


# TONEAudio.

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## THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN

# Shunyata Aurora Interconnects & Stratos SP Speaker Cable

By Jeff Dorgay



On any given day, you can start about 50 separate arguments about whether high-performance signal cables make a difference in how your HiFi system will sound. Unfortunately, most of the arguments are fairly flawed, and will confuse anyone just tuning in. One so-called expert claims that everything sounds the same and that expensive cable is snake oil. Others have flavors of the month, with unbridled excitement for the latest concoction.

My reality, if you choose to follow along with my rationale, is that cables *do* make a difference in how your system sounds. But because of the electrical properties of cable (resistance, inductance, capacitance, just to name a few), they can be tone controls at the worst and an effective conduit at the best. The most-effective cable will transmit everything your equipment is capable of delivering without altering the signal, and trust me, this is always much easier said than done.

Taking this logic to its ultimate conclusion, the more expensive cable at the fringe of affordability requires the most care; I believe it can make or break a high-performance system.

For about six months, I have been living with the Shunyata Aurora interconnects along with their Stratos SP speaker cables. The Aurora interconnects represent their top product range and the Stratos, one step from the top. The interconnects cost \$7,500 a pair (one meter length) and an eight-foot pair of the Stratos SP speaker cable runs \$6,000.

I realize that this is a lot of money for cable, but in an extremely high performance system, it's not outrageous. Fortunately, the Shunyata not only delivers the goods, it provides a level of performance that a number of cables from other companies in the \$800 – \$3,000 range simply do not.

### **The Product and the Process**

All of Shunyata's cable products are hand-built by one of their master technicians at their factory in Poulsbo, Washington. If you'd like a little more background information, take a peek at Issue 22, where we interviewed company principle Caelin Gabriel and took a tour of the facility. Everything there is race-shop tidy and all the Aurora and Stratos cables are meticulously assembled.

Each cable is hand-braided using Shunyata's patented Helix geometry, then terminated and tested. The RCA-based cables utilize WBT NEXTGen RCA plugs, and the XLR connectors use Shunyata's own XLR connectors with gold-plated OFC copper. Once finished, all cables undergo cryogenic treatment, which is all done in house.

Gabriel is a perfectionist, and he pays incredibly close attention to even the most-minute details. Having visited the sound room at Shunyata, I can vouch for their listening room. It is a very musical yet very resolving room so that the smallest details can be identified and modified until Gabriel is pleased with the results. This underscores my point that a high-performance system is necessary for hearing minute differences in cable.

### **Setup**

Most of my listening was done with my reference components, consisting of a Burmester 011 Preamplifier, Burmester 911 MK 3 power amplifier, Nagra VPS phono stage and Wadia 781SE SACD player/DAC, along with the MartinLogan CLX speakers and JL Audio F110 subwoofers. All interconnects in this system were terminated with XLR connectors. I keep all my cables off the floor with Shunyata's Dark Field elevators for the final touch.

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I had been using a combination of Shunyata Anteres interconnects and Orion speaker cables, with a little bit of Cardas Golden reference sprinkled in. It would be an understatement to say that my system took another substantial jump in resolution immediately after installing the Aurora/Stratos combination. About a week of round-the-clock playing, things settled down even more.

It's worth noting that even though these are fairly substantial cables with 12 conductors of 13-gauge wire in the interconnects and 12 conductors of 9-gauge wire in the speaker cables, they are very easy to work with and not stiff, like some of other mega cables I've tried.

### **The Sound**

Let's cut to the chase. After six months of listening, I think the Aurora/Stratos combination is fantastic. I've had the chance to listen to these cables with my reference gear as well as making them part of about 50 product reviews. What really stands out is that these cables not only let more information through my system than I've ever experienced, they do so without the least bit of change to the tonality of my system.

I've had the opportunity to listen to a *lot* of cable over the years. When I substituted these for the last generation of Shunyata cable (which I was very fond of), the sound was so clean, I could hear the grain present in the older cables when I swapped them back in.

I have an extremely revealing system, so it's quite easy to hear how and where a cable affects the tonal balance. Some things bump the highs while others alter the low frequencies, and others can round off the fine details in the music. These two top cables from Shunyata had none of these issues, and they were extremely consistent no matter what speakers or electronics I used them with.

