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BUYER'S GUIDE TO  
**CABLES, POWER PRODUCTS,  
ACCESSORIES, & MUSIC**



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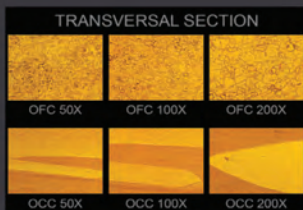


## INTERCONNECT FEATURES

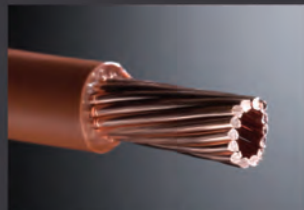
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OHNO Continuous Cast Copper (OCC)



VTX™ conductors



OFE 101 Certified Copper



Shunyata XLR Connectors



STIS Cable Terminals



Shunyata RCA Connectors



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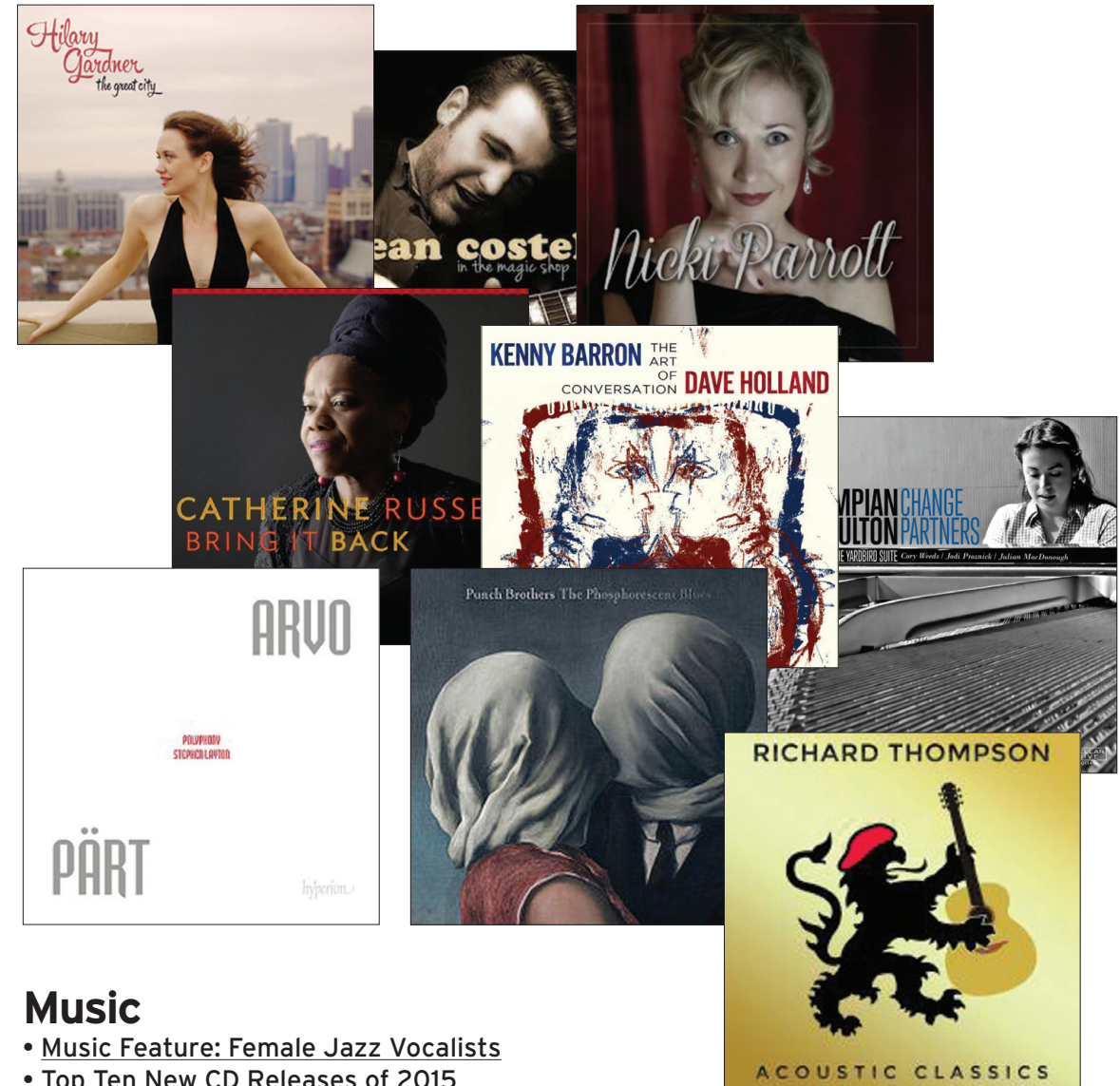
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# Purist Audio Design

A high-end manufacturer for over 30 years, Purist Audio Design still makes our products here in the USA. Our quality materials reduce EMI, RF, and mechanical vibrations to allow the purest sound possible. We've never believed that quality should stop with materials. That is why each cable is made right here in Texas, the way it should be.

Let us connect you to the music at [www.puristaudiodesign.com](http://www.puristaudiodesign.com).



# the absolute sound

## BUYER'S GUIDE TO CABLES, POWER PRODUCTS, ACCESSORIES, & MUSIC

**publisher**..... Jim Hannon  
**editor-in-chief**..... Robert Harley  
**executive editor**..... Jonathan Valin  
**acquisitions manager  
and associate editor**..... Neil Gader  
**managing editor and  
buyer's guide editor** ..... Julie Mullins

**creative director** ..... Torquil Dewar  
**art director** ..... Shelley Lai  
**production** ..... Rachel Holder

**webmaster**..... Garrett Whitten

**senior writers** ..... Anthony H. Cordesman  
Wayne Garcia  
Robert E. Greene  
Jim Hannon  
Tom Martin  
Dick Olsher  
Andrew Quint  
Paul Seydor  
Steven Stone  
Alan Taffel

**reviewers &  
contributing writers** ..... Duck Baker, Greg Cahill,  
Stephen Estep,  
Jacob Heilbrunn, Sherri  
Lehman,  
Ted Libbey, David McGee,  
Kirk Midtskog, Bill  
Milkowski, Derk Richardson,  
Jeff Wilson

**nextscreen, LLC**  
**chairman and ceo** ..... Tom Martin  
**vp/group publisher** ..... Jim Hannon

**advertising reps** ..... Cheryl Smith  
(512) 891-7775

Scott Constantine  
(609) 275-9594

Marvin Lewis  
MTM Sales  
(718) 225-8803

Address letters to the Editor:  
The Absolute Sound  
2601 McHale Court  
Austin, TX 78758 or  
rharley@nextscreen.com  
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# From the Editor

Welcome to the 2015 Buyer's Guide to Cables, Power Products, Accessories, and Music!

Connections between components matter. Cables, interconnects, and power products not only form critical links between your components and power sources, they also impact your system's sound. And music, as we know, is why we're involved in this hobby.

We've combined all those in this "powerhouse" guide, where you'll find:

- Sneak previews of 14 brand-new, "On the Horizon" products that will soon be reviewed in TAS.
- 29 full-length reviews of cables, interconnects, power products, and accessories—across a range of prices.
- Robert Harley's sage advice on how to choose cables and interconnects, and what to listen for when choosing them, and a glossary of cable terms (excerpted the latest edition of his classic *Complete Guide to High-End Audio*).
- Top Ten Lists of 2015's best music—across genres and formats—culled by TAS Music Editor Jeff Wilson, plus a music feature on female jazz vocalists.

No matter what your connection preferences or musical tastes, we hope you'll find this guide to cables, power products, accessories, and music both entertaining and informative.

Happy listening!

Julie Mullins, Editor

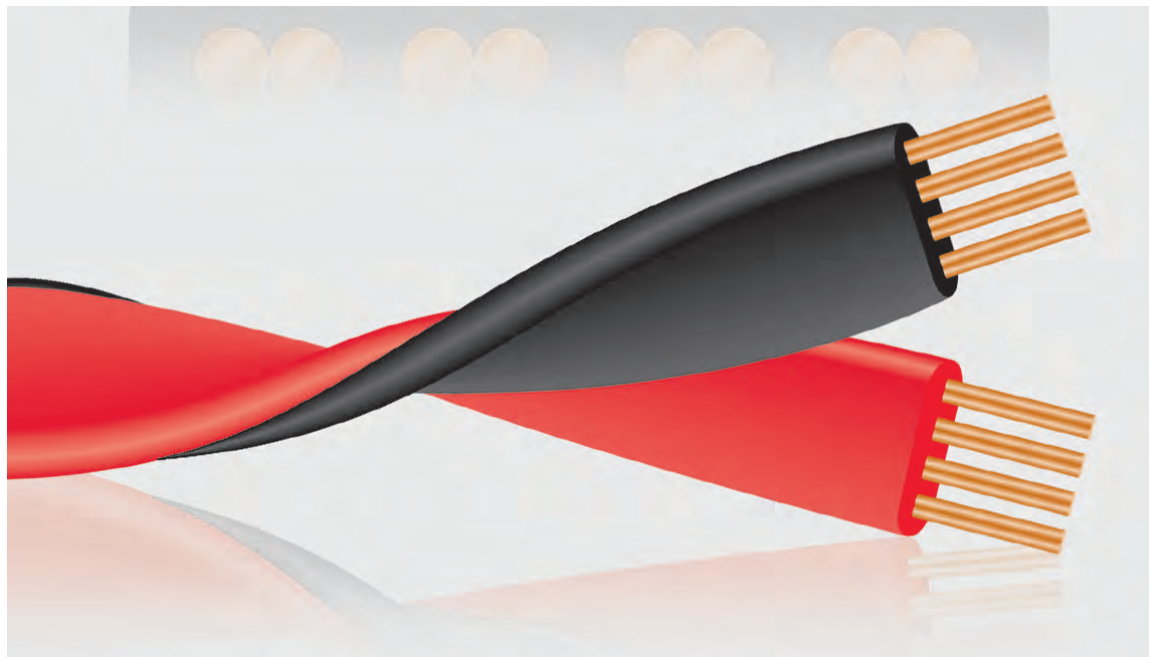
The advertisement features a collection of Nordost cables in various colors: White Lightning, Purple Flare, Blue Heaven, and Red Dawn. The cables are shown in a dynamic, flowing arrangement against a blue and purple background. The LEIF logo, a stylized sailboat inside a circle, is prominently displayed in the upper right corner. Below the cables, the text "BRING YOUR MUSIC TO LEIF" is written in large, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the Nordost logo is accompanied by the tagline "MAKING THE CONNECTION". A circular badge in the bottom right corner announces the "2015 the absolute sound Editors' Choice Awards". The website "www.nordost.com" and the phone number "1 800 836 2750" are listed at the bottom, along with "Made in USA" and an American flag icon.

BRING YOUR MUSIC TO LEIF

NORDOST  
MAKING THE CONNECTION

2015  
the absolute sound  
Editors' Choice  
Awards





# On the Horizon

Hot New Products Coming Your Way

Neil Gader





## WyWires Diamond

Diamond is the newest cable in WyWires' expanding lineup. The Diamonds have a brand-new internal configuration that takes all that WyWires has learned to create a new concept in litz wire air dielectric design. Diamond cables contain a complex combination of different conductor and dielectric materials that have been optimized to provide a neutral and well-balanced tone, along with detail retrieval that goes beyond what WyWires has been able to do in the past. They promise to achieve a superior level of transparency and dynamics designed to enhance the listener's music enjoyment experience. Identified by a subtle sheen on black with carbon-fiber tubing on either end, there's a discreet etched black medallion that moves along the cable that allows the owner to slip WyWires branding out of sight.

**Price:** \$7995 (speaker cables), 8' pr.; \$4495 (interconnect cables), 1.2m pr. (RCA or XLR)  
[wywires.com](http://wywires.com)



## MIT Articulation Control Consoles

"Toward a visceral response" is the new direction MIT is heading with the release of this new line they coined the "Articulation Console Series." There are three versions in this series with each model outfitted with three articulation controls on each channel dashboard, plus a unique "2C3D" switch. Articulation control is now possible over three sections of the bandwidth, which allows the listener to adjust for challenging room conditions, equipment changes, and (sometimes) software choices. The 2C3D switch engages more circuits to produce or "throw" more energy out into the room, which helps to continue the suspension of disbelief that a live performance is within reach. Visit the MIT website

for more information on the Articulation Console Series, Multipole Technology, and 2C3D. Articulation Control Consoles are shipping now for a 2016 release.

**Price:** \$49,000-\$80,000.

[mitcables.com](http://mitcables.com)



## Tributaries Series 8

Engineered with 12-gauge Long Crystal Copper (LC-OFC) conductors cast in a strict environment to deliver a lower crystal count per foot—and said to result in less signal loss or distortion, the Series 8 power cables won't starve power amplifiers of current. High frequencies should be rolled off as much as possible as these would simply represent noise in this type of cable. Because the powerline alternates polarity 60 times a second, vibration isolation needs to be considered utilizing proper dielectric materials. Series 8 power cables rely on proprietary winding techniques and triple shielding to limit EMI egress and ingress, thus designed to ensure the lowest noise floor for sensitive source components.

**Price:** \$160/3"; \$250/6"; \$340/9". [tributariescable.com](http://tributariescable.com)



## Straightwire Expressivo Grande

The Expressivo Grande utilizes six Compressed Conductor Technology (CCT) "air suspended" positive conductors at 15 AWG of OFHC Copper. The effective resistance is 7 AWG per polarity in standard termination and 10 AWG per polarity in bi-wire mode. Multiple low dielectric insulations are employed to optimize mechanical and electrical performance. Dual spiral negative conductor shields are covered with anti-static black fiber followed with a durable PET mesh (choice of white, gray or black). Dynamic passages are effortless via a modified Symmetrical Helix design. The cable delivers three-dimensional spatial cues with ease while preserving the timbre and tonality of the original recordings. Upper register frequencies have great air space and harmonic structure while lower registers offer remarkable weight and authority.

**Price:** \$1180 per 8' pr.; \$120 per additional foot per pr. [straightwire.com](http://straightwire.com)



## Heimdall 2 Ethernet Cable

Nordost's new Heimdall 2 Ethernet cable is the perfect solution for digitally driven hi-fi enthusiasts. This groundbreaking cable allows NAS devices and music streamers to be fully integrated into a hi-fi system, while improving its sonic performance. The Heimdall 2 Ethernet cable consists of eight 23 AWG polymer-insulated conductors, arranged in four individually shielded, twisted pairs, which are then wrapped in braided, silver-plated copper shielding, and encased within a high-density polymer insulation before being cut to a mechanically-tuned length. This cable supports frequencies of 1000MHz and transmission speeds of up to 40Gbits/second, exceeding the bandwidth needed for today's data demands. The Heimdall 2 Ethernet cable is terminated with a completely shielded and ruggedized 8P8C/RJ45 connector designed to further resist EMI and Electro Static Discharge (ESD).

**Price:** \$699/1m. [nordost.com](http://nordost.com)





## Morrow Audio Elite Grand Reference

Morrow Audio's Elite Grand Reference speaker cables contain 384 runs of Morrow's SSI Technology wiring consisting of solid-core, small-gauge, silver-coated copper wire, which is silver soldered, then joined to Furutech terminations. The Elite Grand Reference has a striking white nylon mesh jacket comfortably sealing Morrow's proprietary gauge and silver/copper wiring. The handcrafted cables are extremely flexible and easily managed. As its "Elite" name suggests, listeners ought to expect a truly engaging musical experience within this competitive upper echelon of speaker cables—and it's practically guaranteed: Elite orders come with a free 10-day break-in service, lifetime warranty, and 60-day returns. Options include standard, bi-wired, and bi-amped versions. Custom lengths and orders are also available.

**Price:** \$3995, 2m/pr.  
[morrowaudio.com](http://morrowaudio.com)



## Russ Andrews/Kimber Kable Nohm

The Russ Andrews/Kimber Kable co-designed range of Nohm (pronounced nohm) speaker cables are designed to leverage the inherent noise rejection capabilities of the Kimber braided designs. The concept of pure, clean, fast, with greatly enhanced noise reduction is accomplished with both simple and sophisticated designs and manufacture. For instance, there is a complex arrangement of non-ferrite and non-inductive passive components housed in the wooden pods at either end of the cable. The feel and look of the cable is pleasing to the eye and to the touch. Four-axis, machined hardwood finished pods in hand-rubbed oil is matched to three-axis, precision-machined end caps. To manufacture one pair of cables requires at least 30 hours. A truly bespoke product, in design, manufacture, and materials.

**Price:** Speaker cables, Nohm LS Cu, 2.5m, \$31,602/pr.; Nohm LS Ag, 2.5m, \$64,848/pr. Other lengths and models are available.  
[kimber.com](http://kimber.com), [russandrews.com](http://russandrews.com)



## AudioQuest Niagara 7000 Low-Z Power Noise-Dissipation System

AudioQuest has introduced the Niagara

7000 Low-Z Power Noise-Dissipation System, a complete rethinking of AC power filtration, regeneration, and conditioning, designed by noted expert Garth Powell. The Niagara 7000 is designed to allow high-performance audio systems to achieve up to 30 percent greater resolution of low-level content, which is often lost due to AC and RF noise and distortion masking effects. Its proprietary Transient Current Correction (90 amps peak/25ms) is engineered to optimize the performance of power amplifiers. Niagara 7000 incorporates AudioQuest's patented AC Ground Noise-Dissipation System, patent-pending Dielectric-Biased Symmetrical Power Isolation Transformers, optimized lead directionality, and NRG-Edison AC outlets featuring the tightest clamping grip contacts in the industry.

**Price:** \$7995. [audioquest.com](http://audioquest.com)

## Purist Audio Design Neptune

Released this year, Purist Audio's Neptune speaker cable promises to deliver a romantic sound and a 3-D soundstage. The manufacturer has crafted the Neptune using ultra-high-quality SCC (Single Crystal Copper) strands with a P.E. dielectric and treated the full cable with its proprietary Triple Cryomag process—resulting in a very low resistance of 0.000999 ohm/FT. The cables are designed with an isolated positive and isolated negative per channel to further enhance the sound. Quality materials and expert construction combined with the fluid dampening reduces EMI and mechanical vibrations, and Purist's custom interchangeable connectors are designed to improve ease of use. Available in spade, banana, or most custom connectors.

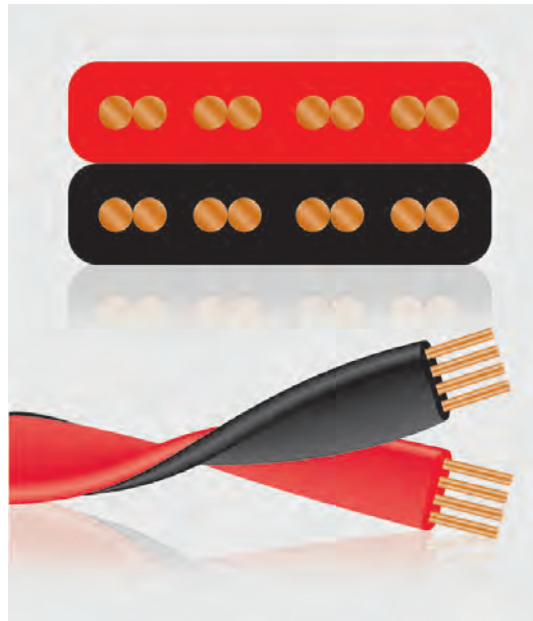
**Price:** \$2545, 1.5m/pr. (\$360 for each additional 0.5m). [purist.com](http://purist.com)



## Wireworld Helicon 16

Wireworld's Helicon 16 is a new series of compact speaker cables designed for internal wiring and DIY applications. These highly flexible cables consist of two flat conductors twisted and bonded together in a helical structure that stabilizes the conductors without the need for an external jacket. It also provides the uniquely lifelike sound quality of Wireworld's patented DNA Helix conductor geometry. Inside the two flat insulated conductors are sixteen parallel copper strands arranged as eight pairs. The gaps between those pairs are essential, because they channel electromagnetic signal energy to provide audible and measurable improvements in fidelity. Helicon 16 is also very easy to strip and connect to internal or external speaker terminals. Cable will be available with OFC or OCC-7N copper conductors.

**Price:** \$5-\$20/ft. [wireworldcable.com](http://wireworldcable.com)



## Shunyata Venom Series

The Venom Signal cables are Shunyata Research's answer to the trend toward the astronomical in high-performance cable pricing. To make a new value statement, Shunyata Research has invested its material and technical resources into the design and construction of products that offer performance and quality at an affordable price. Starting with premium Ohno cast copper as the base metal, Venom Series cables set an expensive-metals standard. In addition, Venom signal cables utilize Shunyata Research's exclusive VTX (hollow-core) conductors and the company's own custom brand of premium copper connectors and interchangeable speaker terminals. Finding this material grade in expensive cables may not be a certainty, which is why Shunyata chose its least-expensive products for this quality counterpoint offering.

**Price:** \$295, 1m/pr. XLR or RCA (interconnects); \$595, 2m/pr. (speaker cables). [shunyata.com](http://shunyata.com)

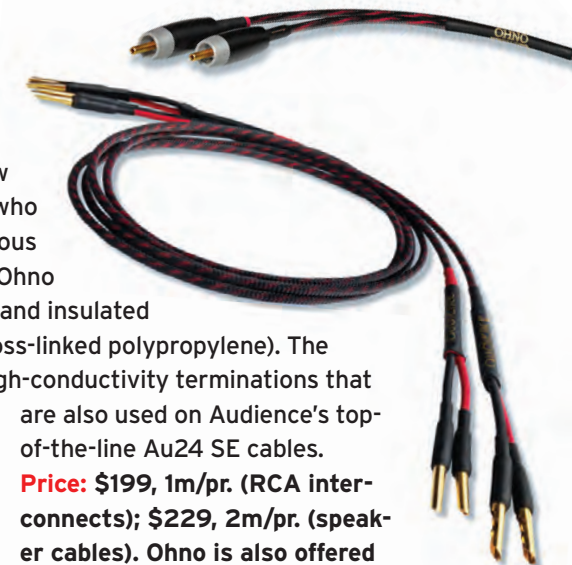


## Audience Ohno

Audience has broken through existing barriers to entry-level high-end audio cables with its new Ohno line. Named in honor of Dr. Atsumi Ohno, who invented the process of making "Ohno" continuous cast wire, aka mono crystal. The new Audience Ohno cables are made with 6Ns mono crystal copper and insulated with the highest achievable quality of XLPE (cross-linked polypropylene). The connectors feature the same ultra-low-mass/high-conductivity terminations that

are also used on Audience's top-of-the-line Au24 SE cables.

**Price:** \$199, 1m/pr. (RCA interconnects); \$229, 2m/pr. (speaker cables). Ohno is also offered in XLR and SPDIF. [audience-av.com](http://audience-av.com)



## EnKlein David Series Digital

Driven by the growing popularity of digital media and availability of hi-res options, EnKlein is introducing its David Series of digital cables, marking the company's first consumer line. Designed to support the integrity of high-resolution data transmission, one innovation includes the Feed Forward Shield noise cancellation technology, which incorporates a shield energy dissipation controller to reduce conductor distortions and interactions. Another is the proprietary Electromagnetic Interference System Shield (EMISS). The technologies integrate within a solid silver transmission construct system and are said to reduce induced digital hash, mismatch jitter, and the transmission of noise to sensitive downstream componentry. This new addition to the David lineup continues EnKlein's tradition of American artistry and custom handcrafted products. Available in AES, SPDIF, and BNC connector terminations.

**Price:** \$8000 first meter. [enklein.com](http://enklein.com)





## VooDoo Cable Stradivarius Amati Edition

The Stradivarius Amati Edition speaker cable is designed to deliver full-bandwidth transparency and accuracy, balanced with speed, and phase-linearity. It features a complex 6 AWG-conductor geometry constructed with discrete conductor groups of high-purity Cryo-Alloy conductors made of continuous cast pure silver and copper conductors. Each conductor group is encapsulated in ISO-grade Teflon air-core dielectric and wound to proprietary specification for optimal balance of capacitive and inductive interaction. All of the Stradivarius Amati Edition cables use wire and connectors treated in the company's proprietary Cold Fusion process to realign and fuse the molecular structure of the conductive alloy crystals. The cable is also protected from EMI and RFI corruption by concentric active silver-plated copper braid shield. Available in spade or banana terminations.

**Price:** \$3500, 8"/pr. (includes Certificate of Authenticity with Serial Number and Hard-Shell Case). Stradivarius Amati interconnects are also available. [voodocable.net](http://voodocable.net)



24 pf 2013 Writer's Choice Silver Dragon Headphone Cable V3 & Adapters

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It's a David in a world of Goliaths...defies every expectation"

- Neil Gader, The Absolute Sound, May 2014

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# How to Choose Cables and Interconnects

Robert Harley

*Excerpted and adapted from The Complete Guide to High-End Audio (fifth edition). Copyright © 1994-2015 by Robert Harley. hifibooks.com. To order call (800) 841-4741.*

## How to Choose Cables and Interconnects

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, planes, 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 loudspeakers, the bass will probably be soft and the dynamics constricted. Speaker 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 pair of long interconnects between the preamplifier and power amplifier, and several pairs of short interconnects for connections between source components (such as a turntable or DAC) and the preamplifier.

If the power amplifier is located near the speakers, the speaker 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 speaker 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.

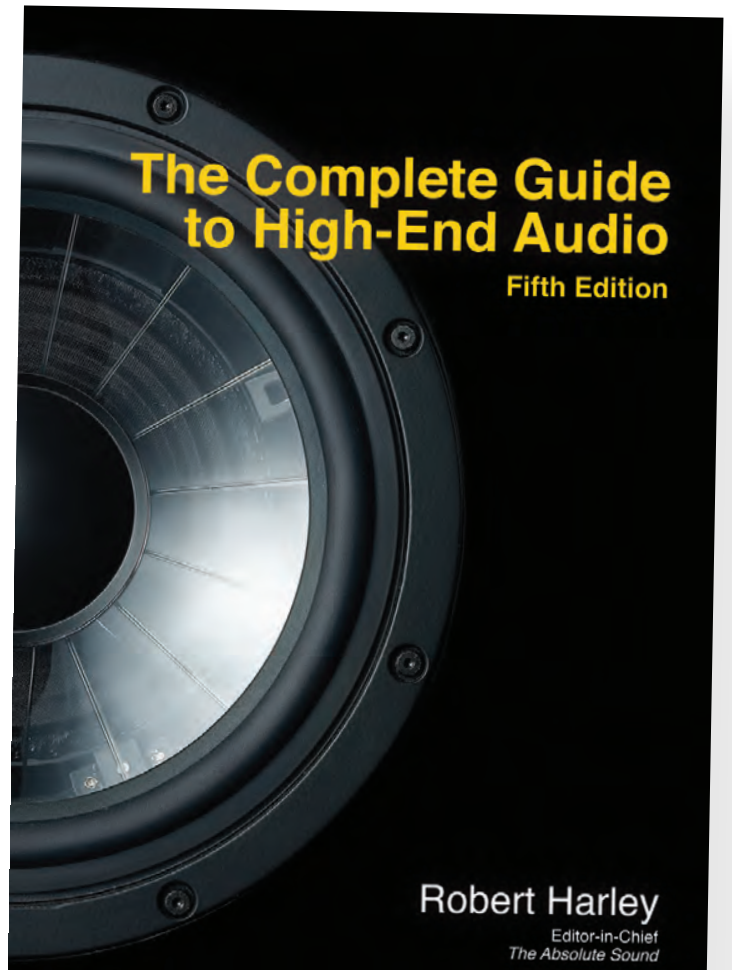
Once you’ve got a feel for how your system is—or will be—configured, make a list of the interconnects and cables you’ll need, and their lengths. Keep all lengths as short as possible, but allow some flexibility for moving loudspeakers, putting your preamp in a different space in the rack, or other possible 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-preamp connections, but too short for many preamp-to-power-amp runs. These long runs are usually custom-made to a specific length. Similarly, speaker cables are typically supplied in 8’ or 10’ pairs, but custom lengths are readily available. It’s better 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 to try 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 often. 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 other sources 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 a mobile device’s analog output—will benefit from good interconnects.

Should all of your interconnects and speaker cables be made by the same manufacturer? Or is it better to mix and





## HOW TO CHOOSE CABLES AND INTERCONNECTS

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

The second school of thought holds that different brands are best. Cables and interconnects made by the same manufacturer tend to share a common sonic signature; using the same interconnect and cable throughout the system will only reinforce that signature. By using cables and interconnects from different manufacturers, the characteristic sonic signature won't be superimposed on the music by every piece of wire.

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 models.

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 permutations 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 to follow your dealer's advice. Try the cables and interconnects he suggests, along with two other brands or models for comparison.

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## Cable Terms

**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 three-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.

**FireWire Cable:** Also called IEEE1394, FireWire is a bidirectional 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 rear panel; 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 rear-panel-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, pins, round lugs over the post, 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 initialism for High-Definition Digital Multimedia Interface, HDMI was developed for home theater to carry high-definition video along with high-resolution digital audio on the same cable.

# What to Listen for When Evaluating Cables

Robert Harley

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Loudspeaker cables and line-level interconnects are an important but often overlooked link in the music-playback chain. The right choice of loudspeaker cables and interconnects can bring out the best performance from your system. Conversely, poor cables and interconnects—or those not suited to your system—will never let your system achieve its full musical potential. Knowing how to buy cables will provide the best possible performance at the least cost.

Cables must be 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 seem to sound better after they have

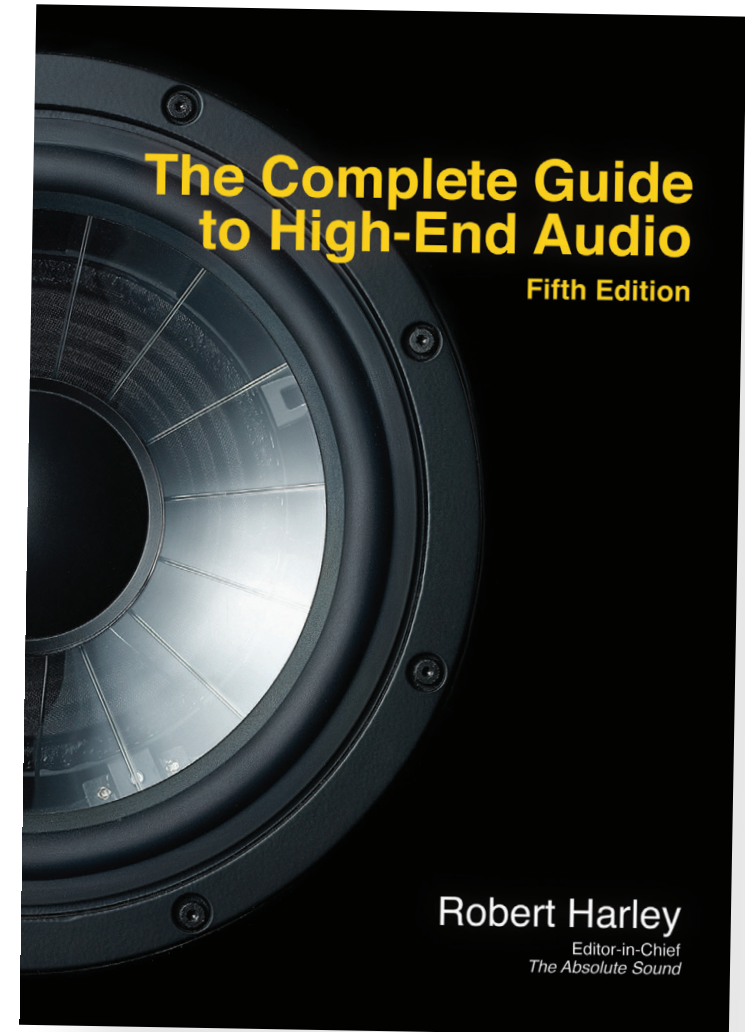
"settled in" for a few days without being moved.

Cables and interconnects can add some annoying distortions to the music. I've listed below 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 sound like compact images. Sibilants (s and sh sounds on vocals) are empha-

**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.**



sized, 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 the upper registers of solo piano. 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 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 regardless of its other attributes.

**Lack of space and depth:** Using a recording with lots of natural depth and ambience, 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 on better speakers—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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**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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# Kimber Kable KS 6000 Series Loudspeaker Cables and Interconnects

Wallets Ready?

Neil Gader



**K**imber Kable's 4PR was the defining entry-level cable for a generation of young audiophiles (including me) back in the early 1980s. Its distinctive brown/black braided design was my constant companion across a vast landscape of beginner systems. Its sound was honest and clean with no discernable tonal colorations to hijack an unwitting hobbyist. At that time it was the rare audiophile who didn't own a pair of 4PRs, and didn't keep them. I still have mine.

Available still, in various and more advanced braided iterations, Kimber's 4PR is a testament to the enduring popularity of the original, a popularity so great, perhaps, that it sometimes obscures the fact that Kimber doesn't just play small ball. It offers some serious Big League products, too. At the summit is Kimber's Select 6000 Series wire, which debuted in 2010 and now vies for prominence in the most respected and competitive venues of the high end—a point that was driven home continually

as I fell under the sway of the crown jewel of Kimber's Select line, the KS 6068 loudspeaker and KS 1036/KS1136 unbalanced and balanced interconnects.

Everything about this blue-chip wire screams extreme (see the sidebar)—its sophisticated construction, geometry, and materials, large cross-section, pure silver conductors, and, yes, breathtaking price. Yet there are paradoxes, too. For example, compared with the unyielding stiffness of so many competitors' cables, the KS 6000 is surprisingly supple and light for its size and girth, easy to maneuver. But there's another area where "extreme" doesn't apply. It's the area of sound. It's here, in the company of a finely tuned audio system, that the Kimber Select settles into such a natural and organic relationship with the music that you forget about the effort that went into designing and building these wires, forget that you're even listening to a system, even forget the hole still smoking in your wallet.

With a tonal balance that's predominately neutral, the KS's overall personality—though not invisible—isn't hard to nail down. And rightly so, as it promptly assumes the character of the system it's immersed in. So, whether your audio rig is strictly grain-free photorealistic or gauzily impressionistic, that's what Kimber is going to give you in return. But that's not to say that this wire is without its own character. There's a feathery, light-footedness to its sound that seemingly doesn't so much add power but transient speed. There's no lag time as Chris Thile's flatpick accelerates across the mandolin strings, and no delay as the Turtle Creek Chorale takes a collective breath before the next bar of Rutter's *Requiem*. The cable moves music in a way that leaves no corner of the

soundstage unaffected. It has both directness and a dimensional component that unerringly position every player on the stage, yet fully immerse them in the surrounding ambience. As I listened to the "Duet for Cello and Bass" from *Appalachian Journey* I found each image physically established yet oh so finely focused, much in the way a precision set of optics edge-sharpens a subject.

By virtue of the combination of pure resolving power and a bottomless well of dynamic contrast and tonal color, the Kimber wire unearths a body of energy and atmospheric lift in even the most familiar recordings. For example, when I launched a weekend Beatles binge-fest listening to the complete LP box set of *The Beatles in Mono* the Kimber captured not only the warm vintage nature of hit songs recorded to analog tape but also the finely wrought precision of these deceptively complex mixes. This was an instance in which every instrument and vocal could be isolated and individually appreciated, even as the recording retains its monaural presentation.

Sonically the KS achieves a level of intimacy and low-level resolution that's almost embarrassing in its nakedness. As I listened to the high-resolution file of "Somewhere" from the San Francisco Symphony's staging of *West Side Story*, I could almost feel the walls shimmering from the diaphragmatic power of the mezzo's performance. As I cued up the DSD file of Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" I became hypnotized by the interplay of Lindsay Buckingham and Christie McVie harmonies backing up the youthful Stevie Nicks. These startling moments add up to a talent for image specificity and macro/micro liveliness that would compel even the most OCD listener to



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Kimber Kable KS 6000 Series

# Building a Better Speaker Cable

Kimber's 6000 Series speaker cable debuted in 2010. In a recent conversation, Nate Mansfield, Kimber's Sales Manager, explained that KS 6068 is an evolution of 3038, which features an all-silver conductor braid with constrained matrix and ESD (Electrostatic Dissipative) yarn woven around a flexible X38R rubber core. The core spaces out the braid and constrains it so that its angles (and polarities) are held perfectly in place in relation to one another and consistently along the length of the cable. Essentially no matter how you bend it the braided geometry stays intact.

The 6068 begins with twelve 20-gauge varistrand silver conductors plus 12 pieces of ESD yarn braided around a smaller core than the 3038, but then braids an *additional* layer of twelve *solid-core* silver conductors, followed by an entire layer of 24 pieces of ESD yarn. Finally the constrained-matrix layer is applied on the outside. Ultimately the finished cable is run through the braider three times. Dimensionally, KS 6068 is roughly the same diameter as 3038 but with a smaller core to accommodate the extra layer of solid-core silver and damping. However, and this is big, there is roughly 50% more conductor in the KS 6068. After three passes through the braiding machines, the 6068 ready for termination with WBT silver sandwich or locking banana plugs.

I asked Mansfield about silver conductors and

the bad sonic rap the material has often received. Silver especially needs to be optimized for audio applications, he explained. At each stage in the process—extrusion, winding, braiding, and finally termination—the silver can be degraded. At the manufacturing stage it needs to be drawn at an ideal

temperature and tension. Flash heating and cooling processes degrade the silver's conductive properties, as do chemical baths. Even as the finished conductor is wound

onto the bobbin at Kimber's Utah factory in preparation for braiding, every inch of wire runs through someone's fingers, searching for imperfections.

The final stage is adding the terminations. And that responsibility falls to WBT. For KS 6068 only WBT Pure Silver Connectors are used with connector options, including silver-sandwich spades, bananas, and silver angled-bananas. And since Kimber uses a gas-impermeable crimp system at the end of each cable, it's easy to swap out connectors in the field. The system is reliable and elegant in that each connector has just two screws, one for strength and another single Torx screw that goes into the crimp. The quality of contact between wire and connector and connector and source is more about correct pressure than contact-patch size. Those curious raised bumps are vital in creating high contact pressure over a small surface area, and are a key player in transferring current between cables and binding posts.

drop whatever he's doing or *thinking* of doing and just sit still and listen.

As great wire has the habit of doing, the Kimber Select prompted me to revisit one of my favorite LPs, the Reference Mastercuts 1992 pressing of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* [RM-1003] with the St. Louis Symphony, Leonard Slatkin conducting. Recorded in Powell Symphony Hall, Saint Louis, the soundstage is somewhat exaggerated in scope, but musically it's a superb recording for timbre, detail, and its "throw-open-the-barn-door" dynamics. Complex piano passages played at *fortissimo* levels never drift or confuse or clutter. In the same way the KS defines and delineates orchestral images, it similarly will take a run of piano notes, played *presto*, and deliver them to the ear without a hint of smear or indecision and not a single nuance left unexpressed.

Of course the Kimber Select also finds itself in some fast and expensive company. Tonally there is not a whole lot separating the KS from my two reference wires, the Synergistic Research Element CTS and Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 7. They both know how to cut a rug with panache, albeit with slightly different moves. Wireworld's flagship matches Kimber Select stride for stride through the mids, and is arguably a bit bolder dynamically in the lower mids and below. Its treble is buttery, but the KS draws an uncanny bead when it comes to feathery, low-level information—the brushed strings of a concert harp, for example, or the decaying flutter off the drum head of a tympani, for another. Element CTS also dances but with a warmer, more boldly resonant style. During Adele's "Someone Like You" her vocal possessed a heavier chest

character and conveyed a hint more density in the lower mids with a darker overall cast. During Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" CTS delivered loads of low-end dynamic punch, more bass, air, and bloom—just a shade more than Platinum Eclipse—but the KS provided greater transient thrills and nuanced detail with every tap off Mick's high-hat, each snare crunch, or Buckingham's raucous acoustic guitar. The KS bass response may be slightly compacted, but Stevie Nicks' youthful voice has never been more shimmering or translucent.

By any benchmark that I'm aware of Kimber Select Series 6000 is as sonically breathtaking as is its price tag. For the life of me I can't think of another a top-tier cable that has ever compelled me to listen quite as deeply as I was able to with these wires. On the one hand it'll expose every weakness in a system. But on the other, it will also permit an otherwise excellent system to realize a whole new level of resolution and musicality. Gulp, wallets at the ready? My highest recommendation. **tas**

## SPECS & PRICING

### KIMBER KABLE

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**Price:** KS 6068 speaker, \$23,880 (2.5m/pr.); KS 1036 interconnect, \$3300/1m, RCA; KS 1136 interconnect, \$3335/1m, XLR

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# Nordost Valhalla 2 Reference Interconnect, Speaker Cable, and Power Cable

Fast, Quiet, Clear

Jacob Heilbrunn

**L**ive music's pop, sizzle, and dynamism is what can make it so downright exciting, but speed is one of the most difficult things to capture in audio. Smaller speakers, particularly mini-monitors, have it, and they can sound devastatingly convincing because of it. I still vividly remember hearing the hurricane gale of sound produced by a pair of Usher BE-718s that was demonstrated in a fairly large room at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. However, it takes more than just loudspeakers to convey such excitement. Everything, from electronics to cables, can have a profound impact.

Perhaps no cable manufacturer has gone to greater lengths to preserve the lifelike speed of live music than the Nordost Corporation. For the past several months I've had the opportunity to use a full set of Valhalla 2 interconnect and speaker cables, as well as power cords. The combo proved to be a ride in the audio fast lane. The Valhalla 2, which has been considerably upgraded from its previous version, is a mesmerizing performer. Unlike its predecessor it never fatigues. (The original Valhalla interconnect and loudspeaker cable I used for several years with the Magnepan 20.1 loudspeaker were also alluring, but eventually I felt that their speed was too much of a good thing.)

To be sure, Valhalla has never been a brumous cable. But it tended to lack body and truncate bass frequencies, and it could take on an edge, particularly in the treble on vocals. The same cannot be said of the Valhalla 2. The new Valhalla features upgraded dual-mono-filament technology that employs ten, silver-plated, 24AWG, oxygen-free-copper conductors (for those of you that scoff at the use of silver, I can only emphatically report that—based on my experience—deployed correctly it offers only plusses). Valhalla 2 also features a specially designed Holo:Plug, a new connector that Nordost says preserves signal integrity and passes on more musical details.

Given my previous experience with Nordost cables, I was very curious to see how the company's products had evolved. Several years ago I heard Nordost's flagship Odin speaker cable at the VTL factory in Chino, CA, and was intrigued by its ability to resolve transient information on a DG pressing of Arturo Benedetti Michaelangeli playing a Beethoven piano concerto. When listening to the Valhalla 2 in

my own room with a variety of amplifiers—the Balanced Audio Technology Rex II, the Jadis JA88S, and the Ypsilon SET 100 Ultimate—I heard this same quality.

I was also immediately impressed by its soundstage depth and smooth tonal balance. When I listened to a CD of the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra's performance of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's harpsichord concertos played by Andrea Staier, the Valhalla 2 seemed to stretch endlessly into the corners of the hall. And talk about smooth! Coupled to the Jadis JA88S, it rendered the brass instruments on an old Vox LP, a label not particularly known for its mellifluousness, with beautiful tonal weight. The trombones had a dense, dark, rich sound that is awfully difficult to reproduce on any recording. And then there was the sheer speed, the delight, of being able to hear the antiphonal effects of renaissance brass music on works by Samuel Scheidt and Thomas Weekles. (It may seem nuts to couple the Valhalla speaker cables to an integrated Jadis that costs \$15,000, but that amp is such a stellar piece that it fully merits top-notch ancillary equipment.)

