

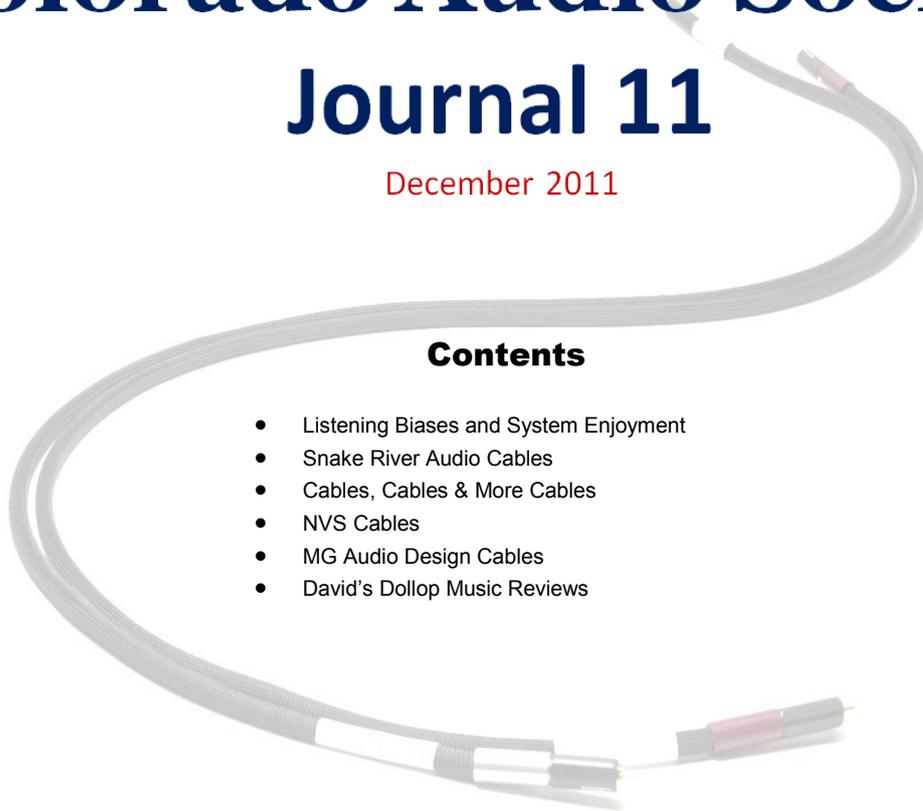
# Colorado Audio Society

## Journal 11

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## Listening Biases and System Enjoyment

Greg Graff

Harry Pearson of the Absolute Sound has postulated that live music is the measurement by which all audio systems must be judged. While I agree philosophically that live music reproduction in our systems is our ultimate objective, I also understand that achievement of that is impossible. For those of you who believe a system can accurately reproduce a live music event, please don't waste your time reading the rest of this article. Rather, go directly to the nearest live music event and do not pass Go or collect \$200.

For the rest of you still reading, I postulate that since we cannot completely and accurately reproduce a live music event with our systems, we must find some other achievable objective by which to judge the quality of our systems. In other words, find happiness in listening to music. I submit that for many of us that objective is to have your system do certain things which allow you to enjoy the music, maybe to the point that you are able to suspend reality and let yourself believe you are hearing a performance in your listening room. There may be other objectives out there for some people, but I will focus my thought piece on this particular objective and how it manifests itself in the audio community/industry.

I further postulate that not all people share the same criteria when listening to systems. After years of listening to numerous systems and people's reactions to these systems, it has become very evident to me that what is important to the enjoyment of a system is not the same for all people. Listening to the same system, I have heard people comment that they liked it very much because it did X, Y, Z very well while other people listening to the same system didn't like it because it didn't do A, B, C very well. What they are really saying is that I liked/disliked the system because it did/did not achieve one or more of my listening biases. It did or did not allow me to enjoy the music.