### **Much Ado About Nothing**

The toughest part about this review is that the best part of the Shunyata Aurora/Stratos combination is their high degree of nothingness. No matter what I was listening to, I never felt that the cables were altering the sound quality of any gear I auditioned. If you are a crazed audiophile, you probably have a few different cables (as do I) in your bag of tricks for problem components. *(continued)*

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The better your room, system and recordings are, the easier it will be for you to hear just what these cables can do. Or more accurately, what they don't do.

These top-of-the-line Shunyata cables are not tone controls; they let all the music through in a way I haven't experienced before. No matter what recordings I listened to, I just heard *more* music. Backgrounds were deeper and blacker but not at the expense of rounding off leading or trailing transients. This also resulted in a larger soundfield, exhibiting an image that was noticeably bigger in all three dimensions.

After extended listening with pieces of music that I've heard repeatedly on my reference system, everything was much more relaxed overall, yet with all the dynamics firmly in place. The closest thing to which I can compare the Aurora/Stratos experience is listening to a master tape for the first time, as opposed to hearing a record or CD that has been made from a copy a few generations removed. You are familiar with the music, but so much more nuance comes through.

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Just to make sure I wasn't drinking the Shunyata Kool-Aid, after months of getting accustomed to the sound of these cables, I went back two steps to see just how much difference there really was. Even going back to the top-quality cable that I use in my living-room system (which costs about an eighth of what the Shunyata cable does), the whole soundfield collapsed substantially. I not only lost dynamics and fine detail, but I also lost the top to bottom coherence to which I had really grown accustomed.

Next, I swapped between the Shunyata and off-the-shelf Radio Shack cables. These were dreadful. All of my curmudgy audiophile friends who don't believe in cable, they get this demo and all cave in and admit that, yes, cable just might be a critical component.

On another note, the Aurora cables have been a fantastic tool to use when reviewing gear across the price spectrum. While they are certainly overkill for a modestly priced amplifier or CD player, I know the cable is not getting in the way of the evaluation process, and that has made them invaluable.

### The Bottom Line

As I mentioned at the beginning of the review, outfitting your system with cable like this is a serious investment. Shunyata has an excellent dealer network and I highly suggest giving the Aurora/Stratos combination (or perhaps an all-Aurora combination) a test drive in your system. It's definitely my favorite and my system has never sounded better.

Keep in mind though, that I suggest this cable only for someone who has a top-notch system. If you have a modest system or serious room issues, keep in mind that this kind of cable is not going to make a \$1,000 amplifier sound like a \$20,000 amplifier or fix a bad room. Actually the better your room, system and recordings are, the easier it will be for you to hear just what these cables can do. Or more accurately, what they don't do.

After a major audition, I am happy to award Shunyata our Product of the Year award in the cable category. This is truly a state-of-the-art product that I am very happy to be using as a reference component. ●

**Shunyata Aurora Interconnects**  
MSRP: \$7,500 (one-meter pair)

**Shunyata Stratos SP**  
**Speaker Cables**  
MSRP: \$6,000 (eight-foot pair)

### MANUFACTURER

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Poulsbo, WA 98370 USA  
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### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Source** Wadia 781SE, Naim 555, Sooloos Music Server

**Analog Source** Spiral Groove SG-2w/TriPlanar arm, Lyra Skala cartridge, TW Acoustic Raven Two with SME iV.Vi arm and Clearaudio DaVinci cartridge, SME 309 arm w/ Dynavector XV-1s cartridge.

**Phono Preamplifier** Nagra VPS with VFS platform, Manley Steelhead, Naim Stageline with Supercap supply

**Preamplifier** Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Burmester 011

**Power Amplifier** Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Burmester 911 MK 3, McIntosh MC1.2kw, SimAudio Moon W-7 monoblocks

**Speakers** MartinLogan CLX w/JL Audio Gotham Subwoofer, Harbeth Monitor 40.1, GamuT S-7, Verity Audio Sarastro II, YG Acoustics Anat Professional II.

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco power conditioners, RSA Mongoose and HZ power cords, Shunyata Hydra 2 power conditioner, Shunyata Python CX power cords, Shunyata Anaconda power cords

**Accessories** Furutech DeMag, Manley Massive Passive Studio Mastering Equalizer, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators