulously packaged 45-rpm Blue Note reissues has undergone a few changes.

One of the most obvious is tied to the closure of the AcousTech mastering facility, which also did work for Analogue Productions. Although Music Matters still uses RTI's pressing plant, a new company started by AcousTech's Kevin Gray, Cohearent, is now mastering all Music Matters titles. Given Gray's involvement, we should assume not only a seamless transition but also one that, if anything, will result in even higher standards.

And though Music Matters' initial plan called for the reissue of 160 Blue Note titles, many of which are already out-of-print, it's currently edging towards 200 releases. One of my personal joys in watching the series unfold is that the Music Matters team—Ron Rambach, Joe Harley, Michael Cuscuna, and more recently Chris Mousdale (who's in charge of cover art production), and Blue Note packaging designer Patrick Roques—has reintroduced many wonderful but lesser-known titles—most recently Sam Rivers' *Fuchsia Swing Song*, Elvin Jones' *Puttin' It Together* and *Genesis*, and Andrew Hill's *Black Fire*.

Perhaps most dramatically, while most reissue labels are sticking to physically movable formats such as vinyl, CD, and SACD, Music Matters is embracing the foreseeable future as well as the present by adding 205 high-resolution 24-bit/88.2kHz downloads to its Blue Note catalog. In addition to the albums themselves, which will be mastered by Gray and sell for \$20 each, Music Matters' downloads will also make available additional Francis Wolff session photography, which are a joy and hallmark of its gatefold LP sets. The program should be ready to launch by the time of this article's publication.



ORG (Original Recordings Group)

Although Michael Hobson was the primary face of the old Classic Records, what many people may not know is that vinyl veteran Ying Tan, Hobson's one-time business partner, was co-founder of the label. Like many who find themselves in L.A., Tan was trying to break into the film business, as he says, “without much success.” In 1989 he chanced upon a record store going out of business. “I'd been bitten by the audiophile vinyl bug, and on the spur of the moment went in and bought out almost all of the LP stock. That stock became the nucleus of Pacific Vinyl, the LP-only mail-order business that I ran out of my L.A. apartment for several years.”

Hobson was a Pacific Vinyl customer, which is how the pair met. Tan adds that “Classic was founded by us in late-1993 based on our ability to license an initial 20-plus RCA Living Stereo titles from BMG.”

But as happens with all relationships, things changed. “We worked reasonably well together for a couple of years, and Classic was quite successful right from the start. There were, however, disputes over the future direction and structure of the company that led me to decide it was time for me to leave, and I did so in late 1996.” Since then, Tan founded the Groove Note label (most famous for its recordings of the singer, Jacintha), which is currently in a sort-of holding pattern, and in 2008 he was invited to join ORG (Original Recordings Group). As Tan tells it, “They had gotten a couple of titles out (Rickie Lee Jones' *Pop Pop* was one), but were having some problems getting their production schedule going despite having licensed some top titles from UNI. Groove Note wasn't doing so great at the

Resurrecting Musical

time, so I figured this was a good opportunity for me.”

With Tan’s help ORG is getting close to reaching its target of around 25 releases per year, with well-known titles from the Decca/London catalog such as *The Three Cornered Hat* and *España* (both reviewed in this issue), *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *La Fille Mal Gardée*, and *Peer Gynt*. “We’re hoping to release approximately 20 new London classical LPs a year for two to three years,” said Tan, “all on double 45-rpm vinyl.” ORG will also be releasing more titles from the UNI jazz catalog, including additional Verve and Impulse titles (recent Ella Fitzgerald, Coltrane, and Johnny Hartman LPs have been stunners).

As if these guys weren’t busy enough, ORG will also reissue the first of several titles from the Warner catalog, including two by Peter Paul & Mary, a few by Bill Evans, plus Gerry Mulligan’s *What Is There To Say*, and Weather Report’s *Heavy Weather*. An excited Tan concluded, “The latter was mastered by Bernie Grundman using absolutely zero compression—it’s going to be dramatic and dynamic!”