At the same time, the Valhallas emphatically displayed Nordost's traditional strengths. Consider a recent Harmonia Mundi recording of Beethoven's *Archduke* Trio, performed on fortepiano by Alexander Melnikov with Isabelle Faust on violin and Jean-Guihen Queyras on cello. Melnikov, a fabulous pianist, performs on a restored 1828 instrument. The Valhalla seemed to track every nuance of the mellow sound of the fortepiano, not to mention the exquisite interplay among the performers. None of the strings' bite was shorn off, even as the gracious, lilting swells of the interchange of sixteenth notes were rendered with what



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Nordost Valhalla 2 Reference



seemed like absolute fidelity. On certain crescendos the music seemed to pop from the loudspeakers with thunderous impact, particularly on dotted eighth notes, as Faust and Queyras dug into them with savage ferocity. On such passages the music moved me from admiration of an electronic reproduction to a more exalted state—pure enjoyment of the performance itself, so full of obvious zest and intelligence.

And what about the power cables? Here, the outcome of using the Valhalla 2 is truly prodigious. Everything instantly improved as a result of using this dynamically unconstrained cable. It was easy to detect that the Valhalla lowered the noise floor, and that the bass notes became more defined and stygian. Drums took on a weight and power they did not previously possess—something I noticed on Mavis Staples' album *One True Vine*, as it saturated my room with warm, plush bass. Other instruments, such as guitars, also took on added heft and resonance. In other words, the bennies were evident across the sonic spectrum, in ways both large and small.

Let's face it: The things that audiophiles really cherish are nuances that were heretofore unheard, but, once made apparent, add immeasurably to a recording's sense of verisimilitude. These cables will considerably increase the sonic prowess of the electronics they are mated to, particularly amplifiers.

In assessing the Valhalla, I feel compelled to note that the Odin offers even more of everything. For example, I directly compared an Odin to a Valhalla 2 cable. Both were superlatively quiet, abolishing any residual noise that I might have heard with other cables. But the Odin was

clearly superior—not so much in sheer information but, rather, in the way it presented it. The Odin had a pellucidity that was most appealing. Put bluntly, it simply sounded more open. For those who swear at rather than by high-priced cables, this may be vexing, but I feel obliged to report that in this instance more dollars does translate to even better results.

Still, Valhalla 2 offers much of Odin's performance and is, above all, eminently satisfying. It delivers the whole package: speed, detail, resolution, and musicality. There are other cables that will provide a fuller presentation, others still that will sound zippier, and so on. But Nordost has struck a fine balance here, producing a cable that will elevate the performance of just about any audio system. And my understanding is that Nordost is not standing still, with new products currently in development. If its latest Valhalla line is anything to go by, the company is firmly on the right path. tas

### SPECS & PRICING

**Price:** Valhalla 2 power cord, \$4999/1m (\$1000 for each additional meter); analog interconnects, \$7599/1m pr. (\$1100 for each additional 1/2 meter); 75/75/110-ohm digital cable, \$3299/1.25m; tonearm cable, \$4799/1.25m pr.; speaker cable, \$11,849/2m pr.

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# Harmonic Technology Pro-7 Reference Armour Loudspeaker Cable and Armour Link III Interconnects

Battle-Ready

Neil Gader

**H**armonic Technology Pro-7 Reference Armour and Armour Link III are the firm's top-line speaker cables and interconnects. As the name implies, they more than look the part—their silver-mesh jacketing appears to be as battle-ready as chain mail. Construction and quality control are, indeed, robust and physically imposing to see. In fact, some dear friends unacquainted with how substantial high-end cables can be joked that the sheer weight and girth of the Pro-7 Ref seemed more suitable for use by an electrical utility company, or for suspending a bridge somewhere, or for lying at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean supporting a telecomm sector.

Kidding aside, while sheer size is not necessarily determinative of sonic quality, the complex composition of these cables—fashioned from a handful of key high-tech materials—does explain their appearance. The Pro-7 Ref speaker wire uses single-crystal OCC Litz copper wire *plus* single-crystal OCC silver-plated Litz copper wires in a symmetrical quad-conductor design. The larger conductors are composed of double-layer, single-crystal OCC Litz wire with microporous Teflon insulation,

while the two smaller conductors are a single-crystal OCC silver-plated Litz copper wire with central polyethylene air-tubing. The Armour Link interconnects employ three conductors which have a central polyethylene air-tube and a spiral, double-layer, single-crystal, OCC Litz copper core, plus a run of single-crystal OCC silver-plated Litz copper wire, and finally microporous Teflon insulation. In other words, there's a lot going on here, much of it intended to isolate the wires from RF and EMI.

A word to the wise: Plan the path of your run of Pro-7 Armour wire beforehand. As the word “armour” in its name implies, this is an unwieldy cable that requires a firm hand when it comes to negotiating obstacles. I also wouldn't suggest trying to wire up a lightweight, stand-mount loudspeaker without securing it to a heavy stand with plenty of Blu-tac or a similar ultra-sticky substance. Additionally, the terminals on the back of your amplifier will need to be adequately spaced and heavy-duty enough to handle this stiff wire at its terminations.

That said, the aforementioned set-up challenges quickly recede as the musical delights of Pro-7 Ref and Armour Link III come into play. This system produced highly communicative, musically insightful sonics straight across the board. The Harmonic Technology wires imparted a wide spectrum of tonal colors, micro-shadings, and dynamic contrasts. There was not an element in its overall sonic resume that suggested hype or overreach.

Overall, the HT's tonal character was essentially neutral with just the barest hint of a lighter balance—a characteristic that often accompanies quick transient behavior. As I listened to various vocalists, including Norah Jones covering “The Nearness of You,” it became clear that HT had created a cable that swings cleanly in the midrange with just a hint of forwardness and a small diminution of front/back depth. As mentioned, transient speed was notable; the HT shone on Joe Morello's potpourri of percussion throughout his ever-colorful, ten-minute solo from “Castilian Drums (Live)” with the Dave Brubeck Quartet [Columbia].

The treble had good air and lift with the string

sections on the *largo* from Bach's Concerto No. 5. There was no claustrophobic “lowered ceiling” over the stage—the music's harmonics decayed freely, filling the venue. During the Tchaikovsky Concerto for Violin and Orchestra [DG] I thought that symphonic layering—the delineation of each section of the orchestra row by row—was also very good. These cables achieved a natural balance between sharply focusing soloist Anne-Sophie Mutter's violin and truthfully reproducing the flavor of the ensemble.

The HT managed to illuminate detail without adding any grit or etch to the upper octaves. If anything it might have been just a little forgiving on top, sweetening harmonics and rounding and smoothing the often complex and shifting textures of voices and strings. Bass response was similarly balanced, with impeccable pitch definition—an uncanny ability to clearly “sing” the notes—from acoustic bass, bass/kickdrum, and even the seismic rumblings of pipe organ.

What captured my attention most of all was the HT Armour's ability to elicit dynamic gradients from recordings. For example, there's the rich, immersive atmosphere that the Turtle Creek chorale generates on Rutter's *Lux Aeterna* [Reference Recordings]. Listen closely and you can hear the chorus intensifying in volume at critical moments, moving great waves of air and then backing off. It's these small, graduated shifts that help build the deep spiritual emotion of the piece. In the midst of this, all the low-level information is preserved, from the rumble of the organ, which anchors the performance, to the supportive cello and harp. In fairness, I've heard this piece through many reference wires and though in some



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Harmonic Technology Pro-7

instances the organ has had a little more depth and weight, and the massed voices of the chorale greater upper-harmonic delicacy, the Harmonic Technology was well within the ballpark of cost-no-object references.

Soundstage was portrayed as a single, near-continuous curtain of sound. And as I listened to the superb Acoustic Sounds' LP remastering of Joan Baez' *Diamonds & Rust in the Bullring* ("Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"), I got an accurate sense of the dimension and connection between the singer and the audience. Everyone is familiar with how easy it is to hear performers sounding disconnected from the audience on live recordings, as if both were taped in separate places. The HT reproduced a three-dimensional stage, with Baez placed forward enough to be intelligible but not so close as to sound aggressive. The audience handclaps and calls and responses, while clearly at a much further distance, were still lively, intelligible, and "of a piece" with the ambience surrounding the soloist. Baez is in great voice on this recording, and her powerful soprano with its almost trill-like vibrato creates a warmth and weight in the surrounding air that the Harmonic Technology reproduced beautifully.

Early on, I concluded that in many respects (perhaps in most), the HT Armour cables rivaled the very best wires that I've experienced, including in-house favorites like Synergistic Research's latest Atmosphere and Wireworld's Platinum Eclipse Series 7, the latter significantly more expensive. In this face-off, the HT narrowly missed the top rung, but only in a couple of areas. It came up a bit short trying to match Synergistic Research's 3-D imaging and

soundstage holography. In the lowest octaves, Wireworld Eclipse produced a more satisfying solo cello from artist Pieter Wispelwey, with more contrast and bloom, a broader image, and a greater sense of the musician aggressively laying into the strings of his instrument (plus a deeper well of resonance rising up from the entire doublebass/cello section).

The Harmonic Technology Armour cables are statement products, pure and simple; they join the ranks of some of the most elite wires I've heard. While every set of cables has a unique signature, I have found that at these exalted levels (and depending on associated equipment) the margins of sonic differences begin to narrow. As I said at the outset, HT's latest offerings are battle-ready. They enter the fray with all the virtues critical to the attainment of a great high-end system. Highly recommended. **tas**

### SPECS & PRICING

**Price:** Speaker, \$3500/8' pair for single-wire, \$3800/8' pair for bi-wire; Armour Link RCA interconnect, \$1300/1m pair (\$400 per 0.5M additional pair)

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# AudioQuest Wind Interconnect

## Full of Surprises

Robert Harley

**T**he most interesting demonstration of cables I've ever experienced was about 20 years ago when AudioQuest founder Bill Low visited me with a carton of nearly every cable he made—and a boom box as a playback system. Why a boom box? To show that you don't need a high-end rig to hear the value that cables can bring to a system. We listened to about twelve cables, starting with the entry level and moving one step up with each comparison. Several times we went back down a level just for reference. In each move up the AudioQuest line, I heard distinct improvements in qualities that matter musically. I was astounded by the degree of control that the cable designer had over the sound, as well as by the specific sonic qualities each step up rendered.

Another highly instructive cable experience occurred recently when I found myself in need of

some long interconnects to wire up the JL Audio e112 subwoofers I reviewed in Issue 252. Looking in the cable closet (yes, there's a cable closet) I found a very old pair of AudioQuest Amazon interconnects. I had used them many years ago for one purpose or another, and thought that they would be perfectly adequate for the job.

Adding the JL Audio subwoofer meant that the signal driving the Raidho X-1 loudspeakers now traveled through about 24' (two 12' single runs) of Amazon interconnect as well as the JL's crossover. I had assumed that the JL's active crossover would be the weak link in this arrangement, and whatever degradation I heard would be primarily introduced by the crossover. This was, after all, a crossover built into a \$1900 subwoofer. If the crossover added grain, glare, hardness, or reduced dynamics or soundstaging, the subwoofer would be a non-starter. The JL Audio's crossover was quite clean, but introduced what I thought were inevitable distortions. I heard a reduction in resolution and transparency, along with a slight thickening of the soundstage. Timbres were less vivid, and transient detail was somewhat blunted and smeared. Tonal colors were overlaid with a bit of a grayish cast. The sense of hearing through the playback system, a quality the superb Raidho X-1s delivered in spades, was diminished.

After about a week of living with this system, I mentioned to AudioQuest that I was listening with these very old runs of Amazon. It suggested that I try its brand-new Wind interconnect, which benefited from the company's recently developed technology. Wind is part of the new Elements Series, and three steps down from the top of AudioQuest's line. I'll get to Wind's design in a minute, but first I'll finish my story. I replaced the 12' runs of Amazon with the 16' (5m) runs of Wind.

Suddenly, the loss of transparency, the reduction in resolution, the slight opacity to the soundstage, the smearing of transients, and the dilution of timbral realism that I had attributed to the e112's crossover vanished, replaced by a crystalline clarity, greater resolution, more expansive space, and quieter backgrounds. To explore this result further, I removed the e112 from the signal path by connecting the two runs of Wind together with RCA barrel connectors. Now I was hearing only the effect of the Wind on the signal, not Wind and the subwoofer crossover. I repeated this experiment with Amazon. I also compared 5m runs of Wind to 1m runs of reference-level interconnects. These comparisons confirmed not only the quality of the e112's crossover, but also that Wind is staggeringly better than Amazon, which introduced more degradation than the active subwoofer crossover built into the JL Audio e112. The listening also suggested that Wind, although not inexpensive, was an outstanding value.

I moved on to listening to Wind in several links in my system, including from the Simaudio 810LP phonostage to the preamplifier. A clear theme emerged in all the auditioning: This is an interconnect that competes with top-tier wires at a less-than-stratospheric price. First, Wind is extremely transparent to sources. It has very little sonic effect on the signals passing through it, and consequently, preserves the music's dynamic verve, spatial dimensionality, and timbral purity. Wind has a very clean, open, and lively sound. It's detailed and vivid, but not in an analytical way. If you want a cable that softens transients and removes a bit of excessive zip from your system, this isn't it. Instead, Wind rewards the listener with a pristine quality that reveals what's on the

recording in all its glory—or faults.

Many interconnects inevitably add a layer of opacity to the soundstage, diminishing the sense of the performers existing "right there" between the loudspeakers. Not Wind; it conveys a full measure of presence and immediacy, while also allowing you to hear deep into the soundstage and pick out individual instruments at the back of the hall.

Similarly, the impression of wide dynamic range was heightened by Wind's extremely quiet background. This quality allowed very fine details to emerge, particularly reverberation decay. It's amazing to me how the apparent size of an acoustic space becomes bigger or smaller depending on the interconnect or cable in the playback system.

The bottom end was fast and agile, with no added warmth or thickness. Again, Wind isn't the kind of interconnect you choose to push your system toward a softer or weightier sound. Rather, it's the kind of interconnect you choose when the rest of your system includes highly

## SPECS & PRICING

**Terminations:** RCA or XLR

**Conductors:** Silver

**Price:** \$1995 1m RCA or XLR

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - AudioQuest Wind Interconnect

resolving and transparent components, and you want to hear them at their best.

AudioQuest has developed many new and interesting cable technologies since Amazon (see sidebar). Judging from Wind's performance,

those efforts have gone a long way toward making an interconnect that seemingly vanishes from the system. Wind is a great interconnect by any measure and, though not inexpensive, is nonetheless a superb value. TAS

### Design and Technology

Wind features AudioQuest's best materials and technology, including solid Perfect-Surface Silver (PSS) conductors. These strands of solid silver have been drawn with very smooth surfaces, which AudioQuest asserts eliminates the brightness often attributed to silver conductors. The silver conductors are enclosed within Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene (FEP) Air-Tube insulation, with almost no contact between the conductor and insulation. This air-tube insulation is thicker and stronger than that used in previous generations of AQ interconnects. Wind also benefits from AudioQuest's Noise-Dissipation System (NDS), a technique of surrounding the conductors with alternating layers of metal and a carbon-based synthetic material. These alternating layers reportedly reflect and absorb RF noise before it reaches the ground conductor. Wind uses six layers of NDS rather than four as in the interconnect it replaced.

AudioQuest's Dielectric Bias System (DBS), used successfully for many years now, polarizes the dielectric with a battery attached to the interconnect. Note that this battery system is completely isolated from the audio signal. Because no current flows, the battery will last for years.

A small button and LED on the battery chamber allows you to easily test the charge.

All the interconnects in the Elements Series feature new RCA plugs designed by AudioQuest. The cold-weld connection between plug and cable is realized with new tooling. I'll let AudioQuest describe its fascinating new termination process: "Whereas Niagara used Direct-Silver-Plated OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) copper, Wind uses our Hanging-Silver Plating directly over extreme-purity Red Copper. In the Hanging-Silver process, the plug is clipped to a hanger and dipped into a silver bath. In addition to creating a very thick direct-silver plate with a gorgeous finish, this process allows us to more productively control the exact chemistry of the plating bath and the bonding of the plating to the underlying part, avoiding the distortion caused by sonically harmful intermediary layers of nickel or alloy. Cold-welded terminations use pressure to join a cable's conductors and plug, reducing the distortion that would be introduced by using damaging heat or foreign materials like solder."

Do these materials and techniques make an audible difference? I can't say, but I can tell you that the difference between a good cable like Amazon (which was designed before these innovations) and a great cable like Wind is not just obvious sonically, but massively significant musically.

David

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# Cardas Audio Clear Reflection Interconnect and Speaker Cable

Fluid and Coherent

Kirk Midtskog

**M**any audiophiles seem to regard cables with a mix of resentment and begrudging admiration—resentment because cables are just long thin things that move electrical signals to the “real” components in an audio system, and yet they can cost more than an amplifier or pair of loudspeakers, and begrudging admiration because astute listeners have recognized that better cables can contribute enormously to overall system performance.

Cable makers continue to have a tough sell, though. They seem to have to constantly justify their existence (and product pricing), and sometimes lament not getting their due respect. The manufacturing and design prowess

involved in the production of cables may not be as glamorous as that of electronics or speakers, but some cable designers put a great deal of effort into what they make. Lofty cable prices may offend many of you, but well-made cables can make an astonishing difference. Advances in cable design have proven themselves. Why not take advantage of some of the choices now available?

## Background, Design, and Context

Cardas Audio, founded by George Cardas in 1987, has demonstrated resiliency and growth in the highly competitive cable and accessories market. One of the elements of its success is the quality of the wire strands Cardas makes. To my knowledge, Cardas Audio is one of the

few companies that manufactures its raw wire in the U.S. A year or two after starting the company, Mr. Cardas apparently approached a wire-drawing factory in New England that was on the brink of going out of business and worked out a partnership to ensure Cardas would get high-quality wire (and the wire factory would get a steady stream of orders to keep it in business). Prior to forming this partnership, Cardas could not procure the quality of wire he needed from either overseas sources or from other U.S. suppliers—at least, not at the prices he knew he would need to make his cables viable in the market. As you will see in the accompanying sidebar interview with Mr. Cardas, the only other available high-quality wire-drawing sources at the time were in Japan, and they were charging U.S. manufacturers very high prices for the sort of high-purity, slow-drawn wire Cardas needed to realize his design goals. Cardas Audio also makes some of its connectors at a machine shop in Bandon, Oregon, the same small seaside town where Cardas Audio has been located for over 20 years. (Some connectors are machined in various different locations.) As it turned out, supplying other manufacturers with OEM internal “hook-up wire,” as well as raw strands (for windings) and connectors, is now the largest part of the company’s business.

Cardas is known for an easy-to-understand and readily identifiable design principle: the Golden Ratio—the ratio of proportions exemplified by the cross section of a nautilus seashell (the Cardas logo), as well as by the length, width, and height of many ancient Greek buildings such as the Parthenon. This ratio, expressed mathematically, is roughly

1:1.61803398871. So if the width of a building, for example, is 10 units long, the length would be 16.1803398871 units long. What does this have to do with audio? As it turns out, the Golden Ratio not only adds to a building’s aesthetic appeal, but also to its ability to mitigate destructive resonances. George Cardas first applied the Golden Ratio principle to controlling resonances in racecar engines and exhaust systems. He then transferred the concept to decreasing unwanted interactions in audio cables (such as eddy currents, RF radiation and absorption, mechanical resonance, strand interaction, high filtering, reflections, electrical resonance, dissipation factors, envelope delay, phase distortion, harmonic distortion, structural return loss...and probably others I am leaving out). Cardas applies the Golden Ratio to cables through the relative location and size of the various conductors within each cable bundle—for instance, the outer conductors are about 1.618 times larger than the conductors in the next inner layer, and this pattern is repeated until the innermost conductor ends up being the smallest.

Cardas not only follows the Golden Ratio in its conductor sizes and layouts, it has also devised a way to match the signal propagation speed of the signal-carrying conductors with the “speed” of the surrounding dielectrics. Cardas’ principle of “matched propagation” asserts that the conductors within a cable charge at roughly the speed of light, but the best solid dielectrics charge at a rate roughly 22 percent slower. This velocity difference apparently causes a sort of “shearing” of the signal, similar to the wake of a boat cutting through water. Cardas does not believe cable



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Cardas Audio Clear Reflection

“networks” can adequately correct for this conductor/dielectric velocity mismatch. Instead, Cardas precisely applies an additional conductor geometry—in conjunction with the Golden Ratio—involving varied twist and pitch angles specific to each conductor layer. As a result, signals moving through the conductors have to travel a longer distance than the overall cable length, which more closely aligns the conductors’ velocity with that of the surrounding dielectrics. (All conductor layers end up having the same length, but their different spiral pitch angles compensate for their relative distance from the center of the cable bundle.) This “Matched Propagation Technology” reportedly results in reduced underlying noise and increased low-level resolution. Matched velocities are the basis of telephone transmission lines; the telephone companies realize matched propagation with coils spaced at certain intervals. Cardas’ innovation is achieving matched propagation velocities continuously within the conductor.

In cost, Cardas’ Clear Reflection (CR) interconnect/cable (\$1150, 1m/\$2800, 2.5m) falls a little below the halfway point between the model above it (Clear \$2320/\$4750) and the model below it in the Clear line (Clear Light \$750/\$1470). George Cardas told me that he did not design CR to a price point, and I believe him. Cardas’ Director of Marketing Josh Meredith mentioned to me, however, that dealers and customers had pointed out there was, indeed, a price and performance gap in the Clear line before Clear Reflection was added—and quite a large one cost-wise. That price gap used to be filled by the now-

discontinued Golden Reference model. Golden Reference and the new CR share some DNA—CR was specifically designed to have some of the warmth associated with Cardas’ traditional, pre-Clear, Golden Reference “house sound,” blended with the resolution, dynamic range, and speed of the current flagship Clear model.

In addition, Clear Reflection speaker cable apparently employs a modified geometry that was implemented in the Golden Reference, but CR has the same forged, rhodium-plated copper connectors used in the flagship Clear Beyond model. CR is “shotgun” bi-wireable, like Golden Reference was. (Clear Beyond is the only other Clear model that is also bi-wireable.) CR has a black jacket—like the Golden Reference had—with a copper-colored stress-relief bead (at the “Y” breakout for the + and - terminations), whereas the rest of the Clear line has a light blue jacket with black beads. CR interconnect apparently uses a conductor geometry similar to Clear’s, but employs fewer bundles of cable, though CR IC also uses the same connectors as the top Clear.

### Listening

Right from the beginning Clear Reflection struck me as both coherent and fluid. Coherent because everything sounded organized and clean, without much interstitial noise or “splashiness,” if you will. And fluid because all types of music seemed to simply emanate with a wonderful sense of ease and immediacy, without any sort of subliminal tension. It was as if my inner dialog were, “Ah, this is nice. Just relax and enjoy the music.” I arrived at these impressions by means of the following audition

process: 1) Switching the interconnect between the sources and the preamp and listening for a while; 2) switching the link between the preamp and power amp and listening some more; and 3) changing the speaker cable. I did this a couple of times in my own system and also repeated the process in an audio buddy’s system, a meticulously set-up and beautiful-sounding system. I also swapped my normal reference cables (Shunyata ZiTron Anaconda) to CR, and back again a few times. Over the course of two months of listening, nothing altered this baseline “coherent and fluid” impression. The combination of coherence and fluidity allowed the music to take on a calm, non-electronic quality and a sense of “proper balance.” When I considered the unforced blend of drum head-and-body sounds, of acoustical guitar strings and body, or of a singer’s throat and chest, on a recording like Doug MacLeod’s *There’s a Time* [RR], it struck me that the CR’s coherence was responsible for many of those musical elements sounding believably proportioned. This coherent quality drew my attention to the musical progression in the songs rather than to an analytical breakdown of the particular sonic minutiae in the mix.

I also noted a light lower midrange emphasis in tonal balance—at least in direct comparison to my reference cables and to my friend’s Siltech cables. (Further comparisons are addressed below.) This more “low-weighted” quality helped lend a pleasant touch of warmth to the presentation—just as George Cardas set out to do. Mind you, the level of warmth in relationship to the aforementioned commendable levels of apparent speed, dynamic range, and overall

resolution, was not the overriding quality I heard in the CR, nor was this warmth quotient as high as my recollections of the pre-Clear Golden Reference sound, but it still offered a beautiful blend of lovely timbre with image specificity and resolution.

We’ve already discussed the warmth factor, so let me address resolution next. The CR’s kind of clarity tends more towards allowing the greater whole to come through rather than spotlighting those aspects of the sound that might immediately suggest *high resolution* in an audiophile sense. For example, there was a winning balance between the sounds of the whole orchestra and the individual instruments throughout *Miraculous Metamorphoses* [RR]. CR’s resolution was also good enough to give me the distinct impression that the first piece on *Miraculous*, Hindemith’s *Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber*, was most likely recorded with different

## SPECS & PRICING

**Price:** Interconnect, \$1150/1m (RCA or XLR), additional .5m add \$300; speaker, \$2800/2.5m (spade or banana), additional .5m add \$350

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Cardas Audio Clear Reflection

microphone placements and/or with different eq than the other works on the same release. (The Hindemith has much more of a front-of-the-hall perspective than either the Prokofiev *Love for Three Oranges Suite* or the Bartók *Miraculous Mandarin Suite*, with their more mid-hall perspective typical of Reference Recordings.)

As a corollary to resolution, I consider CR's soundstaging and imaging performance to be strong points. The proportions of an overall soundscape are portrayed credibly, with commendable width, height, and depth—as well as depth *layering*. Individual images are rendered precisely and clearly but without exaggeration. Images also have heft and depth, rather than appearing like ethereal two-dimensional cutouts. Some other cables tend to spotlight aspects of the tonal spectrum. Not so with CR; everything “sings” with a unified voice.

So what we have here are a positive set of sonic qualities in a well-made cable at a very reasonable price—considering its performance and the current market. Can Clear Reflection compete with more expensive cables?

I compared CR to Shunyata Research ZiTron Anaconda interconnect/cable (\$2250/1m, \$4327/2.5m) in my own system and to Siltech Classic Anniversary 770i interconnect (\$2700/1m) and the now discontinued LS-188 Classic Mk2 speaker cable (~\$5200/2.5m when still available)—both without Siltech's SATT treatment—in a friend's system. This puts Clear Reflection (\$1150/\$2800) within a few hundred dollars of half the price of the other two cable sets.

In my system, the Shunyata Anaconda sounded more detailed, open, transparent, and

revealing. Transient response seemed to be quicker with the Shunyata, and subtle dynamic shadings came through more readily as well. On the other hand, Clear Reflection sounded a little more organized, more relaxed, more liquid, and, dare I say it, more “organic.” I prefer the Shunyata on the whole for its dazzling dynamics and remarkable resolution, but I can easily understand if another listener—in a different system—might prefer the less expensive Cardas for its coherence and musicality.

In my audio buddy's very well tuned system (Lou is a meticulous set-up guy, bordering on fanatical actually), the Cardas sounded a little more expansive and slightly more focused than the Siltech. The Cardas threw a larger, deeper, and more defined soundstage and individual images were a little better fleshed-out, as well. The Siltech and CR had similar respective tonal balances, with the exception of the CR emphasizing the lower midrange a bit more. (There's that warmth factor again.) The two cables' overall performances with dynamics were, for all intents and purposes, the same, but I would give the CR the edge in overall resolution. Now, I must stress that I have also heard the same Siltech cable in my own system and thought it did some things better than the Shunyata set did, such as throwing a wider soundstage and sounding a little more musically natural in some respects. These comparisons illustrate how cables can perform differently than expected across myriad systems.

So, the answer to the question of whether Clear Reflection can compete against more expensive cables is yes. Which cable you gravitate towards will probably depend on



your sonic priorities, system, and budget. As a reviewer, I prefer the Shunyata Anaconda for its remarkable transient response, transparency, and open soundstaging (as I'd mentioned). Others will favor the more smooth, silk-like qualities of the Siltech, or lean towards the clean, balanced musicality of the Cardas.

### Conclusion

When stacked against more expensive cables, Cardas Clear Reflection held its own and,

accordingly, gets high marks for delivering good performance at a reasonable price. Clear Reflection is a fantastic cable in its own right. Cardas is on to something with its blend of the company's previous Golden Reference design and its current Clear technology. I was charmed by Clear Reflection's fluid, organized, detailed, and generally musically satisfying qualities. I would not hesitate to recommend it to others and would consider it myself for a second system. Mr. Cardas, take a bow.



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Cardas Audio Clear Reflection

# An Interview with George Cardas

### How has the cable segment of the market changed since you founded Cardas Audio in 1987?

Well it has obviously grown tremendously. Cables have gone from “all are the same” to “most important link in the system.”

### Are audiophiles more open to the importance of cables now than in those early years?

In general, yes! Now even the general public is starting to get the message. Mainstream manufacturers are now a big and growing segment of our customers.

### What was your first inspiration to apply the Golden Ratio to cable design?

I used it as a resonance control technique when designing racecar engines and two-stroke exhaust systems.

### What have been your biggest challenges, both as a designer and as a business owner?

They’ve been mostly personal. The business has grown since the day the door opened. My biggest challenge was deciding where and how to limit the business itself to a “family unit” in size. Obviously, the business has grown beyond all expectations, so...

### Your company actually has a partnership with a wire-drawing factory in the U.S. How important is this vertical integration to your business strategy and overall product results?

I do these things because they are essential elements, and, over the years, it has become increasingly

difficult to find true quality in metals and metal processing. As it turns out, I supply for the bulk of the manufacturers. I would guess that we produce the majority of the “metal” sold in high-end audio. As time goes on, mid-sized manufacturers are being purchased by larger operations that do not want to be bothered with ultra-refined, slow-drawn products. It seems we are becoming the only game in town.

### Do you incur higher costs by manufacturing your own parts and by doing so in the U.S.?

Cost and quality implications run both ways. If you want metal like ours, it would be virtually unobtainable for anywhere near what we sell it for. We went into the business initially because of what the Japanese were charging my peers in the business. Similarly with conductors, we bought or built our own machines for layered Litz winding. It would not be possible for us to trust the job to China, and it would probably not save us anything if we did. The price on cables these days is nuts. We can easily manufacture here and have the control we are looking for. We manufacture all over the globe. On some things like the OEM headphone drivers, it is not possible to get what we want here. This is a nightmare really. I would much prefer to do them in the U.S., but we have no choice. It has taken me decades to develop partners in Asia who share our values, and still it is a constant battle. I am not opposed to outside manufacture if it is a better choice, but money is not the name of the game here; quality and quality control is.

### How significant is the OEM side of your business to your overall business approach?

OEM is the largest part of my business. I love working with other manufacturers. They are very demanding and keep me on my toes. My metal would not be where it is today if not for the goading of Bill Low [of Audioquest]. I love helping other manufacturers do what they do best. I have a unique set of personal skills that allow me to figure out better ways of doing things and a love for doing things better. This works for me. My metal is art. My conductors are art. If my friends in the business want to use my “paint” to embellish *their* art, I am honored...in fact, I am dedicated.

### When you set about designing the Clear Reflection cables, were you also targeting a return to a form of the “classic Cardas sound,” rather than merely addressing a product price point?

I gave little thought to price point. I didn’t make the product for the point. The product is at the point it is because of its relative cost to produce. Clear Reflection is, in fact, a refinement of Golden Reference. The Clear cables were an experiment in broadband clarity and a test of just how flat a response you can achieve without offending the leading edge of the sound. They are what they are: Clear and fast, neutral and articulate.

The Golden Reference cable is an obsessive bottom-up approach delivering pure musical sound from the bottom up without regard to bandwidth. Those cables felt awesome, but, at the end of the day, were a little dark. The Clear Reflection is an attempt to achieve some Clear-like bandwidth within the bottom-up approach of the Golden Reference. So in

answer to your question, my objective was a musical feel I wanted back in my life.

Price points...yeah, I guess this will fill that hole. But think about it: It took something like five years for this combination’s time to come. A price point? I could have done that in a heartbeat.

### Is the Clear Reflection speaker cable basically a revival of the Golden Reference conductor geometry, or are there other design elements involved?

Well, yes and yes. It uses the connectors and incorporates several design elements seen in the other Clear models, and the strand layering has a slight adjustment. It adds a lot of fine refinements to a tried and proven design.

### Can you please explain how the Clear Reflection interconnect resembles or differs from Golden Reference?

It uses a different dielectric formulation-combination and a different strand layering. The interconnects look similar on paper. The Clear Reflection speaker cable is, to the eye, very similar to the Golden Reference.

### You should be proud of your accomplishments in the specialty audio field. What is next for Cardas Audio?

Well, thank you very much! I have an amazing invention related to loudspeaker drivers—especially small ones. I will work on this project until it has wings. We are changing the wire-drawing operation to be able to draw down to unheard-of sizes. (We are looking at 54awg silver.) This will open windows for cartridge and hearing-aid manufacturers, etc. I will go where I can best improve the state of the art. tas



## Morrow Audio SP7 Grand Reference Speaker Cable and MA4 Reference and MA7 Grand Reference interconnects

Up-and-Comer

Neil Gader

**M**orrow Audio is a relative newcomer to the high-end cable segment. Founded in 2006 and based in Independence, Kentucky, the company currently manufactures both a pro line as well as a comprehensive consumer line that includes power cords and an expanding assortment of headphone cables. Morrow's interconnects and speaker cables are divided into seven levels not including the Elite Grand Reference Series, which, as the name implies is in a class of its own. Common to all Morrow cabling is a three-pronged design philosophy that it describes as SSI Technology—an acronym for solid-core, small-gauge, individually insulated. Key to Morrow's SSI configuration is the excellent RFI- and noise-rejection characteristics that its technologies are said to bring to the table.

My review samples included two levels of interconnects, the MA4, the MA7, and the marque's penultimate speaker cable, the SP7. The MA4 consists of 24 runs of insulated silver/copper conductors and is thin, very lightweight, and manageable. The MA7 ups the ante with 72 runs with its stiffness increasing only slightly. The SP7 speaker wire consists of a whopping 120 runs. For insulation Morrow uses PVDF, a plastic material of the fluoropolymer family. The wires are finished with nylon jacketing and silver-soldered to a choice of terminations. The cables have an attractive, nondescript appearance and are refreshingly light and pliable. Whereas some cables approach the rigidity of conduit pipes, Morrow makes it a breeze to angle its offerings around equipment or furnishings.

Morrow Audio might be the new kid on the block, but its wire performed like an old pro. The entry-level MA4 was nicely weighted with a firmly centered midrange sweetspot that focused images with clarity and conviction. In all-out extension, MA4 is a hint subtractive in that it couldn't fully capture the air and ease of the fancier MA7 interconnects. For example, when it was tasked with reproducing the complexities of orchestra and chorus during Beethoven's *Ninth* [Chicago, Solti, Decca], the imaging of each section grew a little less distinct, the dimensional outlines of the hall a bit imprecise. The sound also wasn't quite as dynamically charged, exhibiting hints of compression on the gut-churning opening kickdrum of The Police's "Murder By Numbers."

However, the MA4 is particularly well suited to the entry-level world in that it possesses a darker, more forgiving character that soothes and slightly softens treble anomalies rather

than resolving every last harmonic detail. This makes it an ideal palliative for systems that already have some attenuation in the lower frequencies and might also have a bit of a treble kick that tends to bleach orchestral string and brass harmonics. At this juncture, I always return to the all-important issues of perspective and system-matching. As well positioned as the MA4 is in its entry- to mid-level niche, it would be overmatched in the company of ultra-high-performance electronics driving resolution monsters like the Vandersteen Treo CT (review forthcoming) or the Wilson Audio Sabrina (Issue 256). Naturally that's why Morrow Audio offers Level 7.

If the MA4 proved to be a great warm-up act, the combination of MA7/SP7 was a very satisfying main event. Compared with the MA4, the darker overall character was lifted. And while the MA4 was midrange centered, the pricier MA7 spiced up harmonics and offered more than a bit juicier textures. It fully restored the delicacy and dynamic throw-down of pianist Ivo Pogorelich's performance during the Mozart Piano Sonata in A Major [DG]. Though a little cooler overall than its budget sibling, the MA7/SP7 wire was by no means bright or edgy. The sibilance range was nicely controlled and conveyed naturally occurring energy rather than a hard sizzle. Also on hand were very good low-level resolving power and solid bass responsiveness. During Nickel Creek's "Sabra Girl," I admired how the MA7/SP7 captured the delicate, acrobatic character and transient speed of Chris Thile's mandolin, and the ripe resonance of the acoustic flat-top accompaniment, and fiddle player Sara Watkins' touching vocal on *This Side* [Sugar Hill]. In soundstage and dimensionality, the



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Morrow Audio SP7 Grand Reference Speaker Cable

Level 7 combination came up a little short of reference level in conveying the vast spread and dimensional depth that top-tier cables such as the much more expensive Kimber Select KS and Synergistic Atmosphere offer. During Norah Jones' "The Nearness of You," her piano didn't fully inhabit the soundspace and decay into the resonant hall. And micro-dynamic differences were not as distinguishable. In comparison, my reference wire placed Pieter Wispelwey's cello precisely within a pocket of the orchestra, while the Morrow was a little more tentative in committing to this unambiguous, locked-down position [Bruch, Channel Classics]. However, in terms of the absolute sound—acoustic music recorded live in a hall—on balance, the Morrow wire bore most of the hallmarks of the very best cables, particularly in the areas of dynamics, tonality, resolving power, and harmonic nuance. It possessed a general ease and lack of artifice when reproducing complex groupings of musicians on the symphonic stage.

Setting performance aside for a moment, Morrow Audio is also making an aggressive play on the marketing side of the equation. For example, all Morrow Audio wire comes with a lifetime guarantee. Morrow also offers bundle packages, an "easy pay program" option, a break-in service option, and a 60-day return. That's what I call *confidence*. Morrow is even shaking things up in the more freewheeling headphone market with innovative ideas such as color selections for some headphone cable models.

By any standard, Morrow Audio is an up-and-comer. Its products may not be head-turners to look at, but in the high end performance is

where the rubber meets the road, and perform Morrow's cables do. Going forward I expect its offerings will challenge many of the more highly regarded notables. An impressive debut. tas



### SPECS & PRICING

**Price:** Interconnects, MA4 \$329, 1m/pr.; MA7, \$1399/1m pr.

**Speaker cable:** SP7 level, \$1499/2m pr.

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5195 Madison Pike  
Independence, KY 41051  
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# Skogrand SC Beethoven Loudspeaker Cables and Interconnects

New Kid on the Block

Jacob Heilbrunn

**O**n a recent trip to Berlin I had the chance to hear the city's *Konzert-hausorchester* play Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 2*. The venerable Gunther Herbig conducted, while Jonathan Biss, a young American piano virtuoso who teaches at the Curtis Institute, was the soloist. The acoustics of the shoebox-sized hall were well nigh perfect, reminiscent of Vienna's *Musikverein*. The sound of the orchestra was velvety and clear while Biss offered as fluid a performance as I've ever heard of Beethoven. It was an electrifying performance.

That also happens to be the kind of the sound that Skogrand's new SC Beethoven line of cables delivers. They are well balanced throughout the frequency spectrum and deliver copious detail. They combine a raw dynamic power, particularly in the bass region, with a beautifully delineated and pure treble. As always with cables, it's something of a misnomer to ascribe properties to them. They obviously can't add anything to the sound. Their task is to convey it. But from what I experienced the Skogrand cables really deliver the goods.

Light in weight, pretty flexible, and quite attractive-looking, the Beethovens reside, at least for now, at the top of the heap of Skogrand's offerings. Based in Norway and named after its founder Knut P. Skogrand, Skogrand has its own way of doing things. Its cables are handcrafted, the company says, in a small mountaintop workshop that sounds like it's really an atelier. Its website indicates that you can even order its speaker cables unterminated if you want the most direct connection from amplifier to loudspeaker. The

company employs a variety of materials in its cables, including ultra-pure Ohno continuous-cast copper wires. The Beethovens feature two 12 AWG wires suspended in air, giving them a dielectric constant of 1.0. The workmanship of the cables appears to be exemplary.

It only seemed fitting to begin listening to the wires with Beethoven's works. Accordingly, I pulled out an intriguing recording of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 2* and sonatas by the Turkish composer and pianist Fazil Say on the superlative French independent *Naïve* label. Right off the bat—and I mean with no preliminary burn-in of the cables on my end—I was transfixed by the silkiness and oomph of the presentation. I like to go in steps to hear each cable, so I started with the Beethoven speaker cable. It did a wonderful job of delineating the orchestra, and the timpani strikes were delivered with power and precision. Nor was there any sense of bloat. Quite the contrary. Say's piano was perfectly balanced in proportion to the orchestral players with not a note blurred or smeared. Equally impressive was the presentation of the *Moonlight* Sonata, which to my ear has a few traces of Bach in its first movement. The fidelity with which the Skogrand conveyed the left hand was very impressive. It was simplicity itself to hear the distinction between the way Say was depressing the piano keys with his left hand and right hand. Adding the interconnects simply enhanced the sense of precision.

The same rendering was delivered by the Skogrands on a very tricky recording to reproduce, namely, a performance of Bach's sonatas for violin and harpsichord by Giuliano Carmignola and Andrea Marcon on Sony. I've never

been fully satisfied with the way the recording has sounded in the past because it could often have a slightly abrasive character in the treble, where the baroque violin played by Carmignola becomes slightly pinched. I was never convinced that it was the artist's doing; rather, I placed the fault on the recording. The Skogrand allowed me to hear further into the music and pretty much banished any sense of stridency. Instead, it beautifully decanted the music. In particular, I was mesmerized by the sound on the *adagio* movement of the *Sonata in E major*, where the violin soars in *cantabile* style over the harpsichord. Every shading, every nuance, every quaver seemed to be captured before disappearing into the ether. Here the presentation was clearly improved by the Skogrand's ability to recreate the sense of air in the hall. The violin and harpsichord both sounded as though they were suspended in space. Close your eyes and you could pretty much transport yourself back to the original venue.

A similar sensation was conveyed on a recording by Anonymous 4 of Civil War songs on the *Harmonia Mundi* label. What you have with the Skogrands, in other words, is an ability to help communicate the emotional essence of the music.

As much as the Skogrand excelled at rendering the mids and highs with great finesse, it also provided a real sense of weight in the bass region. Let me be clear: The bass was not the lowest in extension that I've heard. What the Skogrand did in the nether areas, however, was to supply real gravity and density, coupled with punch. It hit hard and fast, like a boxer ripping off a series of jabs followed by a vicious uppercut. The cut "Don't Wanna Fight" on the



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Skogrand SC Beethoven Loudspeaker Cables & Interconnects

Alabama Shakes *Sound and Color* album came through with tectonic force on the Wilson XLF loudspeakers. Ditto for the track "Gemini." But the most enticing aspect of the Skogrands was apparent on more restrained fare such as a Harmonia Mundi recording of Haydn's cello concertos by Jean-Guihen Queyras, where the plangent sound of his baroque cello came through vividly.

With vinyl, I also sought to test the Skogrand interconnects extensively. My rig, at least when I'm using the Ypsilon VPS-100 Silver phonostage, requires a separate step-up transformer. So there are separate interconnects running from step-up transformer to phonostage and from phonostage to preamplifier. Once again, I was really impressed by the ability of these cables to delineate the sonorities of individual instruments. Take the Impulse! album *Soul Duo*, which features Shirley Scott and Clark Terry. Terry, who died recently, was one of the greatest jazz trumpeters ever. Period. On the cut "Clark Bars," the Skogrands nailed the ebullient sound of his trumpet. It doesn't take more than a split second to know it's Terry, with his ability move seamlessly from a sassy *glissando* to a moaning whole note in order to make the trumpet sound, as much as possible, like a human voice. "Taj Mahal" also caught my attention for the accuracy with which the Skogrands conveyed the groaning, sliding sound of the standup bass.