You can also use this same logic to judge individual pieces of equipment, but to further complicate this judgment you must also factor in system synergy for each piece of equipment. Amplifier Humungous may sound really good in one system, does not automatically mean it will sound good in every system because of system synergy. Add to that the fact that it may sound good/correct to some because it meets one or more of your listening biases while for others it doesn't and therefore, does not sound good or correct.

For those of you who are still awake and reading this, I am sure more than a few are now saying, "Well, duh you have pinpointed the obvious, so what's your point." Glad you asked. Actually, I have three points to consider.

First, if you are serious about music, you need to explore and listen to many systems and pieces of equipment in order to understand what your listening biases are and what you ultimately want your system to do. This can either be a lifelong pursuit for those of us who are deranged maniacs called audiophiles who are trying to achieve the unachievable, or it can be a fairly short pursuit for the rational individuals who just want to enjoy music and couldn't care less whether your system has the last level of \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank here). For the deranged I will use myself as an example. My overall system objective is to hear the musical/emotional expression of the performer and connect with that emotion. Until recently, I didn't realize how important speed in a system was to me to enhance my listening enjoyment. Hearing the leading edge of a voice or an instrument allows me to more easily understand the musical expression of the musician. I have been an audiophile for

close to 40 years and just now really understand how important that is for my enjoyment. You must understand what allows you to connect to the music. The perverse part of this is that until you change something in your system or hear something in another system, you may not know you are missing something. Talk about introducing paranoia.

Second, there are many, many manufacturers out there developing products for your consideration. Almost all of them are trying to achieve a certain sound that fits their listening biases. Most of these pieces have one or more redeeming points to them and in the right environment will probably sound reasonably good to a number of people. The problem is as an audiophile you will have to sort through a lot of chaff to find something that will work for you. There is a price to be paid for being deranged and this is it. Manufacturers could help in this pursuit by engaging in the use of listening panels so that not just their particular listening biases are addressed. If nothing else, they will at least understand what is “good” about their product and what could be improved. Ultimately, this may result in less overall chaff to sort through.

Third, you should view equipment/system reviews made by the various audio publications with a jaundiced eye. You must at least

be aware that they have their own listening biases and system synergy issues when reviewing any product. This is particularly true when they compare one component to another. Reviewers need to state something to the effect that “in my system (and room—see my last diatribe—“It’s The Room, Stupid” for further information about room/system interaction) component X displayed A, B, C characteristics. By doing this you can see if this particular piece might be worth exploring because your listening biases include A, B, C. Unfortunately, too many times we read flowery prose that does little to inform the reader objectively about what the strengths and weaknesses are in a particular product in their system/room. Then there is the infamous Class A rating for products in a highly regarded publication. I will almost guarantee that if you took the highest rated product in each equipment category, you would end up with a very expensive system that sounded like crap or at least didn’t meet your listening requirements.

Bottom line — only you can determine what you want your system to sound like and you cannot depend on others to tell you what is best. Audiophiledom is a journey, not a destination. It is a process not a result. To get satisfaction from it you must understand what you are trying to achieve, otherwise you will never be satisfied.

Pics From the CAS Tribute to Harry Pearson  
RMAF 2010



## Snake River Audio Cables

Steve Travis

### Products Reviewed

- Cottonmouth Power Cable: two meter 24k gold-plated US/IEC connectors - \$1549
- Mamushi RCA Interconnects: one meter pure silver (.999) wire with next gen signature silver WBTs - \$1649
- Mamushi XLR Interconnects: one meter 24k gold-plated - \$1499
- Cottonmouth Speaker Cables: 24k gold-plated, 3 meter - \$1599

I have to admit that I have not been an advocate of cables in the past; however, I have had a minor conversion in the last 5 years, where I have experienced a sizable improvement in system performance due to a change in cables. This has been both educational and somewhat humbling since I dismissed cable technology for so long as, ah.. Snake Oil.

So why did I volunteer to review the Snake River Audio cables when offered the opportunity? Maybe it was because the company is headquartered in Idaho and I have always liked Idaho; or maybe it sounded fun and I did not know what I was getting into. For whatever reason, I received a full complement of cables to review: a power cable, interconnects — both XLR and RCA, and

speaker cables.

I realized that I needed a methodology to follow with this review so I decided to start with my phono stage using the XLR interconnects and then add the power cable to my phono stage as a two step experiment. I would later add the speaker cables to produce a total Snake River Audio solution. As a second phase, I would move on to digital, using the RCA interconnects and then add the power cable. I also selected a group of six albums to serve as my reference while I switched the cables in and out.

### Phono

My phono stage is a Simaudio LP5.3, with-

out the optional and separate power supply. It has both RCA and XLR outputs and I usually use the XLR for most listening. This offers the opportunity to compare the RCA directly against the XLR cables. In this scenario you are obviously comparing the amplifier design, differential vs. single ended, as much as the cables. I happen to own both RCA and XLR version of the Nordost Blue Heaven interconnects and have spent a considerable amount of time comparing between these two outputs before deciding that I prefer the more detailed sound of the XLR over the warmer sound of the RCA. What would the result be from switching to the Snake River Audio interconnects?



Snake River Audio makes three levels of interconnects all named after snakes: Adder, Cottonmouth and Mamushi. I reviewed the Mamushi interconnects which are their high end model. All of their cables are handmade in the USA and are of high quality. The Mamushi cables are finished in a jacket that is a vibrant blue and purple color and they definitely stand out. Connecting the XLR into my system was easy. The cables are not the most flexible cable out there, but they are not the stiffest either, and you get an impression of a solid connection when you push them into their proper positions.

I listened to my first two albums, Grover Washington's - *Mister Magic* and Fleetwood Mac - *Rumours*, both albums I know fairly well. The sound seemed more fluid and a bit more relaxed. There was nice high end detail and tonal balance. The drum strikes had more sharpness and definition, and there was better inner detail for the instruments. This was not a night and day type of a change but it was a definite improvement. On the *Rumours* album, the song - *The Chain*, the bass was great. I'm kind of a picky bass person but if you have heard the tonal texture of a good bass you recognize it and this was it. Lastly, the sense of space, meaning the three dimensionality of the sound was improved. I don't get great imaging in my system but it was getting better with the Mamushi interconnect.

I moved on to Heart - *Dreamboat Annie* and had more of the same experience: great bass, improved inner detail. Previously when I had opted to use the differentiated output over RCA I gave up some warmth in the sound, but now the warmth was back and I had all the detail too.

At this point I deviated from my planned listening material to play Nazareth - *Close Enough for Rock 'n' Roll*, a high school'ish rock LP which I've always liked. It sounded great with drums, cymbals, distorted guitars and vocals. I then switched back to my Nordost Blue Heavens and replayed the LP. The sound was noticeably flatter and while the bass was still good, it was not great. Also I noticed that the music seemed lower in volume when going back to the Blue Heaven. I'm careful about keeping my volume control consistent but with the Mamushi, the dynamic impact was improved and it gave a sense of louder volume.

By this time I had a couple of hours of listening under my belt and the sound seemed to be improving. It might be that I was just getting used to what the Snake River interconnects could do, but I think there may have been a modest amount of settling in that the cables were achieving. I can't explain it but the more I listened, the sound was continuing to improve.

### **Add A Cottonmouth**

So now it was time to add the Cottonmouth power cord. In all the world of electronics, the improvements made by power cords have to be the hardest to explain. To say I'm skeptical is an understatement but as I stated at the beginning of this review, I have witnessed the positive effect they can have. I plugged in the 2M Cottonmouth which is a substantial hunk of cable and prepared to struggle to hear a difference.

I started with Sonny Rollins - *Saxophone Colossus*, I love this album. Big surprise, I did not have to try to hear anything, it was a clear change. The soundstage opened up, the attack of the piano was greatly improved and the low-level bass detail was improved. Impressed but I wanted more validation, I went back to the *Rumours* album. The texture of the bass came across with much more detail; this was wild. I then tried Nora Jones - *Come Away with Me* and then switched back to the standard power cable. Once again a significant difference, a more compressed, less full sound when using the standard power cable. Still very pleasing but with less coherency, vocals were more strained. When more than one instrument was playing, it was more difficult to distinguish between them. The sound seemed to lay the vocal on top of the other instruments instead of making the music seem

like a whole. It was still pleasing but not as good as it was with the Cottonmouth power cable. The Cottonmouth made a huge difference.

### **Moving on to digital**

My CD player is a Rega Jupiter with another set of RCA Nordost Blue Heavens playing the interconnect role. I tend to like the warmer Rega sound and cued up Florence + the Machine – *Lungs*. I decided to listen first with my standard setup and then transition to the Cottonmouth Power cord before using the Snake River Audio interconnect because I was so impressed with what it did to my phono stage. Like I said, I like this player and I like this album and I thought it was sounding good. I switched to the Cottonmouth power cable and was rewarded with a more open sound but different than when applied to the phono stage. I had fuller tones and once again a bigger sound with more depth and once again it still sounded louder even though I had not touched the volume control. I was also hearing some random harp detail that was missing prior and the background vocals were easier to distinguish.

Next, I switched out my Nordost Blue Heaven interconnect with the RCA Mamushi. There was more weight to the music, and every time

I add a Snake River Audio cable it seems that the volume increases. Detail improved but not to the degree that it did on analog with the XLRs. But the more I listened the more detail that emerged. I played with the setup a little, using just the cottonmouth and then just the Mamushi. Both were an improvement by themselves but the combination was by far the best and I was having a great time with these cables. This was the best my CD player had ever sounded but I decided to go back to analog to complete the review with the speaker cables because I really enjoyed the change made by the Cottonmouth and the XLR Mamushi.

By now I was forming a definite opinion on these cables. I like the effect of the Cottonmouth Power Cable the most. It was a great improvement on my phono stage and made a similar but slightly less impact on my CD player. The XLR Mamushi interconnects are my second favorite. Nice sound and works great with the Cottonmouth on my Simaudio phono stage. The RCA Mamushi was close to the XLR but not quite as defined. Once again this may be the difference between single ended and differential amplifier designs. It was now time to try the Cottonmouth Speaker Cables.

### **The final link**

Cottonmouth Speaker cables are not huge but they are significant in their girth. All these cables have some weight to them and the speaker cable is no exception. They are obviously well made cables. The speaker cables came with spade terminations on both ends. This worked well with my speakers but not so well with my NAD M3 receiver. I've heard before that NAD amplifiers can have challenges with some spade connectors but I usually use banana plugs and previously I have not had the experience of a spade connector that did not fit. I was able to get one of the prongs of the spade connector to fit into the bare wire insertion hole of the binding post, maybe not optimal but it made a good connection. I now had a total Snake River Audio cabled solution, if you don't count my turntable leads.

Starting with James Taylor's *Greatest Hits* LP, the sound was once again noticeably different. The bass was thicker but maybe less detailed. I waffled on whether I liked this change. As I listened for the different frequency bands in the music I could not identify a problem such as a missing or an accentuated band. I went through several albums and had the same result. There was detail, there was bass and treble but I was not happy with the

overall change. I can't say that it was worse than my original setup but when I finally went back to my MIT CVT 2 speaker cables, I preferred that sound.

I started to doubt my equipment. I have what you might call experimental speakers, Magnepan 1.6QR which have been extensively modified. Normally they are very detailed and dynamic. After returning to my original setup and rechecking all the components I could not identify any issues. Not satisfied I left the speaker cables for a few days while I considered the problem.

Returning 4 days later, I had found some banana plugs that I could attach to the spade connectors of the Cottonmouth speaker cables to improve my connection on the amplifier end. The banana plugs also made it much easier to move the cables in and out of my system. Additionally I came armed with a recording with strong bass and vocals, Cyndi Lauper – *True Colors*. I listened repeatedly to my standard cable and then switching to the Cottonmouth. With the Cottonmouth, I had deeper bass and slightly more detail in the low to mid treble. The problem I was hearing was in less definition in the bass even though there was more of it. My assessment is that I needed to reposition my speakers in my room to accommodate the additional bass energy. This is usually a two-person affair and I was

not willing to go through that effort. I believe that with room treatments or an improved speaker positioning the bass detail could be improved.