SPEAKERS CORNER RECORDS

Speakers Corner

With a lengthy catalog of over 300 titles in print amassed over 17 years, the German firm Speakers Corner offers what is arguably the most eclectic range of titles in the biz, an amazing resource for excellent quality 180-gram reissues typically not available from its American counterparts, especially in the classical field. Looking for Jochum’s version of *Carmina Burana* on DGG, or several other of the yellow label’s many unforgettable recordings? Or great Mercury titles like the Starker Bach Cello Suites, or Dorati conducting Bartók’s *Dance Suite*? Maybe you’ve been

searching for Ansermet’s terrific *Petrushka*, or the Borodin Quartet’s Shostakovich/Borodin pairing, both originally from Decca? Perhaps your taste runs more to Motown (*Mary Wells Sings My Gyn*), jazz (*Gerry Mulligan Meets Ben Webster*), rock (Patti Smith’s *Horses*), or soundtracks (*The Graduate*)? These guys have it all.

Founded by Managing Director Kai Seemann, Speakers Corner is a vinyl-only reissue house that began issuing classical before branching into other realms. But as Seemann points out, no matter how catholic its releases are they’re not selected because of any personal taste but rather in response to a studiously perceived market demand based on feedback from customers, collectors, journalists, and dealers. Of that market Kai sees two distinct types of buyers: those who grew up with LPs and prefer their sound over CDs (that means us); and the 18-to-30-year-old crowd that grew up with CDs but find vinyl to be a cooler format, regardless of whether the sound is better or not.

As to that sound, although the other reissue labels share this ideal, Seemann’s explicitly stated goal is to faithfully reproduce the sonic intentions of the original musicians and engineers. To that end, unless a mastertape has been lost or damaged, he sources only mastertapes that the engineers he employs cut on analog Neumann lathes. Interestingly, one early key to meeting the company’s intended goal—at least with Decca and DGG titles—was getting the engineers who had been dealing with the tapes for years to cut Speakers Corner’s lacquers, and in some cases it was actually the same guy who cut the original disc.

Continuing its history of varied releases, new titles from the company include Etta James’ *At Last!*, Igor Markevitch’s Philips recording of Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No. 4*, Oscar Peterson and Nelson Riddle’s *The Trio & The Orchestra*, and the Beaux Arts Trio’s take on Schubert’s *Piano Trios*. **tas**

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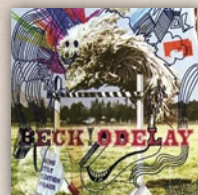
Tom Petty
Damn the Torpedos



Aretha Franklin
Aretha: Lady Soul



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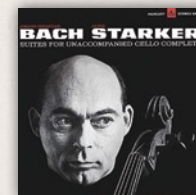
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Rolling Stones
Let It Bleed



Boston
Boston



Derek and the Dominos
Layla



Joni Mitchell
Blue

New and Upcoming Reissues

Wayne Garcia



ANALOGUE PRODUCTIONS

Now that its QRP (Quality Record Pressings) facility is in full swing, expect exciting things out of Kansas—Salina, that is, home of Chad Kassem’s Analogue Productions. The company’s first QRP release should delight longtime fans of HP’s Super Disk list: a 200-gram pressing of Cat Stevens’ terrific-sounding 1970 release, *Tea for the Tillerman*. Also among the first batch: Ben Webster’s *Gentle Ben*, blues guitar great Freddie King’s *Getting Ready* and *Texas Cannonball*, and...drum roll...a 200-gram 45rpm edition of Muddy Waters’ *Folk Singer*. Among upcoming titles Kassem shared with me are two from Verve: the bossa nova classic, *Getz/Gilberto*, and Oscar Peterson’s *We Get Requests* (both on 45rpm and SACD).

Also coming soon:

- Tony Joe White: *Homemade Ice Cream* (33rpm)
- Jimmy Witherspoon and Ben Webster: *Roots* (33rpm)
- Dusty Springfield: *Dusty in Memphis* (45rpm)

And three from Ray Charles’ ABC years on 33rpm vinyl and SACD:

- *Ray Charles and Betty Carter*
- *Live In Concert*
- *Genius + Soul = Jazz*



IMPEX

IMPEX reissues are very personal selections by the company’s Robert Pincus, who informed me that the next two IMPEX titles are going to be classical—surely welcome news to most TAS readers. “We have one of the Heifetz mono Beethoven sonatas (we did the stereo Kreutzer a few years ago), and Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto with Gould and Bernstein.”



MOBILE FIDELITY

MoFi continues its roll with a slew of pop titles in all sorts of formats.

On Vinyl and SACD:

- James Taylor: *Dad Loves His Work*
- Carole King: *Music*

On Vinyl and Gold CD:

- The Cars: *Candy-O*

On SACD only:

- Stevie Ray Vaughan: *Soul to Soul*, *In Step*, and *The Sky is Crying*
- The Beach Boys: *Pet Sounds* (Stereo)

On Vinyl only:

- Foreigner: *Double Vision*

On MoFi’s new Silver Label Vinyl:

- Rod Stewart: *Every Picture Tells a Story*
- Stevie Wonder: *Music of My Mind*
- Stevie Wonder: *Hotter Than July*



MOSAIC

Due to the uncertainty of not-yet-final licensing rights, Mosaic’s Michael Cuscuna was reluctant to disclose much about what’s on the horizon. But when prodded he did share this: “Yes, we’re planning a three-LP vinyl version of *Jazz At The Hollywood Bowl*, recently issued as a double CD on Verve Select. It was originally issued as a double album from a 1956 concert with Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, the Oscar Peterson Trio, and a jam session with Roy Eldridge, Harry Edison, Illinois Jacquet, Flip Phillips, Buddy Rich, and the Peterson trio. It’s been expanded with the discovery of the full Louis Armstrong set.” The release date is scheduled for sometime in early 2012.



MUSIC MATTERS

Music Matters’ string of superbly-produced, double-LP, 200-gram vinyl Blue Note reissues continues apace with three great—if very different—trumpet players: Freddie Hubbard’s *Goin’ Up*, Kenny Dorham’s *Una Mas*, and Lee Morgan’s *The Procrastinator*, and continues with McCoy Tyner’s *The Real McCoy*, tenorman Wayne Shorter’s outstanding *The Soothsayer*, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers’ *Indestructible*, and another, lesser-known tenor player, J.R. Monterose’s self-titled 1958 debut LP.

www.theabsolutesound.com

New and Upcoming



ORG

Original Recordings Group is keeping busy, too. The company's Ying Tan shared the following list of upcoming titles with me. All are 45rpm, 180-gram, two-LP sets.

From Duke Ellington's Columbia years, *Indigos*, and *Blues In Orbit*, as well as another from the Columbia vaults, Jon Hendricks' *Fast Living Blues*.

ORG is also doing its part for the classical music lover by reissuing a quartet of famously great-sounding recordings. From the Decca-London catalog, Grieg's *Peer Gynt*, Fjeldstad; Zubin Mehta and the L.A. Philharmonic's performance of Holst's *The Planets*; and The Royal Ballet production of Hérold-Lanchberry's *La Fille Mal Gardée*. Finally, from the Mercury catalog, ORG will be reissuing the Dorati recording of Prokofiev's *Suite for Three Oranges*.

ORG's impressive release schedule continues through the remainder of the year, with jazz, blues, and classical titles:

- Gerry Mulligan: *What Is There To Say*
- Taj Mahal: *Recycling The Blues*
- Weather Report: *Heavy Weather*
- Charlie Mingus: *Live At Carnegie*
- Bill Evans: *Live In Paris Vol. 1*
- John McLaughlin, Al Di Meola, and Paco De Lucia: *Friday Night In San Francisco*
- Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 1, Curzon (London)
- Mendelssohn: *Scottish Symphony*, Maag (London)
- Ravel: *Daphnis et Chloe*, Ansermet (London)

112 [Guide to Cables, Power Products, Accessories, & Music](#)



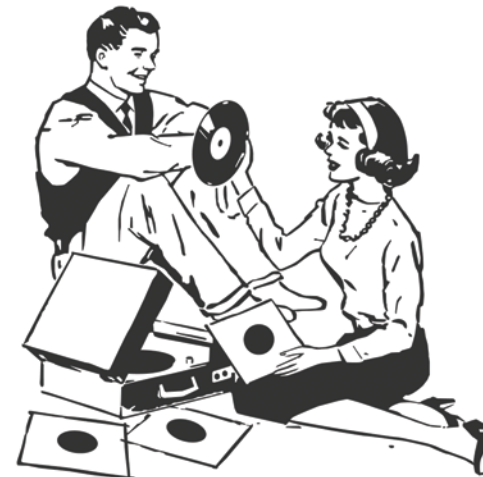
SPEAKERS CORNER

The German firm Speakers Corner has what is arguably the most catholic taste of all reissue labels. The following list of titles is slated for release (on vinyl) before the end of this year.

- Herb Ellis: *Nothing But The Blues*
- Oscar Brown Jr.: *Sin & Soul*
- I Musici: Works by Barber, Respighi, Britten, Bartók
- Duke Ellington: *Newport 1958*
- Henry Mancini: *Breakfast At Tiffany's*
- Henry Mancini: *The Pink Panther*
- Tchaikovsky: *The Sleeping Beauty*

But more exciting still is the news that Speakers Corner will be returning to its roots, when it would frequently secure not just an original master tape, but also the original engineer and engineering equipment in order to recreate the most perfect possible replica of an original LP. As director Kai Seemann explained it, "After years of negotiations and organizing, we were able to get the original Decca equipment, analogue mastertapes, and a former Decca cutting engineer at the same time to the same place. Therefore, we are able to continue with the quality standard everybody is used to from the almost 100 Decca titles we've released in the past."

It was too early for Seemann to discuss titles, but given the importance of the Decca archives this is certainly big news, and something to really look forward to in 2012.



A Different Approach To Analog

We don't think most records sound very good, and we won't pretend to feel differently just to move more product. Many years ago, we started comparing multiple pressings in shootouts because we wanted to hear just how good our favorite albums could sound. Now these shootouts are the main focus of our business, and we evaluate hundreds of records every week. This makes us uniquely able to offer Hot Stamper pressings of classic albums that deliver shockingly good sound.

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Better Records

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DOWNLOAD ROUND-UP

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO HIGH-RES DOWNLOADS

Alan Taffel

High-resolution music downloads are without a doubt high-end audio's most exciting new source format. Thanks to sites like HDtracks, iTrax, and Linn Records, audiophiles now have broad access to source material that is far higher in resolution than CD—fully on par with the niche-market SACD and the extinct DVD-Audio formats. Whereas CD resolution is fixed at a barely adequate 44,100 samples per second and a decidedly inadequate 16 bits per sample, high-resolution downloads *start* at that level and go up from there. Indeed, it's not uncommon to have one's choice of resolutions, from 44.1/16 all the way to 192/24. And while hi-res downloads jettison the limitations of CD, they retain digital's inherent freedom from vinyl-borne artifacts, coloration, and deterioration. This is truly an archive-worthy format.

Aside from the potential for sonic superiority, another cause for excitement is selection. There's a common perception that the selection of music available through hi-res downloads is quite limited. But take a look at, say, HDtracks (just point your browser to hdtracks.com) and you'll see an impressive array of new and vintage jazz, rock, and classical titles. Archive-quality reissues of important classics, from Sam Cooke to Keith

Jarrett to the entire Rolling Stones library are making their way on-line at a breakneck pace.

New releases also abound. Some, such as Paul Simon's *So Beautiful or So What*, are available simultaneously in CD and as hi-res downloads. In other cases, artists are giving preference to on-line consumers. These include Radiohead, which now releases albums on-line months before they show up as plastic discs, and Richard Thompson, who makes many releases available *only* to on-line adherents.