In an increasingly crowded cable marketplace, Skogrand stands out for its fidelity and purity. There are cables out there that are faster or more refulgent. There are cables that produce an even wider soundstage. The Skogrands, for all their punch, may land on the slightly lighter

side in balance. Dark they are not. But their overall liquidity and crystalline presentation make them one of the most enticing cables I've heard. Grunge and grit are simply foreign to them. Given the way cable prices have already soared into the stratosphere, I wouldn't even call the Beethovens particularly expensive when compared to their competition, a statement I could not have made a decade ago. But if you want to play in the cable big leagues, then Skogrand's cables are a must-audition. The more I listen to them, the more I like them. tas



### SPECS & PRICING

**Prices:** SC Beethoven (speaker cables): \$22,000 for a 2m pair; SCI Beethoven (interconnects): \$19,500 for a 1.5m pair

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## Audience Ohno

Neil Gader

**A**udience's new value line of Ohno interconnects and speaker cables runs counter to the perceived wisdom that high-performance wires always require thick, heavy, unyielding jacketing and confoundingly complex conductor geometries. Employing the same 6-nines, 21AWG, OCC-stranded copper that it uses in its tony Au24 SE powerChords, these whip-thin and unobtrusive featherweights are nicely built and very pliable, making them ideal partners for smaller systems—and most especially those of the desktop persuasion. Sonically the Audience Ohno cable lineup achieves a level of balance and midrange tonal weight that seemed almost contradictory to its diminutive profile. It was quiet, quick, and extended with well-focused and dimensional imaging. Characterized with a slightly warmer balance, vocals were full-bodied and expressive. And importantly, Ohno's sibilance range was nicely kept in check and transient behavior was clean and naturalistic. Most significantly, they had no additive colorations and didn't crimp midrange dynamics. They were not the last words in resolution—that is, they lacked the bottom-most excursion in the bass and the effortlessly airy extension in the harmonic range. However, given their entry-level mission Audience Ohno was right on the money in every other respect. Easy to position and so light that they won't tug a compact loudspeaker off its stands, Ohno offers an unerring sense of musicality at a price that won't bust the budget. Interconnect, \$199/1m (\$82 per add'l meter); speaker, \$209/1m (\$20 per add'l meter) (full review forthcoming)

# TRANSPARENT

GENERATION **5**

# XLENCE



REVIEW IN THIS ISSUE OF TAS

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# Transparent Audio XL Generation 5 Interconnects and Cables

*A Voyage of Discovery*

Anthony H. Cordesman



**T**his review focuses on the new generation of Transparent Audio interconnects and speaker cables. It also, however, almost has to begin with a description of the problems I've encountered over the years in dealing with "wires" as passive but important components. Thus it is as much description of a voyage of discovery in seeking out the best interconnects and speaker cables as a review of a given set of products.

## *The Sequel to Joyce's Ulysses: An Audiophile's Cable Odyssey*

Several centuries ago, I wrote some of the first comparative cable and interconnect reviews published in TAS. In the process, I learned that interconnects and speaker cables can make a very real difference in sound. I also learned, however, that they can be remarkably difficult to review if they are well designed and serious efforts to provide the most transparent sound possible, rather than reshape it and act as the equivalent of tone controls.

Over the decades that have followed, I have found that selecting the right mix of interconnects and speaker cables presents exceptional problems for the audiophile. In most cases, you can easily get a real improvement by buying the lower to mid-priced line of top manufacturers. A limited investment will provide some improvement in the bass, better dynamics, and an upper midrange that is more realistic and balanced in timbre. Established manufacturers have to deliver better sound quality to survive. Their products sell more on the basis of audiophile and dealer word of mouth than advertisements or reviews, and

"fool me once" is usually enough to put a given audiophile off a given brand for life.

This does not, however, mean that you will get the best possible sound for money, anymore than you will if you buy electronics or a speaker from well-established manufacturers. Buying by brand names excludes the new innovator by definition, and it presents five other problems that become steadily more important as you move towards an investment in really expensive interconnects and speaker cables:

First, given brands and models of speaker cables and interconnects can have very different effects on the sound when they are connected to different mixes of components. At first, I thought this was true largely of speaker cables, but I learned fairly quickly that balanced and unbalanced interconnects can also vary sharply in their sonic nuances when connected between different components in the front end of a system. This can happen even when the speaker cable and interconnects are clearly designed to be "universal" and suitable for any part of a given system.

Second, standardizing on a given brand or model doesn't work. Early on, I assumed that the best solution was to buy speaker cables and interconnects from the same manufacturer in the same price range. I've learned the hard way over the years that this simply doesn't work. Speaker cables are more interactive and different sounding than interconnects, and need to be chosen to sound best with a given combination of power amp and speaker. Really good interconnects for most components sometimes do not work as well in linking other components. You need to try different speaker cables to find the one that really suits your system, and experiment interconnect by

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Transparent Audio XL Generation 5 Interconnects and Cables

interconnect to make sure that they are truly compatible with your system, and you have the best mix.

Third, most serious cable and interconnect manufacturers try their best to deliver value for money, and to provide better sound with each increase in price. This, however, often leads the designers to “voice” their most expensive cables to suit their ear or that of some listening panel, rather than to provide the best possible level of transparency. The resulting choice of trade-offs in sound quality may or may not help a given system and/or suit the buyer’s taste. In some cases, the resulting “improvement” is very expensive, but actually colors the sound more than cheaper cables and interconnects in a given line. In others, any improvements are of very marginal musical value.

Fourth, there are no meaningful specifications to warn you of the level of compatibility or performance in advance. Every interconnect and speaker cable has to make trade-offs in its electrical parameters, and every component has some variation in its input and output circuitry. There is no one right answer that you can read off a spec sheet, or find by reading about construction and materials. You have to experiment, swap, and listen.

Fifth, it takes time to audition the subtleties in really good cables, and it is simply not possible to do this in a dealer’s showroom. You need a loaner that you can hear in your system, and simply hearing a change that slightly highlights different aspects of the music is not a serious reason to buy. A superior cable has to actually sound better with a wide range of music, and this takes both time and judgment.

Sixth, the increasing use of digital interconnects has not made life easier. To be blunt, far too many really don’t make much of a difference even if they are much prettier than their cheaper generic competition. And when they do make a difference, their performance with a given component often is not maintained when you use that interconnect with other components. This loss of essence, to quote General Ripper, can reflect a design problem in an active component or the simple fact that improved or different connectors are working better in a given case. Many of my fellow reviewers obviously disagree with me, but I would generally put my money into analog cables unless I really hear an improvement with a digital one.

These are not easy problems for any given audiophile to solve. Reading reviews may help, but reviewing a single set of wires out of context often seems to lead the reviewer into a sudden love affair with an inanimate object, one that may not return your affection in the same way it seems to have done with the reviewer. Manufacturer hype is also fun and part of the sport of high-end audio. But hype is hype, and describing cables as sonic miracles doesn’t help. You can’t psych your ears into believing what you don’t really hear for any length of time.

In practice, you need the help of other audiophiles, and dealers or manufacturers who will give loaners or exchanges. You also need patience and common sense. Improving your passive components takes as much time as improving your active ones, and your efforts must meet the same acid test for any serious

purchase or investment: You personally hear the improvement clearly and decisively and it has lasting sonic value in reproducing a wide range of the music you love. Buying a cable is no reason to splurge over the audio equivalent of a drunken Vegas wedding—in both cases you will soon sober up and have to live with the consequences.

### The Transparent Audio XL Generation 5: Tailoring the “Wires” to a Particular System

There is, however, an alternative, and one whose value became even more clear to me when I had the opportunity to try out Transparent Audio’s new generation of cables. I’ve used Transparent Audio XL interconnects and speaker cables as one of my primary references ever since I’ve start using the Wilson Alexias as one of my two reference speakers.

The Alexias are a great speaker but a difficult load and are more sensitive to speaker cables than most. A friend suggested that Transparent Audio could provide a speaker cable tuned to both the Alexia and the Pass 160.8s I use as a reference power amp. I had some doubts about whether such tuning would produce better sound or more coloration, but I had used Transparent Audio cables that were not tuned to given components in the past, and had always found them to be exceptionally neutral.

Accordingly, I ended up trying out a full set of Transparent Audio XLs tuned to all the components in my system. For proprietary reasons, Transparent Audio does not go into a great deal of detail about the adjustments it uses in its interconnects and speaker cables, but when I asked Josh Clark of Transparent

Audio to describe how the process worked, he provided the following details: “Each XL cable is custom-built for a customer’s system components and his specific room layout. For example, the speaker cable terminations are built to perfectly match the binding posts and their polarity orientation on the amplifier and speaker. For your Pass Labs XA 160.8 amplifiers we specified a flat spade with the positive on the right and for your Wilson Alexia loudspeakers a bent spade with the positive on the left, to fit the binding posts on these components. We also ask where the amplifier is located relative to the speakers so we can arrange the nameplates on the network modules to read correctly from the listening position. Every detail is important to us.

“The networks in the XL Cables are custom-calibrated to perform with the electrical characteristics of the connected components. Different audio components have

## SPECS & PRICING

**Price:** XL phono interconnect starts at \$6400 for a 1m pair; XL balanced interconnect starts at \$11,000 for a 1m pair; XL speaker cable starts at \$17,000 for an 8' pair

### TRANSPARENT AUDIO, INC.

47 Industrial Park Road  
Saco, ME 04072  
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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Transparent Audio XL Generation 5 Interconnects and Cables

different input and output impedances and at the XL level we calibrate the networks so that they will perform ideally with any combination of components.

“Since we calibrate the XL cables for specific components you may wonder what happens if you decide to change one of these components. In this case you would contact your dealer and, if necessary, he will arrange for us to recalibrate and re-terminate the cables for the new system components. We offer this service at no charge to the original owners of the cables.”

I was more than happy to take advantage of this the latest version of this tuning process when Josh called me and told me that Transparent Audio had made its first major upgrade to the XL Series in better than half a decade. I was particularly happy to take advantage of it when Josh offered to come down and demonstrate them in one-on-one comparisons with the previous-generation XLs. (Reviewers do have perks.) Josh has since provided me with summary of the changes involved, and it is a further illustration of the fact that passive components can be as difficult to engineer and improve as active ones (see sidebar).

### The Voyage and the Sound Quality

The new models of the XL cables did make improvements in sound quality that immediately grabbed my attention. We swapped the Generation 5s in for the previous generation in reverse order—going from the speaker cable to the phono tonearm cable. We went through a separate comparative listening

session with each individual swap, using the same mix of different acoustic music—most in the form of 24-bit/96kHz recordings, but also including analog recordings and finally a mix of older Haydn chamber music and symphony LPs when it came to the phono interconnects.

I have to admit that I was surprised by the extent to which each step in the upgrade process made a real difference in several critical areas. Quite frankly, when I first talked to Josh, I didn’t expect to hear any serious changes, and thought whatever improvements I would hear would be limited to the speaker cable. I was wrong, as my aural voyage through the new Transparent Audio XL Generation 5s quickly made this clear.

The improvements in dynamics were immediately apparent with each swap; even including the shorter pairs of interconnects. Step by step, my system opened up, and not simply at the symphonic level. Solo piano, small string groups, solo violin acquired more life as well. Later listening made it clear that solo voice also become more dynamic and lifelike, with no added strain or hardness. I have always found low-level dynamics to be more important in enjoying music than peak dynamics, and the sound opened up as much at low levels as at high ones.

Far more was also involved than dynamics. The bass was clearer, better defined, and more natural, particularly in the critical transition area between the upper bass and lower midrange. This area of sound can make music dull when it is exaggerated or lacking in natural

life and detail, or cold and hard, if it is weak, and it affects virtually all of the sound in every performance. The Generation 5s got this area more consistently right than the previous generation XLs, matching or surpassing every competitive cable I’ve tried in the past.

The only exception was the connection between my EMM (Meitner) Labs XDS1 and Pass Xs preamp. Here it became clear that the problem was that Josh did not have the right specs to tune the interconnect to the XDS1. A properly adjusted Generation 5 that he sent later did just fine. It provided yet another warning that each stage in upgrading cables

can be critical and requires equally critical listening.

The upper octaves—particularly the upper midrange—became smoother and more musical.

I suspect that this resulted as much from having better upper bass and lower midrange as having better highs, but I may be wrong. I heard the improvement in the upper register of soprano voice and violin, and while it was far subtler than the other improvements, it was definitely there.

The improvement in the soundstage was less subtle. I have found over the years that every improvement in detail and low-level dynamics is accompanied by an improvement in depth and imaging placement and size. I’m not sure that one causes the other, but a chamber music buff, and fan of small jazz groups, really notices any improvement in soundstaging and the realism of imaging, and each link of XL

Generation 5s did make a clear improvement.

Soundstage width did not change particularly, but better imaging and more realism in imaging size makes that width more realistic, particularly since it improves centerfill and better populates the full arc of the soundstage. Improvements in depth and in hall and venue ambience depended heavily on the recording, but were there when the recording actually had them.

Perhaps most importantly, these impressions that the new generation was dramatically better held up over time, even after I started making comparisons by swapping in some really good cables from other manufacturers. The best competitors sometimes rivaled the XLs, but the match in sound quality was far less consistent, and some cables that have proven to be excellent with other components did not work as well in given links in my system.

### Summing Up

If you already have Transparent Audio cables and think as highly of them as I do, I’d strongly recommend upgrading them to the Generation 5, and updating them to your current components if you have not already done so. Transparent offers an upgrade program that allows a customer to trade in a lower-level Transparent cable toward a higher-level one. (This upgrade program provides between a 50% and 70% value for the original cable in trade.)

If you do not own Transparent Audio cables, be aware that the Transparent Audio XL Generation 5 is not the most expensive set of cables that Transparent Audio sells—those

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Transparent Audio XL Generation 5 Interconnects and Cables

would be the Magnum Opus models, and I did not audition the Magnum Opus, the second-from-the-top Opus, or the less expensive models in the line. One real problem with reviewing cables from even a single manufacturer is the sheer number of options, and about all I can say is that the various models I've tried over the years have been consistently good.

### **More broadly, I don't see how you can go wrong with a properly matched set of Transparent Audio XLs, but the Generation 5s are scarcely cheap.**

More broadly, I don't see how you can go wrong with a properly matched set of Transparent Audio XLs, but the Generation 5s are scarcely cheap. And yes, my praise inevitably does reflect my taste in nuances and may not reflect yours. Good as the new Transparent Audio interconnects and speaker cable are, there also are great competitors; they are just harder to match to a given set of components. As a reviewer, I've had good results with AudioQuest, Kimber, Cardas, Wireworld, and StraightWire products over the years, and I use a mix of more universal cables and interconnects from different manufacturers in all my reviews. In short, my voyage of discovery is scarcely over.

I do believe, however, that the Transparent Audio XL Generation 5 Cables are a truly great offering, and that tailoring cables to a given mix of components really does work, and works far better than simply sorting through a wide range of different designs and hoping things will come out OK. tas

## Designer Josh Clark on the Generation 5

There are three primary areas of improvement in the new XL cables: cable construction technology, network technology, and network module vibration-control technology. All of these improvements are designed to increase dynamic range.

A system that can play from soft to loud with no apparent strain or compression allows the listener to relax and become more involved in the musical performance. We find that a lack of dynamic range is often the key element that separates hi-fi from real music, and cables can significantly limit dynamic range by adding noise and distortions to the signal and by limiting dynamic peaks. Transparent cables have always had a wide dynamic range but based on our Magnum Opus project we learned that we could make some significant improvements across all our cables.

The benefits of a wide dynamic range go beyond just resolving soft and loud passages with ease. For example a system that can play high-level signals without compression can reproduce powerful musical transients, like the percussive attack of a piano, which makes the instrument sound more full-bodied and realistic. The piano has a more natural tonal balance, or timbre, when these dynamics are more fully realized.

Another example is in the sense of space. A wide dynamic range requires a low inherent noise level, and if the noise levels are low, a system can reproduce the low-level musical information that conveys the location of the instrument within the performance space.

The new XL cables also benefit from the cable

construction techniques that we developed for our Magnum Opus project. Our goals for the Magnum Opus cable were to reduce effects of external vibrations, which add noise that interferes with the music, and to reduce the variations of inductance and capacitance that occur when a cable is bent, pulled, and twisted in its installation.

The XL speaker cables and interconnects are made with new, specialized twisting techniques and new elastic binding wraps that help to lock the positive and negative conductors together. This prevents the conductors from moving relative to one another, inside the cable, which is important because the capacitance and inductance of the cable is mostly a function of the spacing between the conductors. If the conductors are able to move around inside the cable, as they tend to do with external vibrations, the movement creates noise and losses that reduce musical dynamics, and as I will discuss below, affect the performance of our networks.

In addition to the new twisting techniques and elastic binding wraps we added new types of fillers in the spaces between the conductor bundles. These fillers also help to prevent movement inside the cable and, more importantly, are designed dampen the inevitable vibrations that the cable picks up from contact with the floor and audio components and from the sound waves travelling through the air. These vibrations might seem negligible but in fact they add a significant amount of noise that masks musical information. Keeping these vibrations under control keeps the noise floor low so the system can reproduce the low-level information in the music,

such as the vibrato of an instrument or the slight volume differences that a singer uses to emphasize a word in a phrase.

The Generation 5 XL networks take advantage of this greatly improved stability of inductance and capacitance. The new cable is far stable in all electrical parameters and this allows the network to be more precisely calibrated for better rejection of ultra-high-frequency noise, i.e. radio frequency interference. When this noise is removed the dynamic range of the system is increased.

Another problem with RF noise frequencies is that they tend to result in a distortion we can hear in the upper audio frequencies, where most musical instruments have their harmonics. The networks on the XL cables prevent this noise that would otherwise make instruments sound artificially bright.

The last major area of improvement in the Generation 5 XL cables is in its network modules. We redesigned all of these modules to be less susceptible to external vibrations, to maintain the low noise levels that are possible with the new XL cable and network.

The XL Speaker Cable modules especially benefit from what we learned in designing the Magnum Opus speaker cable module. The isolation feet create a wide, stable stance that is more immune to vibrations. This is combined with a new module design derived from the Magnum Opus shape that is significantly stiffer and more massive, and has more internal dampening material to protect the resistors, capacitors, and inductors used in the network from vibrations.





# Synergistic Research Atmosphere Cables, Level 4

The Insider

Neil Gader

**T**he Atmosphere line of speaker wire and interconnects from Synergistic Research (SR) represents the brand's latest thinking on cables. Comprising four distinct models that correspond with ascending levels of performance, Atmosphere is perhaps SR's most ambitious offering to date and the summit of the brand's efforts to bring the full weight of its innovative conductor, isolation, and anti-resonance technologies from its premium, actively-shielded range into a less costly "passive" design. For this review I spent the lion's share of the time listening to the Atmosphere Level 4.

First, let me say at the outset, I'm no stranger to Synergistic Research. Hard to believe, but it was nearly ten years and one hundred issues ago (Back Page, December 2006) that I interviewed its chief designer and owner Ted Denney, III. Soon thereafter I spent an afternoon touring the Synergistic factory, and listening to the just released Tesla Series cables. Denney then (and still) remains an outspoken and creative designer. In my conversations with him I noted a curiosity that bordered on obsession about the reproduction of three-dimensional soundspace, immersiveness, and ambience in recorded music. This quest inspired Synergistic to develop Uniform Energy Field (UEF) technology that has yielded a collection of products and accessories which address resonance control, room treatment, isolation technology, and the elimination of RF/EMI distortions. Synergistic's actively shielded cables have been available since 1998, but with their thick DC wires and mini-power-couplers (MPC) they demanded not only a higher level of commitment from owners but also enough AC outlets to plug in each cable's MPC. The key goal of the Atmosphere Series was to achieve comparable performance without that burden. The company now believes it can build non-active cables with performance levels that are only surpassed by its Reference Galileo LE Active cables.

Each gradation of Atmosphere adds increasingly sophisticated runs of conductors and proprietary shielding. But the real fun begins with Levels 2, 3, and 4, which are equipped with SR's Ground Plane Technology (described further

on). Additionally, for Levels 3 and 4 exclusively there are special terminations for Atmosphere Tuning Modules—small red or blue cylindrical "bullets" that users can freely substitute to fine-tune a system. Red tuners for "warmth, liquidity, and musicality," and blue tuners for "refinement, detail, and focus." I swapped out tuners at various times over the course of this evaluation, and though I'm still in the dark as to how they work I found myself consistently settling on the blue tuners in my reference system.

In sonics, Atmosphere Level 4 performance was instantly familiar to my ears as a Synergistic product. It carried over the same high degrees of tonal neutrality, inner detail, and dynamic authority that have marked my SR experiences over the years—experiences that include the actively shielded Tesla and Element series. Atmosphere is not a gee-whiz, shout-out-loud attention-grabber for superficial listening, however. Rather it's an honest, even conservative purveyor of sound, designed for the perceptive, thoughtful listener with a highly resolved and nuanced system. Atmosphere revealed the dark-wood cello resonances, detail, and low-level intricacies of the Bach Cello Suites [MA Recording], inviting me to listen deeper than ever before into Martin Zeller's well-measured performance. The cable's superb transients, bracing immediacy, and bloom of Lew Soloff's trumpet in the Manhattan Jazz Quintet [King Records]. Tricky vocal sibilance combined clarity and speed without veering into bright sizzle territory. The wires also have an innate vitality and

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Synergistic Research Atmosphere Cables, Level 4

gravitas that infuses the mids and lower mids with a darker natural authority that releases the resonant energy of cello and bass violin, baritone sax, and bassoon. Moving further into the upper mids there's a delicate bloom and a slightly warmer, unconstricted harmonic range that eliminates thin, papery textures and whitewashed timbres.

More than any single parameter, Atmosphere connected each image in its own contextual space. I didn't just hear the deep guttural pitch of the baritone saxophone during Jen Chapin's cover of "You Haven't Done Nothin'" [Chesky]; there was also the shimmer of ambient air reverberating in the recording space. Atmosphere also doesn't manufacture false fore and aft dimensionality by suppressing frequencies to create a depth effect—in perspective this cable is as neutral as they come. I often listen to the Laurel Massé's deceptively simple recording of "I Am the Mountainy Singer" from *Feather and Bone* [Premonition]. Recorded in the vast Troy Savings Bank auditorium, the folk song is voice and violin only. But there is a second phantom "accompanist" to Ms. Massé, and it's the vast reverberant sound of the venue. When everything else in the playback chain is working properly and there's a loudspeaker like the Vandersteen Treo CT (review forthcoming) anchoring the system, I began to pick up cues regarding the volume and height of the space, the amount of sustain and decay, and most specifically how the singer gradually closes in on the microphone. She begins the song from a more distant perspective than where she finishes. It's an effect that makes her sound as

if she is indeed descending from the mountain and approaching the listener.

The line that separates good wire, even the very good, from the great is an ability to reproduce symphonic music. While every genre of music provides clues about a cable's performance, in the end it's classical music's complexity, broad tonal spectrum, wide dynamic range, inner detail, and venue acoustics that makes it the final arbiter of a cable's potential. It's also the strongest reason to consider auditioning Atmosphere Level 4. As I listened to Solti's reading of the Beethoven Ninth [Decca], I sat transfixed as I experienced the specificity of section layering across the entire orchestra—the array of the large chorus, the placement of the soloists, the texture and skin resonances of the timpani positioned deep in the percussion section. Similarly, and if your speaker system and listening setup is optimized, you should be able to locate cellist Pieter Wispelwhey sitting in a cushioned pocket onstage, taking a measured breath during the Bruch *Kol Nidre* [Channel Classics].

I also had an opportunity to listen to the SR Grounding Block. To paraphrase Synergistic, "it connects the cable's shields and noise directly to ground and not through a component's power-supplies or speaker crossovers as is normally the case." Not much bigger than a pack of cigarettes, the SRGB is fitted with a copper top plate, and plugs directly into a wall outlet. It's equipped with eighteen mini ground connections. The SRGB package includes four 4" ground wires for Atmosphere interconnects and two 8" ground wires for Atmosphere speaker cables. Although it was engineered to improve

ground performance on all SR products with external ground plane connections, any system component with an unused input or output can also be integrated. I began by linking the speaker cables and interconnects to the SRGB and then moved on to individual components, using an available RCA or XLR input on that component's back panel.

Inserting the SRGB into the system was in all candor a surprise—the cynic in me did not expect this level of sonic improvement. As I settled into the Mozart Piano Sonatas [DG], there was no question about an overall shift in the system's character. At first blush there seemed to be a slight darkening overall, but as I listened further it became more of an awareness of the noise floor having significantly dropped and the soundstage having further stabilized into an unyielding brick-and-mortar foundation. Imaging stability improved while individual notes and chords firmed up in texture. There was a greater density beneath and behind each note—plus more authoritative soundboard energy and resonance from the grand piano. My takeaway was that the SRGB drilled deeper into the recording and uncovered detail at the lowest discernible levels. The effect was also cumulative with the addition of each component to the SRGB. It quickly became a mandatory option in my view and is cost effective, to boot.

Perhaps the greatest compliment I can confer on a cable is summed up in three words: "Cable? What cable?" The transparency of Atmosphere continues what has become for me an SR tradition of expanding the boundaries of soundstage dimensionality, pursuing every microdynamic cue, and

resolving the lowest level details. Aptly named, Atmosphere elevated the listening experience with every spin of a recording. A must-audition component. **tas**

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# Moon Audio Silver Dragon V2 Interconnect

Dracarys!

Neil Gader

**A** visit to the Moon Audio Web site and on-line store reveals an honest passion for the high end, with a particular enthusiasm for headphones and head-amps and for the bespoke cables to drive them. This is Moon Audio's specialty—custom, handcrafted cabling for any application from home theater to high-end stereo, as well as iDevices and laptops.

Moon Audio's top audiophile interconnect offering is the Silver Dragon V2, the successor to the Silver Dragon. It still uses a braided geometry made of eight, solid-core, 99.999% pure silver, 26AWG wires with Teflon insulation. However the braiding has been upgraded and an external shield added to the mix for further noise rejection and durability—handy for lengthy runs across a studio floor. The

connectors have also been upgraded; after extensive testing, Moon Audio selected the new WBT Nextgen WBT O102Ag for unbalanced RCA and the Furutech FP-601 in rhodium for XLR.

It doesn't take exhaustive listening sessions to understand why Moon Audio cabling has already achieved near-cult-like status. The Silver Dragon V2 (SDV2) slipped into my system without a hiccup. Key among its strengths was the noise-free environment it established—a dark, dead-silent background from which music freely and cleanly emerged. Another key was its smooth, rich midrange—elegant in its neutrality, color saturation, and fluidity. There was a satisfying mellowness to the SDV2's character—one that didn't exactly soften transients (there's plenty of snap and speed to go around), but that did add a measure of overall warmth to the presentation.

Vocals were always unwaveringly positioned in space. Tom Waits' throaty, barrel-chested voice rumble onstage fully focused, while Renée Fleming's dark mezzo soared on a thick cloud of air. The lower-mid and bass octaves of the SDV2 also had a distinctive weight and heft that reproduced the resonances of orchestral instruments like bass, cello, and bassoon with a gut-level thrum of authenticity. And as I listened to the title track of Michael Garson's *Serendipity*, now a Reference Recordings LP chestnut, I was reminded of the wonderfully raspy attack of the sax and the bell-like sustain of the piano. The Silver Dragon reproduces these concurrent timbral contrasts and dynamic energies beautifully. Its "inside" game is also very good. Norah Jones' "Sinkin Soon" from *Not Too Late* [Blue Note LP] proved a feast for the Silver Dragon as it delineated the inner vocal harmonies and the *extreme* low-level details from the quirky percussion section of this clever tune.

Regarding the SDV2's top end I held my breath as the Ray Brown Trio launched into "That's All" from its classic *Soular Energy* [Groove Note]. This track, in all its acoustic and naturalistic purity, has become a beacon of resolution and detail for me. So why the held breath? Even now my ears remain on alert for the colorations/distortions I associate with

earlier iterations of silver wire. It's true that current, state-of-the-art silver cabling has largely moved on from the thin, dry, tipped-up treble that this conductor offered once upon a time. But most of the current crop of sterling wires are costly no-holds-barred efforts. The SDV2 is priced quite modestly by comparison. Nonetheless, it conveyed none of the searing vices from yesteryear—and I began to breathe more easily.

On the aforementioned cut from *Soular Energy*, the SDV2 did come up a bit shy of the pure, unveiled treble-range openness of reference wires like the Synergistic Tesla CTS and Wireworld Platinum Eclipse Series 7. These cables leave behind very few traces of their own signatures. That said, Silver Dragon captured the delicacy of the piano's slowly decaying upper harmonics, the intensity of Gene Harris' lightning keyboard trills, and the top-end air of the brushed snare and cymbals quite realistically. Ray Brown's bass was rich in dark woody timbre, with a certain creamy thickness to its rotund resonances.

The Silver Dragon was very specific in placement and perspective—each musician positioned clearly and each slightly forward on

## SPECS & PRICING

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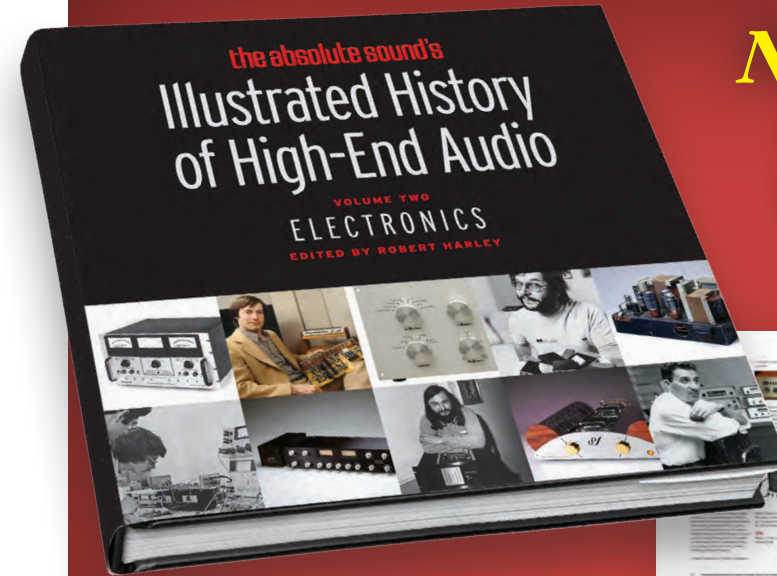
## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Moon Audio Silver Dragon V2

the stage. What was interesting was to contrast this fairly upfront and slightly flatter perspective with that of the Kimber Select 1136 pure-silver interconnects—a way, way pricier option to be sure, but still an instructive comparison. When I switched to the Kimber (review to come) the performance settled back into the studio slightly, though it was not laid-back in the tonal sense. Micro-information and balances were unchanged; rather, the players seemed less stiffly regimented in lines across the stage, and spatial relationships were better defined and ultimately more immersive. Ray Brown's bass also seemed to open up slightly as if shifting from an emphasis on tight pitch control to a looser, thicker, more lifelike measure of reverberation.

I don't begrudge anyone who has the bankroll buying the high-priced spreads. I've heard some great expensive cables. And in the same general range of the Silver Dragon there is stiff competition from the likes of WyWires Blue Series and Nordost Purple Flare (reviewed in Issues 235 and 236). These are competitors, however, not dragon-slayers. I've got to give it up for the Moon Audio Silver Dragon V2. It's a David in a world of Goliaths. It defies every expectation for a modestly priced interconnect. To say I'm impressed doesn't go far enough. You're just going to have to hear these for yourself. *tas*

### A Few Words with Moon Audio's Drew Baird

Moon Audio President and Founder, Drew Baird, is a self-professed audio junkie. An electronic music DJ in high school and college, he had early aspirations of becoming a speaker designer and builder. However, after doing some research during his early years at Penn State as an Electrical Engineering major, he quickly changed to Structural Engineering after some advisor meetings. In an e-mail conversation, he adds that "most EE's don't believe in the psycho-acoustical effects of audio equipment and especially changes in sound based on cables, etc. I am a true believer that all pieces in the signal path make a difference." In conversation, Baird's a direct kind of guy and that's exactly the kind of retail audio store he runs in Cary, North Carolina. "Moon Audio is a rare type of shop, as we are both a cable manufacturer and also a high-end-audio retailer. I only sell products that I believe in and use myself as I cannot sell items that I don't perceive great value in as a consumer. In addition, our cables are not three inches thick and stiff as flag poles. They are simply hand-crafted, in house, with passion and high-quality materials. Moon Audio sells direct to the consumer in order to keep pricing at a minimum and we never discount our cables. You will rarely see Moon Audio cables on the used market because our cables hold their value. We also build everything to order and to whatever specs the customer needs and wants for his hi-fi setup. Overall, we cater to our customer's passions and desires, plus as a company we try to live by the golden rule. This has served us well and continues to create long term relationships with our customers, and for this we are truly thankful."



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# Wireworld Platinum Eclipse Series 7 Speaker Cable & Interconnects

The Sound of Nothing?

Neil Gader



**W**ireworld always seems to end up on my short list of preferred speaker cables and interconnects. The reason? The line embodies uncolored sonics year in and year out. If we can agree that every wire (every component) leaves something akin to fingerprints on a pane of glass—a smear, a smudge that impairs transparency and resolution—Wireworld, in my experience, has consistently left fewer traces of itself than most others. Actually, as weird as this may sound, Wireworld wires never seem to be actively *doing* much of anything—except making music, and a whole lot of it, as I discovered with Wireworld’s latest, Platinum Eclipse. (The flagship now carries the Series 7 moniker in celebration of the firm’s 20th Anniversary.)

Beyond its newly refined cosmetics, Platinum Eclipse represents the summit of Wireworld’s

current thinking. When I reviewed the entry-level Equinox and mid-priced Eclipse (Issue 238) Wireworld’s David Salz discussed Series 7, and his remarks regarding its improvements bear repeating here. He describes a developmental process that began with “the discovery that most audible differences among cable insulation materials are caused by spectral variations in the noise they create. Furthermore, that noise is modulated and therefore amplified by the electrical energy of the music signal. This discovery led me to focus on custom-blending composite insulation materials specifically optimized for sonic purity.” The result of that effort is Wireworld’s Composilex 2 insulation technology, which dramatically reduces triboelectric noise (note: static electricity occurring through friction is an example of triboelectric noise) at the interface between conductor and insulation. “Additional improvements were garnered from new versions of Wireworld’s DNA Helix conductor geometry, which channel more electromagnetic energy and therefore more music, than the previous

designs.” The new geometry is the most obvious visual difference compared with the flat-profile of the cable’s immediate predecessor.

Platinum Eclipse Series 7 (PE7) uses heavy nine-gauge OCC Silver conductors (interconnects are seventeen-gauge OCC Silver). The speaker cable is as stiff and unwieldy as the interconnects are supple. That stiffness made me reconsider my choice of the delicate banana terminations used for my review samples. I would opt for the more robust spades if these were mine.

Over the years I’ve found that when a system is paired with Wireworld cabling—entry-level to cost-no-object—the distinctions are not (initially) obvious. It’s not a sense of “lights on” in the treble or “fasten your seatbelts” in the bass. Platinum Eclipse, for all its technology and (let’s face it) awesome cost, is not about hype. If there is one phrase that describes its character, it would be relaxed but ready. PE7 is first about balance and about uncovering the bundles of inside activity that animate a great recording. These include the details, dynamic gradations, and harmonic nuances that were preserved during the recording/mixing process—and the higher the playback resolution the better (LPs especially).

At rest, there’s an underlying silence to this wire that creates something akin to a glassy expanse of deep black water—a motionless landscape waiting in anticipation of the micro-ripples of music to begin. Listening to Malcolm Arnold’s *English Scottish and Cornish Dances* I could hear the ever-present hall sound reverberating behind every note and filling every pause and musical rest. Or the crackle of the far upstage tambourine that rockets down the center section of the London Philharmonic

orchestra, its reverberation flaring and fading into the soundscape. The point is that it’s the sheer silence of these cables that provides the launching pad for all that comes later.

Tonal balance is essentially neutral with just a suggestion of midrange warmth and a top end that at first blush can sound slightly shaded, but in fact is not. I’ll return to this point further on. Most importantly PE7 possesses a uniform palette—there are no color shifts across the musical spectrum. Rock-steady, its sonics don’t ripen in one octave and then narrow or bleach out in another. And these include the frequency extremes where such discontinuities manifest most audibly. When I listen to Joni Mitchell singing “A Case of You” as I recently did in my evaluation of the Ortofon Quintet Black cartridge (review in this issue) I don’t want to hear splashes of treble harmonics and air decoupled from the fundamentals of the vocal. This is all too common in cables that miss the mark. But Platinum Eclipse’s overall response is continuous and smooth. At the other extreme, its bass response is as open, well defined, and complex as its treble, imparting body and air proportional to the demands of the music. For instance, listen closely to the final smack of the bass drum during John Williams’ *Liberty Fanfare* [Wilson Audiophile]. Beyond the immediate and immense impact, you’ll hear and feel the resonance and flutter of the drum head as it does a slow fade into the background.

As I alluded to earlier, Platinum Eclipse is at its most expressive in the treble octaves—to my mind audio’s most precarious region where most wires either narrow, bleach, or otherwise wring out the harmonic juices of the signal. The initial tip-off for me is the sibilance range, the 6-8kHz regions, where overtones either gently

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Wireworld Platinum Eclipse Series 7

punctuate a singer's articulation or begin to sizzle like bacon on the griddle. As I listened to Norah Jones' "Wish I Could," consonants and especially "s" sounds were smooth, devoid of trailing smudge off the transient. At first blush, this can lead to the (false) impression that there is some shadowing in the treble, but it's really the reduction of distortion. It was a lesson in naturalistic reproduction—like I said earlier, no hype. What you won't hear from the Platinum are violin sections losing bits of resonant body and sounding stringy, or brass sections depleted of their sparkling golden bloom from lack of air and truncation of harmonics.

In these upper octaves PE7 most reminds me of my first experience listening to Tara Labs Zero and Omega (at JV's suggestion) many years ago. They were driving MBL's three-way compact, the mbl 121 Radialstrahler via MBL electronics. This omnidirectional speaker (since replaced) had a reputation—as musically luminous as a loudspeaker could be, it was equally ruthless in the way it exposed component impurities. Prior to the Taras it was also disturbing to me that the vaunted treble purity of the Radialstrahler was proving so elusive in my listening room. The violin solos of Arturo Delmoni from *Songs My Mother Taught Me* [JMR] had a stridency, a stinging string tone more penetrating than the instrument deserved. Similarly the upper octaves of Valentina Lisitsa's piano registered a more metallic signature as if the felt had worn off the keyboard's hammers. The Tara effectively put an end to that immediately. It smoothed, sweetened, and opened up these octaves. The Platinum Eclipse is the first wire since the Tara

to score as highly in this area. On solo piano and violin there is a consistent sweetness, especially in the treble range, a warm air enriching each image in the way an artist adds rich swathes of color to a line drawing.

Beyond its upper-octave performance, dimensionality and spatial gradations are Platinum's most persuasive virtues. It sets a symphonic soundstage with the same precision as the staff preparing the dining room table at Downton Abby. Once again I turned to Rutter's *Requiem* [Reference Recordings], a reference album of immersive spatiality and vast staging. As heard through the PE7 wire, the Turtle Creek chorale remained fully integrated within the reverberant venue yet, if the mind's eye so chose, the individual vocal nuances of each chorus member could be singled out. The presentation never devolved into a slice-and-dice affair that set players apart from their acoustic surroundings. Only the Synergistic Research Tesla CTS, with its uncanny holographic soundstage, has bettered the Wireworld in this regard.

What price glory? Platinum Eclipse is certainly well beyond my pay grade. But don't assume that just because it is so costly it requires an ultra-high-resolution, *fancy pants* system to make its magic—or that it wouldn't make a dime's worth of difference in a more "real world" high-end system. Unfortunately it does make a difference, and all too much of one. Loudspeakers as cost-accessible as the new Audio Physic Classic 30 floorstander and the ATC SCM19 stand-mounted monitor benefitted to no small degree from these wires. So much so that it may not be a good idea to try them unless you're prepared to go all the

way to purchase.

For those prepared to go all the way, and I'm glad there are those of you out there, I wouldn't hesitate to commend these wires. I've heard plenty of other cables that have

proven themselves over various criteria, but Wireworld's Platinum Eclipse Series7 is the most balanced and musical cable I've experienced yet. A component worthy of the designation, the state of the art.

### Further Thoughts from Wireworld's David Salz

**It's consistent with the Wireworld philosophy that the only valid comparison is against no cable at all, hence the creation of the Cable Comparator. I asked Salz about its development.**

Back in 1980, about 14 years before I even thought of creating a Cable Comparator, I performed my first cable bypass test by soldering together a pair of two-inch-long twisted-pair jumpers to replace the various high-end one-meter interconnects I had been using between my preamp and amplifier. The moment I listened to my system with the interconnect bypass, I realized that I was hearing much more music than I had ever heard through any of the one-meter interconnects. The confusion of only being able to hear differences between cables was gone, because I had gained the ability to hear what each cable was losing! I also realized that I had discovered the way I could learn to create cables that let more of the music through, and so I vowed to turn that challenge into my career.

Creating excellent cable bypass tests is rarely easy and it's often very tedious to keep switching among various cables and reference jumpers. The very detailed and tiring work of perfecting and performing these tests is what led me to invent

the Cable Comparators. With direct switching between cables and the reference bypass, I was then able to test more easily, and I also gained the capability of demonstrating the audibility of cable losses in double-blind comparisons. Even though the Cable Comparators are a great convenience, I now perform most of my bypass testing manually to avoid the sonic losses of the extra connections within the Comparators.

**Do you have more than one reference system and do you use a listening panel?**

Throughout my thirty-odd years of performing cable bypass tests, I have always gone out of my way to repeat important tests on multiple reference systems to avoid system-dependent effects or limitations. Despite obvious differences in the sonic impact of various cables on those systems, I have learned that the actual effects of cables are very consistent from system to system. I have also enjoyed the benefits of having some very talented listeners, including high-end audio designers, recording/mastering engineers, and musicians, assist me in my testing and prototype evaluations. **lars**



# Audience Au24 SE Power Cable, Au24 SE Interconnect, and Au24 SE Speaker Cable

A Veritable Steal

Jacob Heilbrunn



**J**ohn McDonald, the president of Audience cables, has been in business for several decades, but he isn't someone who makes a big fuss about the properties of his cables. They're slim and unpretentious, even—dare I say it?—unprepossessing, at least visually. All this is intentional. Audience cables follow a low-mass/low-eddy-current design that ensures they look as if they've been put on a starvation diet next to some of the hulking monsters out there. Those audiophiles who equate performance with bulk and heft probably wouldn't give Audience much of an audience.

But does size really matter when it comes to cables? Does bulk determine performance? Is it imperative to have cables the length and girth of pythons snaking around your audio gear?

Judging by the sonic qualities of Audience's latest offerings, the answer has to be a resounding no. Over the past few months, I've had the opportunity to sample the company's latest interconnects, as well as speaker and power cables. And its new line represents a substantial leap beyond the Audience cables that favorably impressed me a few years ago—particularly when it comes to power cables. Audience's build-quality has always been exemplary—it's a sophisticated company that sells high-quality capacitors, power conditioners, and, not least, loudspeakers—but quite frankly I wasn't expecting the degree of improvement that these new wires offer across the board. Whether on the dCS Vivaldi CD/SACD playback system or on preamps and phonostages, improve things they did, and not by a small margin.

One of the novelties of Audience designs, at least when it comes to power cords, is that they come in three gauges. For power amplifiers, which require a lot of current, Audience offers a 10-gauge cord. For medium power requirements—between 50-150 watts—you can order a 14-gauge cord. And for CD players and other equipment that doesn't draw much current, Audience offers a low-power version. (Note that owners of Audience cables can upgrade to the new SE versions.)

If this sounds overly complicated, it's really not. And even if it were, that wouldn't stop most audiophiles. But here's the deal: The cords work extremely well. The first thing I noticed when I inserted the power cords into the dCS rig was that the noise floor dropped quite a bit. They helped to create a more sumptuous and velvety black background. With it came more detail—detail that helped create a more lifelike sound. My take is that the Audience cords help to reduce distortion, which is to say the smearing between notes that our ears subconsciously perceive. Remove that almost imperceptible layer of grunge and you achieve a new level of clarity, both in rhythm and image solidity. Everything starts to sound better.

On digital this was apparent to me on CD after CD. Consider Murray Perahia's recording on Sony of Handel and Scarlatti. The music may not be all that complicated, but sometimes a more spare recording gives you a chance to listen more deeply than a bunch of razzle-dazzle sonic fireworks. Here it was clear that the interstitial black space between notes was audibly improved. Individual notes seemed to linger even longer, decaying into the ether. Ditto for the Eagles on the "Hotel California" cut on the album *Hell Freezes Over*. It was now possible to distinguish even more clearly between the singers and instruments. The power cables helped to create a wall of sound.



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Audience Au24 SE

The same went for vinyl. I plugged the cables into the Ypsilon phonostage and preamplifier. On Red Garland's album *All Kinds of Weather* [Prestige], a wonderful mono LP recorded in 1958 by the immortal Rudy Van Gelder, it was clear that the reduction in noise allowed me to hear further into the music. All of the instruments—piano, bass, and drums—sounded as though they were being more clearly resolved. You got the benefits of lower distortion without any suppression of dynamics. On the contrary, there was greater snap and precision to classic numbers such as "Rain" and "Stormy Monday." It almost sounded as though my mono Miyajima Zero cartridge was tracking the LP more accurately, especially on LPs that I thought were hopelessly compromised due to wear. It was a real treat to discover that they were, in fact, more listenable than I had previously thought.

Adding in the Audience speaker cables and interconnects did nothing to subtract from these appealing qualities. The most notable virtue of the speaker cables is that they follow the audio equivalent of the Hippocratic oath, which is to say that they don't do anything wrong. These are not cables that have even a trace of etch or tizziness. Nor are they saccharine or rolled-off. Rather, they seem to conduct the signal with no fuss or muss. They are accurate, lithe, and taut. When I used them with the Boulder 2050 monoblock amplifiers, which put out an imposing 1200 watts of pure Class A power, the Audience speaker cables performed admirably. Coupled with Audience interconnects in balanced mode running from the dCS into the Boulder preamplifier, my system delivered some of the best sound

I've been able to get from it—the shimmer on cymbals was so beautifully controlled, expanding effortlessly into the air as though the instruments were hovering right before me. And the bass. Oh, my. It sounded like tectonic plates were shifting on Mavis Staples' new album *One True Vine*. Sometimes these sonic experiences are just hard to forget.

Suffice it to say that the Audience speaker and interconnect cables may be relatively diminutive but they will never short-change your system, whether it comes to sonic prowess or nuance. Still, for all their virtues, I have to say that it was the power cables that ended up stealing my heart. The number of power cables on offer is daunting, and skeptics love to maintain that the notion that they can improve your system is bogus. My experience with them says otherwise. Their flexibility and extreme performance make Audience's latest assault on power delivery a steal in the world of the high end. **tas**

### SPECS & PRICING

<b>Prices:</b> Au24 SE unbalanced (1meter), \$1290; Au24 SE balanced (1 meter), \$1895; Au24 SE speaker cable (2 meter), \$2095, Au24 SE LP powerChord (5 feet), \$1030; Au24 SE MP powerChord (5 feet), \$1175; Au24 SE powerChord (5 feet, standard full-gauge), \$2250.	<b>AUDIENCE</b> 120 N. Pacific St., K-9 San Marcos, CA 92069 (760) 471-0202 (800) 565-4390 audience-av.com
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# Digital Interconnects

# Transparent Reference XL Digital Link Interconnect

Must-Audition

Jacob Heilbrunn



**C**lose readers of TAS—and what other kind are there?—may recall that I recently contributed a sidebar to editor Robert Harley’s comprehensive review of the new dCS Vivaldi CD/SACD playback system. In it, I compared and contrasted the performance of the dCS Scarlatti, the company’s longtime flagship, to the Vivaldi, concluding that the latter handily surpassed its predecessor. There I thought the matter rested. I was wrong. In recent months, there have been rumblings of even greater gains to be had by employing Transparent Audio’s new Reference XL line of digital cables. Transparent itself claims new technological advances in designing these cables. It says, “Reference XL Digital Link uses Transparent Advanced Expanded Foam Technology for precise impedance control and low noise signal transmission. With a solid OFHC conductor that is significantly larger than the Reference 75-ohm Digital Link conductor, Reference XL Digital Link has far more surface area with which to transfer digital signals accurately.” It doesn’t take more than a glance to see that the construction of these handsome cables is exemplary.

But how much further could the performance of the dCS Vivaldi be taken? Well, the answer to that question is not exactly what I thought it would be. After Transparent’s Brad O’Toole sent me the new cables for review, I anticipated

some improvement in the bass and treble, and perhaps a pinch more detail. Once again, I was dead wrong.

The improvement rendered by the new cables was not subtle or minor or difficult to detect. On the contrary, inserting them proved to be one of the most flabbergasting experiences I have ever had in the high end. The Reference line did not improve the sound; it took it into another realm. As good as the Vivaldi is—and it is superb—there can be doubt that ancillary equipment such as the digital cables employed on it not only can but do have a profound effect upon its reproduction of music.

This is not an easy concession for me to make because it adds substantially to the cost of the already costly Vivaldi. But friends, there is no way around it. The Transparent digital cable makes an immense improvement by banishing any lingering digital artifacts, opening up the treble, sending the bass plunging down another octave, fleshing out the midbass, and noticeably increasing the articulation and weight of instruments and voice.

Take the recording by the London Brass of Francois Couperin’s *La Triomphante*. The brass possess a vibrancy, a snap and sassiness, that simply was not present previously. Somehow micro-dynamics also benefit immensely from the Transparent cables. The attacks of trumpets are resounding—they pop into the air. They sound, to put it another way, as if they are supported by more air. The swells and crescendos of the brass choruses are vastly clearer. But at the same time, the increase in dynamic range means that pianissimo passages simultaneously sound softer and clearer. It is as though these cables increase the bandwidth of a recording. At the most basic level, the intonation



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Transparent Reference XL Digital Link

of voice and instruments—the centering of an individual note—is much more precise.

Nor is this all. Soundstage separation also benefits. The soundstage seemed to expand laterally and to deepen. The sense of three-dimensionality, of an actual stage populated by musicians and instruments, is heightened. Suddenly a background chorus to Leonard Cohen on his CD *Old Ideas* isn't simply floating murkily in the background but is its own distinct entity. Or take John Eliot Gardiner's recording of Bach's "Advent" Cantatas for Arkiv. There is something profoundly moving about the ability to hear each chorus gently enter without intruding on the others. The anchoring of the instruments, the lack of any sense of drift, means that it becomes simplicity itself to track complex passages of music, something that also becomes abundantly clear on Andras Schiff's marvelous recording on ECM of the Bach Partitas.

But the greatest merit of the Reference XL is its supernatural ability to help deliver a kind of clarity on digital playback that I have never previously experienced. The slightest swish of the cymbals, a foot tapping on a piano pedal, the mildest brush of the bow on a cello—nothing is effaced by these cables. There is a limpidity and tranquility, a sense of ease to the sound, that are hard to forget once you've heard them. Whether on jazz, classical, rock, or rap, the Reference XL/Vivaldi possesses the ability to vanish from the signal chain, imposing no audible coloration.

No doubt further advancement in digital playback looms. The high end bears more than a passing resemblance to an arms race

in which various manufacturers constantly attempt to one-up each other. But for now, the combination of the dCS Vivaldi and Transparent Reference XL digital cables exceeds anything else I have heard. I could tell you that it took a lot of listening and chin-stroking to arrive at this conclusion. Fiddlesticks. It didn't take long at all to realize that these cables take digital performance to a glorious place. If you have a high-end digital rig, then auditioning Transparent Reference XL is not a good idea. It is a must. *tas*



### SPECS & PRICING

Reference XL Digital Link (75 ohm): \$3195 (one meter)	<b>TRANSPARENT AUDIO</b> 47 Industrial Park Road Saco, ME 04072 (207) 284-1100 transparentcable.com
Reference XL Digital Link (110 ohm): \$3595 (one meter) (longer lengths available at additional cost)	

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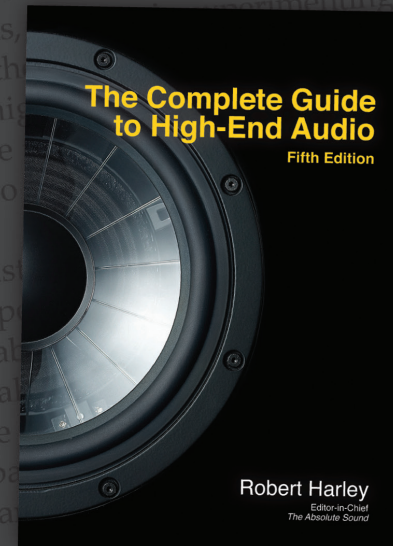
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# Two USB Cables

Clarus Cable Crimson  
USB and Kimber Kable  
KS 2436

Neil Gader

Over the past year I've been using the USB output from my MacBook Pro sparingly. This was not my original intent, but ever since I set up a NAS drive the Lumin A-1 Network Music Player (Issue 248) has been my go-to digital source. Consequently, USB kind of fell off the radar. However, having just powered up the excellent new Esoteric K-03x, which is equipped with USB and multiple 32-bit DACs, I thought it a good time to put a little USB back in my life. Fortuitously, I also had two new USB cables on hand—the makings of a tidy little comparison.

For the tests I used a MacBook Pro, running iTunes/Pure Music, connected via USB to the Esoteric K-03x, a Classé Audio CP-800 preamp and CA-D200 amplifier, and the Dali Rubicon 6 or TAD CE-1 loudspeakers. Loudspeaker and interconnect cables were Synergistic Research Atmospheres, and power cables were Audience Au24SE's.

## Clarus Cable Crimson USB

Clarus Cable has quickly gained a well-deserved reputation for standout performance at reasonable prices (for the high end anyway). Its USB cable uses conductors of 22-gauge PCOCC (Pure Copper by the Ohno Continuous Casting) and 6% silver plating. Power conductors are 20 gauge. Clarus uses proprietary twisting to reduce noise and jitter, and separate shielding for both signal and power conductors. The five separate shields in the Crimson include aluminum foil, copper foil, and braided silver-plated copper. Signal conductors are insulated with high-grade, high-density polyethylene, while the jacketing is PVC with nylon braiding.

The Clarus USB nails the middle range of the musical spectrum with a fullness of body, a timbral warmth, a transient alacrity, and an overall honesty that calms and relaxes the ear. As I listened to Laurel Massé's luminous a *cappella* performance of "How Can I Keep From Singing," I was struck by how persuasively warm and articulate the character of this cable was. Its balance and its light touch with vocal sibilance were excellent.

During the Tchaikovsky, the Clarus USB reproduced Anne Sophie-Mutter's violin with a little more grit, a little more tension in the upper

octaves, yet had a nice enveloping warmth and weight with larger stringed instruments like cello and contrabass. Low-end response was powerful and expansive with hints of added bloom that on one level conveyed a lively venue atmosphere but on another suggested some minor pitch ambiguity.

Throughout this survey I kept returning to the ballet section of Vaughan Williams' *The Wasps*, specifically the opening flute theme with harp accompaniment (later joined by percussion triangle and strings). In this delicate example of low-level interplay the Clarus was slightly darker in character and transparency seemed ever so slightly muted—a minor subtraction.

Summary: The Clarus is an authentic bargain with performance that flirts with top-tier cables. A terrific upgrade cable (a standard-setter in this range) for nascent and experienced computer-audio fans alike.

## Kimber Kable KS 2436

The 2436 is all about the silver. Stranded and solid-core conductors are woven together in a field-isolating braided geometry which keeps the power and signal paths separate throughout the entire assembly. Kimber is big into silver and emphasizes that the metal needs to be optimized for audio applications, not jewelry. The silver is drawn at the ideal temperature and tension, and there are no chemical baths using lubricants like graphite which can embed themselves in the silver. Terminations are realized by bonding the connector body to the concentric shield with conductive epoxy and copper foil. Next, each conductor is soldered to the gold-plated pins using a nitrogen-charged system to eliminate the possibility of impurities at the in-



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Clarus Cable Crimson USB & Kimber Kable KS 2436

terface. Finally, the ebony wood shell, which also insulates the conductors, is added.

The Kimber established the widest, most detailed soundstage I've yet heard from a USB cable. During the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto orchestral images seemed to fill every corner of the venue; a flurry of timbral information and ambient activity flooded the space behind violin soloist Mutter. Low-level retrieval of the aggressive bowing from the bass violins was almost distracting in its clarity.

**The KS has a cooler character that's ultra-detailed and transparent. It's so revealing that only the finest DACs need apply.**

The Kimber's character was the embodiment of speed with a hint of added top-end brilliance and extension. It's a cable of strong tonal and micro-dynamic contrasts. It doesn't offer a harder sound, mind you, but is a hair's breadth more finely grained in energy and treble air. For instance, during Dick Hyman's big band disc *The Age of Swing* not only did the KS demonstrate excellent transient attack and micro-dynamic expression, but it also allowed me to hear further back in the mix. The KS 2436 also followed descending bass lines a little more attentively and clung to that pitch information with tenacity.

During "The Wasps" referenced earlier, the Kimber seemed to reproduce the finest threads of a performance especially during the low-level interplay with flute and harp and triangle. The KS also hinted at a little more keyboard tonal color, finer gradations of the player's "touch"—contrasts of loudness-to-softness—

during pianist Evgeny Kissin's performance of Glinka's "The Lark." During the high-octave rush of keyboard trills near the end of this composition, the KS was as open and free from treble tension as I've heard from this piece.

Summary: A brilliant soundstager, the KS has a cooler character that's ultra-detailed and transparent. It's so revealing that only the finest DACs need apply.

### Conclusion

These are both musically persuasive USB cables. But there's another consideration to keep in mind—application. The Clarus is the sweetspot, sure to please the majority of users. The Kimber is a different kettle of fish. This is an ultra-premium wires designed for first-class DACs and well-informed (and -heeled) users. Candidly, the full breadth of its performance will be lost in the entry-level world. The takeaway is to know your system and your aspirations for that system. That will help make the choice an easy one. *tas*

## SPECS & PRICING

CLARUS CABLE/GORDON J. GOW TECHNOLOGIES, INC.

(470) 477-2277

claruscable.com

Price: \$250/1m; \$350/2m

KIMBER KABLE

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# Audience Au24 SE USB Cable

## No Compromise

Robert Harley

**A**udience is an interesting company. Although this 18-year-old firm offers signal cables, AC power cords, AC power conditioners, and speakers, it doesn't easily fit into any of those particular niches. Audience brings products to market only when it believes it can contribute something unique—no matter the category. Take its 1+1 loudspeaker, for example. With two 3" full-range drivers in a bi-pole configuration, dual side-firing 3.5" passive radiators, and no crossover, the 1+1 is not your typical speaker. Yet its combination of midrange clarity, transparency, resolution, and naturalness of timbre is sublime.

Audience's new Au24 SE USB cable is similarly distinctive—and similarly impressive. The culmination of nearly two years of development, the Au24 SE breaks new ground in USB cable performance, in my experience.

The first thing you'll notice is that the Au24 SE has two jacketed sets of conductors rather than one. One set carries the signal, and the other, the power. The data conductors are shielded silver-coated OCC copper wires with Teflon insulation. The power conductors are also shielded and made from OCC copper wire with polypropylene insulation. This separation of signal and power conductors is reportedly key to the Au24 SE's performance. The Au24 is available with either one or two USB-A connectors at the source end. In the single-connector version, the power and signal conductors are joined at the USB connector. In the double-connector version, data and power are sent from two different USB busses for greater isolation. I evaluated the dual-connector version.

The Au24 SE is a super-premium design with a premium price: \$945 for a meter with two USB connectors, and \$895 for the single-connector version. Like other products in the Audience catalog, the Au24 SE is intended to deliver uncompromised performance.

I listened to the dual-connector Au24 SE in the link between a MacBook Pro running iTunes/Pure Music and a Berkeley Alpha USB-to-AES/EBU converter. This then fed a Berkeley Alpha Reference Series DAC via an AudioQuest AES/EBU digital interconnect. Amplifiers were Soudation 701 monoblocks driving Magico Q7 loudspeakers through MIT Oracle cable. In other words, this is a reference-quality system that lays bare every other link in the chain.

I've listened to a number of top-end USB cables, but none approaches the Audience in sheer naturalness of timbre. The Au24 has an extremely smooth, rich, and liquid rendering of tone color that is a welcome departure from the many USB cables that impart a synthetic, "plastic" character to the sound. Midrange textures through the Au24 SE are rich, dense, dark, complex—even voluptuous. The tendency for USB to sound a bit mechanical and artificial is replaced by an organic flow and ease with the Au24 SE in the system. Similarly, the treble is the antithesis of bright, hard, forward, and thin. The top octaves never call attention to themselves; the treble sounds like a natural part of an instrument's timbre rather than a separate component.

I also greatly enjoyed the Au24 SE's rendering of space and depth. The overall perspective is a bit laid-back, with the presentation taking a step behind the speakers. Concomitant with this relaxed perspective is tremendous depth, expansiveness, and holographic imaging. Instruments within this space are beautifully delineated and defined, surrounded by a richly reverberant field. These qualities were particularly vivid on the 176.4kHz/24-bit Reference Recordings files. Although I've heard these recordings many times, the Au24 SE revealed an even larger and more dimensional spatial perspective.

The Au24 SE's bass is spectacular. The bottom end is extended and powerful, but what makes it so satisfying is the Au24 SE's warmth and richness through the midbass and upper-bass. This quality provides a solid tonal foundation for mid-range textures, which partly explains the density of tone color mentioned earlier. The Au24



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Audience Au24 SE USB Cable



doesn't bleach or thin the upper bass and lower mids, a quality that contributes to this cable's warmth and texture. Think of a bass clarinet's rich "chocolatey" timbre and you'll have a good impression of the Au24 SE's overall character.

Despite the laid-back spatial presentation and tonal warmth, the Au24 SE is not lacking in resolution. All the fine details are there, but presented in a subtle rather than hyped way. It's the type of presentation that doesn't sound highly resolved at first, but the more you listen, the more you're drawn into the subtleties of the musical performance. The Au24 SE's resolution is achieved by revealing nuances of expression, not sonic fireworks. It's a sophisticated and refined sound that fosters an intimacy with the music and encourages long listening sessions—always a good sign.

Frankly, there's nothing to fault in the Au24 SE. Many USB cables—as with everything else in audio—force you to make trade-offs; this cable

has better resolution while another may have greater smoothness and ease. The Audience cable seemingly does it all; it is convincingly superior in every sonic criterion. The Au24 SE is priced at the very top end of the scale, but if you want a no-compromise USB cable, look no further. **tas**

### SPECS & PRICING

**Type:** Dual-conductor USB cable

**Price:** \$895 (single connector); \$945 (dual connector)

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# TRANSPARENT

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REVIEW IN THIS ISSUE OF TAS

## TRANSPARENT

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# Oyaide Neo d+ Class A USB 2.0 Cable

A Surprising Discovery

Karl Schuster

**W**hen I reviewed the Bryston BDA-2 DAC in Issue 233, I ultimately concluded that, as good as its USB input sounded with the USB cables that I had on hand, ranging from the entry-level Belkin Gold through the top-of-the-line WireWorld Platinum Starlight, it still sounded considerably better when connected to the BDP-1 Digital Player through my ED-120 SPDIF cable.

In the intervening years, I have continued searching for a USB cable that would allow the BDA-2's USB input to equal the performance of its SPDIF and AES/EBU interfaces. I even built a prototype non-standard "data only" USB cable that entirely eliminated the noise-prone 5-volt power line and ground wire,

thereby removing those known sources of interference. This prototype USB cable sounded dramatically better than even the most expensive commercially available alternatives I had tested, but it still didn't sound as good as SPDIF.

On a wild hunch, I ordered an inexpensive

but distinctively designed USB 2.0 cable from a mainstream computer accessory manufacturer, hoping that it might work as well as a USB audio cable. From the moment that this cable was installed, even "dead cold," it utterly trounced every previous USB cable that I had auditioned, including my experimental prototype. After an extended warm-up period, I conducted a lengthy run of skeptical critical listening comparisons, and enthusiastically concluded that this USB cable finally enabled the BDA-2's USB input to perform at a level competitive with the best SPDIF and AES/EBU alternatives.

Eager to share this encouraging development with industry associates and fellow listeners, I hit the web to stock up on this USB cable, only to find that it had been discontinued by the manufacturer! I scoured the 'Net, and managed to locate half a dozen samples, but further searching has been futile. Disappointed, I moved on, testing a few more designs from well-known high-end manufacturers, none of which approached the performance of my unlikely new "accidental reference" USB cable.

Continuing my quest, I recently found another USB cable that may ultimately prove even better than the aforementioned accidental reference. Fortunately, the Japanese-designed Oyaide Neo d+ Class A USB 2.0 cable is currently available from multiple sources at eminently reasonable prices: \$50 for 1 meter, \$70 for 2 meter, and \$90 for 3 meter lengths. Curiously, the Oyaide d+ series USB cables are not generally available through Oyaide's high-end accessory distributors; rather, they appear targeted to

the professional/performing-musician market.

The Oyaide d+ USB cables feature a flat geometry, similar to that of products from other manufacturers. The black-jacketed Class A model incorporates gold-plated connectors and high-purity copper conductors, though the specific copper formulation has been changed recently, and different suppliers still carry overlapping stock, depending on length. I have one of each, and thus far cannot differentiate between the two by listening.

The less expensive Class B model sports a garish neon-green jacket, and silver-plated copper conductors. The more expensive Class S model is fitted with a white jacket over substantially thicker copper conductors of the same formulation used in the Class A cable, but terminated with platinum- and rhodium-plated connectors. Perhaps the greater conductor area of the Class S cable might benefit longer runs, but the Class A cable seems well-suited for the typical 1 or 2 meter connections between USB sources and DACs, without excessive mass or stiffness stressing the components' jacks. Prior experience with silver-plated copper and pure silver USB cables informed my decision to opt for the Class A cable's high-grade copper conductors. For further information visit [neo-w.com](http://neo-w.com), but be forewarned that the text on the English site is in dire need of a new translation.

With some trepidation, I installed a 1-meter Oyaide d+ Class A USB cable between the Bryston BDP-1 Digital Player and Bryston BDA-2 DAC. Initial impressions were promising, but not as immediately compelling as my first exposure to the accidental reference USB cable. However, it has become increasingly



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Oyaide Neo d+ Class A USB 2.0 Cable

apparent that for some inexplicable reason, most USB audio cables (and/or the circuits they connect) take an *inordinately* long time to warm up. Since the beginning of the digital audio era in the 80s, I've learned to allow at least four days for CD players, DACs, and other digital components to stabilize after first being powered on. The necessary warm-up period for USB circuits seems to be at least a couple of days longer, perhaps substantially longer.

I auditioned the Oyaide d+ Class A USB cable briefly each day for a week, tracking the sonic changes as it warmed up. Some days it sounded shrill, other days dull. By the fourth day, it sounded quite coherent, and encouragingly similar in many respects to the reference, but still a little sweet and euphonic in the upper octaves. I was unable to conduct any serious listening on the fifth day, but returned on the sixth day to find the residual

euphonic sweetness gone. Thankfully, by the seventh day the warm-up process appeared to reach a plateau, as the sound was recognizably similar to that of the preceding day.

And what a sound it is! Or, as is often the case with true progress in this domain, what a sound it *isn't*. Music played through the sufficiently warmed-up Oyaide d+ Class A USB cable flows gracefully, with a self-effacing, delicate, open, airy quality. Resolution is extraordinary, but with nary a hint of frequency-specific spotlighting. Tonal balance is coherent from top to bottom, without the added grunge and glare of most USB cables, nor the broad presence range dip and lispy, sparkly top end that euphonic color the sound of pure-silver USB cables.

I've never heard superior focus from any digital cable, regardless of format. Every note is reproduced with exceptional timing precision, yielding an unexpected sonic

benefit: naturally rich timbres of disarmingly realistic substance, body, and density. This "emergent phenomenon" seems to be the serendipitous byproduct of unprecedentedly accurate temporal alignment of an instrument's harmonics, which allows the listener's auditory system to recognize and identify sounds with considerably less mental effort.

Spatially, individual images may initially seem small, until one realizes that this compactness signifies an absence of smearing, vagueness, and bloat. Another telltale indicator that something very *right* is going on here is the stability of the reproduced soundfield during complex passages and dynamic peaks; instruments don't splash forward, change size or location, or suffer from timbral shifts. Everything stays put with remarkable solidity and tonal consistency. As a result, one can play music at more realistic volume levels than would otherwise be tolerable.

Preliminary listening suggests that the Oyaide d+ Class A USB cable's exceptionally linear handling of dynamics across the frequency spectrum may elevate its performance above that of the accidental reference USB cable, which may be just a little too mellow and laid-back. In contrast, energetic music played through the Oyaide cable thrills the listener with unfettered transient peaks. Hearing saxophones, trumpets, and trombones in their full-throated glory is an exhilarating experience, but one which is often marred by either edgy glare or life-robbing compression. The Oyaide cable suffers from neither constraint.

I have a lingering suspicion that the Oyaide cable still hasn't fully stabilized, having only recently been installed between my Bryston BDP-1 Digital Player and the BDA-2 DAC. But already, the combination is playing with music with such effortlessly engaging vitality and unflustered ease, that I'm sure going to enjoy hearing what it may yet have to offer.

Caveat: The performance of the Oyaide d+ Class A USB cable described above was achieved within a specific context of a dedicated, optimized digital-file player driving a digital-to-analog converter with an exceptionally well-designed USB input. All three components of a USB audio playback chain—source output, cable, and DAC input—must be capable of operating at a level commensurate with the others to achieve maximal performance. <sup>tas</sup>



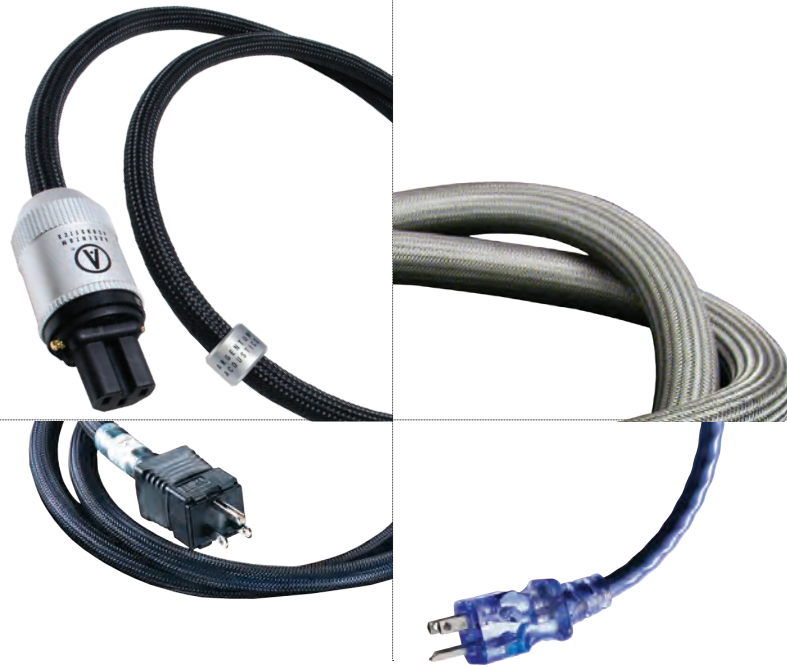
### SPECS & PRICING

- Conductors:** 102SSC, power AWG 21, signal AWG 25
- Structure:** Flat (inverted concentric structure)
- Shield:** Double shielding with individually shielded pairs
- Insulator:** Polyolefin
- Sheath:** Thermoplastic elastomers
- Connectors:** USB Type A, USB Type B
- Terminals:** Gold-plated bronze alloy
- Body:** PBT + Glass Fiber 30% with aluminum cover
- Solder:** Oyaide SS-47 for audio
- Price:** \$49.99 (1m), \$69.99 (2m), \$89.99 (3m)

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Some brands of cable without this level of customization or parts quality come with four and five-figure price tags. Shunyata Research chooses to make its strongest statement of value by applying its finest parts and technologies within products that virtually anyone can afford to own.

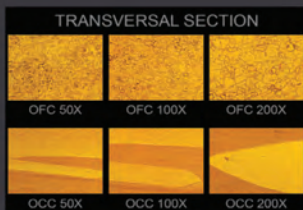


## INTERCONNECT FEATURES

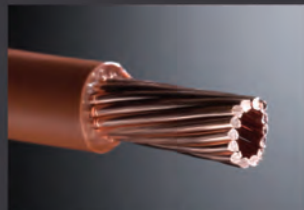
- OHNO Continuous Cast Copper (OCC)
- VTX Conductors (*hollow-core*)
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Shunyata XLR Connectors



STIS Cable Terminals



Shunyata RCA Connectors



# Shunyata Venom PS8 Power Distributor, Venom Defender, and Venom HC Power Cords

How Dedicated Are You?

Neil Gader



**M**y history with AC power-distribution and line-conditioning products is a fairly spotty one. Sonically, they give and they take away, and I generally put them aside after a few weeks. Nowadays I just grab a power cord and head for the nearest available outlet, avoiding power-surge-protection strips for critical components. I've come to view such "convenience" strips as a hangover from the days of tower computers, forty-meg hard drives, and 14" monochrome displays, when the fear of a brownout sent shivers down the spine. My listening room isn't blessed with a dedicated circuit, either. I've considered remedying this but just haven't gotten around to hiring an electrical contractor. The truth is that I'm a little skeptical of monkeying with power and conditioning products. My room is quiet with a seemingly low noise floor. Basically what I'm admitting is that my listening space is probably a lot like yours. Sensible but nothing fancy.

Shunyata must've seen me coming. It has designed a system that takes the existing AC power entering a listening room to the next step without engaging the services of an electrical contractor. There are three basic components to its entry-level Venom Series of power products, starting with a Venom PS8 power strip. Nicely constructed of heavy, brushed steel, the PS8 is 20-amp rated to cover even the most demanding high-current components, provides eight

Hubbell outlets that are cryogenically treated using Shunyata's Alpha process, and a tough Carling Hydraulic Electromagnetic breaker. It sits on thick rubber feet, but steel spiked-footers with floor protectors are also offered as a \$195 option.

The second component is the Venom Defender—a tidy little plug-and-play power conditioner. Chassis-free, it's a plug-in module that incorporates the MPDA (multi-phase-differential-array), thirty-element parallel filters found in Shunyata's flagship Hydra models. Ruggedly built, Defender is equipped with 20,000 amps of surge protection and its own LED fault-detector. It can be plugged directly into the PS8 or, ideally, into the same wall outlet.

The final link in Shunyata's power chain are the Venom HC power cords. Big brothers to the original Venom cords (still a steal), they use heavier 10-gauge conductors, and employ hand-soldered contacts that are crimped to improve the metal-to-metal contact integrity.

All Shunyata components are cryogenically treated. Each can be purchased individually, but these three have been designed and priced to perform in trio. With *three* Venom HC cords, the complete Venom system Shunyata set me up with retails for under \$1800.

Shunyata's Grant Samuelson filled me in on Venom system particulars. He reiterated that "all home electronics are extremely peak-current-sensitive. Their power supplies draw current dynamically off the peak and trough of the sinewave. Any break or open contact in the electrical chain represents a *loss* that can affect system performance."

Shunyata, he says, "views current delivery



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Shunyata Venom PS8, Defender, and HC

as a high-frequency event, not a low-frequency event because systems draw current at a high-frequency and they output high-frequency noise. It all starts and ends with junction integrity, material quality, material manipulation—all aimed to lower the insertion-loss of the device. The overriding design goal of this system is to minimize peak-current loss at every junction.

“The Defender builds upon the foundation the PS8 establishes. Its filters are computer-modeled to capture and filter the high-frequency noise that exists on any line and prevent it from re-circulating within the system. All of this is accomplished without any added connections and with no loss of peak current integrity—which is our baseline for performance.”

### All Amped Up

My approach to evaluating power strips, power cords, and line conditioners pretty much comes down to the same tried-and-true methodology. After concluding a period of extended listening with the current reference system, I unplug the entire rig, substitute the electricals under evaluation, and let 'er rip. Electronics in this instance were the Parasound JC 3 phonostage, the mbl Corona C11 preamp, and the mbl C21 stereo amplifier in rotation with the Aragon 8008 amp (review to come)—a system requiring three power cords. A Meridian Director USB DAC decoded computer-sourced files.

My first impression of the Venom system flat-out caught me off-guard, largely because my expectations were built on previous encounters with power distribution products, some good,

some not so good. I began by cueing up *The Wasps Overture* [RCA] followed by the third and fourth movements of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony [Decca]. In each instance I heard the same thing, which arrived in the form of newly discovered orchestral weight and a more rigidly grounded soundstage. The system revealed a density change in the way I perceived ambient information. At first I thought I was hearing a tonal shift downward, as if a darker palette of colors were being applied to the performance. But in truth this was more about system or line noise being reduced to the extent that significantly more ambient information and harmonic minutiae from venue and orchestra were freely emerging.

Celli and bass viols exhibited more pitch precision and less bloat. The individual voices of a chorus were unwavering in space and could be more easily pinpointed, almost visualized. String section layering was better defined in depth. The Venom system was not just quieting the system down; it was also allowing resolution within those silences of the acoustic/reverberant life that exists between notes or during musical pauses, but which is so often obscured. It was like the air was fueled with a different mixture of energy and harmonics. I listened closely to Copland's *Fanfare For The Common Man* and its near overpowering dynamic swings. Thankfully, what I *didn't* hear was a softening or smoothing over of transient detail and contrasts. The textures of music, from the reedy and bristly to the buttery, were fully represented. Compression of dynamics—the bane of many conditioning products—was non-existent on either the micro or macro scale.

Weirder still was that when I took out the Venom system the individual artists of St Martin's in the Fields, performing excerpts from Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, seemed somewhat abandoned, as if they were separated by acoustic dead zones rather than joined as a contiguous ensemble. With the PS8 out of the system, the air and dimensionality, the swirl of ambient activity became spotty. The impression of a single soundspace unbroken from one end of the proscenium to the other, upstage and down, sounded more thread-bare, like an unframed musical canvas. Reinserting the Shunyata into the system, the fully framed picture rematerialized.

When I turned to pop vocals like Shelby Lynne's "Just A Little Lovin'," I encountered the same enriched ambient quality that I had with symphonic recordings. In this instance it was the distinctive, heavily damped, reverb-washed character of the recording studio. Imaging on this disc was truly stunning. Drums, bass, acoustic guitar cues were so clean, quick, and stable that it was as if someone had applied a squeegee to a grimy window. Even the title track's metronomic hi-hat had more drive and a thicker, less tinny quality. The Shunyata found more sustain in the instrument, while the slight smearing that collected in the wake of certain of its transients all but vanished. Bass response was further defined in character and timbre. For example, the bass vamp that kicks off the intro to Holly Cole's "I Can See Clearly" didn't come off as more deeply extended *per se* but as considerably tightened up, with more rhythmic bounce and melodic character.

In as little time as it takes to plug in a couple

power cords, I've gone from skeptic to believer. The Shunyata Venom system refined the voicing of my system to an extent I never would have predicted at the outset. And I never felt the music was being compromised. To be clear, Shunyata doesn't promise a seismic shift in system performance, but a subtle clarification of previously hidden musicality. Don't look at me to pull the plug anytime soon. For the dedicated among us (without a dedicated line) the Venom system represents a cost-effective, plug-and-play, real-world solution to power issues. Another way of saying that I guess I better tell my electrical contractor not to wait up for my call. **tas**



### SPECS & PRICING

<b>Venom PS8</b>	<b>SHUNYATA RESEARCH</b>
Number of outlets: 8	26273 Twelve Trees
Price: \$695	Lane, Ste D
<b>Defender</b>	Poulsbo, WA 98370
Price: \$195	(360) 598-9935
<b>Venom HC Power Cord</b>	shunyata.com
Price: \$295/1.75m	

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# Shunyata Research Hydra Typhon

World's First Two-Chassis Power Conditioner

Kirk Midtskog



In September, 2012, the TAS Web site ran a short piece announcing the introduction of the Hydra Typhon, an optional, dedicated, A/C-line noise-reduction unit intended for use with the Hydra Triton power distributor. Since I'd reviewed (and highly recommended) the Triton in Issue 219, I decided to give Shunyata's add-on Typhon a listen.

The Typhon and Triton units have the same cosmetics, dimensions, and price (\$4995 each). The heavier Typhon is an additional, passive, noise-filtering "slave unit" which simply plugs—via a Typhon Umbilical cord—into either an unused standard A/C receptacle on the Triton or into a Typhon-ready receptacle. (Note well: You will have to order an umbilical cord—preferably as short as possible—with one of two different terminations, depending on the type of receptacle you intend to plug the Typhon into.) Shunyata recommends using an unused normal receptacle, but all Tritons come with an auxiliary receptacle, so that all eight normal receptacles may be used for electronics if needed. Since the Typhon is not in the current path, as such, it does not alter the total current-delivery capacity of the Triton (2400W at 120VAC, 4800W at 240VAC). The Typhon simply provides additional noise-suppression capacity to the Triton. In effect, the Triton and Typhon pair becomes one power conditioner in two chassis.

Fairly early in the development of a new, higher-performing power conditioner, Shunyata's designer Caelin Gabriel ruled out offering one large unit in favor of splitting up the two main sections into smaller chassis. This offers consumers more flexibility; they

can start with a Triton and add a Typhon later as funds allow. I have to say, the two smaller chassis are also easier to place than a single, double-sized unit would be. In my setup, the Typhon is on the bottom shelf of a rack, and the Triton rests on a spiked platform on the floor next to the rack. Shunyata does not object to stacking the two units if that works best for you. Shunyata also offers sets of four 1.25-inch-tall stainless-steel spiked feet (\$195) and matching protective discs for enhanced performance over the stock rubber feet when either unit is placed directly on a floor. (More on these optional feet later.)

Almost the entire internal chassis space of the Typhon is devoted to two large cylindrical Noise Isolation Chambers (NIC) filled with proprietary ZrCa-2000, a "ferroelectric" compound. The hot and neutral A/C power legs are routed through the NICs via Shunyata's hollow-core, high-purity, CDA-101-copper "VTX" wiring. The large volume of ZrCa-2000 material, combined with the large surface area of the internal copper cylinders, is said to provide very effective ultra-high-frequency noise-dissipation characteristics through "an E-field coupling between the ferroelectric material in the NICs and the electric field of the high-frequency noise that rides on the AC signal." The main unit of the tandem, the Triton, already has three fairly large NICs, so the add-on Typhon increases the total NIC capacity to a much more robust level.

Does the Typhon significantly reduce signal-obscuring noise? Yes, and I would add the Typhon's most prominent sonic effect on the connected system is that it enhances the system's ability to portray spatial cues. The Typhon does not alter tonal balance or macro-



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Shunyata Research Hydra Typhon

dynamic behavior, so listening for typical changes after you insert a new device is not a standard exercise with the Typhon. What the Typhon does do is allow your system to better reproduce depth of both individual images and of the overall soundstage. Spatial cues around individual images are more clearly defined, with more body and solidity. As a result of clearing up the surrounding, obscuring, gray electronic “fog,” images stand out in greater relief within their ambient surroundings. The Typhon also expands soundstage width and height, though not to an appreciable degree in my setup.

The Typhon also subtly clarifies a few other aspects of music playback: tonal colors and textures are more vivid, fine details are more apparent, transients are cleaner and less smeared, and micro-dynamic shadings—which seem to be so important to reproducing “artistic expressiveness”—also come through more readily. What this all points to, in my estimation, is a reduction in underlying noise across the board. Essentially, the Triton/

Typhon combo enhances what your electronics can already do, not only by feeding them a cleaner A/C stream but also by reducing the noise those electronics feed back into the A/C line. If your system already has a good measure of the qualities you are looking for, you’ll get more of them with the Triton/Typhon pair.

Realizing the benefits of the Typhon/Triton pair takes some time. Just as most of us would not unpack a new piece of electronics and immediately set about conducting quick side-by-side comparisons against warmed-up, familiar gear already in the system, the Typhon, too, should be integrated into a system with some “settling time.” Shunyata recommends plugging it in to an active Triton for at least five days before critical listening. I plugged the Typhon into the Triton and left my system on for eight days before I did any critical listening. When I first sat down to listen closely, the Typhon’s effect seemed subtle. As I mentioned, the typical cues we listen for with the introduction of a new piece of gear, such as a shift in tonal balance or macro-dynamic emphasis, are not there with the Typhon. Rather, the benefits of the Typhon become readily apparent when you pull it out of the system for a few songs and then plug it back in. Those qualities I mentioned (depth, spatial clarity, vividness of tone colors, etc.) were all better with the Typhon plugged in. I like the improvements so much that I would feel a bit short-changed without the Typhon, especially after living with it for over a month. Adding a Typhon will probably not transform a mediocre system into a “giant-killer,” but it will elevate an already good system another notch in

musically meaningful ways. I imagine that most audiophiles who would contemplate purchasing two \$4995 power conditioner chassis (and two good 20-amp power cords) have already invested a great deal of money in their systems and would truly appreciate the next level of realism the Triton/Typhon combo brings to the equation.

As for those optional spiked Stainless Steel Feet (SSF), they simply screw into the sockets of the stock rubber feet they replace. I tried them only with the Triton because the Typhon was sited in a rack without enough clearance to accommodate the Typhon with the 1.25" SSFs installed. At \$195 for a set of four, the SSFs are a good way to deploy the Triton directly on a floor—better than the stock rubber feet. The Triton’s ability to help my system’s electronics make leading edges sound more defined was improved when the SSFs were installed. Since the Triton is situated on a wood platform in my setup, I also tried a set of three Aurios Pro Max bearings between the Triton’s chassis and the platform. This yielded greater overall clarity than either the stock rubber feet or the SSFs. Since these sorts of individual tuning options can vary greatly from system to system, listen carefully for your own results if you experiment with Triton/Typhon footers.

In conclusion then, if you already have a Triton main unit and would like to ratchet up your system’s performance even more, adding a Typhon is a worthwhile option. If you do not already have a power conditioner and are comfortable with the \$4995 price tag for each unit, the Triton/Typhon combo very much deserves your consideration. The Triton can

get you started and the Typhon can be added later. The benefits the pair brings to bear serve the music well and do so without any negative effects. Highly recommended—especially for those with relatively high-resolution systems. **tas**



### SPECS & PRICING

**Connection:** One 20-amp receptacle  
**Power rating:** 2400W (120VAC)  
**Dimensions:** 17.25" x 5.75" x 16.50"  
**Weight:** 43 lbs.  
**Price:** \$4995 (requires a Typhon Umbilical cord)

running JRiver MC 17, Hegel HD2 and HD20 DACs, Ayre P-5xe phonostage, Ayre K-1xe linestage, Hegel H200 integrated, Gamut M250i power amps, Dynaudio Confidence C1 Signature, Aerial 7T, YG Kipod II Signature

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 26273 Twelve Trees Lane NW, Suite D  
 Poulsbo, WA 98370  
[shunyata.com](http://shunyata.com)  
 (360) 598-9935  
[shunyata.com](http://shunyata.com)

Passive speakers, Shunyata Anaconda ZiTron signal cables, Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval speaker cables, Audioquest Coffee USB and Hawk Eye S/PDIF, Shunyata Anaconda and Cobra ZiTron power cables, two 20-amp dedicated lines, Shunyata Triton and Typhon power conditioners, PrimeAcoustic Z-foam panels and DIY panels

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Basis Debut V turntable with Vector 4 tonearm, Benz-Micro LP-S cartridge, Ayre C-5xeMP universal disc player, Sony VAIO VGN-FZ-490

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# 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, 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. **tbs**

## SPECS & PRICING

Type: AC power conditioner with five Wave Stabilizer modules	Price: \$9500
Supplied accessories: Vesuvius II power cord with Furutech IEC connector and power connector, and Eden Sound TerraStones footers	<b>SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH, INC.</b> 17401 Armstrong Ave. Ste. 102 Irvine, CA 92614 synergisticresearch.com silvercircleaudio.com

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## EQUIPMENT REPORT

# Baker's Dozen

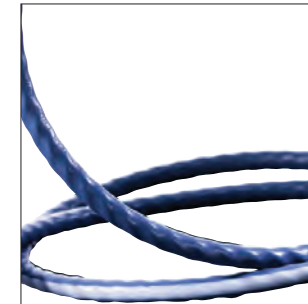
13 Power Cords \$500 and Under

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 envelops 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 \$500 and Under

### 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." 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

### 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 definitively 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

(949) 585-0111

audioquest.com

## EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords \$500 and Under

### 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

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

www.theabsolutesound.com



## EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords \$500 and Under

### 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 a 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

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### 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

www.theabsolutesound.com

## EQUIPMENT REPORT - 13 Power Cords \$500 and Under

### 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 voodocable.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 voodocable.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.** tas



## Purist Audio Design

A high-end manufacturer for over 30 years, Purist Audio Design still makes our products here in the USA. Our quality materials reduce EMI, RF, and mechanical vibrations to allow the purest sound possible. We've never believed that quality should stop with materials. That is why each cable is made right here in Texas, the way it should be.

Let us connect you to the music at  
[www.puristaudiodesign.com](http://www.puristaudiodesign.com).





# Three Power Cord Upgrades

Dynamic Design, Voodoo Cable, and Audience

Neil Gader

**W**hether power cords represent the most important component in a high-end system, or the least, or even qualify as a component at all is an argument for another day. Controversies aside, power cords are a necessity and, technically, the first piece of gear that the system sees. For this article I listened to mid/upper-priced power cords from three top players in the field. All represent a serious upgrade over stock cords and a significant expenditure to boot. Each in its own way suggests that when the AC flows freely and cleanly, and aggressive isolation technology is used to thwart EMI/RFI, the rest of the

chain clearly benefits. Audience, Voodoo Cable, and Dynamic Design each supplied a pair of power cords. Dynamic Design and Voodoo Cable provided products specified for high power and source applications, while Audience opted for identical power cords.

Let me state at the outset that there wasn't an ounce of dead weight among these entrants. Each presented a solid step up in resolution over stock cords and in some areas were threats to my reference power cords, like the Synergistic Research Hologram A. Ultimately patterns begin to emerge. The three contenders share a fine resolution of dynamic gradients that adds liveliness

to the presentation; yet each accents music in unique and subtle ways, not as an EQ switch but by adding its own "body English" to the presentation, particularly in the area of low-level integrity and focus—the micro-aspects of music reproduction with an emphasis on dimensional space and depth information, such as the layering of string players in an orchestra for example. The recordings I used ranged from pop titles like Holly Cole's *Temptation* to Reference Recordings of the Rutter *Requiem*, Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, and Vaughan-Williams' *The Wasps*, MA Recordings' *Sera Una Noche*, especially the track "Nublado," and the vinyl ORG reissue of Ricki Lee Jones' *Pop Pop*, particularly the cut "I'll be Seeing You."

## Dynamic Design AE15 Lotus and Challenger

Dynamic Design AV is a Chicago-based cable company that currently offers three levels of power-cord products, the entry-level Lotus series, mid-level Heritage series, and the flagship Nebula series. Commemorating its 15th Anniversary are the AE15 Lotus Analog power cord for analog components like amplifiers, and the Heritage Series AE15 Challenger Digital power cord for low-power or source components. Dynamic Design uses a variety of proprietary shielding technologies to improve isolation from EMI/RFI, and maximize conductivity. The Challenger, for example, uses Multi Layer Insulation System (MLIS) and or Unitized Multi Layer Shielding (UMLS) to lower the noise floor, reduce cross talk, and increase dynamics. Dynamic Design's Challenger also includes a battery-powered shielding circuit to reduce coupling capacitance and isolate system noise from the system ground.

The Lotus and Challenger combo exhibited an openness, a harmonic ease, and lack of tension that effectively permitted them to disappear from the soundspace as convincingly as the reference. Their character is neutral-to-warm. Without losing any speed or attack, solo piano seemed to relax a bit and bloom harmonically. Lotus and Challenger tended to round off the more aggressive elements of string sound in some recordings. During *The Wasps* overture, they reproduced the brass section in all its airy intensity from the transient bite emanating from the mouthpiece of each trombone to the golden bloom shimmering outward from instrument's bell. They captured textural information that grounds images to the stage with superior focus and without the

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Three Power Cord Upgrades

disadvantage of added etch or brittleness. It doesn't take much to smudge the gently brushed snare and the sax and bass lines during "I'll Be Seeing You," but the DD cords mastered this challenge with ease. Ricki Lee Jones' vocal on this track had a slightly darker, richer sound consistent with these cords' easy-going, open treble. Similarly backgrounds were church-mouse quiet, allowing rich, dense tonal color to emerge from dark velvet silences.

The "Nublado" track from MA Recordings conveyed layers of depth and dimension that bordered on the holographic, providing plenty of elbow room for discrete image elements to breathe—like the snap and trailing resonances of the classical guitar, the buttery bandaleon, and fast percussion stabs from the other accompanists. The DD seemed to offer thicker, heavier bass as well as a nice combination of punch and refinement—impressive but slower as well.

But Lotus and Challenger's biggest calling cards were the high levels of bloom and reverberant information they conveyed. During Holly Cole's "Train" the slowly decaying vibrations off the kettle drum that punctuate the end of each verse really shifted the air. There was a sense of drumhead movement and reverberation not altogether present with other cords. (It's a terrific reference track—especially on LP—that presents a potpourri of percussion details and textures from the ring of a triangle to sandpappy wood blocks, all convincingly rendered with good vocal air and articulation.) During the Rutter *Requiem* the DD system conjured up a rich and inviting soundspace with powerful low-frequency information. Its ability

to reproduce dimensional depth bordered on the exceptional. And again, on this disc I found its character skewing ever so slightly to the darker, wetter side of the tonal spectrum. You can hear it as the pedal points of the pipe organ charge the space with reverberation. Vocally there was a bit more definition between the mezzo-soprano and the ambient environs of the auditorium. The DD system's low-level resolution allowed me to hear her rolled "r" sound when she pronounced the word "requiem." Once again Lotus and Challenger demonstrated a bolder, slightly more forward sound that physicalizes images and sculpts their boundaries.

Conclusion: Hints of warmth and superb bass extension ably underscore the effortless bloom and roomy soundstage performance of this power cord.

### Voodoo Cable Black Diamond and Electra

The Voodoo Cable Electra and Black Diamond occupy the midpoint in an extensive line of power cords. Black Diamond is recommended for solid-state and tube power amps, whereas Electra is suggested for source components and preamps. Voodoo reports that the primary difference between the two is tonal balance and harmonic resolution. It states that "while the Black Diamond offers a clean 'dead neutral' tonal balance, the Electra offers higher harmonic resolution that reveals subtle musical detail and micro-dynamics."

The winding of Black Diamond is an #8 AWG concentric lay of twelve discrete conductors made of solid-core silver, solid-core copper, and stranded silver-plated copper, all hand-

threaded and wound in Teflon dielectric. Electra's winding is similar to the Black Diamond, but with the addition of hand-wound copper and silver Litz conductors in a heavier-gauge Teflon dielectric for lower noise and increased harmonic resolution. Both power cords are shielded with heavy-gauge copper braid and terminated with rhodium-plated tellurium-copper IEC and AC connectors. All the conductive materials and components have been treated in Voodoo's Cold Fusion cryogenic system—both vapor and deep-immersion cryogenic processes, depending on the part or alloy to be treated. The process is said to structurally align and fuse the molecular bonds of the conductive alloys for significantly less resistance, leading to improved performance.

The Voodoo combo conveys a more midrangy character, with good extension at the frequency extremes, a drier top but with an emphasis on the wider acoustic environment of the venue rather than specific and isolated images. To my ear this is often the way real music sounds. Certainly image definition and focus is very good, just not overly individuated—a trait I noted during the Ricki Lee Jones' track "I'll Be Seeing You" where the clarinet, classical guitar, and acoustic bass seemed bathed in a warmer, more diffuse ambient atmosphere. In the case of orchestral music, the musicians assume positions on stage but don't so much stand apart from the orchestra as become fully integrated within it and the ambient space that surrounds the performers.

Low-level detailing and transient textures were very persuasive. So much so that during the "Nublado" track the Voodoo tandem

captured the low-level cymbal cues without smearing the finely grained metallic timbre of the instrument. Plus the delicate bell cues that ring forth at the four-minute mark were startlingly clean and sustained. During Holly Cole's cover of "I Can See Clearly" the Voodoo pair reproduced the punch and rhythmic pace of the opening bass vamp with assurance, and Cole's torchy delivery had all the texture and come-hither nuance I've come to expect from this track.

In soundstaging, these cords reproduced the lush ambient space and immersive qualities of the Rutter *Requiem* although, again, they didn't quite illuminate individual choristers quite as clearly as the reference. As an aside, and in light of its strong performance driving the Parasound JC 3+ phonostage (review this issue), I found the Electra the more musically

## SPECS & PRICING

<b>DYNAMIC DESIGN CORP.</b>	<b>VOODOOCABLE</b>
(872) 216-0530	(510) 535-9464
<a href="http://dynamicdesignav.com">dynamicdesignav.com</a>	<a href="http://voodoocable.net">voodoocable.net</a>
<b>Price:</b> AE15 Lotus Analog power cord, \$1200/1.5m;	<b>Price:</b> Black Diamond, \$1100/6ft; Electra, \$1500/6ft
AE15 Challenger Digital power cord, \$3500/1.5m	<b>AUDIENCE</b>
	(760) 471-0202
	<a href="http://audience-av.com">audience-av.com</a>
	<b>Price:</b> Au24 SE powerChord, \$2420/6ft

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[www.theabsolutesound.com](http://www.theabsolutesound.com)



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Three Power Cord Upgrades

open and revealing power cord of the two that Voodoo supplied.

Conclusion: Balanced and immersive big-buck performance for half the price of the Big Boys.

### Audience Au24 SE powerChord

The original Audience Au24 power cords have been a part of my reference systems for sometime now, but Audience recently introduced an upgraded SE line that offers improved rhodium-plated copper plugs and IEC connectors, higher-quality metallurgy, lower mass, and improved terminations. The Audience SE is a low DC resistance, low-impedance design that uses multi-strand conductors of high-purity mono-crystal copper. Jacketing is quite flexible, which will be welcome to anyone who has wrestled with the implacably stiff stuff. Note: Existing Audience Au24 cords are upgradable to SE status for \$275.

The signature of the Au24 is sophisticated—complex, controlled, detailed, with a neutral-to-cool character. The Audience established the widest, cleanest soundspace, broadening the proscenium to the boundaries of the loudspeakers and inflating the ambience of immersive acoustic recordings like the Elgar and the Rutter with flurries of soft air and top-end extension. Most markedly, Au24 SE has a light, delicate touch, an insider's touch, that illuminates transient and low-level information like few power cords I've encountered. Music seems to emerge from a quieter space and exhibit wider dynamic contrasts. During the intro to the Ricki Lee Jones, for example, the Audience brought out the very articulate and

agile acoustic bass and the organic snap and string rattle from the classical guitar. But this higher resolution came at the cost of some of the bloom of the Dynamic Design.

The bandaleon theme during the "Nublado" was the most specifically focused in soundspace of all three contenders, though the Audience also held tight to the reverberant information from the menagerie of other regional instruments. Layering and dynamic contrasts and tonal-color rendering were excellent. During the finale of *The Wasps* the timbral and harmonic intricacies of the flute line dancing around the accompanying harp motif were riveting in their pastoral beauty and articulation.

The Audience's portrayal of Rutter's *Lux Aeterna* track was impressive in the energy it gathered from the large men's and women's chorus and the weight of the pipe organ expanding and contracting in the immense acoustic space. The Audience made it a breeze to picture the soaring height and scale of the auditorium, and the diminished size of the musicians within it. It's a terrifically balanced power cord. Some cords, the Dynamic Design for one, will nose it out in ultimate bass extension, but not a cord surpasses its pitch precision or its charms when it comes to illuminating dimensional space.

Conclusion: Well balanced, and a knack for detail spells reference-level sonics that reveal the entire musical picture. **tas**



## MEDICAL SCIENCE DISCOVERS SHUNYATA RESEARCH

### SHUNYATA RESEARCH'S DISTRIBUTED POWER CONDITIONING SYSTEM: A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE IN MEDICAL IMAGING

Power-line and component generated electrical noise is a problem in almost every industry that relies on imaging and resolution. The Director of Electrophysiology at the renowned Abbott Northwestern Heart Hospital, Doctor Daniel Melby, was dealing with an intractable noise problem that wreaked havoc on the low-level signals he relies upon to complete extremely delicate heart procedures. After contacting Shunyata, Doctor Melby applied a Shunyata Research System within his operating theater. The system of Shunyata Research products were objectively evaluated during Dr. Melby's heart Ablation operations. **The following results speak for themselves.**

"In short, with the final step of placing the mapping computer on the Shunyata Research system, both resolution and noise were improved to a level that I have never seen, and that I didn't know was even possible. This improvement can and will result in meaningful improvements in these procedures for our patients."

"The noise level on the mapping computer was the lowest I have seen in 10 years and over thousands of cases. In fact, the noise level was below my measurement capabilities (deemed as 0.01mV)."

— Dr. Daniel Melby, Director Electrophysiology Lab,  
Abbott Northwestern Heart Institute

These results provide objective insight into the effect Shunyata Research systems have on power-line noise. If Shunyata products are instrumental in medical systems designed to prolong and save peoples lives, there is no mystery as to how they may perform in your home-audio or film system.

See Dr. Melby's video and noise results at [www.shunyata.com](http://www.shunyata.com)



# Dynamic Design AnnaLyric PC-1 Power Cord

## Worthy Upgrade

Neil Gader

Since 2000, the Chicago-based cable company Dynamic Design has offered three levels of power cord and cable products—the mid-priced Lotus Series, the premium Heritage Series, and the lofty Nebula series (see my review in Issue 245). Now, to accommodate first-time users (and upgraders bumping up against a budget) Dynamic Design has introduced the AnnaLyric PC-1, which checks in at a modest \$400. (Dynamic Design uses direct-only sales to keep costs down.)

The AnnaLyric PC-1 uses a PEEK jacket (a semi-crystalline, high-temperature thermoplastic not unlike Teflon). Inside are eleven-gauge stranded bi-metal conductors, plus Dynamic Design's own Multi-Layer Insulation System and multiple shields. These technologies are similar to the Dynamic Design Lotus AE15 power cord and intended to lower EMI/RFI. Termination quality appears to be excellent, and the brass connectors are heavy-gauge.

Sonically, a good many of DD's strengths have migrated over to the PC-1 pretty much intact. It easily betters most original equipment cables with finer dynamic gradations, stronger, more focused images, and a weightier overall balance. Imaging performance is very stable, and timbres have some of the dark richness that I admired in the Lotus and Heritage models, though the PC-1's overall character is just a

little lighter in color. This said, bass is still solid with a nice balance of pitch and control.

The PC-1 isn't additive in the aggressive sense of edge detail or etchiness. Rather, there are only minor sonic subtractions compared to its more elite siblings. For instance, backgrounds are not as inky black as those of my reference cords, and the complexities of soundstage depth and general spatiality are modestly reduced. As I listened to Britten's *Serenade*, for example, the singer and accompanying lute inhabited the soundspace but not with the full breadth or immersiveness that I get with the pricier stuff.

Overall the AnnaLyric is a no-brainer bargain and joins the Shunyata Venom HC as a personal fave. It's a strong effort that I would place high on my list of worthy upgrades. tas

## SPECS & PRICING

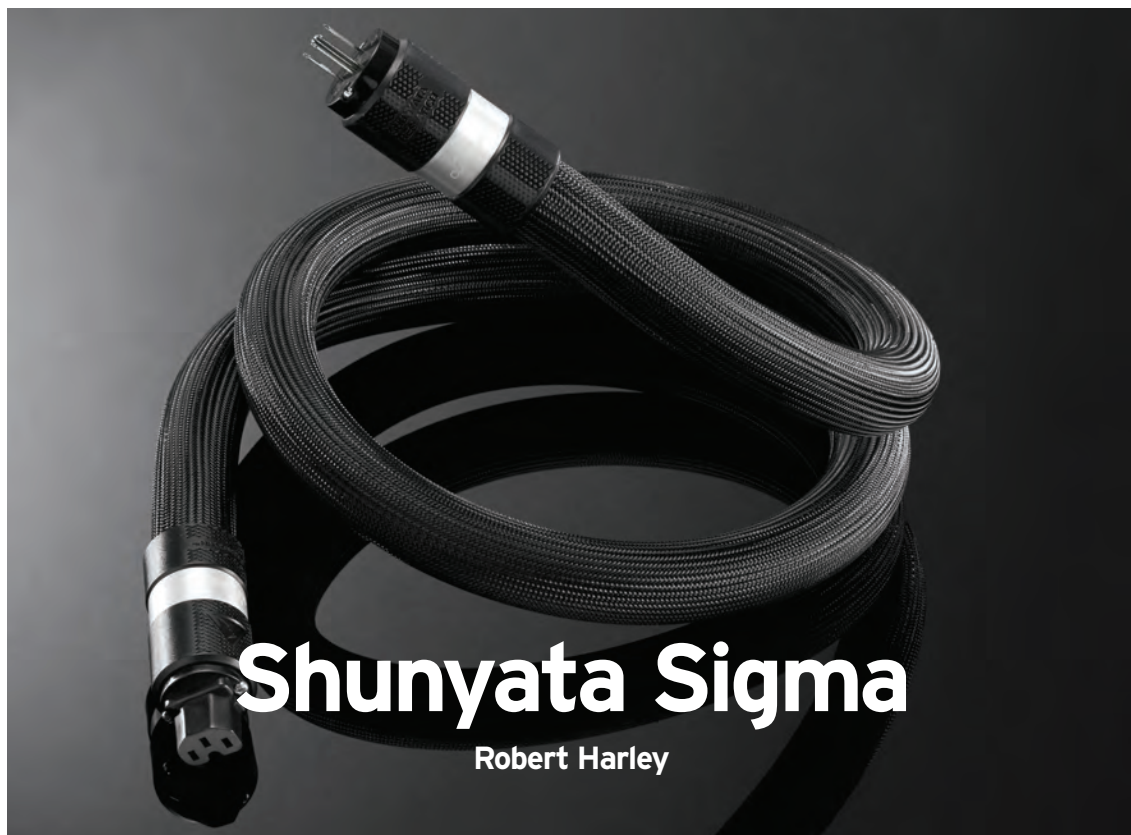
**Price:** \$400/5 ft. (also available in 15- and 20-amp configurations in standard metric lengths)

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# Shunyata Sigma

Robert Harley

**S**hunyata Research continues to push forward the state of the art in AC power for audio, with the Sigma being a prime example. These AC cords incorporate noise filters inside the connectors, which act as miniature power conditioners to isolate components from noise. Build-quality is outstanding, with all-custom parts, including the carbon-fiber housing. The Sigma is the best cord Shunyata has made (though not the most expensive), improving on previous models by deepening background silences, increasing resolution at the lowest levels, rendering textures more realistically, and allowing the rest of your components to sound their best. I swapped out my entire system's previous generation of Shunyata cords with the new Sigma all at once and was surprised to discover a new level of detail, timbral purity, and dimensionality. Comes in three versions: analog, digital, and HC for power amplifiers. RH's reference. \$2495 (analog or digital), \$3495 (high-current) (full review forthcoming)



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# Accessories



# Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200 Ultrasonic Vinyl Record Cleaner

Ne Plus Ultrasonic

Andre Jennings



Recently, a few of the latest commercial units have added a new wrinkle: the use of ultrasonic transducers to scrub the record grooves the way printed circuit boards or surgical instruments are cleaned after sterilization—through cavitation in a cleaning bath. Cavitation bubbles are the result of the high-frequency pressure waves generated by ultrasonic transducers agitating the liquid inside cleaning machines. Not only does the agitation produce these tiny cavitation bubbles, but it also pushes them into the nooks and crannies of the groove walls and valleys of our records. The force exerted on the vinyl by this cavitation bubble-action dislodges and removes dirt and debris that standard cleaning brushes just can't reach.

In May 2013, Klaudio (based in Auburn, Washington) introduced its own version of an ultrasonic record-cleaning machine, the KD-CLN-LP200. What is unique about the Klaudio unit is that it uses ultrasonic cleaning exclusively (no brushes), is fully automated, and, perhaps most importantly, requires no special cleaning fluids. The unit only needs distilled water to work its magic.

The KD-CLN-LP200 Ultrasonic Vinyl Record cleaner arrives wrapped in clear plastic, surrounded on all sides by approximately two inches of dense, closed-cell-foam inserts precisely cut to neatly fit into the triple-walled shipping box. Included with the unit are a user manual, marketing/feature brochure, treated fabric dust cover, rubber funnel (more on this later), PVC drain hose, and AC power cable.

If you follow the user manual, setup is pretty straightforward. After setting the unit on a level surface in its final location, use the supplied funnel to slowly add 2.5 liters (0.66 gallons) of distilled water through the fill port on the top of the machine. (The use of the supplied funnel prevents you from too rapidly filling the wash chamber and creating an overflow condition that could potentially damage the internal electronics. In other words, be cautious when filling the reservoir with distilled water, and avoid the temptation to use a larger funnel to fill the Klaudio more quickly, or you may be asking for trouble.)

Once the unit has been filled so the water line is between the Min and Max fill-level in the reservoir window on the front

panel, this part of the set-up process is done. The next step is connecting the power cable and turning the unit on. After that, all that's left to do is to select washing and drying times.

There are three controls on the Klaudio: a rotary switch for wash time (which can be set from 1–5 minutes), a rotary switch for dry time (2–4 minutes), and a toggle switch to select a “wash & dry” or “dry only” cycle. Ease of use and operation is where the KD-CLN-LP200 has the biggest advantage over any other cleaning method I've used in the past. The cleaning cycle goes like this: Put the record in the top-loading slot; the cleaning starts; in 3–9 minutes (depending on the “wash & dry” settings) the green “completed” LED illuminates; and you are done.

After spending some time with the Klaudio, I've settled on a 4-minute wash cycle for most of my new and used records, with an occasional 1–2 minute rewash on a few newer LPs. A 2-minute drying time has worked for nearly all of the records I've cleaned so far. If the record needs more drying, set the toggle switch to the “dry only” mode and reinsert the LP to start an additional rotary-switch-selected dry cycle. (A nice undocumented feature is that if a record requires additional dry time and you notice this before removing the LP from the unit, after the full “wash & dry” cycle is complete a simple flick of the toggle switch to the “dry only” cycle will restart the previously selected drying cycle without any need to remove the record from the unit.)

What is going on inside the KD-CLN-LP200? Inserting a record into the top loading slot triggers a lever switch; the priming pump fills the stainless steel wash chamber while the record is supported—half-submerged in the bath (below the label area)—on four internal rollers, three of which are belt-driven to rotate the record. When the wash chamber fills, the priming pump continues to run, circulating water to maintain the proper level, and the four 50-watt 40kHz ultrasonic transducers (two horizontally placed per side) start the cleaning cycle for the selected wash time. On my review unit, the record appears to complete approximately seven rotations every two minutes. The display panel shows current status and washing progress. (The amount of record wetting

**R**ecord care has been part of the vinyl experience from the dawn of the LP. Over the years the process has evolved from a simple wipe of an anti-static cloth or a squirt from a dust blower to an all-out-assault on uncleanness via record-cleaning machines equipped with vacuum pumps, rotating platters, cleaning brushes, and single-to-multistep fluid-dispensers.

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200

during the unsubmerged rotation of the cleaning process can vary from barely damp to what I call “juicy.” This wetting difference appears to be related to different vinyl formulations. In no case has water made its way on to the record label.)

Once the wash cycle is complete, the priming pump stops, the water drains from the wash chamber and the drying cycle begins. During the drying cycle, two centrifugal-type, air-blower fans dry the record surface while the display panel shows drying progress. Once the dry cycle is complete, the Klaudio beeps twice when the “completed” LED illuminates and flashes green until the record is removed.

The Klaudio accepts only full-sized records in the range of 11.65-12", according to the user manual. Every one of my 12" LPs worked in the unit, including a few warped ones, without any problems. However, recognizing that there are KD-CLN-LP200 users with a need to clean 7" 45-rpm and 10" 33/78-rpm records, Klaudio has recently introduced two adapters that allow these smaller records to be cleaned in the Ultrasonic cleaner.

The four 50-watt ultrasonic transducers tend to generate some heat that increases the bath temperature during repeated cleaning cycles. During my testing of up to 21 continuous 4-minute wash-time cleaning cycles, the temperature of the water bath in the wash chamber increased slowly in a linear fashion with each consecutive cleaning cycle, from a room temperature of 72 degrees to upwards of 100 degrees Fahrenheit for the last record in the batch. I first took note of this when I observed an LP going through what I would call a “yoga exercise”—or flexing—

during the heated wash cycle, only to return to being perfectly flat during the dry cycle. It should be noted that the record never stopped rotating or got stuck or suffered any damage I could discern. When I observed this occurrence, I started measuring the record temperature as it emerged from submersion during the wash cycle. What I noticed was that as the water temperature increased with continuous use, the submerged surface of the record would follow suit. This heated water created a temporary thermal imbalance (via thermal expansion of the submerged grooved area) between the outside of the record and the inner label area, which caused this temporary flexing of the vinyl. This thermal exercise, in my estimation, may increase the cleaning benefit since the record temporarily flexes under the temperature imbalance during ultrasonic cleaning, helping the cavitation process with debris removal. In short, if you see a record in the cleaner begin this little “yoga exercise,” don’t panic. Things will return to normal during the dry cycle.

Besides its ease of use, the Klaudio cleans records deep in the grooves better than any unit I’ve observed to date. I’ve viewed the before-and-after images of cleaning results under 400x magnification with my own records. This has been with lightly dusty records and also with used records that are pretty filthy. In both cases, the resulting images showed groove walls and valleys that were much cleaner than before. I’ve also tried putting some fresh oily fingerprints on test records; they were also, somewhat surprisingly given there is nothing but distilled water in the unit, removed by the ultrasonic cleaner.

Subjectively, Klaudio-cleaned records tend to show across-the-board sonic improvements, most notably in the perceived depth of recording venues, the clarity of images and surrounding areas, and more natural tone, density, and texture on instruments. One example would be Duke Ellington's *Jazz Party In Stereo*. The opening track on this record, “Malletoba Spank,” is a horn and percussion festival of dynamic delight. After I ultrasonically cleaned the disc, the impact, tone, and decay of every percussion instrument had greater clarity and less haze, and the horn section went from a moderate wave of occasionally aggressive sound to a full set of instruments with greater resolution of individual players than I’d heard before. On this opening track, the percussion instruments closely followed by the horns are the stars of the show, but what’s interesting is that I could also more clearly follow Jimmy Woode’s bass rhythmically plucking along, providing a solid foundation in the center background. Additionally, Sam Woodyard’s stick work on the cymbals was much clearer after Klaudio ultrasonic cleaning, to the point of having increased noticeably throughout the entire performance, even though the drum kit is deep in the background on the right side of the stage. The Klaudio ultrasonic cleaning took this particular track on the Classic Records reissue from moderately enjoyable to clean, clear, and very near to great sounding. On the other end of the musical spectrum, large-scale classical recordings gained an abundance of depth and recording-venue expansion from Klaudio ultrasonic cleaning. I want to point out that this isn’t the type of effect, similar to a speaker positioning change, where the entire

soundstage takes a wholesale step backwards. This ultrasonic cleaning keeps instruments where they were, but allows the recording venue’s full expanse and reverberant clarity to be heard more clearly.

Value is always something of a personal choice, but for me this unit has proven to be an unflagging asset in the enjoyment of vinyl playback. Of course, there are many factors to consider when purchasing something like the Klaudio ultrasonic unit. Some of you may have a backlog of records numbering in the thousands that are in need of a good cleaning. Others may have come to the conclusion, long ago, that it is highly unlikely they are going to perform a multi-minute, multi-step cleaning exercise for each side of their LPs. To them, let me just say that as the quality of analog playback continues to advance it may be that the level of sonic engagement conveyed by Klaudio’s ultrasonically-cleaned records will become increasingly difficult to do without, even if you hate the time spent washing and drying your vinyl. tas

### SPECS & PRICING

<b>Type:</b> Ultrasonic record cleaner	<b>KLAUDIO</b> 2840 W Valley Hwy N Auburn, WA 98001 (253) 249-7813 klaudio.com info@klaudio.com
<b>Dimensions:</b> 7.12" x 11.65" x 17.12"	
<b>Weight:</b> 45 lbs.	
<b>Price:</b> \$3999	

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# Follow-Up: Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaning Machine

Essential

Robert Harley



**A**fter reading Jacob Heilbrunn's review of the Audio Desk Vinyl Cleaning Machine in Issue 234 I had to try one for myself. I was intrigued by the idea of cleaning LPs with ultrasonic energy rather than with conventional bristles and a vacuum. In theory, ultrasonic cleaning can reach into groove modulations that even the finest bristle tips can't reach. Looking at an LP groove under a powerful microscope reveals an incredible world of miniscule nooks and crannies. When viewed this way, it's easy to imagine how record-cleaning bristles simply don't have the "resolution" to reach into these infinitesimally small grooves. It's akin to trying to clean the wheels on a car with a broom handle. Brushes can remove most dust and large surface contamination, but that's where their utility ends.

And it's in the smallest features of the groove where fine detail is encoded. The groove's shape creates the mechanical motion of the stylus as the groove spins beneath it, and then this motion is converted into an electrical signal by the cartridge's coils and magnets. By the time this electrical signal reaches your loudspeakers, it has been amplified by as much as 200,000 times (0.2mV to 40V, for example). Small effects at the groove level become large effects at the loudspeaker's voice coils.

The massive amplification of the cartridge's tiny output voltage is only part of the story of why low-level information is important. The more experience I gain in audio the more it's apparent that what separates a very good-

sounding system from a spectacular-sounding one is the accurate preservation of the finest details of timbre, microdynamics, and spatial information. This is why vibration control, for example, can render such a dramatic improvement in an audio system—it reduces smearing of low-level information.

In the Audio Desk, high-frequency sound waves in the cleaning solution create cavitation bubbles that exert a force on the contaminants, dislodging them from the record's grooves. This force is able to reach the tiniest recesses. Ultrasound cleaning is particularly effective on jewelry and intricately detailed objects because the cleaning action isn't reliant on a cleaning brush or other device physically touching the entire surface of the object to be cleaned.

In practice, the Vinyl Cleaner is very simple to operate. After you've filled the tank with just over a gallon of distilled water, add a small bottle of solution (two bottles are included). This isn't a cleaning agent or detergent; rather it simply reduces the water's surface tension to help the ultrasonic cleaning action. Then insert the LP vertically into the slot and press the red button. You'll hear a beep, signifying that the Vinyl Cleaner is ready to start. The longer you hold down the red button the more beeps you'll hear, with each beep signifying an additional 30 seconds of cleaning time for dirtier LPs. The tank fills up with water, the LP starts spinning partially submerged in the water, and four microfiber brushes spin to remove the dirt dislodged by the ultrasonic cleaning action. At the end of the cleaning cycle the brushes stop spinning, the tank drains, and a powerful blower dries the LP as it slowly rotates. Both sides are cleaned and dried simultaneously in about five minutes. The German-made machine is solidly

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Audio Desk Systeme

made, and performed flawlessly.

I was beyond shocked when I performed a before-and-after test on the first LP I tried, an original Pablo release of *88 Basie Street*. The Audio Desk didn't just make the surfaces quieter as expected, but rendered a wholesale increase in clarity, the apparent separation of instrumental images in space, vividness, and dimensionality. The opening piano line of "Contractor's Blues" had greater tone color and a richer texture, and I could better hear the acoustic around the instrument. Then as the ensemble came in playing the melody in unison I heard a more convincing sense of individual instruments. Before cleaning, the instruments and the space around them were slightly homogenized, a character unrecognizable until it was removed. Each of the solo instruments took on a greater palpability both in the space it occupied, as well as in timbre. Textures were denser and more realistic. Midway in Joe Pass' swinging solo the drummer drives the rhythm even harder with rim shots, which, after cleaning, had a greater musical effect owing to the way the rim shots stood out from the mix, the greater sense of air around the sound, and the heightened impression of depth and of the drummer sitting directly behind Pass. The improvement



was on the level of a component upgrade.

I repeated these before-and-after comparisons on about ten LPs, and then set to work cleaning as many records as I could before the Audio Desk review sample had to go back. I went on a binge buying used direct-to-discs through eBay while I still had the machine. And then I came to the realization that the Audio Desk was indispensable, despite its considerable expense. I worked out a

"time-share" arrangement with two other writers on the staff—we would buy the Audio Desk and each have it for four months of the year. I suspect that if you hear the Audio Desk's effects, you'll also find a way to own one. *tas*

### SPECS & PRICING

**Dimensions:** 13" x 10.7" x 8"  
**Weight:** 12 lbs  
**Cleaning time:** Variable (five minutes minimum)  
**Warranty:** Two years  
**Price:** \$3995

**ULTRASYSTEMS INC.**  
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New Hope, PA 18938  
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# Critical Mass Systems Sotto Voce Equipment Rack

Pretty and Smart

Alan Taffel



**S**ometimes, if you're lucky, you acquire a component or accessory that is so good the thought of replacing it never comes to mind. You install it, have a listen, and say to yourself: "Well, that's that." For me, this happened when I replaced whatever racks I was using to support my system (see, I can't even remember, so thoroughly did I jettison them) with a contraption from Goldmund. Back in the day, when Goldmund was blazing trails that others are still following, the company made a rack system built from state-of-the-art materials and with a clever method of isolating shelves from each other. Isolation of the equipment from the shelves was handled by the superb Goldmund Cones, which were an integral part of the system. I put my gear onto those racks, had a listen to their effect, and I was done. The sound had improved substantially in every way.

Since then, understandably, racks haven't been on my radar. Oh, sure, over the years I have read the glowing TAS reviews of some pretty fancy-shmancy racks, like the Critical Mass Systems Maxxum. But they tempted me not at all, given their \$40k price tags and my satisfaction with the Goldmunds. Truth is, I probably would have lived happily with those racks right into my twilight years if not for their *bête noir*. You see, these things are ugly. I mean seriously ugly. Massive blocks of sharp-edged black iron form the frame, which supports equally-square, equally-black slabs of methacrylate shelves. On the style-ometer, the Goldmund racks earn a solid zero.

Why is this relevant, given that the racks perform so well from a sonic perspective? Well, I happen to believe that aesthetics contribute mightily to the pleasure of this hobby. Top-notch audio components don't just sound good; they look the part, oozing craft and workmanship and, yes, style. Some are even sexy ("audio porn" as my buddy Karl Schuster calls them). In my view a rack should show off these components to best effect, and also show off the system as a whole within the room. This is why, despite the eyesore-Goldmund's sound, I have rankled at inhabiting it with the stream of gorgeous components I am fortunate enough to have flowing through my home. The equipment—not to mention the room—deserved better.

So when Critical Mass came out with a brand new entry-level rack, the Sotto Voce, the first thing that intrigued me about it was not its potential sonic benefits, which were purely theoretical at that point, but rather its looks. Other CMS racks lean toward a purposefully industrial style (though *not* with the brutality of the Goldmund stuff), but the Sotto Voce has a much friendlier, warmer, and more inviting look. This is because, while metal connections within the frame are milled from billet aluminum, the frame and shelves themselves are made of good old-fashioned wood. Sapele African hardwood, to be exact. Not high tech, to be sure, but purposefully chosen and certainly appealing to the eye. The rack also appealed to my value detector. Unlike CMS' ultra-pricey top models, a four-tier SV system with shelves costs just \$4500 (\$5500 if you'd like it in black). That's right: the SV is one-tenth the price of the top-line model.

I took delivery several months later. By the

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Critical Mass Systems Sotto Voce

time CMS' affable and deeply-knowledgeable Joe Lavrencik personally delivered two SV racks, plus assorted accessories and options, I had already seen them at many trade shows. Still, experiencing the Sotto Voce in my own room was something of a revelation. Replacing the Goldmund racks with the CMS quite literally transformed the look of my room. Rather than being a blight, the new racks melded into the décor and showed off the components within to great effect. I took stock. Looks: check. Value: check. Ah, but would the SV rise to the sonic standard of my long-time reference rack?

Before I delve into that, let's talk about the component that *doesn't* sit on a shelf: the speaker. CMS' solution for SV (and other) buyers is their Rize! footers (\$225 each). To get a feel for what they do, I first compared the sound of my speakers with and without their normal Goldmund Cone underpinnings. Using "God Bless the Child" from the terrific OMG pressing of *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, I could easily detect that the Cones conferred more air to the brass, nicely tightened the bass, brought some needed control to the top, generated previously-missing depth, and gave drums both more realism and more visceral impact. Man do I love these Cones! But if I'm being honest, I must admit that they also dulled the mids a tad, and rhythms weren't quite as razor-sharp either.

I then replaced the Goldmunds with a set of three Rize! footers under each speaker. My hope was that they would sound as good as the Cones—a tall order since nothing else ever has. To my delight, the footers delivered all the benefits of the Cones. If anything, drums, and transients in general, became even more

visceral. Even better, the footers also nixed the Cones' drawbacks; tempos regained their drive, and there was no dullness anywhere in the sonic spectrum. Then there was the wholly unexpected icing on the cake: The footers removed some of what I can only describe as "random energy" in the system. You don't consciously hear this energy; but you can definitely hear its absence. A layer of electronic noise recedes, leaving a rare and blissful purity. Somehow, the reduction of this stray energy lets the ear-brain mechanism interpret what it is hearing as "music" rather than "sound." That, in turn, means more realism co-joined with more relaxation.

I have gone into detail about the effect of footers in what is, after all, supposed to be a rack-system review because it turns out that the Sotto Voce has the exact same effect on everything set upon it. Bass tightens, transients gain more verve yet maintain better control, rhythms sharpen, and—perhaps most significantly—that subliminal low-level noise plummets. All this without any noticeable sonic degradation, at least not compared to my reference rack. I knew very quickly that I could live happily with the Sotto Voce. Sound: check.

But wouldn't it also be nice if, unlike the Goldmund rack, the CMS wasn't a closed system? Even the most content of us will revisit the upgrade situation in the wake of a lottery win, or even just a hefty bonus check. Upgrades are especially appealing (and tempting) if they can be done over time, at incremental cost, and in place. As it turns out, while the stock SV will, I believe, ably serve most audiophiles, it is only the beginning of what can be done with this system.

The first step in CMS' multi-layered upgrade plan is an inexpensive one that doesn't require changing anything about the SV itself. Simply insert a set of MXK-SV spikes (\$225 for a set of four) between a component and its shelf. I found that the efficacy of this upgrade depends on the component being spiked. When I slid the spikes under the CH Precision D1 transport, there was a loss of transparency, spatial focus, and dynamic nuance. But then let's remember that one of the things you get with the CH's \$40k price tag is an intricately conceived vibration-evacuation system, of which the feet are an integral part. The spikes bypass the D1's feet, thus completely defeating CH's elaborate scheme. In this case, it's not surprising that the D1 preferred to be right on the SV's shelf.

In contrast, and more typically I suspect, the Esoteric K-01 transport/player/DAC virtually breathed a sigh of relief when set atop the spikes. On its own feet, the K-01 had played the ravishly-recorded "Title of This Song" from Beck's recent *Song Reader* CD with typical élan. But compared to the same track through the D1 the Esoteric betrayed some spatial confusion, paler tonality, and a loss of clarity. With the MXK-SVs in place, though, the K-01 was suddenly doing a mighty close impression of a transport costing twice as much. The difference was that transformational. My conclusion is that for gear that has not been as fanatically engineered for mechanical grounding as CH is—which is to say, most gear—this \$225 per component upgrade will be worth every penny.

The next step up is to place our friends the Rize! footers between components and SV shelves. This will cost \$775 for a set of three

(\$600 if you buy them with the SV). I found it a rewarding upgrade. The difference is in the "purity factor"—a measure of how much random noise is being banished. The footers do a better job at this than the spikes, so the sound clarifies. I'd say the footers get you about half the way between the spikes and the next step in the upgrade path.

For a more profound—and yet again more expensive—upgrade, you can swap out stock Sotto Voce shelves for one of CMS' "filters." These are shaped and function like shelves, but are mechanically far more complex. The filters compatible with the SV rack are the very ones that snuggle into CMS' high-buck systems. I tried swapping out an SV shelf for the entry-level filter, the Black Sapphire Mk.2 (\$995). I was expecting this upgrade to be subtle, but, boy, was I wrong. The filter is clearly more accomplished at noise abatement, and the "purity quotient" takes a sizable jump. Under some components, like turntables, the improvement can be even

### SPECS & PRICING

#### CRITICAL MASS SYSTEMS

Critical Mass Systems  
69 Windsor Dr.  
Oak Brook, IL 60523  
(630) 640-3814  
criticalmasssystems.com

Price: \$4500 for a four-tier, four-shelf system  
(\$5500 in black)

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW - Critical Mass Systems Sotto Voce

more dramatic. The filter allowed bass from my 'table to really speak out, and there was a good deal more timbral information and tonal richness. These filters aren't cheap (there are two more models above the Black Sapphire Mk.2), but they deliver the goods. Don't listen to them if you aren't prepared to buy them. To be exposed to what they do is to be spoiled for anything less.

The nice thing about the SV system is that if funds do not permit making an upgrade right away, it can always be done later. And when the time comes, the process couldn't be simpler. Even installing a filter is a breeze. Heck, there aren't even any screws involved; just lift off the SV shelf and plop down a filter. *Voilà*—better sound. Also, there is no requirement to replace all the shelves at once. Instead, you can upgrade selectively, moving to spikes/footers/filters one by one, starting with the components that will benefit most. Mixing and matching shelves and filters in the same SV rack is perfectly okay.

The only gap in the SV system, to my mind, is the lack of a proper amplifier stand. Depending on the size and quantity of your amps, they may or may not fit in the SV rack. In my case, with two swank but bulky, inhumanly-heavy CH Precision A1's, there was no way they were going on the rack. Amplifier stands to match the SV would *look* cohesive, but CMS offers plenty of sonically workable possibilities for outboard amps. For starters, amps that would otherwise be on the floor can be placed on Rize! footers. Alternately, an SV shelf (\$125) can sit atop a set of MXK spikes, resulting in an apparition of the shelf hovering just above the carpet or floor. The shelf can also be set atop footers. The ultimate

option, sonically, is to use one of the amplifier stands CMS offers as part of their higher lines. They won't match the rack, though.

I was able to test the latter scenario thanks to Joe having provided a pair of QXK amp stands (\$1995 each) with the mid-tier Black Platinum Mk.2 filters (\$1895 each). Compared to the previous Goldmund amp stands, the QXK imparts that same wonderful feeling of the electronics getting out of the way, letting more *music* shine through. They also make the amps more coherent, with more air, more dynamics, and more bass, yet with more control of spurious elements. The SV shelves on spikes, however, are impressive as well. They give up little—just a smidge—in the by now familiar “purity factor.”