So how does a music-devouring, sound-loving audiophile take advantage of these riches? The good news is that you probably already have most of what you need. You *do* own a Mac or a PC, don't you? Fine, then your next step is to install some player software. You can certainly get by with iTunes or Windows Media Player, but frankly that's like using zip cord for speaker cable. Experiencing hi-res audio at its formidable best requires a bit more effort. For the Mac, optimum sound can only be had from software that bypasses the Mac's core audio modules and also adapts dynamically to the source's sample rate. Solid options include Pure Music, Amarra, and Decibel. Similar considerations apply to PCs, so you'll want to download one of the many good

players out there, such as J River or MediaMonkey, as well as the free but essential ASIO4ALL plug-in.

Now you have a source. In standard audio fashion, getting music out of that source requires a cable—in this case a USB cable. Also in keeping with audiophile tenets, the quality of that cable matters. Thankfully, while there are certainly expensive options available, an excellent low-cost alternative exists in the form of the Belkin Gold, procurable at Amazon.com for under ten bucks. Start there, and remember that USB cables sound best in shorter lengths.

At the other end of this cable resides the one potentially new component you'll need: a USB DAC. Like a regular DAC, these devices receive digital signals and convert them to an analog stream that flows to the rest of the system. Unlike other DACs, which typically offer S/PDIF and optical inputs, a USB DAC has the interface necessary to connect to your computer. As TAS coverage reflects, these devices are proliferating manically at all price levels. Yet recent technical advances clearly favor newer models. If you're in the market for a USB DAC, consider only those that support resolutions all the way up to 192/24 over a single cable and incorporate "asynchronous USB," a superior clocking scheme whereby the DAC isn't slaved to the PC's jittery clock.

If you already own a non-USB DAC, fear not; many excellent USB-to-S/PDIF converters are also available. Because both USB DACs and the aforementioned converters are evolving and proliferating so rapidly, reviews quickly become obsolete. Readers should consult only the most recent Editors' Choice and Buyer's Guide issues, and monitor new reviews as they appear.

Now you're ready to download music files. As with every format, not all hi-res downloads are created equal. Our "Download Round-Ups" will help you sort out those that represent significant improvements over their earlier counterparts from those that don't. And since many downloads are offered at varying resolutions, we'll let you know which extra bits are worth the extra bucks.

Our survey of hi-res downloads begins as an occasional feature, but based on your feedback we may adjust how often it appears, and perhaps eventually integrate our evaluations of downloads into our regular reviews of 20th century (some might say "legacy") formats. So let us know your reactions, and how we can improve the "Download Round-Up." High-resolution downloads have come of age as an audiophile source, and we want to bring you the best-informed and most useful coverage possible.

DOWNLOADS

POP/ROCK

Alan Taffel

David Chesky: *Urbanicity*. HDtracks.com \$11.98 (44.1/16), \$14.98 (48/24)

Dense, busy, occasionally manic, yet always driving, always compelling. That's the story of David Chesky's latest set of works. As one would expect given the label, the album's sound is exemplary, although the perspective is surprisingly distant. In comparing the CD-quality download to the CD itself, with both going through the dCS Debussy DAC, I found the download slightly more spacious, and it was easier to hear into the dense mix. The 48/24 version sounds slightly better still, offering greater smoothness in the orchestra and a grittier electric guitar. Moreover, dynamics and upper-end extension feel less constricted. Although these differences are subtle, for just three bucks more the higher-res version is worth the difference.

Paul Simon: *So Beautiful or So What*. HDtracks.com \$17.98 (96/24)

Simon's jubilant new release—his best since *Graceland*—brims with the joy of music-making and the wit of a wizened poet. But here is the secret other reviews don't mention: this album is a killer demo disc (demo file?). It's one of those recordings that makes even your car's audio system sound its best. Needless to say, the 96/24 download is fabulous. The main difference between it and the CD can be heard in vocals; both Simon and the occasional backup singers sound far more natural, less "in your face." This download is highly recommended both sonically and musically. (See review this issue.)

Paul McCartney: *Band on the Run*. HDtracks.com \$19.98 (96/24)

I had intended to compare this download to both the LP and the CD. Unfortunately, my vinyl collection languishes in storage awaiting relocation to a new house, so the 25th Anniversary CD had to suffice. Its sound is pretty rough, and treble is entirely absent. The download simply trounces it. Highs are restored, McCartney's buoyant bass is more defined, and the entire listening experience is far more relaxed. Interestingly, the overall volume level of the download is well below that of the CD, indicating that the CD was probably compressed, goosed up, then clipped like a military crew cut. The download isn't cheap, but it's a no-brainer nonetheless. This music has lost none of its allure, and deserves to be heard at its best.

Sam Cooke: *Ain't That Good News*. HDtracks.com \$19.98 (88/24)

The CD—I actually listened to common tracks from *Portrait of a Legend*—is quite respectable, marred only slightly by astringent violins and generic brass. Much better, though, is the SACD, which features lovely strings and brass that not only can be heard more clearly, but whose timbres really shine. The 88/24 download splits the difference, not quite equaling the SACD's refinement or timbral diversity, but proving more spacious and relaxed than the CD. If you already have the SACD or LP, there's no need to buy yet another format. Otherwise, you'll appreciate this download.

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers: *Damn the Torpedoes*. HDtracks.com \$33.98 (96/24)

The surprising thing about this download is that it differs from the CD in atypical ways. Normally, downloads present a more relaxed yet revealing listening experience; here, the differences involve tonal balance. The 96/24 version is tonally fleshed out, with good solid bass—important factors for a rock album, right? Yet the CD is bare boned from the lower midrange down. In truth, though, this is not a great recording in the best case, so the download only rises to the "good" level. Given the download's hefty price, I'd suggest sticking to your dusty old LP.

The Rolling Stones: *Let it Bleed*. HDtracks.com \$19.98 (88/24), \$29.98 (176/24)

For the purpose of this article, I chose *Let it Bleed* to represent the entire Stones library, now available on HDtracks. All were made from the excellent 2002 ABKCO re-issues. I never found much to complain about those hybrid CD/SACD discs, which are clean and rich in both formats. As usual, the SACD is the less "digital" sounding of the two. How do the downloads

fare? I confess that the 88/24 version disappointed me. There is plenty of detail here—listen to the opening choral notes on "You Can't Always Get What You Want"—and a wider soundstage than the CD; however, it still sounds highly digital. Furthermore, Mick Jagger's voice, as on "Love in Vain," can be so strident as to be off-putting. Fortunately, the 176/24 version has no such failings—it sounds terrific, boasting all the ease of the SACD, along with a remarkable degree of naturally-rendered detail. The 176/24 downloads are truly archive-worthy versions of archive-worthy music.



DOWNLOADS CLASSICAL

Andrew Quint

High-resolution classical music down-loads are, in an important way, a different beast than their jazz and rock counterparts. SACD has had a following among sound-conscious classical listeners far more robust than that of fans of other genres. Except in the instance of older analog material—and sometimes even then—a high-resolution physical disc version of many of the classical recordings chosen for the HD download treatment is frequently available for comparison. A download vs. CD match-up is irrelevant if there's an SACD (or DVD-Audio or Blu-ray) to compare, and that's the case with all 12 of the programs considered here.

There are several areas of controversy that an audiophile wading into high-resolution download waters for the first time should be aware of. The first is whether a music file sold as “high-resolution” is actually as billed. There have been instances of material presented as 88.2 kHz/24-bit or 96 kHz/24-bit that, when subjected to spectrographic analysis, turns out to be of more humble origin. Most of these occasional transgressions are, I believe, honest mistakes and not an attempt to deceive consumers. There's also the issue of upsampling which should be *verboten*: one shouldn't take a 44.1 kHz file, upsample it to 88.2 and market it as HD. But it's also misguided to maintain that only a new digital recording can be considered high-res. The most obvious exceptions are remasterings of the finest analog material that certainly can be fairly viewed as high-resolution. With the downloads considered here, I've made comparisons to the

SACD, DVD-A, or Blu-ray versions and, usually, to the Red Book compact disc, if one exists. The download is *always* superior to the CD and generally indistinguishable from the high-resolution polycarbonate iteration—sometimes better, if it's a 192 kHz file. So, on to a dozen classical programs that can be heartily recommended, both for their musical and sonic merits.