I realize that this has been a highly deconstructive analysis, so it's important to sum up by saying that the Sotto Voce not only looks good and is more than fairly priced; it just plain works. My system has never sounded better. The hallmark of the SV rack, in all of its various permutations, is that it gets the crap out of the sound, delivering a less electronic, less hurried, less blurred presentation of the music. *tas*



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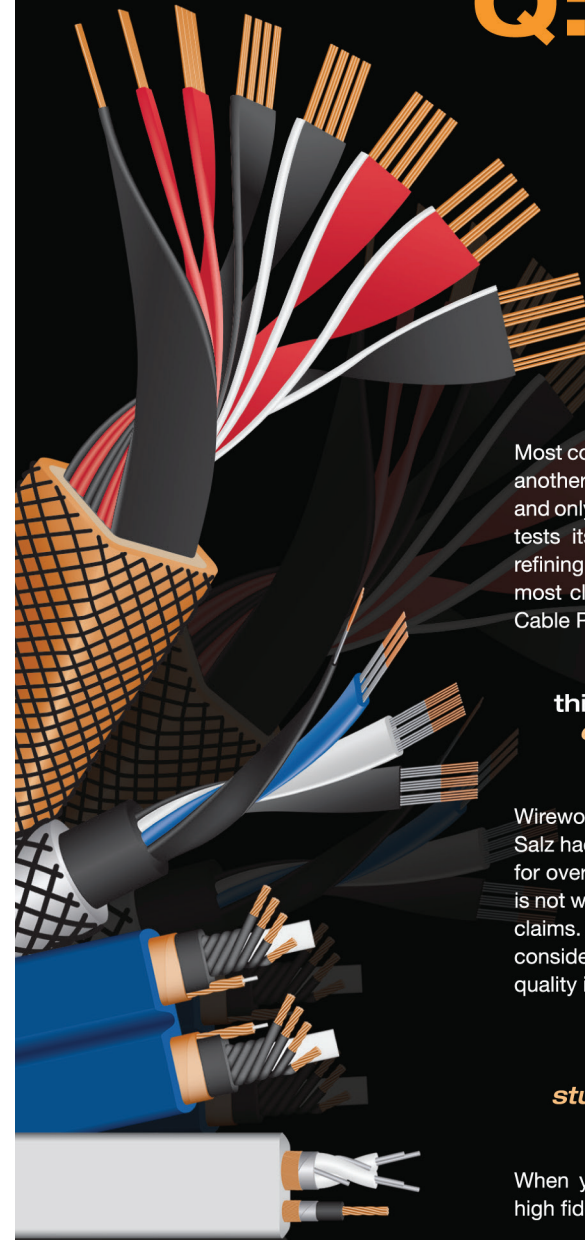
**Robert Harley of *The Absolute Sound* says this method provides “illuminating insight into exactly how each cable affects the sound.”**

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Wireworld has been in business over 23 years and designer David Salz had been developing our testing method and refined geometries for over three decades. It can be difficult to tell what is real and what is not with so many fly-by-night brands popping up making grandiose claims. But the truth is in the test. If you're still skeptical because you consider sound quality subjective, then the physical and aesthetic quality is something you will appreciate.

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# AudioQuest JitterBug

Robert Harley

**T**his little device looks like a miniature plug-in DAC, but actually fits between a DAC or USB cable and a USB jack on a computer or music server. Its mission is to reduce jitter (hence the clever name), isolate the computer from the DAC, and reduce noise on the digital signal and the USB interface's power lines. Judging from its sonic effects, the JitterBug does just that, providing a smoother treble, deeper soundstage, and more relaxed and natural presentation. Multiple JitterBugs can be cascaded (connected in series) for improved performance. You can even add a JitterBug to a non-audio device to reduce the noise on your computer's USB bus. A no-brainer recommendation for the asking price. \$49 (full review forthcoming)

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## Stillpoints Ultra6

Jacob Heilbrunn

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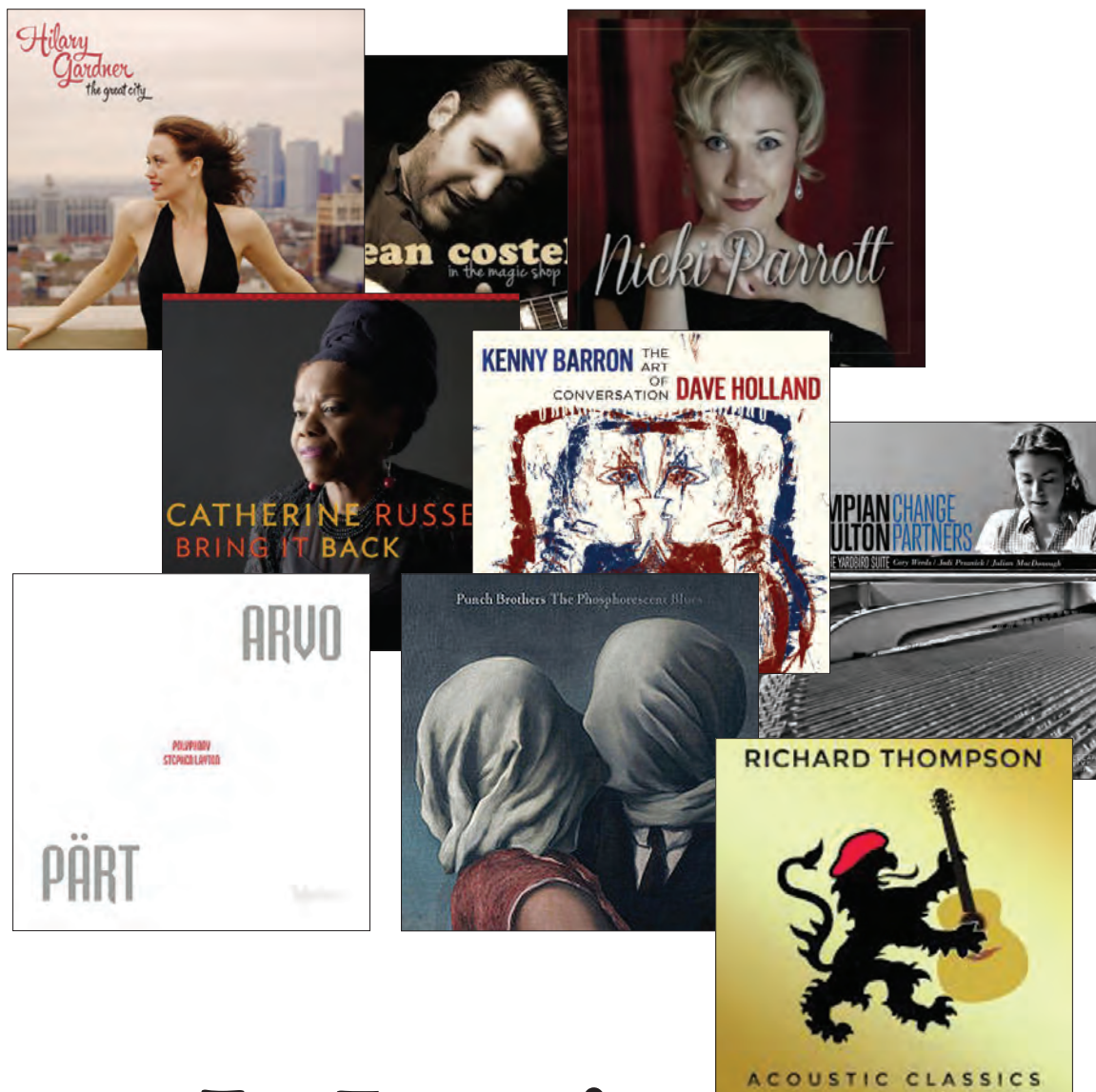
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# Music



# FEMALE JAZZ VOCALISTS: AN ENCORE

Jeff Wilson

In Issue 219 I wrote an overview of contemporary female jazz singers that bypassed the most well-known vocalists. Since that issue I've kept listening, and gradually a new list was created. Like last time, I searched for jazz singers whose work impressed me enough to strongly recommend them to TAS readers. During this process the rejects were many, and I don't think that's because I'm a tough sell. Being a good jazz vocalist isn't easy, and simply releasing a CD doesn't prove competence. More than some genres, a voice that's technically good is almost a requirement. There are exceptions, but in this particular genre you don't find too many Captain Beefhearts or Leonard Cohens. (Well, you don't find too many of them anywhere—but you see my point.) Also, the idiom of jazz singing is demanding enough that some people never quite get a handle on it.

There's also the question of material. When it comes to the Great American Songbook, it's hard to give a fresh spin to tunes that were already popular in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and never faded into obscurity. On the other hand, singers have mixed results when they look elsewhere. Let's face it, incorporating post-Beatles pop music has produced its fair share of train wrecks in both vocal and instrumental jazz. Usually the fault

lies in the interpretations rather than the choices, with musicians creating uninspired arrangements of obvious material in a sad effort to seem relevant. Writing your own songs also presents its own challenges, and my reject pile proves that not everyone is a songwriter. Even after a jazz singer has passed through all those hoops challenges await her. Somehow she has to surround herself with good musicians, and there's also the question of arrangements. Some are too safe while other strain for novelty.

So—believe me—I heard my fair share of duds, but that didn't deter me from searching for what were in some cases less-than-obvious and emerging singers. While doing so I thought of all the less visible female jazz vocalists from the 50s and 60s whose records ended up becoming highly collectible. Often these singers worked in informal small group sessions that allowed the instrumental soloists to stretch out, and I much favor some of those obscure dates to the overly-arranged, gimmicky, and pop-oriented sessions that were sometimes imposed upon more famous singers. Fortunately a loose, wide-open spirit is still alive on many of the releases recommended in this article, giving the singer the spotlight...but sneaking in a mini-jam session as well. Something that impressed me about these recordings in general was the sound. Were I to critique sonics on each

individual release, expressions like “intimate,” “life-like,” and “in-the-room sound” would keep getting repeated in order to say...I'm impressed.

## NANCY KELLY

Early in her singing career Nancy Kelly performed regularly at a nightclub that was a magnet for Hammond B-3 heavyweights. That was in Philly in the early 80s, and while listening to her BlueBay release *B That Way*—where she finds herself once again heading an organ-based combo—the dues she paid during that period helped ensure that this project has the gusto that such a project demands. Nice backup, too: organist Dino Losito keeps things swinging while Peter Bernstein delivers some tasty guitar licks and Jerry Weldon slips in some sweet tenor sax. Overall *B That Way* is an energetic set, but at times on this well-paced collection Kelly slows things way down and plunges deep into some moving ballads, as on “Don't Explain” and “Don't Go to Strangers.” Twice the winner of Down Beat's best female jazz vocalist award, Nancy also impressed me with her deft handling of Charlie Parker's “Billie's Bounce,” an uptempo blast of bebop that requires true dexterity.

## HILARY GARDNER

“In literal and abstract ways, these songs form a narrative of life in New York City, replete



with myriad contradictions, complexities, and moments of unexpected beauty,” Hilary Gardner writes in the liner notes to *The Great City*. While songs like “Brooklyn Bridge” and “Autumn in New York” contain explicit references to the Big Apple, this album is more about capturing the *feel* of the city, including (and in fact highlighting) its charm and romance. Recorded at Systems Two Recording Studio in Brooklyn, *The Great City* has a warm, intimate sound and benefits from tasteful and uncluttered arrangements that allow Gardner's seductive voice to woo the listener with subtlety and grace. On “Brooklyn Bridge” her relaxed delivery and Jason Marshall's breathy tenor sax obbligatos combine to set the mood. Released on Anzic Records, *The Great City* contains both common and lesser-known standards plus solid arrangements of pop songs, including interpretations of Leonard Cohen's “No One After You” and Joni Mitchell's “Chelsea Morning” that are as convincing as the jazz standards.

# Music Feature

## DEBORAH LATZ

Maybe you've heard "Blue Skies" a thousand times, but not the way Deborah Latz sings it on the leadoff track to *Fig Tree*, a June Moon release. The rhythm section lays down an off-kilter funk beat while Latz, who sounds playful here, zigzags around the beat in a way that reminds me of Wayne Shorter's soprano work with Weather Report. And she has a fine band behind her, as evinced by the serpentine guitar and piano solos during Randy Weston's "Hi-Fly." I'm also impressed by Latz's versatility. "É Luxo Só" and "Corcovado" are both bossa nova gems, and Orfeas Peridis' "Fevgo" is equally memorable. Latz is accomplished enough that even with the most minimal accompaniment—on the bare bones "'S Wonderful" and "Ill Wind," for example—the song feels complete. Her fans include Sheila Jordan, who knows a thing or two about singing.

## FREDA PAYNE

Remember "Band of Gold," that 70s soul classic that still sounds good today? That was sung by Freda Payne, whose jazz roots actually precede her soul hits (her 1962 debut on Impulse included renditions of Monk's "'Round Midnight" and Ornette's "Lonely Woman"). She remains in fine form on her new Mack Avenue release *Come Back to Me*, which includes such well-known standards as "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To," "Haven't We Met," "Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out to Dry," and "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most." With a strong, commanding voice, Payne seems totally at ease fronting a big band led

by Grammy winner Bill Cunliffe. Eventually the more pop-sounding contemporary material in the middle of the CD gets monotonous, but there are plenty of solid performances of standards to make up for that.

## YEAHWON SHIN

This is the second survey in a row where I've praised this Korean-born vocalist, whose debut *Yeahwon* focused on Brazilian music by composers like Antonio Carlos Jobim, Egberto Gismonti, and Milton Nascimento. On the surface her follow-up *Lua ya* is a radically different project. Where *Yeahwon's* debut album featured elaborate arrangements and a full, rich sound, *Lua ya* primarily consists of duets inspired by a chance occurrence. While visiting pianist Aaron Parks at a recording session in Massachusetts, Yeahwon fell in love with the acoustics of Mechanics Hall, and the two musicians later reunited to record on the same stage (accordionist Rob Curto also appears on some tracks). Although the music relies heavily on improvisation, many of the performances on this ECM release are based on simple motifs, including the melodies to some lullabies Yeahwon first heard as a child.

## CATHERINE RUSSELL

There's something old-fashioned about Catherine Russell's new Harmonia Mundi release *Bring It Back*, and in a good way. Singing tunes written or performed by Fats Waller, Art Tatum, Billie Holiday, and others, Russell leads a relaxed session that hearkens back to the days when swing, blues, and popular music



were all intertwined. There's some familiar material as well as some obscurities, including "Lucille," a song written many decades ago by her father Luis Russell, who worked extensively with Louis Armstrong. The ten-piece band that accompanies Russell on much of this set boasts a swinging horn section that can be vigorous (check out the muted trumpet, clarinet, and trombone on "You Got to Swing and Sway") or sweet as honey ("I Cover the Waterfront") and receives a plush and richly-detailed recording. Russell's ability to charm is evident by the time she finishes the first line of "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart"—and also on the classic "Aged and Mellow," where she spells out very clearly her ranking system for members of the opposite sex.

## NATHALIE BLANC

Nathalie Blanc appears on *Este Mundo* as a special guest artist for a group led by Phillippe Petrucciani. The songs on this Harmonia Mundi release are a colorful blend of jazz and Brazilian music; at times you might be reminded of the Pat Metheny Group. Performing on electric, acoustic, and synth guitar, Petrucciani wrote the music for more than half the songs while Blanc penned the lyrics. Their compositions are ethereal, dreamy, and well-crafted, especially on "Este Mundo," "Mike P.," "Bania," "Souvenirs D'Enfance," and "May Be One Day." Of the standards, the duet performance of "'Round Midnight" is the most memorable, Petrucciani's nylon-string guitar and Blanc's vocals breathing new life into Monk's most-played song. The warm Jaco-like tone of electric bassist Dominique Di Piazza also stands out here. You'd think he was playing a fretless bass, but apparently his custom-made instrument just sounds like one; in any case, he has a nice touch both in a supportive role and as a soloist.

## NICKI PARROTT

Prior to releasing albums as a vocalist, Nicki Parrott had already built a reputation in jazz circles for her abilities on the bass, with a resume that included a lengthy stint as one-third of the Les Paul Trio during the legendary Monday night sessions at the Iridium in New York City. The guitarist encouraged her to sing, and a string of successful records confirms that this was good advice. Parrott, who grew up in Australia and continues to



# Music Feature



hold down the bass role while singing, has a slightly smoky voice that's expressive in a cool, understated way. On Ooroo records, *The Best of Venus Volume One* is culled from tracks originally released on the Venus label from Japan, marking the first time that these tracks have been available in the US and Canada. Highlights include the sultry "I Love the Way You're Breaking My Heart," the bright and bubbly "C'est Si Bon," the charming "They Say It's Spring," and the melancholy "Moon River."

## SARA SERPA

In my previous jazz vocal roundup I praised *Camera Obscura*, which paired Sara Serpa, a native of Portugal, with the pianist Ran Blake. The chemistry between Blake and Serpa was unique, combining the dissonant, angular,

avant-garde veteran with a much younger vocalist who can project a vulnerable and almost childlike aura. That studio recording was memorable, and *Aurora*, the follow-up live set on Clean Feed, is even better. Partly that's due to the way the concert unfolds. There's no applause until the end, making the whole stronger than the sum of its parts and creating powerful transitions. Serpa's haunting a cappella version of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," which would have been noteworthy in any case, has even more impact when preceded by such half-sunny fare as "Saturday" and "Moonride" (and leads dramatically into Blake's ominous solo performance of "Mahler Noir").

## LISA FERRARO

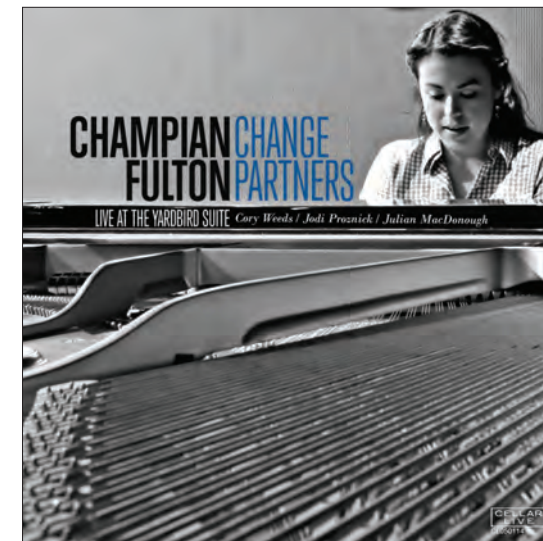
Perhaps the most romantic record in this survey, *Serenading the Moon* kicks off with a version of "I Wished on the Moon" that's slow and sparse, allowing Lisa Ferraro's enticing voice to cast a seductive spell. That song sets the tone for a record inspired by and dedicated to the moon. The recording was produced by tenor veteran Houston Person, who also contributes high-quality obbligatos and solos; the band also includes John diMarino on piano, Ray Drummond on bass, and Lewis Nash on drums. There's an undercurrent of the blues at times ("Teach Me Tonight," "More Than You Know," "Lucky So and So") as well as a straightforward reading of "Skylark." Note that this Pranavonic Universal release is currently only available on the singer's website, [lisaferraro.com](http://lisaferraro.com).

## GLAUCIA NASSER

Glauca Nasser is a Brazilian singer, Sammy Figueroa a percussionist who has long been an important figure in the Latin jazz world; recently these musicians teamed up for the new Savant release *Talisman*. If the Latin rhythms on this album have a heavier than normal beat for Nasser, her strong, full-bodied, and sensual voice is nonetheless well-suited for fronting a smoking rhythm section. Likewise, Figueroa offers sensitive support on more lyrical material like "Abrigo" and "Passos." *Talisman* also benefits from strong songwriting by such guest performers as Bianca Gismonti ("E Quando Quiero") and Chico Pinheiro ("Encontro" and "Boca de Siri").

## MIKI PURNELL

On the Sweet and Lovely Music label, *Swingin' to the Sea* has a light, airy, relaxed feel. Highlights include a warm reading of "Estate," an Italian song made famous by the bossa nova icon João Gilberto. The slow, stripped-down version that appears here—with just voice, piano, bass, and drums—is a delight. When so inspired the band can also be frisky, as on the Toots Thielmans classic "Bluesette," where dynamics, tempo changes, and aggressive flute and piano solos abruptly raise the energy level. On "The Nearness of You" it's just Purnell and a piano, and the intimacy of that performance, the use of space, and Purnell's smooth, silky voice make it another highlight of *Swingin' to the Sea*. A holistic physician, Purnell believes that music "creates therapeutic harmony," and I can hear why.



## CHAMPION FULTON

*Change Partners* captures the excitement of a live club performance where Champion Fulton provides further evidence of her talents as pianist, burning through the changes on "Lover, Come Back to Me" and throwing in unexpected jabs during saxophonist Cory Weeds' solos. As a vocalist, Fulton is most often compared to Dinah Washington, and you'll also hear a trace of Billie Holiday. The resemblance never feels studied, however, and in fact Fulton comes across as one of the most distinctive singers on the scene. Fulton's unique sense of phrasing and her coy manner of delivering lyrics to songs like "Change Partners," "The Boy Next Door," and "It's a Sin to Tell a Lie" help assure her a place among today's top vocalists. TAS

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2015



**Richard Thompson: *Acoustic Classics*.** Beeswing.

New listeners to this multifaceted genius of British folk-rock could begin with one of several solid multidisc compilations—*Watching the Dark*, *RT*, or *Walking on a Wire*. Old hands probably own many versions of these “classics” on studio albums and the slew of live sets available on Thompson’s website. But no previous collection services both demographics as completely-satisfaction guaranteed—as this single disc of 14 vocal-and-acoustic-guitar performances, mixed and mastered for maximum realistic presence by Thompson’s longtime concert sound engineer, Simon Tassano. While I might prefer the fierce, explosive electric-band concert treatments of “Valerie” and “Shoot Out the Lights,” just about every other song here (including “I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight,” “Wall of Death,” “1952 Vincent Black Lightning,” “I Misunderstood,” “Beeswing,” and “Dimming of the Day”) soars, seethes, or simmers to new perfection in this intimate environment. The guitar, whether strummed or picked, does more than accompany Thompson’s yearning and urgent vocals; it decorates, drives, and dances with the tunes, and dazzles on its own splendid, impeccable terms. These 57 minutes provide hours and hours of wonderment, and beg for sequels digging even deeper (Fairport Convention days?) into a peerless catalog. **Derk Richardson**

**Further Listening:** RT: *More Guitar*; Randy Newman: *The Randy Newman Songbook, Vol. 1*



**Kenny Barron and Dave Holland: *The Art of Conversation*.** Impulse.

This intimate duo recording between pianist Barron and bassist Holland, both regal players, composers, and bandleaders, developed out of a 2012 tour together (after hearing a performance, Impulse executive Jean-Philippe Allard shepherded them into the studio to document their chemistry). Both are superb listeners with a lyrical sense that borders on the poetic, as revealed on Barron’s poignant ballad “Rain” and Holland’s sublime “In Your Arms.” Barron’s already well-known love of Thelonious Monk receives further exploration on the angular and heavily Monk-influenced original, “The Only One,” and a swinging cover of “In Walked Bud.” Barron benefits from Holland’s unerring time feel (particularly evident on a delicate uptempo romp through Charlie Parker’s bop anthem “Segment” and “In Walked Bud”). The bassist delivers superb solos throughout, none more melodic and luminous than the one he turns in on “Waltz for Wheeler,” his heartfelt tribute to the late trumpeter/flugelhornist and early musical inspiration Kenny Wheeler. The two kindred spirits touch on an Afro-Latin vibe on Holland’s “Dr. Do Right” and on Barron’s sprightly “Seascape.” The collection closes with a tender reading of the Ellington-Strayhorn composition “Day Dream.” The album title says it all on this glorious duet project. **Bill Milkowski**

**Further Listening:** Kenny Barron and Charlie Haden: *Night and the City*; Dave Holland: *TriPLICATE*



# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2015



## Sean Costello: *In the Magic Shop*. Vizztone.

A couple pertinent details about the astonishing “new” Sean Costello album: recorded in 2005 at The Magic Shop in New York City, its dozen mostly original tracks were only recently dusted off and polished to gleaming, widescreen sonic perfection by original producer (and four-time Grammy winner) Steve Rosenthal, whose poetic reminiscence in the liner booklet is a most moving tribute to a gifted, generous artist; also, all profits from album sales will support research at the Sean Costello Memorial Fund for Bipolar Research, in order to help fight the disorder that claimed the artist’s life on April 15, 2008, a day before his 29th birthday. Otherwise we are talking about a fully realized personal statement in blues and true R&B with Costello’s basic trio supplemented by a handful of guests. The revealing songs include a funky but searing R&B confessional, “I Went Wrong,” fueled by Costello’s gritty, soul-baring vocal; a beautifully nuanced, impassioned reading of “Trust in Me,” Mildred Bailey’s atmospheric, slow grooving blues ballad from 1937; “Make a Move,” all ferocious funk and gospel thrust—every song, in fact, is a highlight. Gone but vividly remembered, Sean Costello is fully present as a guitarist-vocalist-songwriter on this, a bona fide masterpiece. **David McGee**

**Further Listening:** Sean Costello: *We Can Get Together*; Nappy Brown: *Long Time Coming*



## Pärt: *Choral Music*. Polyphony, Stephen Layton. Hyperion.

The liner notes for this hour-long program of unaccompanied choral music lay out the range of opinions regarding the man who is arguably the most famous living classical composer. There are those who hear his music as “aural pillows to sink into.” But Pärt’s work is never formulaic or dumbed down— it’s expertly constructed, respectful of tradition, and its devotional tone is genuine. Since the 1970s, tonality has indeed been both its starting and ending point, but along the way there are disturbing moments of ambiguity. If you find Pärt’s music soporific or merely “soothing,” you’re not listening hard enough. Stephen Layton conducts 11 works, two of which (*Virgencita* and *Alleluia-Tropus*) are first recordings. Most were written between 1997 and 2007, but also included is Pärt’s serial but exquisite *Solfeggio* from 1963 and *Summa* from 1977, an early example of the composer’s “tintinnabulist” style. There may be no finer medium-sized chorus than Polyphony, which manifests utter perfection of attack and release, blend, balance, and intonation. The recording was made in All Hallows Church in London, a highly reverberant environment that suits the music’s spiritual content. But the sonics are clear enough to understand the words without the supplied texts, remarkable for any choral recording. **Andrew Quint**

**Further Listening:** Pärt: *Kanon Pokajanen*. Symphony No. 4

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2015

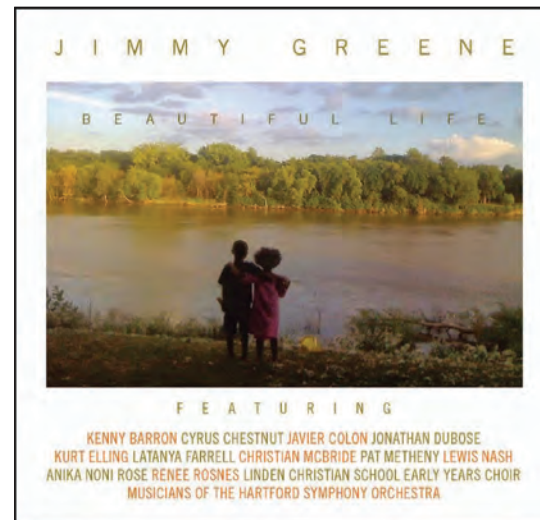


**Punch Brothers: *The Phosphorescent Blues*.** Nonesuch.

The Punch Brothers play what I call “chambergrass,” with detailed songs as influenced by Bartok as by the Beach Boys or Bill Monroe. Chris Thile and four friends started the band after Nickel Creek announced their dissolution; this is their fourth album, and it’s a doozy. Of all things, love and cell phones are its warp and woof. “Familiarity,” a ten-minute suite, presents the cell in its role as purveyor of songs you only pretend to love because you love the friends playing them. In “I Blew It Off,” the girl’s “trouble vibrates the table, interrupts my reverie.” In “My Oh My,” Thile sings, “Something beautiful’s gonna come/Out from underneath our thumbs/To let freedom vibrate not ring.” The stunner is “Magnet,” a number about a passionate encounter that also wonders, “What’s the center between two centers of attention?” Interspersed are two songs harking back to pre-cell phone days: an original, “Julep,” sung from the point of view of a deceased but happy old man, and the traditional “Boll Weevil.” Both of those are followed by the album’s two instrumentals, Debussy’s “Passepied” and a Scriabin prelude, both stunningly arranged and affectionately played with bluegrass instruments. *Phosphorescent* is a record to live with and wonder at. Sound is close-up and accurate. **Stephen Estep**



**Further Listening:** Ma, Duncan, Meyer & Thile: *The Goat Rodeo Sessions*



**Jimmy Greene: *Beautiful Life*.** Mack Avenue.

There are no words to describe the profound sense of sorrow that must have consumed tenor saxophonist Jimmy Greene when he lost his six-year-old daughter Ana, one of 19 innocents gunned down on December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. After a year of grieving, Greene took the first steps toward healing by making this music celebrating his daughter’s life. Pat Metheny’s warm acoustic guitar joins with Greene’s keening tenor on the intimate opener, “Come Thou Almighty King,” which also includes a poignant recording of Ana singing the hymn a year before her death. Pianist Kenny Barron engages in moving, conversational duets with Greene on the Broadway musical numbers “Where Is Love?” and “Maybe.” Anchored by the stellar rhythm section of bassist Christian McBride, pianist Renee Rosnes, and drummer Lewis Nash, *Beautiful Life* also features performances by members of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra on the soulful “When I Come Home,” which features vocals by Javier Colon, and a musical adaptation of “The Lord’s Prayer,” sung by Latanya Farrell. The Linden Christian School Early Years Choir adds a tear-jerking touch on “Little Voices,” which includes an optimistic spoken word recitation by Greene’s high school classmate, actress/singer Anika Noni Rose. **Bill Milkowski**



**Further Listening:** Jimmy Greene: *Mission Statement*; The New Jazz Composers Octet: *The Turning Gate*



# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2015



## Steven Wilson: *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* Kscope.

Steven Wilson is the last person you'd want to attend your high school reunion. He's too much of an overachiever: his remixes (including surround sound) of such classic progressive-rock bands as Yes, King Crimson, and Jethro Tull would silence the bragging businessmen, plus the multi-instrumentalist has already compiled a lengthy discography with (among others) Porcupine Tree, No-Man, and Blackfield, and also as a solo artist. In a broader sense, he deserves credit for following his own path, as critically no genre has inspired more critical wrath than progressive rock. Yet sometimes I appreciate Wilson's music more than I like it. I enjoy *Fragile*, *Red*, and *Animals*, but some neo-prog seems to codify old ideas rather than break new ground, which was kind of the point originally. His 2013 release *The Raven That Refused to Sing (And Other Stories)* boasted virtuosic musicianship but left me cold; however, I quickly grew fond of the more pop-oriented *Hand. Cannot. Erase.*

Wilson conceived *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* after learning about the tragic story of Joyce Carol Vincent. Even though Vincent was young and had family and friends, after she died three years passed before anyone thought to check on her. Sounds like a maudlin premise for an album, but Wilson bypasses the gory details and instead focuses on Vincent's mundane everyday life. Ultimately she comes across not as a recluse but a person with real (if at times tenuous) human connections. Because Vincent ultimately seems like a lot of people,

the album suggests that what happened to her could happen to anyone. Somehow the record manages to evoke sympathy for Vincent without resorting to melodrama, and that by itself is a feat.

I'm also impressed by the songwriting, as *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* contains numerous passages that, hours after a listening session, drift back into my head the way good pop songs do. The episodic "3 Years Older" and the more concise title song and "Transience" both have strong (and relatively straightforward) pop melodies. The best moments on the album occur when the Israeli singer Ninet Tayeb trades lead vocals with Wilson on "Perfect Life" and "Routine." When Tayeb belts out the climax of "Routine," it seems that the pain and anguish lurking beneath the surface of Vincent's dull, flat existence is given full expression.

Less impressive are some echoes of Wilson's prog-rock forefathers (Chris Squire-like bass lines, Keith Emerson-ish organ riffs, and a nod to King Crimson's "One More Red Nightmare"), which seem too literal and secondhand. (Pink Floyd seeped so deeply into Wilson's musical DNA so long ago, however, that by this point its sound has blended with his own personal voice.) Also, some instrumental sections simply strike me as bombastic, especially on the lengthy "Ancestral." Yet by the following track, "Happy Returns," the lyrical melodies that characterize much of the album return. At the end of the song there's a brief guitar solo reminiscent of David Gilmour's work with Pink Floyd. Using long, sustained notes and lengthy silences between them, Wilson sounds

as expressive here as Ninet Tayeb does during her musical epiphany. Sonics are clean and detailed, with superb dynamics. **Jeff Wilson**

**Further Listening:** Pink Floyd: *Dark Side of the Moon*; Donna Summer: *Love to Love You Baby*

# Top Ten New CD Releases of 2015

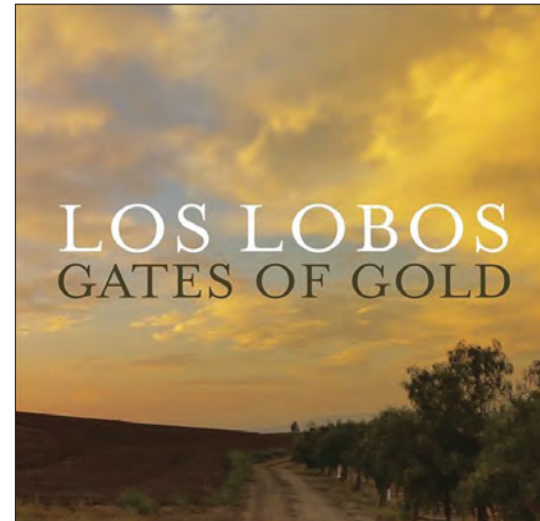


**Ralph Stanley & Friends: *Man of Constant Sorrow*.** Cracker Barrel.

The rubber meets the road immediately on this alternately rousing and stirring collection of duets pairing 87-year-old bluegrass giant Ralph Stanley with various roots-centric partners. A Resurrection celebration, “We Shall Rise,” jets into Gloryland fueled by Josh Turner’s jubilant vocal and a rustic wall of sound consisting of furiously charging banjo, fiddle, and mandolin. Credit producers Buddy Miller and Jim Lauderdale for the savvy duet pairings plus crackling, live-sounding sonics with vocals hot in the mix. Dierks Bentley and Dr. Ralph blend beautifully on the driving bluegrass heartbreaker, “I Only Exist”; Lee Ann Womack’s mountain ache of a voice digs deep into Carter Stanley’s “White Dove,” a wrenching reflection on darkness descending as death visits the family circle; above eerily droning violins, Robert Plant and Dr. Ralph, somber and straightforward, metaphorically plumb the travails of sin and the triumph of salvation in “Two Coats.” Del McCoury, Ricky Skaggs, and Nathan Stanley all have memorable turns, but no one tops Dr. Ralph’s solo turn on “Hills of Home,” a heartfelt recitation for brother Carter, replete with a promise to join him again in the sweet by and by. In the end, there’s not a dry eye in the house. **David McGee**



**Further Listening:** Ralph Stanley & Jim Lauderdale: *I Feel Like Singing Today*; Ralph Stanley & Friends: *Clinch Mountain Country*



**Los Lobos: *Gates of Gold*.** 429.

For 40 years Los Lobos has delivered American roots music steeped in everything from blues to música norteña. There’s often a lyrical theme or cohesive sound to their albums, whether it’s the autobiographical rock of their 1989 major-label debut *How Will the Wolf Survive?*, the Spanish-language ballads of *La Pistola y El Corazon*, or the dreamy Latin rhythms of their 1992 epic *Kiko*. Now there’s the eclecticism of *Gates of Gold*. The opening track, “Made to Break Your Heart,” veers from familiar mid-tempo Latin-inflected rock to a slow, snarling sonic wash in the spirit of Crazy Horse. “When We Were Free,” with its jazzy vibe, is reminiscent of the band’s mid-career work with Mitchell Froom. The wistful “There I Go” takes that experimentation further. The second half of the album revisits traditional Latin rhythms and Spanish-language lyrics before dipping into Delta blues and other roots music—the mandolin intro and drunken beat of the catchy title track could have been hatched at one of Levon Helms’ *Midnight Rambles*. If you’re seeking a thematic approach, you’d better search elsewhere. But if you’re looking for an album that reflects the cultural polyglot that is modern America, *Gates of Gold* is it.



**Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** Los Lobos: *Kiko*; *Disconnected in New York City*



## Top Ten New CD Releases of 2015



### Fred Hersch: *Solo*. Palmetto.

Perfectionists like Fred Hersch are generally their own harshest critics, but even he can't deny that something very special happened at the Windham Civic Center Concert Hall on this August night in 2014. Not only is Thelonious Monk's "In Walked Bud" imbued with the deft syncopated touches needed to pull off Monk's music successfully, it is also full of contrapuntal daring, radical reharmonizations, and rhythmic inventions that take the familiar piece to some wholly new territory. His original "Whirl," dedicated to the iconic 20th-century ballerina Suzanne Farrell, is both kinetic and graceful while his reimagining of Juan Tizol's "Caravan" sounds alternately informed by Scott Joplin, Ran Blake, and Cecil Taylor. His gentle interpretation of Jerome Kern's "The Song Is You," normally played at a blazing uptempo as a chops showcase by jazzbos, is slowed to a luxurious ballad pace and rendered as a kind of gorgeous jazz lullaby. Perhaps most precious and transcendent of all is his sublime take on Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now." That Hersch, a notorious stickler for every aspect of sound on his recordings, was pleased with this live performance is saying a lot. Of his ten solo albums, this may be his best.

Bill Milkowski

**Further Listening:** Fred Hersch: *Alone at the Vanguard*; *Passion Flower*



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# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2015



**Big Star: #1 Record.** Concord/Stax.

**Big Star: Radio City.** Concord/Stax.

After four decades Big Star continues to cast a shadow over pop music, their music sounding as fresh today as it did when their infectious mix of Southern rock, jangle pop, soul, folk, and Velvet Underground hipness blew out of Memphis on the strength of a singer and songwriting team that was the Lennon and McCartney of indie rock. When Big Star's debut album *#1 Record* was released in 1972 Alex Chilton was still a boy wonder: the lead singer of the Box Tops had, in 1968 and at the age of 16, scored a No. 1 hit with "The Letter." The debut also showcased the talents of Chris Bell as a producer and revealed his fondness for such British Invasion bands as the Beatles, the Yardbirds, and the Who. "Feel," the opening track, explodes like a shower of sparks from my Kef LS50s, the sweet, pleading vocal harmonies shimmering above a solid foundation of tight bass and punchy horns, and the wry, playful flower-pop tribute "The India Song" would have done Syd Barrett proud. In his liner notes to the newly remastered *#1 Record* R.E.M.'s Mike Mills describes it as "a record of rich sonic textures, of declaration and vulnerability." Mills also praises the level of detail in the album's production and the innovative recording techniques, much of it handled by Bell, calling it "a revelation."

In the early 70s, however, few paid notice (it didn't help that Big Star's label dropped the ball when it came to distributing and promoting the record). The commercial failure

of *#1 Record* sent Bell into a deep funk and led him to quit Big Star, though he helped write "O My Soul" and "Back of a Car" from the band's 1974 sophomore effort, *Radio City*. That gem of an album is arguably Chilton's creative peak. It finds him tamping down some of the band's rock influences to add flourishes of funk, country, and power pop. The album's opener, "O My Soul," is a funk-drenched barnburner. "Way Out West" reverberates with Beatles-esque and Badfinger-ready power pop. The dreamy ballad "Daisy Glaze" sounds like it could have been released yesterday on Sub-Pop. All totaled, the band delivers a heady mix that is realized fully on the classic power-pop ballad "September Gurls," which helped define alt-rock in the 80s and 90s.

These days you can't overstate the impact of these landmark albums, as noted in the critically acclaimed 2012 documentary *Nothing Can Hurt Me*. Without Big Star, you never would have had the Replacements, or at least not the evolved post-thrash incarnation—the Replacements' song "Alex Chilton," from the *Pleased to Meet Me* album, paid tribute to this groundbreaking Memphis musician. Other acts that have sung the praises of Big Star include Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, R.E.M., the Flaming Lips, and Belle & Sebastian, to name a few. These latest reissues—which contain the same bonus tracks found on earlier versions—sound fantastic and should help seal Big Star's status as rock legends. **Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** Big Star: *Nothing Can Hurt Me* (DVD); *Live*



# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2015



## George Harrison: *The Apple Years 1968-75*. UMG (7 CDs + 1 DVD).

This box set documents the early stages of George Harrison's solo career, when his interests were all over the place. Every CD contains additional tracks; here the highlights include the single "Bangla Desh" and its B-side "Deep Blue." Remastered from original analog sources, the compilation especially benefits from the freshened-up sound on the last two CDs. Although I seldom gush about CD packaging, this box set, made to look like a miniature house, is itself a work of art.

The first solo album by a Beatle, 1968's *Wonderwall Music* was the soundtrack to an experimental movie. Neither it nor Harrison's 1969 follow-up, *Electronic Sound*, signaled a breakout album. Of course these decidedly uncommercial records have always attracted Beatles completists, but they appeal to other camps as well. *Wonderwall Music* helped Indian music gain a larger audience while throwing in some Western music (some psychedelic, some silly), and it belongs on the list of colorful late 60s soundtracks. For those who favor early synthesizer music, the more primitive the better, *Electronic Sound* has its own charms.

Whatever their merits, neither album hinted at what was in store when George Harrison released his first solo album following the Beatles breakup. Similarly, no one predicted that the third-best songwriter during the Fab Four days would release what remains the best solo album by an ex-Beatle. The two song-oriented LPs at the heart of the triple

album *All Things Must Pass* are focused in the way most great albums are. I like some tracks more than others, but every cut contributes something to what is often a gloomy record; it's interesting that on his first post-Beatles LP the band member most content with calling it quits recorded an album considerably more depressing than *McCartney* or *Imagine*. Reaction to Phil Spector's production has been mixed, and Harrison himself eventually felt it was overdone. I've always thought that Spector's echo-filled wall of sound fits the consistently big-picture lyrics that handle metaphysical issues with a rare maturity. Rather than reel off mystical platitudes, *All Things Must Pass* documents a spiritual struggle in a compelling way. None of the best songs received heavy airplay. "Beware of Darkness," "Isn't it a Pity," "Ballad of Sir Frankie Crisp (Let it Roll)," and "The Art of Dying" share strong melodies and provocative lyrics; the upbeat "Awaiting on You All" is an infectious Jesus freak jingle; and, with its reedy harmonica playing and scrappy acoustic guitar work, "Apple Scruffs" has a nice raw sound.

Why, then, did the inspiration quickly slip away? Perhaps because you only leave the Beatles once. In any case Harrison's lyrics quickly grew ponderous, his expressions of transcendence and sorrow facile, his melodies less distinctive. On *Living in the Material World*, *Dark Horse*, and *Extra Texture* the best moments occur when reality bursts his metaphysical bubble. On "Sue Me, Sue You Blues" legal and money squabbles launched a catchy, witty, and sardonic pop song. The

emptiness of worldly pleasures inspired "Living in the Material World" and "Try Some, Buy Some." On "Dark Horse" his marital infidelities and blunt self-assessment gave the song a sense of urgency. For the quiet Beatle, nothing invoked the Muses like standing face to face with soft shoe shufflers, greedy leaders, and other Blue Meanies. **Jeff Wilson**

**Further Listening:** George Harrison: *Cloud Nine*; *Brainwashed*

# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2015



## **The Complete Clifford Jordan Strata-East Sessions.** Mosaic (6 CDs).

When the first music on this set was recorded in late 1968, 37-year-old tenor saxophonist Clifford Jordan had already led ten recording dates and worked in the bands of such figures as Charles Mingus, Max Roach, and Randy Weston. Each of these leaders had been involved in running their own record labels, and by the late 60s Jordan was determined to do the same thing. He recorded most of the music on this set for a label he tried to launch in 1968, but it didn't work out, so he made an arrangement to have it released on Strata-East, a label founded by pianist Stanley Cowell and trumpeter Charles Tolliver in 1971. This was really a perfect fit for this music, as Strata-East would go on to become the most successful musician-led

jazz label of the time, releasing some 60 titles in the course of the decade, including many classics. These Jordan-produced dates were designated the Dophy Series (to honor the brilliant multi-reed specialist Eric Dolphy). Gathered together for the first time, they make for a fascinating set, enhanced, of course, by Mosaic's excellent work at every level of production, from the sound transfers to the full-size, 16-page booklet.

A wide stylistic range is represented in this series, from unregenerate hard bop to modal and free jazz. Most of these strains are discernible on Jordan's *In the World*, which takes up the first of the six CDs in this set. The leader is joined by, among others, trombonist Julian Priester, pianist Wynton Kelly, bassist Wilbur Ware, and drummer Ed Blackwell. Trumpeters Don Cherry and Kenny Dorham both appear on two tracks. The Dorham pieces seem more satisfying, but this is due to the compositions themselves rather than the personnel differences. Jordan, Priester, and Kelly all sound more assured on the hard-boppish "Ouagoudougou" and the adventurous "872" than on the modal tunes that preceded them, and Priester's fans should be particularly pleased.