Zephyr: *Voices Unbound*. 96/24 Multichannel. \$27.99. [iTrax.com](#)

Mozart: *Clarinet Quintet. Horn Quintet. String Quartet No. 9 in A. Old City String Quartet*. 96/24 Multichannel. \$27.99. [iTrax.com](#)

Handel: *Concerti grossi, Op. 3. Academy of Ancient Music. Richard Egarr*. 96/24 Multichannel. \$27.99. [iTrax.com](#)

Voices Unbound, available since 2002 as a DVD-A, is among the finest “surrounded” recordings I've ever heard. There's direct sound behind the listening position because there's supposed to be, and it serves a musical end. AIX founder, producer, and engineer Mark Waldrep configured Zephyr's 12 vocalists in a circle, each with his or her own microphone, and the effect is stunning. The repertoire ranges from French chansons to English madrigals to modern settings. One of many memorable selections is “Bright Morning Star,” a luminous arrangement of a

traditional Appalachian tune that will leave you holding your breath.

AIX's latest release is an all-Mozart affair featuring the Old City String Quartet, four musicians who began playing together at Philadelphia's prestigious Curtis Institute. The high point of this recital is the Clarinet Quintet, K.581, with Ruokal Chen joining the young string players for a performance of exceptional poise and maturity. The 5.1 “Stage Mix” will be too much for some, exhilarating for others; there are stereo and “Audience Mix” multichannel download options for the faint-of-heart.

iTrax carries a relatively small but choice number of programs from other labels, including Harmonia Mundi. Richard Egarr's traversal of Handel's Op. 3 Concerti grossi is historically informed but expressive and joyous, rhythmically alert and affectionately shaped. Solo instrumental voices are beautifully characterized, especially the woodwinds—there's no problem distinguishing a wooden flute from recorders. Subtle dynamic swells within phrases, even with a single sustained note, are readily discerned, as they were on SACD.



DOWNLOADS

CLASSICAL

Bach: Easter and Ascension Oratorios. Retrospect Ensemble. 192/24. \$27.00. Linnrecords.com

Granados: Goyescas. Albéniz: Iberia. Artur Pizarro, piano. 192/24. \$27.00. Linnrecords.com

Dvořák: Symphony No. 7. Suite in A major. Budapest Festival Orchestra, Iván Fischer. 192/24. \$27.00. Linnrecords.com

The Retrospect Ensemble's Bach performances are pretty much ideal—four outstanding soloists, a chorus of 18 that has satisfying heft yet is still light on its feet with contrapuntal passages, and an “original instruments” approach that's bracing but never studied or sterile. The two longest arias are especially ravishing, both soprano Carolyn Sampson's “Seele, deine Spezereien” and countertenor Iestyn Davies' sublime “Ach, bleibe doch, mein liebstes Leben”. The recorded perspective is close enough for textural clarity, but spacious enough to savor the warmth of the London church venue.

Artur Pizarro's fluent and idiomatic readings of two Spanish piano masterworks were favorably reviewed in TAS last year. These are expansive, thoughtfully paced, and richly colored performances. Pizarro's use of a Blüthner grand piano for the recording instead of the ubiquitous Steinway also contributes to the success of his interpretation.

Like iTrax, Linn sells downloads sourced from other labels, including many items from Channel Classics' superb catalog. Iván Fischer's justly lauded Dvořák recordings include this pairing of Symphony No. 7, one of the composer's more serious and ambitious works, with Dvořák's own orchestration of an earlier piano composition, the five-movement Suite

in A major—a work with a decidedly American flavor, in the spirit of the *New World* Symphony.

The 192/24 downloads do represent a significant improvement over the SACD DSD version. On the piano program, for example, there's greater focus, a sense of the attack of each note being connected to the rest of the sound that follows, and a better feel for the three-dimensional quality of the instrument.

Haydn: String Quartet in D, Op.76, No.5. Solberg: String Quartet. Edvard Grieg: String Quartet. Engegårdkvarterten. 96/24 Multichannel. \$33.40. 2Lmusicon-line.no

Fred Jonny Berg: Flute Mystery. Warning Zero. Pastorale. Vicino alla Montagna. Flute Concerto No. 1. Emily Beynon, flute. Philharmonia Orchestra, Vladimir Ashkenazy. 96/24 Multichannel. \$33.40. 2Lmusicon-line.no

Arvid Engegård has known that playing in a string quartet would be his life's work since he was 10. His eponymous ensemble presents one work each from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries with complete technical and stylistic assurance. The Norwegian ensemble may feel a proprietary attachment to the Grieg G minor quartet, perhaps the best-known Scandinavian chamber work in the standard repertoire, and their performance is white hot. Another son of Norway is the long-lived Leif Solberg, whose Quartet in B minor is solidly constructed, immediately engaging fare. Many of 2L's multichannel recordings are of the “immersive” sort and here, viola and cello are easily discernable in the rear speakers. It's an engineering choice that will appeal to many who have played chamber music: listening becomes more of a participatory experience.

Fred Jonny Berg is a prolific Norwegian composer approaching 50, whose unapologetically tonally-based music is cinematic in the best sense of the word—highly evocative without seeming merely decorative. Berg writes quite idiomatically for flute and, in addition to the title track, a highly atmospheric 14-minute reverie that also features harp prominently, we hear his moody Flute Concerto No. 1. 2L's 5.1 recording is luxuriantly spacious, with exceptional air and dimensionality.

Brahms: Requiem. Christine Schäfer, soprano; Michael Volle, baritone. Tanglewood Festival Chorus. Boston Symphony, James Levine. 88/24 Multichannel. \$12.99. bso.org/bso/shop

It's not clear why many HD downloads are as expensive as they are. The Boston Symphony's high-resolution offerings are a notable exception, and it gets better: you can purchase a year-long subscription for \$50 and get everything the Orchestra puts on-line in any format, including 88/24 multichannel files.

By coincidence, I attended one of the September 2008 concerts from which this recording derived. It was—is—a profoundly moving performance. My seat was roughly two-thirds of the way back on the main floor of Symphony Hall, where I had a powerful impression of the room supporting the grandeur of Levine's reading. The surround version, in particular, comes close to duplicating that experience.

Cantate Domino. Oscar Motet Choir. Alf Linden, organ. 88/24. \$14.38. HDtracks.com
Rameau: Une symphonie imaginaire. Les Musiciens du Louvre, Mark Minkowski. 88/24 \$17.98. HDtracks.com

Verdi: Requiem. Soloists, Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; Ricardo Muti. 88/24. \$19.98. HDtracks.com

HDtracks is the biggest high-resolution download show in town, with close to 200 labels on board at this point. Included are small audiophile operations like Proprius that, 35 years ago, recorded *Cantate Domino*, a varied program of mostly sacred music performed in a Stockholm church. Spatially, the program is utter magic—there are moments when you'd swear you were listening in surround—and the subtlety with which voices are reproduced is extraordinary. Try the familiar French Christmas carol “Il est né, le divin enfant.”

Une symphonie imaginaire fashions a coherent and engaging hour of instrumental music from material gleaned from a dozen stage works by Baroque composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. The selections are often quirky and strangely modern-sounding, early program music that ranges from maniacally propulsive dances to surprisingly soulful pieces, such as “Entrée de Polymnie” from *Les Boréades*. The stereo recording is impressively open.

Ricardo Muti led a highly regarded version of Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* for EMI over three decades ago. Both that performance and this one, recorded in January of 2009 and released on the Chicago Symphony's house label as a hybrid multichannel SACD, are melodramatic renditions of a very melodramatic composition, even if the earlier version has a bit more operatic volatility. Muti has at his disposal here a quartet of *Aida*-ready soloists, an impeccably prepared chorus, and, of course, one of the finest orchestras on the planet. The less bombastic sections are thoroughly satisfying while the most cataclysmic pages of the “Dies Irae” hold together well sonically: bass drum thwacks realistically represent a large hollow instrument being clobbered with a cloth-covered mallet, rather than gunfire.