*Zodiac*, led by baritone saxophonist Cecil Payne, is hard bop all the way, and it features a strong, all-original program. Again Dorham and Kelly are on hand, and both are brilliant; it is difficult to believe that their careers were at this point winding down and would be over within a couple of years. *Zodiac* did not seem all that special when it was released, but it holds up very well. The same could certainly be said of *Rhythm X—The Music of Charles Brackeen*. At that time, the overt influence of Ornette Coleman on this tenor saxophonist

seemed like a drawback, but the fact that so very few people have ever adopted the style now adds greatly to the record's interest. And Brackeen was no mere imitator; he had great tone and drive, and he built his solos well. Matching him with erstwhile Coleman sidemen Cherry, Blackwell, and Charlie Haden underlined the stylistic debt to Ornette, but Brackeen fills the leader's role fearlessly.

The previously unreleased *Shades of Ed Blackwell* consists of two pieces for a standard quintet and four for a sextet of percussionists. Don Cherry is in particularly fine form on the quintet numbers, but the surprise here is the very obscure tenor saxophonist Luqman Lateef. This seems to be Lateef's only studio recording, but he is a strong player in the mold of Junior Cook or even Clifford Jordan. The remaining tracks show how very melodic all-drum ensembles can be. There is nothing hard to follow in this flowing, invigorating river of sound, as it all moves along carefully charted routes.

Although it was released in 1973, Pharoah Sanders' *Izipho Zam (My Gifts)* was recorded in early 1969 and is similar in tone to *Karma* and *Jewels of Thought*, which were made later that year on Impulse. Many of the same supporting cast are on hand, from vocalist Leon Thomas to guitarist Sonny Sharrock and pianist Lonnie Liston Smith. Listeners who enjoy the Impulse titles will be delighted with *Izipho Zam*, which ranges from vocal selections like "Prince of Peace" to the interesting, punchy head and fiercely high-octane group improves on "Balance." I'd like to hear more instrumental soloing on the Pharoah Sanders records from this period, but overall this is a strong session.

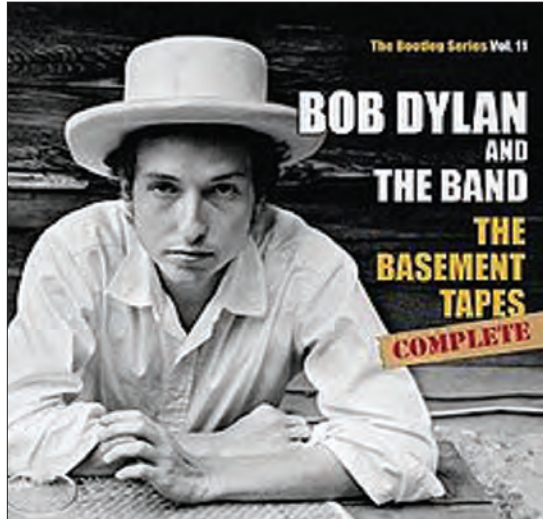
The real discovery of this entire set may be Wilbur Ware's *Superbass*, which went unissued until a limited release came out in 2012. Jordan played tenor and contributed two excellent compositions on this remarkable date, and the group was rounded out by, again, Cherry and Blackwell. Despite the two fascinating solo bass tracks, it's the quartet playing that makes the deepest impression. The bass plays a more prominent role in the ensemble than it usually does, but without the high-end flying around of the LaFaro-school styl-ists, and Don Cherry is simply spectacular. Here he seems to push Jordan into territory he rarely entered on his own.

The set concludes with one of Clifford Jordan's finest recordings as a leader, *Glass Bead Games*, which came out as a two-LP set in 1973. One could easily view this minor masterpiece as a synthesis of all the stylistic influences that have been presented on this collection. The title is taken from the Herman Hesse novel *Magister Ludi*, in which especially gifted students of a future world learn extremely advanced artistic/scientific concepts by means of the game. Jordan's glass bead lessons have been given by African-American musicians named in the titles, including John Coltrane, Paul Robeson, Cal Massey, and others. This is not a record that hits the listener between the eyes, but it's solid and satisfying, and it grows on you with each listen. It's the kind of record that people who don't know jazz will enjoy and that those who do will love. The same could be said of the entire set, another triumph for Mosaic. **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Clifford Jordan: *Cliff Craft*; *Starting Time*



# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2015



**Bob Dylan & the Band: *The Bootleg Series Vol. 11: The Basement Tapes Complete.***  
Columbia/Legacy (6 CDs).

They've been called the sacred texts of Americana and the foundation of alt-country. Since their official release in 1975 *The Basement Tapes*, recorded in 1967 in Bob Dylan's music room and the cellar of the Band's upstate New York ranch house known as Big Pink, have been analyzed, anthologized, and canonized in such books as Greil Marcus' *Invisible Republic* (which popularized the term "weird old America" to describe the sounds that informed Dylan in this period) and Sid Griffin's *Million Dollar Bash*. While the 1975 release contained two LPs' worth of material, this six-disc box set (which includes an essay by Griffin and a 120-page hardbound book of photos and memorabilia) makes available for the first time 138 tracks created at one of the most productive songwriting sessions in the history of popular music. The set is "complete" in the sense that it offers every song that wasn't too fragmented or sonically challenged to warrant release.

The relaxed, acoustic-oriented demos were recorded in the summer of 1967 on a Revox A-77 tape machine in a cinder-block cellar with a churning furnace, clanging pipes, and an oil-stained concrete floor. The sessions marked a turning point for Dylan. A year earlier, he was riding high on the pop charts following the release of *Blonde on Blonde*. Then he crashed his Triumph motorcycle on a narrow country road near his home in Woodstock, New York. Following his recovery, Dylan later said, he realized that he couldn't go back to the life of a touring rock star. So he summoned his recent backup band, The Hawks, whose mem-

bers later would become known as The Band, to record these demos.

The music finds Dylan, just months before the release of his stripped-down folk masterwork *John Wesley Harding*, diving headfirst into folk, Civil War-era ballads, country, blues, soul, and early rock 'n' roll. The first disc especially gives you a sense of Dylan and his cohorts gaining their footing by performing the works of earlier masters. It includes a cover of Hank Williams' "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It" that has a rave-up in the middle eight. That's followed by the Dylan original "Roll on Train," which sounds like Chuck Berry's "Maybelline." In a similar spirit, disc two features a cover of blues great John Lee Hooker's "Tupelo," folk artist Eric von Schmidt's "Joshua Gone Barbados," and soul singer Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready."

By disc three Dylan is flexing his songwriting muscle. "This Wheel's on Fire," "Too Much of Nothing," "I Shall Be Released," "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," and "I'm Not There" roll out in rapid succession. Discs four and five follow suit: "Tears of Rage," "Quinn the Eskimo," and "Nothing Was Delivered" rub elbows with such lesser-known originals as "Clothes Line Saga" and "Goin' to Acapulco."

The recordings, which sometimes dissolve into laughter or abrupt endings, show Dylan shaking his pop sensibilities to search for a *new* folk music. In the process, he would light the path for a half century of alt-country and Americana bands, from Uncle Tupelo, Wilco, and Son Volt to Ryan Adams, Iron & Wine, and the Lumineers. **Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** Bob Dylan: *John Wesley Harding*; The Band: *Music from Big Pink*

# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2015



**Jethro Tull: *War Child: The 40th Anniversary Theatre Edition*.** Rhino (2 CDs + 2 DVDs).

The release of *War Child: The 40th Anniversary Theatre Edition* marks the fulfillment of a longstanding promise. In 1974, following the unexpected commercial success of the band's concept album *Thick as a Brick* and the critical thrashing of the sprawling *Passion Play*, Ian Anderson announced plans to release a feature-length film, an orchestral film score, and a double-LP rock album. What fans got was just a single rock LP, which spawned the hit "Bungle in the Jungle" while hurling barbs at organized religion and society's elite. Critics who disparaged *Passion Play* for its ambition and sprawling musicality (it's a single two-part song) were no kinder to *War Child*, which marked a return to standard song structures but is widely regarded as one of Tull's weakest albums.

Enter *The Theatre Edition*.

Remixed by Grammy-nominated, British prog-rock aficionado Steven Wilson of Porcupine Tree—whose recent engineering projects have included stunning remixes of Tull's *Thick as a Brick* and *Passion Play*, as well as titles by Yes, XTC, and ELP—this two-CD/two-DVD set is a completist's dream. It offers a new stereo remix of the original album and a second stereo CD of related recordings, including three previously unreleased songs and nine previously unreleased orchestral tracks that were intended for the unrealized film.

The DVDs deliver a wealth of content. The first features a stirring 5.1 surround mix in

both DTS 96/24 and AC3 Dolby Digital sound and a 96/24 LPCM stereo mix. There's also a remarkable flat transfer of the original 1974 quad LP (with two additional quad tracks) in DTS 96/24 (4.0) and AC3 Dolby Digital surround sound, video clips of a Montreux press conference, "The Third Hoorah" promo video, and other visuals. The second DVD, which is audio-only, contains an additional 11 recordings, both band and orchestral, from the *War Child* sessions and later remixed for 5.1 surround sound and stereo. An 80-page book, the heart of the hardbound portfolio, contains a detailed history of the *War Child* project, Anderson's engaging track-by-track annotation, a film script synopsis, rare photographs, and other materials.

Musically, *War Child* lacks the nuanced complexities of *Passion Play*, which delivered on the prog-rock promise with adventurous arrangements blending rock, folk, classical, and jazz. However, the melodic "Ladies" and "Skating Away on the Thin Ice of a New Day" are quite beautiful. And the Wilson remixes complement the power and punch of the rock combo that lies at the core of these orchestrated arrangements—check out guitarist Martin Barre's red-hot riffs on "Back-Door Angels."

For diehard Tull fans, *The Theatre Edition* accentuates the radio-drama style of the original and offers a hint of what the complete multi-media project might have been like had the film been produced. Sonically, Wilson has lavished attention on the newly released orchestral tracks and added the same level of transparency to the 5.1 and quad remixes of

the *War Child* original that can be found on his earlier remixing projects, allowing previously hidden details to stand out. That said, the original 1974 quad transfer is the icing on the cake—listening to those tracks made me nostalgic for my long-gone Sylvania RQ-4748 quad receiver. **Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** Jethro Tull: *Thick as a Brick: 40th Anniversary Special Edition*; Emerson, Lake & Palmer: *Brain Salad Surgery*





# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2015



**Various Artists: *The Complete Dial Modern Jazz Sessions*. Mosaic (9 CDs).**

Driving in the dark of the southwest Florida night, I tuned the rental car's radio to an NPR station playing jazz. With the highway and its painted lines stretching out ahead as straight and parallel as a staff of sheet music, the sounds of saxophones, trumpets, pianos, basses, and drums bounced around the car's interior, intermittently punctuated by the mellifluous announcing of syndicated programmer Bob Parlocha. Except for the occasional big band track, the lineage of every tune emanating from the radio, it seemed, could be traced back to the music on this nine-CD collection, recorded between June 6, 1945, and November 29, 1947. That's not to say the acoustic bebop played by the groups and soloists recorded on Ross Russell's relatively short-lived Dial label—featuring saxophonists Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, Teddy Edwards, and Lucky Thompson; trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Fats Navarro, and Howard McGhee; pianists Erroll Garner, Al Haig, Dodo Marmarosa, Duke Jordan, and Jimmy Rowles; vibraphonists Red Norvo and Milt Jackson; trombonists Melba Liston and J. J. Johnson; drummer Max Roach, vocalist Earl Coleman, and many, many others—is *the* Holy Grail of modern jazz. But the 185 tracks captured in 20 different recording sessions in New York City and Hollywood, California (including a one-off in Glendale), definitely belong in the Olympian pantheon that extends from W. C. Handy and Louis Armstrong through Ellington and Basie to Mingus, Monk, Coltrane, and beyond.

As for the historical, social, and personal context for this dense wedge of bop, Russell, a record store owner turned recording entrepreneur (and Parker biographer), and Tony Williams, a record producer, bring it to life in their illuminating introduction and session histories threaded among the terrific black-and-white photos of the box set's 32-page booklet. Among the more intriguing stories for those who watch record industry trends is the saga of the independent labels—12 in Hollywood alone—that kept jazz alive after the majors (Victor, Columbia, Decca) cut back during World War II. Arising out of Russell's Tempo Music Shop, Dial scored its biggest coup by signing Parker to a one-year exclusive deal on February 26, 1946, resulting in 34 tracks with Bird playing alongside Dizzy, Miles, McGhee, Garner, Gray, guitarist Barney Kessel, and others.

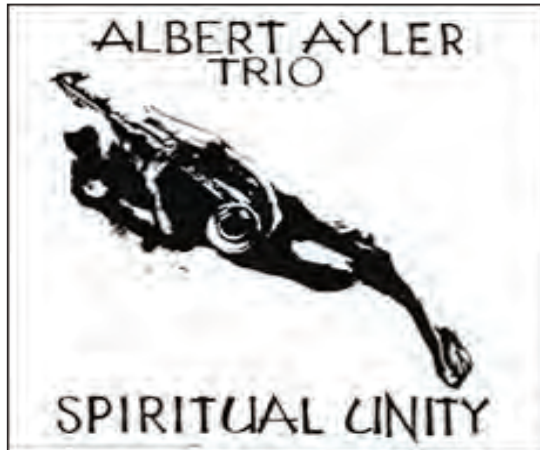
But the definitive Parker performances, including "Yardbird Suite," "Ornithology," "Crazeology," "How Deep Is the Ocean," "Bird Feathers," and "Scrapple from the Apple," are just a few of the highlights. There's Gordon and Gray's historic tenor battle, "The Chase"; the Marmarosa Trio session with cello instead of bass, and the Garner piano solos; Gordon and Edwards sharing Dial's final Hollywood session; and plenty more. For those wary of multiple takes of individual tunes, rest assured that almost every alternative version here carries its weight, illustrating how these bebop masters (plus pre-bop veterans and youngsters learning the bop idiom) were constantly exploring new ways to express mood, develop melodies, and sculpt harmonies. The pristine remastering creates a startling

presence for music nearly six decades old, and the predominant uptempo buoyancy will keep your spirits appropriately high. **Derk Richardson**

**Further Listening:** Charlie Parker: *Now's the Time: The Quartet of Charlie Parker*; Various Artists: *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles (1921-1956)*



# Top Ten CD Reissues of 2015



## Albert Ayler: *Spiritual Unity*. ESP.

In marking the 50th anniversary of the first recording made for ESP (apart from one spoken word record), the label is finally releasing an edition that includes an extra track, identified here as “Vibrations,” that was somehow substituted for “Spirits” on one pressing of the LP. This epochal record introduced Albert Ayler’s astonishing music to the American public, and the impact of this explosive tenor saxophonist was immediate and enormous. About five years earlier, Ornette Coleman had spearheaded the introduction of a free style that eschewed fixed harmonic schemes, but he tended to retain standard jazz rhythm, and his most fiery moments were generally used as punctuation. In contrast, Ayler’s solos often consisted of an unbroken series of explosive outbursts. Not only harmony, but fixed pitch and time both went out the window, and every young player took note, as did such established figures as John Coltrane. Ayler did use tunes as points of departure, but these were almost absurdly simple, folksy melodies. That his cathartic outpourings could sustain interest is a testament to true genius, and that bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Sonny Murray found ways to support this maelstrom without everything reducing into chaos is equally impressive. **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Albert Ayler: *Prophecy*; *Ghosts*



## Junior Wells: *Southside Blues Jam*. Delmark.

It was Junior Wells’ return to the Delmark fold; it was the titan Otis Spann’s last recording session. Junior’s regular band—Buddy Guy, guitarist Louis Myers, drummer Fred Below, bassist Earnest Johnson—filled the studio with blues legends, all at the top of their games. Finally on CD, this reissue of a free-flowing 1970 session adds seven bonus tracks to the original vinyl’s eight and is remastered with bright, warm studio sonics. Honoring the Monday night goings-on at Theresa’s Blues Bar on Chi-town’s south side, *Southside Blues Jam* features the deepest blue of blues, “I Could Have Had Religion” (wherein Junior blames a feckless lass for causing him to forsake the pulpit); blends autobiography with social commentary in the swaggering “Blues for Mayor Daley”; and soars with the warm, ad-libbed verbal jousting on “Trouble Don’t Last,” 7:54 of volcanic simmering featuring sly references to Skip James and Sonny Boy Williamson amidst Buddy Guy’s stinging guitar and earthy vocal, Junior’s tremulous harp and dark voice, and Otis Spann’s spot-on responsive fills on the 88s. That Theresa’s was a one-of-a-kind night spot is a point Junior and his buddies make with a vengeance. You’ll wish you had been there. **David McGee**

**Further Listening:** Junior Wells: *Hoodoo Man Blues*; *Live at Theresa’s 1975*

## Top Ten CD Reissues of 2015



Music       
Sonics

### Wes Montgomery: *In The Beginning*. Resonance (3 LPs or 2 CDs).

In 2012 Resonance Records released *Echoes of Indiana Avenue*, a spectacular collection of previously unheard Wes Montgomery recordings. Apparently doing the impossible once only whetted the label's appetite; they have followed up with a three-LP set that's just as rewarding musically and even more significant historically, as it includes most of Montgomery's very first recordings outside of Lionel Hampton's big band, in which he practically never soloed. These 1949 sides are R&B-oriented and somewhat dated, and some of the live recordings that make up the bulk of the set are a bit lo-fi, but the genius of Wes Montgomery far outweighs such minor distractions. The live material is mostly from Indianapolis clubs, and it prominently features Wes' brothers Buddy (piano) and Monk (bass) as well as the fine tenor player, Alonzo "Pookie" Johnson, all of whom were on hand when Wes' recording career really got going. The set also includes five tracks produced in 1955 by Quincy Jones for Epic but unissued (except one cut) until now. Production values could not be higher, from the beautiful vinyl to the accompanying booklet, complete with great photos and reminiscences from Buddy Montgomery, Quincy Jones, and others. An absolute must for jazz guitar fans. **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Wes Montgomery: *Full House*; *Beginnings*

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# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2015



**Duke Robillard Band: *Calling All Blues!*** Stony Plain (LP or CD).

Herein the rubber meets the road: a hefty 180-gram vinyl pressing that yields a sound so warm, rich, and full as to underscore why audio pros lament the rise of the MP3 and regard streaming with disdain. Moreover, the superior analog depth of this platter places the musicians front and center in your living room. Even better news: you'll dig this tight band having a ball romping, stomping, and grinding through eight Duke originals and two tasty covers. Of the many fine moments, pay special attention to the tempered wail of sturdy-voiced singer Sunny Crownover on "Blues Beyond the Call of Duty" while Duke complements her with anguished upper-neck solos on his Strat. On "Motor Trouble," a double-tracked, mordant Duke laments his aging auto's physical decline in a slow boogie arrangement spurred by the stinging, distorted Robillard guitar. Behind some nice honky-tonk flourishes from piano ace Bruce Bears, the basic quartet delivers a strutting blues on "I'm Gonna Quit My Baby," complete with a loosey-goosey slide solo Duke fashioned while his broken hand was still in a splint. Nice variety of blues styles here played hot but sensitively behind the personable vocals—another Robillard winner, in other words. **David McGee**

**Further Listening:** Duke Robillard Band: *Low Down and Tore Up*; Marcia Ball: *The Tattooed Lady and the Alligator Man*



**John Mayall: *A Special Life.*** Forty Below (CD or 2 LPs).

With a deep discography that includes some classic and influential blues albums, John Mayall could easily rest on his laurels, but *A Special Life* avoids late-career complacency. Assets includes a core band with solid players (guitarist Rocky Athas, bassist Greg Rzab, and drummer Jay Davenport), all of whom have some years with Mayall. Sonics on the recently-released vinyl copy that followed the CD by a few months are impressive, with special marks for clarity, balance, and separation. The session seems focused, with some less-than-obvious covers and, on some cuts, an old-school rhythm and blues/early rock 'n' roll feel that suggests Mayall may be feeling nostalgic about a part of his initial musical inspiration that we don't know as well. My reservations about *A Special Life* concern those moments when this relaxed session simply sounds uninspired. Some of Mayall's lyrics seem generic, and there are moments when the lyrics by other composers demand, emotionally, more than he delivers. Ultimately, however, what makes the record memorable is the opportunity to hear Mayall address such earlier masters as Albert King ("Floodin' In California"), Eddie Taylor ("Big Town Playboy"), Jimmy Rogers ("That's All Right"), and Jimmy McCracklin ("I Just Got to Know"). **Jeff Wilson**

**Further Listening:** John Mayall: *Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton*; *The Turning Point*

# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2015



**Joan Shelley: *Electric Ursa*. No Quarter.**

I first heard Joan Shelley performing duets with Daniel Martin Moore in a historic theater that acoustically was so vibrant some of the quietest music I've ever heard in a live setting spread softly around the room and gave the audience goose bumps. That evening they played very subdued Americana, and there are traces of that on *Electric Ursa*, along with a generous helping of downer folk suffused with lyrics that address love, loneliness, and yearning in a personalized and often enigmatic way. The ache in Shelley's voice feels real, and if the details remain elusive, that only makes the songs more intriguing. She has success in a full band setting—drummer Sean Johnson does an excellent job of laying a foundation, and Joe Manning excels at electric guitar fills that respond to vocal lines—and she also shines in the pared-down all-acoustic settings. Except for a couple recordings that have a demo tape quality sonics are good, with an open soundscape, drums you feel as well as hear, and vocals that, somewhat recessed, invite (and reward) close listening. Her first No Quarter release, *Electric Ursa* should draw a crowd in its own understated way. **Jeff Wilson**

**Further Listening:** Daniel Martin Moore & Joan Shelley: *Farthest Field*



**Doug MacLeod: *Exactly Like This*. Reference.**

Live-in-the-studio audiophile recordings aren't a guaranteed success. Sometimes those meticulously documented performances with perfect microphone placement lack one essential thing: that sense of being in the moment that musicians lose when they know that if they don't get it right their flaws will be revealed in the same vivid detail as the rest of the recording. Fortunately on *Exactly Like This* blues guitarist, singer, and songwriter Doug MacLeod seems as animated and inspired as he would be if he were playing to a live audience. You especially notice this on "Ain't It Rough" and "Seriously Doin' Woman," where his storytelling before and between verses convincingly gives the impression of a concert performance. And it doesn't hurt that the sound is amazingly lifelike on this 24-bit HDCD release engineered by "Prof." Johnson that effectively captures the timbre of five different National Resonator guitars and (on some cuts) pianist Mike Thompson, bassist Denny Croy, and drummer Jimi Bott; a showcase for Bott, the instrumental "Ridge Runner" is both a musical and sonic highlight. It's not all fun and games either, as the more pared-down performances bring out MacLeod's plaintive side ("Find Your Right Mind," "New Morning Road," "Heaven's The Only Place"). **Jeff Wilson**

**Further Listening:** Doug MacLeod: *There's a Time*; *Brand New Eyes*



# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2015

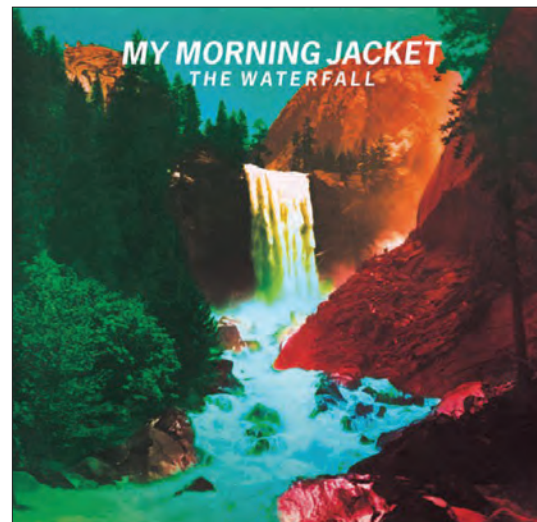


**The Church: *Further/Deeper*.** Unorthodox (CD or 2 LPs).

When *Starfish* was released in 1988, the Church quickly transformed from an obscure neo-psych band to a college-rock favorite. The two-guitar four-piece never sold that many records again, but they've stayed busy, the only significant break occurring between 2009's *Untitled No. 23* and this year's American release of *Further/Deeper*. As with *Starfish*, the music here features shimmering guitar work and thick atmospherics, some songs concise and catchy and others more epic in nature. However, the sound on *Further/Deeper* is so layered and reverb-drenched that it can be distracting, at times nearly concealing the solid songcraft that often distinguishes the Church from other space-rockers. An almost disarming sweetness describes passages from "Pride Before A Fall," "Laurel Canyon," and "Old Coast Road," but the Church can masterfully switch moods from sunny to sinister, particularly when they break into one of those long instrumental passages at which they excel. On "Love Philtre," "Lightning White" and the vinyl-only "The Girl Is Buoyant," an ominous tone surfaces within the first few bars, and the Church still has a knack for making the dark side seem seductive. "Miami" is the perfect closer, its superb extended instrumental outro proving that, 35 years into it, the Church remain vital. **Jeff Wilson**



**Further Listening:** The Church: *Heyday*; *Priest=Aura*



**My Morning Jacket: *The Waterfall*.** ATO (180-gram LP).

On its first album in four years, My Morning Jacket continues to explore different genres, jumping from alt-rock to folk to soul to pop. In the past, the Kentucky band has recorded in a grain silo and a church gym to provide frontman Jim James with heavy vocal reverb. *The Waterfall* sessions found the singer laying flat on a couch while recovering from back surgery. The opening track, "Believe (Nobody Knows)," bristles with an 80s prog-rock feel. That retro approach is used most effectively on "In Its Infancy (The Waterfall)," with its 70s keyboard tones and sonic wash of multi-tracked vocal harmonies. The fingerstyle guitar arrangement of the navel-gazing ballad "Like a River" is a cool draught for fans of James' acoustic side projects. The 180-gram vinyl edition includes a download code for four bonus tracks: the solo acoustic "Hillside Song," the loping soul of "I Can't Wait," the Lloyd Cole styling of "Compound Fracture (Miami Jungle Version)," and the stripped-down demo of a soul ballad that closes the album, "Only Memories Remain." *The Waterfall* is beautifully engineered and seductive, even if it's hard to shake the feeling that James may have been laying down on the job. **Greg Cahill**



**Further Listening:** Jim James: *Regions of Light and Sound of God*

# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2015



**Dexter Gordon: *Soy Califa: Live From Magleås Højskole*. Gearbox (200-gram LP).**

As the informative liner notes point out, the years Dexter Gordon spent in Copenhagen (1962-74) saw him achieve his full artistic stature. And while we might wish that we had many more 1950s recordings by the tenor saxophonist, we can be thankful that the period of his Danish sojourn was so well documented. During the year of this recording (1967), for instance, he was also captured on another four occasions live at the Montmartre in Copenhagen. Still, no one should complain about having more prime Dexter, especially when the music is as well-produced and packaged as this record. He sounds like he is having a ball here on three tunes he loved to blow: the title track, *Blues Up and Down*, and *The Shadow of Your Smile*. He is joined by fellow expatriates Kenny Drew and Albert “Tootie” Heath on piano and drums, and the 21-year-old Danish monster bassist, Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen (already a veteran who had appeared on dozens of recordings). Sound quality is good, though the drums are a bit too loud on the fast numbers, a common problem with live recordings of this era. The bass comes through loud and clear, anyway. Definitely a nice addition for Gordon fans.

**Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Dexter Gordon: *A Swingin' Affair*; *Gettin' Around*



**Frank Lowe: *Out Loud*. Triple Point (2 LPs).**

Frank Lowe hit the free jazz scene in 1973 with the explosive *Black Beings*, and immediately established himself as one of the most committed tenor saxophonists who followed in the wake of John Coltrane and his acolytes, Pharoah Sanders, Albert Ayler, and Archie Shepp. But Lowe was also influenced by other things, from the soul music he grew up hearing firsthand in Memphis to the restless explorations of the Art Ensemble and other Chicago-based innovators. The first of the two discs in this lavishly-packaged set is a studio recording that Lowe sent producer Alan Bates for consideration for an Arista/Freedom release, but Bates instead preferred to produce a new Lowe record, *Fresh*. It's a mystery why this stunning music was never picked up by another label, though. On both this session and the live Studio Rivbea date that makes up the second LP, Lowe is joined by trombonist Joseph Bowie, bassist William Parker, and drummer Steve Reid. Trumpeter Ahmed Abdullah sits in on one long performance. This is free jazz at its undiluted best, depending almost entirely on the players' ability to create collectively on the fly. The wonder is that the music flies so high, without ever losing its deeply-rooted earthiness. **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Frank Lowe: *The Flam*; *Decision In Paradise*



# Top Ten New Vinyl Releases of 2015

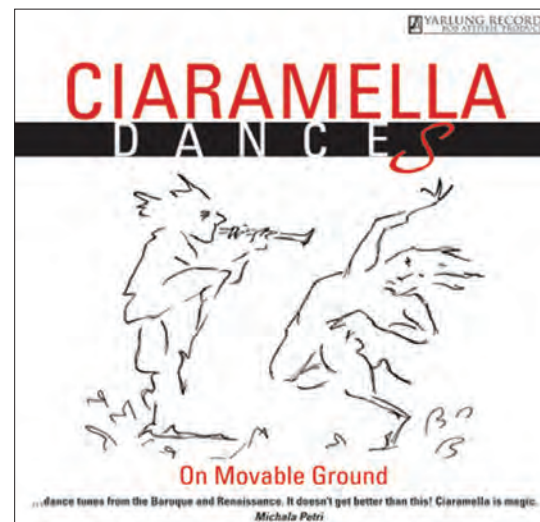


**Sufjan Stevens: *Carrie & Lowell*.** Asthmatic Kitty.

On a first listening Sufjan Stevens' new album sounds like a series of Spartan, indistinguishable songs. The elaborate production that's characterized his recent work is strikingly absent. Missing too are the classical techniques of polyphony and counterpoint that Stevens, like no other songwriter working today, typically weaves into his musical fabric. Meanwhile, the album's lyrics initially seem a grim, overly-personal catalog of the grief, confusion, and recklessness that afflicted Stevens after his mother's passing. But listen further. Before long, each song reveals not only a unique identity, but an absolutely beautiful melodic underpinning. Melodies this strong need no thematic elaboration. Similarly, the sparse instrumentation—most tracks are simple vocals backed by multiple acoustic guitars—turn out to suit the music perfectly, as does the pure, uncluttered recording. In both cases, anything more would be counter-productive. And while the subject matter is unavoidably dark, what ultimately comes through is an enormous, wistful love: for the past, for a soul, and for life itself. Despite being more self-effacing than any Sufjan Stevens album since *Seven Swans*, *Carrie and Lowell* is one of the artist's most satisfying works. Given such towering past achievements as *Illinois*, that's saying a lot.

**Alan Taffel**

**Further Listening:** Sufjan Stevens: *Seven Swans*; Neil Young: *Live at Massey Hall*



***Dances on Movable Ground*.** Ciaramella. Yarlung (45rpm LP).

Yarlung hits a home run! This is its first 45rpm release, and Bernie Grundman cut the lacquers directly from the tape. The sound is clear and warm, intimate, and not too wide. The instruments are recorders, dulcian (a Renaissance double reed instrument), viola da gamba, guitar, theorbo, harpsichord, and percussion. "Grounds are the repeated chord progressions and melodies that lie at the heart of Renaissance and Baroque dances," say the liner notes; the fact that Ciaramella is based in earthquake-prone California makes "movable ground" a pun as delightful as the lively music here. The first two tracks, by Gaspar Sanz and Andrea Falconieri, are from the late Renaissance and are heavily Spanish-flavored. In the Sanz, in fact, the Arabian influence is as prevalent as the Spanish. Adam Knight Gilbert, one of Ciaramella's directors, contributes "The Fisher and Fox," a whirling English-style dance that sounds straight out of the 1500s. Falconieri's "L'Eroica" is a wild three-parter, and the version of "Greensleeves" is a world away from the soggy, sulky versions you normally hear. Ciaramella's intonation can be a little...er...rustic, and the LP is too short—the CD version has 20 dances on it. I wish Yarlung had released this as a two-LP set, but I'm still thankful for it.

**Stephen Estep**

**Further Listening:** *Ensaladas* (Hesperion XX, Savall/Astrée Auvidis)



# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2015



**Jeff Buckley: Grace.** ORG (two 180-gram 45rpm LPs).

It's difficult to believe that *Grace* is now 20 years old. It's even more difficult to fathom that Jeff Buckley died just a few years after recording his one and only finished studio effort, and a masterpiece at that. From self-penned originals such as "Mojo Pin," "Eternal Life," the title track, and "Lover, You Should've Come Over," to covers ranging from Buckley's now famous take on Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," "Lilac Wine," and Benjamin Britten's "Corpus Christi Carol," popular music doesn't get any more original than this. Mastered by Bernie Grundman from the original master tapes, ORG's 45rpm edition is the one Buckley fans have been waiting for. The sonics herein trounce every other release I've heard, to a degree that often leaves me slack-jawed with amazement. Buckley's music covered an unusually wide dynamic spectrum for pop, and that's but one of the many revelations offered by this set. Others include a great feeling for the studio's ambient space, a remarkable degree of minute detail to Buckley's vocals, phrasing, and finger picking, plus a complex layering of texture and explosive bottom end heretofore unheard. Given the genius of Buckley's music and the stunning sound of this release, this set earns my highest possible recommendation.

Wayne Garcia

**Further Listening:** Jeff Buckley: *Live at Sin-é*; Nina Simone: *After Hours*

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# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2015



## Oscar Peterson: *Exclusively For My Friends*. Edel/MPS (6 CDs/LPs).

This extraordinary six-CD boxed set (also available as a six-LP 180-gram virgin vinyl set) documents what the late piano virtuoso Oscar Peterson regarded as his favorite recordings and what cognoscenti asserted were his very best. Recorded before a small group of admirers in the living room of Peterson's friend, German audio engineer and amateur pianist Hans Georg Brunner-Schwer, these private performances have a remarkably warm and intimate sound while showcasing the sheer command and dazzling facility of Canada's greatest jazz star, who was called "Maharaja of the keyboard" by no less than Duke Ellington. These house concerts took place between 1963 and 1968 at Brunner-Schwer's villa in the Black Forest. They were initially released in 1968 on the Musik Produktion Schwarzwald (MPS) label (that acronym

has also been referred to, among audiophiles, as "Most Perfect Sound") and are now part of a massive reissue campaign by the legendary German label.

The first volume, *Action*, features the great pianist with his classic trio that includes the relaxed, hand-in-glove rhythm tandem of bassist Ray Brown and drummer Ed Thigpen. They kick off this house concert with a vibrant, reharmonized take on "At Long Last Love," underscored by Thigpen's trademark brushwork. Brown's resounding woody upright tone comes to the fore on Billy Taylor's "Easy Walker," which offers a quintessential example of the bassist's formidable walking groove. On "Tin Tin Deo," the Gil Fuller-Chano Pozo tune that Dizzy Gillespie's band popularized during the late 40s and early 50s, you can hear every nuance of Thigpen's drumming as he affects an Afro-Cuban percussion section with his intricate polyrhythms on cowbell and drum kit. Gershwin's "A Foggy Day," again underscored by Thigpen's signature brushwork which earned him the nickname "Mr. Taste," begins at a pleasant mid-tempo gait. Soon enough, though, Peterson doubles the tempo while nonchalantly tossing off the kind of dazzling right-hand runs that led listeners to regard him as the heir apparent to the immortal Art Tatum. *Action* concludes with the trio's 11-minute version of Jimmy Van Heusen's "Like Someone in Love," which is taken at a luxurious tempo and has Peterson playfully quoting from such nuggets as "Centerpiece," "Moonlight Becomes You," and "Sonny Boy" along the way while also featuring an extended, outstanding bass solo from Brown.

Consisting of sessions recorded between 1965 to 1967, *Girl Talk* alternates between two rhythm sections, one with bassist Sam Brown and drummer Louis Hayes, the other pairing Brown with Bobby

Durham. Brown gives more examples of his contrapuntal brilliance and indelible groove on renditions of "On a Clear Day" and Illinois Jacquet's "Robbin' Nest." The trio with Jones and Durham offers a daring 17-minute extrapolation on "I'm In the Mood for Love," which opens with an imaginative five-minute piano intro by Peterson, who later blazes on more Tatumesque runs and some two-handed parallel runs inspired by Erroll Garner.

*The Way I Really Play* is strictly Peterson with Jones and Durham on Ray Brown's "Waltzing Is Hip" as well as such nuggets as Duke Ellington's "Satin Doll," which starts off in relaxed mode before building to a dizzying crescendo, the delicate waltz-time "Alice in Wonderland," and the jazz standard "Our Love Is Here to Stay." Peterson contributes two originals in this set, his "Sandy's Blues" (named for his wife) and his knuckle-busting "Noreen's Nocturne," which opens as a refined, classically-influenced number before escalating to a sizzling uptempo showcase for his peerless chops.

Peterson's first full record of unaccompanied piano pieces, *My Favorite Instrument* is also the only disc in the collection with no audience present. In his remarkable reinvention of "Someone to Watch Over Me," the pianist gets into some jaunty stride playing, at one point alluding to Fats Waller's "Ain't Misbehavin'." His frantic take on "Perdido" is an astounding showcase of shifting tempos, torrents of Tatumesque runs, and stride passages. It's as if his mind is flying faster than his hands as he flawlessly leaps from one brilliant idea to the next. This disc includes beautifully orchestrated renditions of "Body and Soul" and Anthony Newley's "Who Can I Turn To?" as well as intimate balladic versions of "I Should Care" and "Little Girl Blue." Peterson renders "Lulu's Back in Town" in bold, Tatumesque strokes

while also alluding to Fats Waller's stride work, and he closes the collection with a rousing rendition of the Strayhorn classic "Take the A Train" that is full of two-handed bravado.

Sam Jones and Bobby Durham return for *Mellow Mood*, which includes scintillating versions of Ellington's "In a Mellow Tone," Horace Silver's minor key and Latin-tinged "Nica's Dream," and Bronislaw Kaper's "On Green Dolphin Street." Peterson makes no apologies for his abundant virtuosity on these and other tracks, including his blazing take on "Who Can I Turn To?" and his bluesy "Summertime," in which his stream of double-timed lines pour forth as easily as breathing. Peterson's inherent bluesiness also comes to the fore on the trio's rendition of the Swing-era staple "Sometimes I'm Happy," which has the piano virtuoso tossing off a quote from Louis Armstrong's "The Gypsy" in the middle of his two-handed fusillades.

The gospel-flavored title track that opens *Travelin' On* is played at such a burning tempo as to be superhuman. Peterson's jaw-dropping break here is as astounding as Charlie Parker's famous alto break on his classic Dial recording of Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia." Even on Jobim's restful bossa nova, "Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars," Peterson offers scintillating filigrees on the keyboard. It's as if he can't sit still; he must double-time! The trio gets through the head on Francis Boland's uptempo blues "Sax No End," and then it's off to the races. On the other end of the dynamic spectrum, they turn in a gently reharmonized rendition of Johnny Mandel's ballad "Emily" and a subdued "When Lights Are Low."

Bill Milkowski

**Further Listening:** Oscar Peterson: *The Trio*; *The Sound of the Trio*

# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2015



**The Grateful Dead: *American Beauty*.** Mobile Fidelity (two 45rpm LPs).

My original vinyl pressing of *American Beauty* sounds really good. The sound is warm and realistic while clearly capturing the sinuous bass lines of Phil Lesh. That copy has served me well, and no reissue could make me think less of it, for reasons that are partly sentimental, but not solely. Yet listening to the new MoFi is also enjoyable. The sound is more expansive, the bass that much sturdier, and the acoustic guitars more forward; all of these things highlight the remarkable musicianship of a group spending considerably less time in the studio than in their pre-*Workingman's* days yet accomplishing much more. The most dramatic difference lies in the vocal harmonies, which sound fuller and have more punch. When richly layered harmonies burst out of the speakers during "Attics of My Life," I'd swear someone slipped a CSN album on my turntable—and then I remember who inspired the Dead to explore their vocal side in the first place. The more forward sound also invigorates less celebrated and seemingly low-key songs like "Box of Rain," "Brokedown Palace," "Candyman," and "Attics of My Life," as suddenly these "mellow Dead tunes" seem, from a closer range, more potent.

Jeff Wilson

**Further Listening:** Jerry Garcia: *Garcia*; Bob Weir: *Ace*



**Tony Bennett: *At Carnegie Hall*.** Analogue Productions (two 200-gram LPs).

Wow. That's about all I could muster when I first heard this stunning LP reissue. And yes, I plead a baffling ignorance to its existence, which makes me (and anyone else hearing them for the first time) especially lucky to finally discover these sides. Recorded on June 9, 1962, it showcases Tony Bennett in peak vocal form, elegantly accompanied by the Ralph Sharon Orchestra. As Sharon's liner notes explain, the evening represented a bold shift in Bennett's career, shifting from TV and nightclub slots to Carnegie Hall. The 28 songs unfold as naturally as breathing, and listing the more famous ones, such as "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," "April in Paris," "Blue Velvet," and "One for My Baby," in no way diminishes the brilliant program presented that night. The sound here, as mastered from the original 3-track masters by Ryan Smith at Sterling Sound, is as fabulous as the music. The balance between Bennett and the orchestra is near perfect, with a lively sense of air, space, and dynamic snap. The Columbia engineers captured Bennett's voice and the instruments with the relaxed naturalness they created on this stellar evening, with an immediacy that rather magically brings the entire concert home. Wayne Garcia

**Further Listening:** *The Tony Bennett/Bill Evans Album*; Frank Sinatra: *Live at the Sands*



# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2015



**Duke Ellington: *Masterpieces*.** Analogue Productions (180-gram LP).

On December 19, 1950, the Duke Ellington Orchestra recorded four songs in an abandoned church Columbia Records had recently converted into a studio. By that point recording sessions were old hat to Duke, and three of the four songs (“Mood Indigo,” “Sophisticated Lady,” “Solitude”) had been staples for over 15 years. Yet surely there was a buzz in the air, as *Masterpieces of Ellington* was Duke’s first-ever LP, a format that offered the orchestra an opportunity to stretch out considerably more than on 78s. Also, the musicians and the engineers must have jumped at the possibility of beginning to reflect what the orchestra sounded like in person—and the results are captured exquisitely in the Analogue Productions 180-gram vinyl reissue. Remastered by Ryan Smith at Sterling Sound from the original analog tapes, the record was plated and pressed at Quality Record Pressings. The depth and space when those rich chromatic harmonies create a wide and well-defined soundscape, the timbre of the orchestra as a whole as well as individual instruments, and the thick, wooden sound of Wendell Marshall’s bass are among the aural pleasures provided when you drop a needle on this platter; expect goose bumps. **Jeff Wilson**

**Further Listening:** Bill Berry: *For Duke*; Abdullah Ibrahim: *Duke’s Memories*

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# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2015



**Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble: *Texas Hurricane*.** Analogue Productions (Six 200-gram LPs).

One lazy afternoon in the spring of 1978 I received a call from Doc Pomus, the late, great songwriter who was like a second father to me. “Come down to the Lone Star tonight,” Doc said. “There’s a terrific blues and R&B singer in from Austin that I know you’ll love.” After a brief pause he added, “Her guitar player’s not bad either.”

At New York City’s fabled Lone Star Cafe on lower Fifth Avenue, the singer in question, a slim dynamo named Lou Ann Barton, fronted a band calling itself Double Trouble. Before she came on, her backing trio did a short opening set that left those in attendance slack-jawed and maybe in shock, thanks to the jolt supplied by a virtually unknown Stevie Ray Vaughan. For 20 minutes he fashioned inventive guitar solos betraying the influences of masters ranging from T-Bone Walker to Hubert Sumlin to Albert King to Lonnie Mack, with some Wes Montgomery octave chords thrown in for good measure, and also proved himself an affecting vocalist with an assured stage presence. When it was all over—and a deferential Stevie had come by the table to pay his respects to Doc—a bit of Pomus wisdom capped the night. “Lou Ann *should* be a star,” he observed as if it should be obvious to all, “but Stevie *will* be a star.”

A vivid reminder of that incredible Lone Star night crossed my desk recently in the form of Analogue Productions’ meticulously, sensitively crafted vinyl box set (bearing a hefty \$400 price tag) containing SRV’s five studio albums

and his first posthumous anthology (*The Sky Is Crying*, assembled by brother Jimmie Vaughan). On these 200-gram remastered vinyl discs tellingly sourced from the original 30 ips analog master tapes the crisp, sizzling sonics capture the heft of Double Trouble’s onstage assault, but now with even more pop and crunch, and, in the case of Reese Wynans’ keyboards, scintillatingly enhanced atmospherics.

It’s all here and potent as ever: from the debt Stevie repays to Texas blues, R&B, and traditional rock ‘n’ roll on his debut, *Texas Flood*; to the inventive stretching evident on *Couldn’t Stand The Weather* (check the jazz-flavored Charlie Christian-Kenny Burrell homage, “Stang’s Swang”); to the great leap forward on *Soul to Soul* (with a richer band sound, courtesy of Wynans and sax man Joe Sublett, plus Stevie’s first moving ballad, “Life Without Love”); to his maturing as a songwriter (“Crossfire” being one of his finest originals) and interpreter on *In Step*, his final studio album. Supplementing these LPs is *Family Style*, Stevie’s 1990 teaming with brother Jimmie, featuring bold displays of the fire and the tenderness common to the Vaughans’ art, as instrumentalists and as underrated vocalists. An often stirring overview of SRV’s stylistic range, the aforementioned *The Sky Is Crying* closes on a somber note with Stevie’s first recorded acoustic solo effort, “Life By the Drop.” Herein the newly sober artist reveals how precious he now viewed life and love. That this moment ends is as wrenching as it is haunting. Stevie Ray Vaughan belongs to the ages, but the ages have yet to catch up to him. Not bad at all, Doc. **David McGee**

**Further Listening:** Stevie Ray Vaughan: *In The Beginning*; Albert King w/Stevie Ray Vaughan: *In Session*



# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2015



**Keith Jarrett: *The Köln Concert*.** ECM (Two 180-gram LPs).

To commemorate the 40th anniversary of this landmark recording (the best-selling solo album in jazz history), ECM has released the double vinyl set in a 180-gram audiophile pressing. The sound is a revelation. Every note and nuance of Jarrett's amazing dynamic touch on the Bösendorfer baby grand fills the Köln Opera House with radiance. Four decades later, one still gets an emotional/nostalgic charge from the rhapsodic right-hand runs, the dramatic intervallic stabs and driving resolution of "Part I," the rolling, gospel-tinged flurries of "Part IIa," the somber introspection and mesmerizing folkloric vibe of "Part IIb," and the bittersweet, hymn-like "Part IIc" (by far the shortest and most memorable of the four sides). For those of us who came up in the late 60s/early 70s, this music is imprinted on our memory banks as deeply as *Sgt. Pepper's* or *Bitches Brew*. We've memorized every passage, odd yelp, passionate moan, or foot stomp by the theatrical enfant terrible. A time machine trip for some, this 40-year-old document may also hook a new generation. From rare delicacy to cathartic tension and release to giddy exuberance, *The Köln Concert* is still a feast for the ears.

**Bill Milkowski**

**Further Listening:** Keith Jarrett: *Facing You*; *Rio*

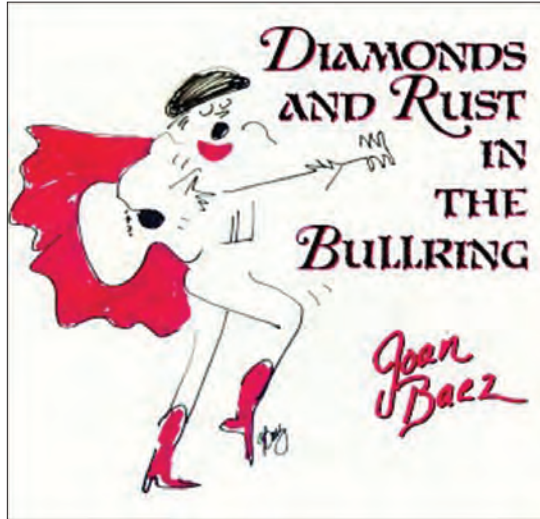


**Julie London: *Julie Is Her Name Volume Two*.** Analogue Productions (200-gram LP).

For admirers of London's 1955 release *Julie Is Her Name*, its successor *Volume Two* picks up where the original leaves off, with little more than the side breaks to distinguish them. The year is now 1958, but London's satiny voice is still as earthy and seductive. Husband Bobby Troup returns as producer with a mix of mid-tempo and ballads that run the gamut from "Blue Moon" to "Too Good to Be True" and "Little White Lies." Accompaniment is spare and muted, with Howard Roberts (guitar) and Red Mitchell (bass) framing every warm and sensuous syllable slipping from London's simmering lips. Sadly missing, however, are the astounding fills and flourishes of legendary jazz guitarist Barney Kessel featured on the first disc. Unlike London's initial release, this is a stereo recording that was mixed at what was then the world's only "transistorized recording studio" at Liberty Records. Its sonics have all the hallmarks of a much earlier day, including widely panned instruments, tape hiss, and occasional subsonic mike pop. A slightly additive treble prevails as well. Pressed at QRP, the surfaces are wonderful. But this album is all about London, a pitch perfect and understated talent who understood that less is more. **Neil Gader**

**Further Listening:** Julie London: *London by Night*; *Around Midnight*

# Top Ten Vinyl Reissues of 2015



**Joan Baez: *Diamonds and Rust in the Bullring*.** Analogue Productions.

Capturing a live concert is one of audio's most difficult balancing acts—like taking a snapshot from two perspectives simultaneously. A rare exception is this Analogue Productions release, which captures an impassioned performance with much-better-than-expected sonics. Baez recorded this LP in a bullring in Spain in 1988; eventually it was released on a modest label, but it never saw big sales. It features 12 songs, roughly half performed in English and half in Spanish, plus the folk favorite “Txoria Txori,” which Baez performs for the appreciative crowd in their native Catalan. Highlights include her performance of “Diamonds & Rust” as well as Leonard Cohen’s “Famous Blue Raincoat,” with tasteful piano, guitar, and cello accompaniment. A luminous version of “Sweet Chariot” begins a *cappella*, the audience supporting Baez in a gospel call and response. The Beatles’ “Let It Be” becomes a showstopper accompanied by gospel piano, organ, and the L.A. Mass Choir. Impeccably mastered from the original analog tape by Kevin Gray at Coherent Audio, the 200-gram vinyl was plated and pressed at Quality Record Pressings. This small treasure preserves the essence of what makes Baez such a beloved figure on the world stage.

Neil Gader

**Further Listening:** Joan Baez: *Diamonds & Rust*; Jennifer Warnes: *Famous Blue Raincoat*



**Stealers Wheel: *Ferguslie Park*.** Intervention (180-gram LP).

Stealers Wheels’ sophomore effort from 1973—produced by industry veterans Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller—features the Scottish band’s core members, Gerry Rafferty and Joe Egan, bolstered by nine ace session players. Stylistically, the album ranges from the bouncy R&B-inflected pop of “Good Businessman” to the feel-good anthem “Wheelin’” and the power pop of the Top 30 hit “Star.” The album also spawned the stunning “(Everyone’s Agreed That) Everything Will Turn Out Fine.” There are lush vocal harmonies, shades of lazy afternoon psychedelia, hints of Raspberries-era power balladry, and jazzy sax breaks that foreshadow Rafferty’s solo hit “Baker Street.” You might detect a Beatlesque sound—after all, the album shares former Fab Four orchestrator Richard Hewson. You also might hear an uncanny resemblance between “Who Cares?” and Sir Paul’s “Riding to Vanity Fair,” from 2005’s *Chaos and Creation in the Backyard*. This all-analog reissue of infectious lit pop, remastered from a pristine half-inch 30 ips safety copy of the original 15 ips stereo master, boasts striking sonics, with a deep and wide soundstage and tight, punchy drums and guitar. It’s part of the first batch of releases on Intervention, a new audiophile label devoted to first-ever vinyl reissues. Greg Cahill

**Further Listening:** *Stealers Wheel* (Intervention); Gerry Rafferty: *City to City*



# Top Ten Pop/Rock/Jazz Hi-Res Downloads of 2015

Alan Taffel

**The Band: *The Band*. SuperHiRez.com (192/24 and DSD); HDtracks (96/24 and 192/24)**

Of all the recently-released downloads, this, the second and best album by one of the greatest groups ever, was the one I was most anxious to get my hands on. The Band (the group) had it all: unrivaled musicianship on every instrument, songwriting that has stood the test of time, three terrific vocalists, and a charismatic ringleader in the form of writer-guitarist Robbie Robertson. *The Band* (the album) is a glorious mix of radio-friendly fare ("Rag Mama Rag"), soon-to-be classics ("The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," "Up on Cripple Creek"), and quirky Americana ("Jawbone"). Not every track will grab you at first, but in the end, each song reveals its brilliance.

The 1969, pre-Pro Tools recording is blessedly natural, downplayed in a way that ideally suits the low-key music. Indeed, the original CD is perfectly recommendable. It's nice and lively, with very little digital grit. Then there's the Gold Disc remastered by Steve Hoffman which, as is usually the case, is even better. On this version, it's easier to hear individual instruments and vocal character.

Both SuperHiRez.com and HDtracks have come out with multiple versions, so there's suddenly a lot of high-res Band out there. I started with the HDtracks 96/24 and found it both louder and brighter than the Gold CD. The pace was decidedly rushed. Some may prefer this version's more up-front and admittedly clearer presentation, but to me it sounds like someone tried to "modernize" the sound. I

say "Yuck" and "No thanks." HDtracks' 192/24 more closely resembles the 96/24 than the Gold CD, but it's a step in the right direction. Pace is more measured—though still not as relaxed as it should be—and there is enough less brightness to take the digital edge off. This version is acceptable, but still not ideal.

SHR also offers *The Band* in 192/24. I expected it and the HDtracks version at the same resolution to sound similar, if not identical, so I was mightily surprised at how much better the SHR acquitted itself. Here, the pace finally sounds unrushed, and there is real, unforced detail. At times, this version, too, can be a bit bright, but the compensation is a lode of musical and sonic info that's missing on any CD. Highly recommended.

SHR also very kindly offers a DSD version of this album. Guess what? It sounds almost exactly like the 192/24. I give the latter a very slight edge thanks to a touch more tonal fullness, but you can safely take your pick.

**John Lennon: *Imagine*. SuperHiRez.com (96/24); HDtracks (96/24)**

After John Lennon's first post-Beatles solo album, the blistering *Plastic Ono Band*, listeners in 1971 must have been surprised by the utopian, almost pastoral opening track of his follow up, *Imagine*. That track, of course, is "Imagine," one of Lennon's most affecting and enduring songs. The opener sets the mood for an album that is by turns heartfelt and playful. No primal scream therapy here!

Another difference between *Imagine* and *Plastic Ono Band* is that while the latter

was immensely effective as a whole, its individual songs were hardly singles material. In contrast, *Imagine* is filled with tracks that either were or should have been hits. That doesn't make it a better album, just a more approachable one.

Still, Lennon's essential message was unchanged. When Paul McCartney favorably reviewed *Imagine* (despite its infamous broadside, "How Do You Sleep?") because he found it "less political," Lennon chastised his former band-mate, arguing that the two albums were equally political. *Imagine*, he said, simply made the message more palatable.

Far from having faded with time, *Imagine* seems only to have benefited from age. "Jealous Guy," for example, reveals newfound layers of songwriting craft. The album's lyrics in general are cleverer than you may remember. And "How Do You Sleep?," while as bitter as always, cannot be heard today without the poignancy of knowing that McCartney and Lennon never had enough time to fully heal their friendship.

Despite Phil Spector's involvement, this is a lightly-produced project. The original CD's sound suits the pared-down spirit and doesn't have any serious flaws. In fact, the subsequent 2003 MFSL Gold Disc is inferior, with a tipped-up treble, less substantial bass, and a more *digital* sound. The price of these now out-of-print Gold Discs are creeping up, so I hope I just saved you some money.

Turn instead to the 2000 release, for which Yoko Ono personally oversaw the remastering. She did a good job. Her version sounds even

sparer than the original, which has the counter-intuitive effect of a more organic whole. Each element speaks more clearly, but never shouts, which allows the album to weave a more intricate tapestry. Timing is also distinctly steadier. In some cases, Ono's sense of restraint goes too far, such as on "Crippled Inside," where Lennon's voice is overly recessed. Overall, though, this is a sensitive and sonically-satisfying version. (Yet another remastered version was released in 2010, but I did not have this one on hand.)

The HDtracks and SuperHiRez.com 96/24 downloads were both apparently taken from the Ono release. (SHR states this explicitly, but HDtracks is mum on the subject.) They certainly sound very similar to it—and to each other. Because of these similarities, I'll make the breakdown of their sonics brief. The 44.1 version is tonally a little pale compared to the downloads. Surprisingly, though, Lennon's voice comes through here with the greatest purity of all these versions. The SHR download is nicely fleshed out compared to the CD, at the cost of a very slight edge to Lennon's voice. HDtracks' version is almost indiscernible from the SHR, but I hear just a tad more of that edginess in Lennon's voice.

In sum, this is an album you should definitely own. It has stood the test of—and even grown with—time. Given that there are tradeoffs between the Yoko Ono-remastered CD and the downloads, if you own the former you would be within your rights to stand pat. If not, I would recommend the SHR download.

# Top Ten Pop/Rock/Jazz Hi-Res Downloads of 2015

Alan Taffel

## Chicago: *Chicago Transit Authority*. HDtracks (96/24, 192/24)

*Chicago Transit Authority* arrived in 1969, but the band was already clearly a child of the 70s. For all its 60s-esque experimentation—in this case with brass as an adjunct to standard rock instrumentation—the group had a propensity for slickness and long-form songs that characterized (too) many a 70s band. Similarly, while it is tempting to think of Chicago as a jazz-rock ensemble in the mold of Blood, Sweat and Tears, the truth is that the two groups approached their big band sound from opposite directions—BS&T from a jazz sensibility, Chicago from that of pure rock.

Which is not a bad thing. Chicago may not offer David Clayton-Thomas' soulful crooning, but every track on *CTA*, the group's first and purest album, is fueled by Terry Kath's rip-snorting electric guitar. In those days, his playing was often compared to that of Jimi Hendrix—even by Hendrix himself. Kath cuts loose on the unstructured "Poem 58," but even radio-friendly hits like "Questions 67 and 68" have him exploring the fretboard at dizzying speeds.

Those hits hold up better than most of the long-form pieces, which today come across as self-indulgent noodlings (just like those of other 70s stalwarts like Yes and Rush). The one exception is "Beginnings," for my money the best song Chicago ever recorded. The track not only captivates sonically and emotionally, it best succeeds at Chicago's stated goal of using horns as an independent melodic "voice."

In 2002 *CTA* was given the Rhino remastering treatment. Unfortunately, that didn't save it

from sounding bright and spitty. The HDtracks downloads sound completely different. For one thing, Terry Kath's guitar is more prominent—a distinct plus. But the main difference is in the treble region, and here the results are mixed. The downloads blessedly tame the Rhino CD's obnoxious brightness, making them far more listenable. Unfortunately, they veer so far in this direction that they end up sounding dull, not to mention dynamically lifeless.

I will say that the 192/24 version is clearly the better of the two. The higher-res option has spunkier rhythms, tauter bass, and a more realistic tonal balance. I also have a slight preference for this download over the Rhino CD, primarily due to its superior rhythmic drive and lack of harshness. Sadly, neither option is fully satisfying.

## Supertramp: *Crime of the Century*. SuperHiRez.com (192/24); HDtracks (192/24)

Upon its release in 1974, *Crime of the Century* was hailed as a bona fide audiophile recording. Guess what? It still is. My CD, the 2002 remastering, yields solid bass, stellar dynamics, and clean instruments and vocals. Listening to it now reminds me that Supertramp excelled not only in catchy tunes but also in diverse instrumentation, often combined in surprising ways.

The songs run longish, in the 70s mien, but they are *composed* that way. Most of them work well, moving seamlessly through multiple themes, instrumental configurations, and even time and key signatures. Despite lyrics that manage to be voluble without saying much, the musical creativity, combined with highly sing-

able melodies, is captivating. Guilty or not, listening to Supertramp today is a pleasure.

As agreeable as the 2002 CD is, the new HDtracks and SHR downloads kill it. Their sound is bigger and ballsier, yet smoother and airier. These commonalities aside, the two files do not sound exactly the same; the HDtracks download is clearly superior. The differences may seem small—note decays, image focus, background quiet—but they add up. Highly recommended.

## George Harrison: *All Things Must Pass*. HDtracks (96/24); SuperHiRez.com (96/24)

George Harrison's first post-Beatles album, *All Things Must Pass*, was an emancipation. The pent-up songs came not in a flow but in a gush. Surprisingly, aside from the "Original Jam" that occupied the third LP of the original vinyl release, there was little filler. Indeed, while the album's appeal initially centered around "My Sweet Lord" and "Isn't It a Pity," today it is clear—and somewhat surprising to realize—that 14 of the other 15 songs are nearly as good. The album opens with the sublime "I'd Have You Anytime," immeasurably enhanced by Eric Clapton's exquisite touch on the guitar fills, and rarely flags from there.

As for the sound, *All Things Must Pass* was a victim of producer Phil Spector's "wall of sound" treatment, which in this case often devolved into a wall of noise. The 2001 "30th Anniversary Edition" CD's listenability proves inversely proportional to how much is going on in the arrangement. Simpler tracks come through beautifully, if a bit pale tonally; but

when there's a lot going on, as on "Wah Wah," the sound quickly becomes unbearable.

So it's a welcome development that both HDtracks and SuperHiRez.com have released 96/24 versions of the album. Of course, the downloads can't do anything about the bloated arrangements and generally hollow sound, but they do admirably address the noise issue. It's like the music has taken a nice hot bath, emerging the same but minus the grime. Even "Wah Wah" becomes tolerable.

The two files sound the same, so choose your favorite download purveyor and waste no time rediscovering this enduring masterpiece.

## Blind Faith. HDtracks.com (96/24 and 192/24); SuperHiRez.com (96/24 and 192/24)

Most "supergroups" never live up to expectations. Sure, the personnel are great, but the players haven't had the years on the road that enable regular bands to gel. Also, outsized egos have been known to be present. As a result, supergroup albums tend to be a mishmash of turn-taking with respect to compositional, solos, and vocal chores. Not surprisingly, these projects are typically one-time affairs.

Blind Faith is, by and large, an exception. True, the group had only album, the eponymous *Blind Faith*. But that album has shown a lot more staying power than, say, *Little Village*. Indeed, if you're looking to buy *Blind Faith* you'll find yourself confronted with a surfeit of options. In the digital domain alone, there are multiple remasters, a "Deluxe" version, and an MFSL gold disc. Obviously, this doesn't happen



# Top Ten Pop/Rock/Jazz Hi-Res Downloads of 2015

Alan Taffel

for moribund albums.

Several factors make *Blind Faith* a standout. First, the album contains one certified classic track: Steve Winwood's "Can't Find My Way Home"—as beautiful and compelling now as when it came out in 1969. The rest of the tracks aren't dogs, either, and Steve Winwood's vocals are *always* worth listening to. Clapton, meanwhile, provides the tasty guitar licks and solos. The superb rhythm section consisted of Cream's Ginger Baker on drums and Family's Ric Grech on bass. (Grech later joined Winwood to form Traffic.)

Yet perhaps the factor most responsible for *Blind Faith*'s longevity is its cooperative vibe. This clearly isn't a vanity project; there isn't a whiff of pretension or showboating. Instead, the artists devote themselves to bringing out the best in the songs themselves. Nor is this a particularly "hard" rock album; plenty of songs are largely acoustic, and the arrangements are relatively spare. This lends the album an approachable quality that over time has served it well.

Now the digital cup overfloweth even more, with 96/24 and 192/24 versions of *Blind Faith* from both HDtracks.com and SuperHiRez.com. Heretofore, I have been rather pleased with the MFSL CD, which is both clear and warm. The rhythms are crisp and dynamics are all you could ask for. This version sounds, in a word, analog. Meanwhile, the original CD is brighter and edgier, while 1975's "Deluxe Edition" is mastered at a higher level, which of course only serves to flatten dynamics. A 2001 release is available on Amazon for about six bucks, but

it too is overly bright and loud in the name of some fallacious version of "clarity."

So let us turn to the downloads. From the first note of the HDtracks 96/24 download I knew it was a winner. It retains the analog warmth of the MFSL disc and adds just a dollop more drive and resolution. The grunge in the guitars comes out more clearly, as do Ginger Baker's percussive touches. I expected the SHR equivalent to be identical, but for some reason it sounds more polite and closed.

In the 192/24 domain, the roles reverse. At this resolution, I have a distinct preference for the SHR version. The HDtracks is rhythmically reticent, which makes it inferior to the site's own 96/24 file. So which is the champ—the SHR 192/24 or the HDtracks 96/24? You can't go wrong with either choice, but after a good deal of back and forth I concluded that I would rather own the HDtracks 96/24. It's a hair lighter tonally, but that ends up working in its favor, as it's easier to hear what each player is doing. And with players like these, you don't want to miss a thing.

**Jackson Browne: *Standing in the Breach*.  
HDtracks.com and SuperHiRez.com. (96/24,  
192/24)**

Jackson Browne is a marvel of nature. At 16, he was writing songs with a sagacity far beyond his years ("These days I seem to think a lot/ About the things that I forgot to do"). Now here he is, at 66, writing with the passion of a freshman. Throughout that span, Browne's voice—in both the physical and poetic senses—has barely changed. Listening to his latest,

*Standing in the Breach*, you'd never know you were listening to an older Browne.

Browne's latest blessedly avoids the pretension and preaching that have characterized too much of his work since *Running on Empty*. That's not to say there isn't some overtly political material on the new album. When you hear Browne sing, "Take the money out of politics and maybe we might see/This country turn back into something more like democracy," you know he hasn't changed his stripes. The difference here is that Browne doesn't take himself so seriously that he can't poke fun at his own railings. On "Leaving Winslow," for instance, he jests: "I keep on hearing 'bout the disappearing ozone layer/I keep on hearing 'bout the disappearing Greenland Shelf/I keep hearing all about the disappearing middle class/I figure I'll be doing some disappearing myself." In another break with the past, the words here are unfailingly optimistic.

Complementing the typically beautifully-crafted lyrics is a full set of memorable melodies, with arrangements that do them justice. Unfortunately, David Lindley, the incomparable slide guitar whizz and frequent Browne collaborator, is not part of the proceedings. Yet the musicians on hand give the music the verve or sentiment each song requires.

The CD, while sporting a nice warm tonal balance, seems to get congested even on uncomplicated tracks. The HDtracks 96/24 download dispenses with that problem, giving every part its own space and making each

player easier to hear. Stepping up to 192/24 doesn't yield any detectable advantage. In fact, there's better depth on the 96/24 version.

For some reason, the SuperHiRez downloads are markedly superior to those from HDtracks. There's less mid-bass, which is a tad too ripe on the HDtracks files, and that lets instruments speak more clearly still. The soundstage is also notably wider. The SHR 192/24 subtly improves upon the 96/24, primarily in the purity of Browne's voice and air around the acoustic guitars. In sum, either SHR version is highly recommended for sound and music.

**Paul Simon: *There Goes Rhymin' Simon*.  
HDtracks.com and SuperHiRez.com (96/24)**

Simon fully redeemed himself the very next year with this release. The album kicks off with "Kodachrome," and continues with one terrific song after another—"Tenderness," "Something So Right," and "Loves Me Like a Rock," to name a few. The highlight is "American Tune," which, in its troubled depiction of a country going astray, has lost none of its resonance in the intervening decades.

The arrangements are also superior to those on the first solo outing. Simon is credited as the album's producer, but he had lots of help on various tracks from Phil Ramone, Roy Halee, Allen Toussaint, the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, and even Quincy Jones. It all works seamlessly.

Unfortunately, for all its musical progress, *Rhymin' Simon* was a sonic step backward. The 2004 CD is dynamically squashed and tonally pale, while flaccid in the bass. The SHR

# Top Ten Pop/Rock/Jazz Hi-Res Downloads of 2015

Alan Taffel

version doesn't improve significantly on the remastered CD, but the HDtracks download certainly does. Tighter imaging, modestly-improved dynamics, and instruments brought out of the shadows give these tracks added presence and emotional impact.

## **Woodstock. HDtracks and Super-HiRez.com. (96/24 and 192/24)**

When I listen to the seminal *Woodstock* concert soundtrack, I never think, "What a great recording!" That's because the original CD and LP were a whole lotta grunge, with stellar music doing its best to seep through. In 2009, Rhino took a stab at cleaning things up, and was partially successful. Yet in some ways the remastering only made the album's various distortions more obvious. Now SHR and HDtracks are taking their turn at it, each offering a hi-res and higher-res version of the album, and one of these releases is nothing short of a revelation.

I'm going to skip a detailed analysis of the CD's sound. You need not bother with either the original or the Rhino remaster. Likewise, I will spend zero time on the 96/24 versions from either online source. I don't recommend either one, not because they're bad, but when there is another option so patently, adamantly, definitively superior, I can only recommend going straight for it.

That would be the HDtracks 192/24 download. Suddenly vocals are startlingly immediate, even intimate. From John Sebastian to Joan Baez to Arlo Guthrie to a youthful Crosby, Stills and Nash, singers come across without filtration—

of either the electronic or emotional variety.

I'm highlighting these folk-oriented artists because, with so many iconic amplified tracks (e.g., Jimi Hendrix's take on "The Star Spangled Banner"), it's easy to forget that much of *Woodstock* is folk music. That means a lot of acoustic instruments that benefit mightily—and obviously—from this hi-res release. In other ways, though, so do Hendrix, Joe Cocker, Santana, the Who, et al. Mainly, they're a lot easier to listen to with the harsh highs tamed and a layer of glare excised. The sometimes extensive array of instruments is much easier to hear. Finally, as with all tracks, this download delivers a keen sense of a large, airy space.

I can't explain why, but the HDtracks 192/24 download is clearly superior to its SHR counterpart. Good as it is, the SHR version lacks the HDtracks' eye-popping transparency. Unlike the HDtracks version, SHR's 192/24 download never crosses that ephemeral threshold that causes the mind to say, "That's real."

Indeed, the only sonic compromises to be found on the HDtracks 192/24 file stem not from the recording or mastering process, but from the amplification technology of the time. Guitar amps were under-powered and drenched in distortion—not all of it intentional. Bass is universally fuzzy, as those amps were essentially clipping full time. And a 60Hz hum is more or less a constant companion to the music. These artifacts are rarely distracting, and in a way they bring the listener more completely into the scene.

## **Led Zeppelin: *Celebration Day*. HDtracks and SuperHiRez.com. (48/24)**

In 2007, Led Zeppelin staged a performance in honor of the late Ahmet Ertegun. The drummer that evening was Jason Bonham, who knew every one of his father's licks.

The concert, filmed and recorded at London's O2 Arena, was dubbed *Celebration Day* and given a brief theatrical release in 2012; that was quickly followed by two CDs bundled with a DVD or Blu-ray. To put it mildly, the evening went well. Rather than resting on their laurels, the band's members were intent on proving they still had the goods. With Jason Bonham dropping seamlessly into place, Jimmy Page exhibiting still amazing dexterity, Robert Plant singing with a little less rawness but no less fervor, and John Paul Jones providing able support on bass and keyboards, the concert was a triumph.

The available audio formats are the CD and, now, 48/24 downloads from SHR and HDtracks. The CD does an admirable job of capturing the power of the proceedings, although, this being an all-electric affair, it won't win any awards for naturalness. Both downloads are a hair less congested and more open than the CD. Plant's voice comes through a shade more clearly. In stepping up from the CD to the hi-res files, the difference is subtle, yet it is audible. If you are a Zep fan and don't have this album, consider it a must and go for either download. tas



# Top Ten Classical Hi-Res Downloads of 2015

Andrew Quint

## **Schubert: 11 Piano Sonatas. Daniel**

Barenboim, piano. HDtracks.com (96/24)

There is surely no musician on earth with less to prove than Daniel Barenboim. It's been 60 years since Wilhelm Furtwängler pronounced the 11-year-old pianist "a phenomenon" and Barenboim has been a highly regarded soloist, conductor, and chamber music collaborator since. The Argentina-born musician clearly remains at the top of his game, yet it's still rather amazing to find Barenboim applying himself in a Berlin studio to a substantial chunk of the core piano repertoire.

Barenboim has recorded all of Schubert's symphonies and many of that composer's short keyboard pieces but somehow never got around to the piano sonatas. The artist chose to record Schubert's 11 completed sonatas (about a dozen additional surviving works are unfinished), close to six hours of music captured in immediate but far-from-claustrophobic sound. Every one of these pieces is a masterpiece, at once expansive—the "heavenly lengths" frequently mentioned in regard to Schubert—and, at the same time, intimately communicative. Barenboim's technique isn't flashy—Schubert *shouldn't* be flashy—but is supremely controlled and confident. He savors the harmonic twists and turns of the finale of the Sonata in E Flat Major, D.568 and the composer's lyrical gifts are always appreciated, as with the opening Allegro moderato of the Sonata in A Major, D.664. A gentle sort of virtuosity makes an appearance in the last movement of the C Minor Sonata, D.958 and the Andante sostenuto of the Sonata in B Flat Major, D.960 manifests

a Mahlerian profundity. Barenboim is quoted in the liner notes: "All that we human beings are incapable of expressing without music is achieved by the Sonatas." He makes the case extremely well.

**Bach: *The Art of Fugue, BWV 1080.* Angela Hewitt, piano. (44/24)**

**Bruch: *Violin Concerto No. 3 in D Minor. Scottish Fantasy.* Jack Liebeck, violin; BBC Scottish SO, Martyn Brabbins, conductor. (96/24)**

**BOTH: Hyperion.com**

After 20 years of recording Bach for Hyperion, Angela Hewitt has at last arrived at the composer's final masterpiece, *The Art of Fugue*. Hewitt plays BWV 1080 on her beloved Fazioli piano, which serves her lyrical and coloristic approach to the music well. The soloist delivers the contrapuntal essence of each of the 21 pieces—there's a Glenn Gould-like drive to the faster movements—but the performance always sings with remarkable pellucidity. As she must, Hewitt breaks off the final fugue where Bach did and then ends the program, sublimely, with the chorale "Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit," the so-called "Deathbed Chorale" that Bach may or may not have dictated in his final moments. The 24-bit download sounds significantly better than the Red Book CD despite the same playback sampling frequency—more focus and a better sense of the room.

Max Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor is a top-ten item, a standard piece to introduce a young soloist and for an older

one to play hundreds of times to pay the bills. But the two other concertos that followed are, unaccountably, rarely heard—especially Concerto No. 3 in D Minor. Jack Liebeck's tone is sweet but not cloying, his intonation flawless, and his performance has a Brahmsian restraint that wears well. An equally satisfying reading of Bruch's familiar *Scottish Fantasy* completes the program, which has been captured in weighty, detailed, and tonally alluring sound.

**Greene: *Overtures.* Baroque Band, Clarke. (44.1/24)**

**Khachaturian & Prokofiev: *Piano Concertos.* Arghamanyan, Altinoglu, RSO Berlin. (96/24)**  
**BOTH: eClassical.com**

For most of us, Cedille Records' program will be the first exposure to the English composer Maurice Greene (1696-1753). Greene was a good friend and admirer of Handel and a fellow member of London's Academy of Ancient Music. After Greene promoted a plagiarized work for another AAM member, he had to break away from Handel and the society. Perhaps that's part of why Greene is so little known today—too bad, as his music has much of the energy and contrapuntal interest of Handel's. The program includes Six Overtures in Seven Parts, plus the Overture to an opera (*Phoebe*) and to an *Ode for St. Cecilia*. In addition, Cedille stalwart David Schrader performs ten Greene pieces for solo harpsichord. Sound is clear and balanced.

Aram Khachaturian's music is often perceived as far less advanced than that of Prokofiev and Shostakovich, but he suffered the same charges

of "formalism" from the Communist regime. Nearly two-thirds of available Khachaturian recordings are of music from his two popular ballets, *Spartacus* and *Gayane* (there are 126 recordings of the *Sabre Dance* from the latter alone), but the Violin and Piano Concertos give an idea of his ability with extended forms. Nareh Arghamanyan's glittering technique and interpretive intensity reveal the D-flat major Concerto's lean edginess. The soloist fills out her program with a taut, rhythmically pointed reading of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3. Pentatone's recording has good depth, imaging and detail. Be sure to listen for the ondes martenot in Khachaturian's haunting second movement.

***Cantate Domino.* Oscar's Motet Choir; Torsten Nilsson. (192/24, DXD, DSD, and DSD 2x) Prostudiomasters.com**

Recorded in 1976 by the Swedish label Proprius, *Cantate Domino* is quite clearly a Christmas album. But for nearly four decades, audiophiles have been happy to employ it as a reference yearlong. This exceptional recording variously features chorus, soprano soloist, organ, and brass ensemble. Timbral balance is even from organ fundamentals up to the Oscar Motet Choir's high female voices, Marianne Mellnäs' buttery but focused soprano is realistically scaled, and—most impressively—musical sounds connect seamlessly to the reverberant acoustic of the Stockholm church where the program was recorded with one Revox A77 and a pair of Pearl TC4 microphones. Included are hymns, carols, and a couple of lullabies; the

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title track, a setting of a psalm text for chorus, organ, trumpets, and trombones by Enrico Bossi, starts the program off magnificently. Two selections for organ alone are stylishly played by Alf Linder, including Johann Gottfried Walther's Concerto in A Major. A pair of *a cappella* "religious folksongs" is shaped gorgeously by Mellnäs. The only misstep is "White Christmas," a cheesy choral arrangement with roller rink organ accompaniment. Tell your computer or media server to skip that one.

René Laflamme of 2xHD remastered *Cantate Domino* and provides four high-resolution options: 192/24 PCM as wav files, DXD (352 kHz, also as wav files), DSD, and DSD 2x. All do justice to the analog original (which has already been well-served on SACD and by an 88/24 HDtracks download), but the finest is the DSD 2x version, which improves the most upon a slight tendency for the coarsening of choral textures heard with the 192/24 format.

**Gubaidulina: Chamber Music. Quatuor Molinari; Louise Bessette, piano.**  
[eClassical.com \(96/24\)](#)

It's ironic that Shostakovich, though he wrote in a fairly accessible style, was considered subversive by the authorities while Sofia Gubaidulina, among the most accomplished of the next generation of Soviet composers, was tolerated (if not exactly encouraged) even though her work was highly experimental. Gubaidulina had the good fortune to arrive on the scene at the outset of the cultural "thaw" that followed Stalin's death and has been a progressive musical voice since; now in her mid-

80s and living in Germany, she was producing new work as recently as 2013. Quatuor Molinari, a Canadian group specializing in 20th- and 21st-Century repertoire, performs well over two hours of Gubaidulina's intensely involving chamber music. The four single-movement string quartets each inhabit a different world in the way that Mahler symphonies do, even though they are cut from the same cloth. The works employ the full range of Gubaidulina's methodologies—aleatoric techniques, pre-recorded tape, novel means of producing sound with traditional instruments, serialism and other mathematical approaches—reflecting a deep spirituality without Messiaen's glittering, soothing surfaces. Other pieces include a string trio, *Reflections on the theme BACH* (written to complement *Art of Fugue's* final, incomplete movement), and *Rejoice!*, an endlessly inventive and engrossing duo sonata for violin and cello. The Piano Quintet, from 1957, was a student composition, very much in the spirit of Shostakovich's very fine piece for that instrumental combination. ATMA Classique's sound is detailed and texturally complex, revealing all the advanced string-playing techniques that the musicians so confidently employ. There's loads of air, and loud pizzicato notes nicely define the recording space.

**Sibelius: Symphonies Nos. 2 & 7. BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Søndergård.**  
[\(192/24\)](#)

**Mozart: Divertimenti. Scottish Chamber Orchestra Wind Soloists.** [\(192/24\)](#)

**BOTH: Linnrecords.com**

The Sibelius Symphony No. 2 is among the most

performed and recorded orchestral works of the 20th century; a new version that makes it seem fresh and vital is noteworthy. The Danish conductor Thomas Søndergård, still in his mid-40s, paces each movement masterfully. The agonized slow movement is riveting and the scherzo has a Mendelssohnian fleetness. When the tonality changes from minor to major at the end of the finale, in preparation for the closing brass apotheosis, it's as if the sun has come out from behind a cloud. Symphony No. 7, running just 20 minutes, is also grandly affirmative. Linn's recording—the dependable Philip Hobbs is responsible—is open and spacious, capturing all the conductor's nuanced dynamic gradations.

Mozart wrote a good deal of "occasional music"—that is, music for a specific event that wasn't a concert. His serenades and divertimenti are especially treasurable examples, intended for a party. Wind instruments were used prominently, sometimes exclusively, as with this program from six superb players of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. They play with flawless blend and intonation, phrasing together like a single performer. Despite pretty much the same sonority for over an hour, such elegance prevents any impression of monotony. The recording is immediate: we hear the intake of breaths, the clacking of keys, the buzzing of reeds. Wonderful.

**Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition. Schumann: Fantasie, Op. 17. Paul Lewis,**  
**piano.**

**Hindemith: Sonatas for... Alexander Melnikov, piano.**

**BOTH: HDtracks (96/24)**

Paul Lewis is a first-rate pianist who has emphasized "absolute music" with his recordings—Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven's complete sonatas—so it's a little surprising to hear him taking up a work as allegedly programmatic as *Pictures at an Exhibition*. But Lewis understands that the brief pieces making up this work are meant to evoke mood and emotion in the spirit of Schumann, the composer chosen to fill out Harmonia Mundi's release. The liner notes point out that the ever-popular orchestral treatment(s) of *Pictures* perhaps suffer from "overemphasis of the illustrative moment." With "The Old Castle" or "Bydlo," we hear the poetry of *Kreisleriana*. Even "Great Gate at Kiev" has a restrained majesty. The excellent recording is sufficiently percussive but almost sweet-sounding in the piano's upper registers.

Paul Hindemith composed a single sonata for pretty much every instrument he could think of, in addition to three each for piano and organ. The reason was twofold. Hindemith wanted to enlarge the impoverished repertoire of many instruments, and the composer wanted to become more facile at writing for all of the orchestra's voices. This HM release holds five sonatas—for alto horn (Teunis van der Zwart is the soloist), cello (Alexander Rudin), trombone (Gérard Costes), violin (Isabelle Faust), and trumpet (Jeroen Berwaerts). All get technically assured and interpretively cogent performances; the "glue" for the project is Alexander Melnikov, now in his early 40s, who accompanies idiomatically. Instrumental sonorities are nicely char-



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acterized—for example, the ruggedly beautiful sound of the alto horn.

**Schubert: Symphony No. 9. Orchestra**

**Mozart; Abbado. (96/24)**

**Prokofiev: Violin Concerto No. 2. Violin Sonata No. 1. Sonata for 2 Violins. Janine Jansen. (96/24)**

**BOTH: HDtracks.com**

The late, great Claudio Abbado wasn't much of a talker in rehearsal; reportedly, he often simply asked his orchestral players to "listen." That might help explain why his recordings, especially the late ones, have such a powerful sense of communal music making, of a shared approach and purpose. This live performance of Schubert's "Great" C Major Symphony from September of 2011 is an ideal presentation of a masterwork that balances right at the point of intersection of the Classical and Romantic styles, as the conductor manifests an intuitive understanding of structure but doesn't slight the piece's many lyrical flights. A wide, open soundstage serves a middle-of-the-hall sonic perspective. Deutsche Grammophon's woodwind sonorities are especially beautiful, even if the bass foundation of the orchestra is sometimes overripe.

Janine Jansen offers a wide-ranging selection of Prokofiev's extensive output featuring violin, including the G Minor Concerto (Vladimir Jurowski and the London Philharmonic accompany), the F Minor Sonata (Itamar Golan on piano), and the sensational Sonata for 2 Violins (with Boris Brovtsyn, Jansen's near-contemporary, handling the other fiddle part). Everything succeeds, but it's the third work that's the standout. Brovtsyn's

tone and sensibility matches Jansen's completely, as their lines intertwine and cultivate each other. The sound on this piece, in particular, is exceptionally alive. The download closes with two brief arrangements not included on the Decca CD, the "March" from *The Love for Three Oranges* and a lovely Andante from Prokofiev's *Mémoires*, Op. 35.

**Bach: St. John Passion. La Petite Bande, Kuijken. (96/24)**

**Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 1. The Isle of the Dead. Detroit Symphony, Slatkin. (96/24, 192/24, 352/24)**

**BOTH: HDtracks.com**

*St. John Passion* was J.S. Bach's first large-scale religious work, performed within a year of his arrival in Leipzig. The piece is every bit as dramatic as the more exalted *St. Matthew*, but achieved with more modest means—no double-chorus, for instance. Period performance master Sigiswald Kuijken plays it with just eight singers and an instrumental group of 17, assuring utter clarity of the contrapuntal writing. The aria movements with obbligato instrumentalist—oboe da caccia, viola da gamba, flute—are sublime as the singer and his/her wordless partner commune at a spiritual level. Several of the vocalists are especially praiseworthy, including soprano Gerlinde Sämman ("Ich folge dir gleichfalls") and Christoph Genz, who holds down the enormous part of the Evangelist without overacting and provides admirable narrative continuity.

The Naxos 2xHD sublabel provides more beautifully recorded evidence that the Detroit

Symphony Orchestra, with Leonard Slatkin at the helm, has returned from the brink as one of North America's finest ensembles. Rachmaninoff has always been a Slatkin specialty—he recorded both of these pieces with St. Louis in the late 1970s for Vox—and his Symphony No. 1 is purposeful and carefully contoured. *The Isle of the Dead* is ominously mysterious, Wagnerian in the richness of its tonal colors. I listened to the 192/24 version: *Isle's* opening pages exploit the orchestra's lower reaches with cello, bass, bass clarinet, bassoons, horns, tuba, low harp, and timpani rendered with amazing transparency and intelligibility.

**Mendelssohn: String Quartets Nos. 2 & 3. Andante sostenuto. Scherzo. Escher String Quartet. (96/24)**

**Chausson: Poème de l'amour et de la mer.**

**Berlioz: Les Nuits d'été. Duparc: Songs. Soile Isokoski; Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, John Storgårds. (96/24)**

**BOTH: eClassical.com**

The Escher String Quartet, founded in 2008 and mentored by the Emerson Quartet, gives vital performances of two of Mendelssohn's six numbered quartets, plus two of the four pieces comprising Op. 81. These four young men seem to have it all, collectively and individually. They play with an appealing blend and balance, flawless intonation, and assured technique—the *Presto con brio* finale of the third quartet is taken at quite a clip, for example, and no one seems to break a sweat. BIS provides a recording that is close-up without much

room sound, but plenty of dynamic range and convincing string textures.

The orchestral songs of Henri Duparc and, especially, Ernest Chausson are the ultimate manifestation of Richard Wagner's influence on French music. Chausson's *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, running close to half an hour, is saturated with the aura of *Tristan*, a restlessly ambiguous harmonic world here placed in the service of the heady, world-weary, dreamlike symbolist poetry of Maurice Bouchor. Duparc taps Baudelaire and others of his worldview for texts; even Berlioz's earlier *Les Nuits d'été* possesses the same sort of perfumed sensuality. Soile Isokoski's warm, velvety lyric soprano instrument is perfect for this repertoire, and she's sympathetically supported by John Storgårds, Leif Segerstam's successor as chief conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic. Ondine's sound is aptly luxuriant. tas