#### **Summary:**

This is fairly easy for me.

Buy the Cottonmouth Power Cable. It's not cheap but it works great, even if I don't understand why. I can easily recommend the Mamushi interconnects. I like the XLR over the RCA but either are great cables and additions to your system. I recommend that you audition the Cottonmouth speaker cables before purchasing. They are obviously a top rated cable but as I experienced they have the ability to change the way your system performs and you might need to make some adjustments because of that.

In closing, Snake River Audio is clearly an impressive company with high ideals and deserves your consideration. This quote from their web site says it all:

**“Satisfaction Guaranteed !** We are so confident in the quality of our cables, that we not only offer a lifetime warranty, but we also maintain a 30-day guaranteed satisfaction policy with each purchase. And we are very proud to admit that we have never had an

unsatisfied customer request a refund!”

#### **System used for all comparisons:**

**Analog:** Nottingham Spacedeck with Grado Reference Master

**Preamp:** Simaudio LP5.3,

**Amplifier:** NAD M3

**Speakers:** Magnepan 1.6 (heavily modded)

**Cables:** Speaker - MIT Terminator 2 CVT, Interconnects: Nordost Blue Heaven – XLR and RCA; Kimber Hero RCA

#### **LP Music Used:**

Nora Jones: *Come Away With Me*

Grover Washington Jr.: *Mister Magic*

Heart: *Dreamboat Annie*

Willie Nelson: *Stardust*

Fleetwood Mac: *Rumours*

James Taylor: *Greatest Hits*

Sonny Rollins: *Saxophone Colossus*

Cyndi Lauper: *True Colors*

Nazareth: *Close Enough for Rock 'n' Roll*

#### **CD Music Used:**

Florence + the Machine: *Lungs*

## Snake River Audio Cables

Brian Boehler

Art asked if I would like to review a set of Snake River Audio interconnects and speaker cables to audition in my system. I'm always up to hearing what affect cables have on my system and how they might affect the overall sound of a stereo system. I listened to these cables between a review of the Cardas Clear Beyond speaker cable and a set of interconnects and speaker cables designed and built by Lee Matuszczak and Greg Graff. I share this as a point of reference so that my comments might make more sense from a comparison perspective.

Snake River Audio is located in the Pacific Northwest in Riggins, Idaho, right next to Hells Canyon, the deepest gorge on the North American continent. Jonny Wilson is the President/CEO and a very friendly and energetic personality. He has kept his company small and only employs a handful of highly skilled individuals to produce his products. They have named all of their cable sets based on snake names including Adder, Cottonmouth, and Mamushi, the series that I am reviewing.

Snake River Audio states "All electrical and electronic equipment causes radio frequency

interference. Processor noise, digital noise, ground noise, voltage spikes ... all contribute to the degradation and corruption of the transference. So... How can you protect your fine resolution, and keep your silent noise floor from being contaminated? Mamushi to the rescue!" They go on to say that their "line of Mamushi interconnects are truly unique in the world of interference suppression. After extensive research, and innovative improvements upon the original Zero design, Snake River Audio's Mamushi incorporates a natural capacitive rejection of radio frequency interference by their construction principles alone. Utilizing our world famous Snake River Audio 24k gold-plated wiring as the foundation, the Mamushi then separate the conductors using an air gap dielectric, and protect this configuration by surrounding it with mid-level magnets. Our magnets are specially ordered for our Mamushi and are supersaturated with magnetism in a multiple pole magnetization pattern, so their magnetic strength is evenly distributed across the surface."

So in simple terms they are using gold-plated hyper-pure oxygen free copper and silver alloy wiring, air dielectric, and spaced magnets to manage the RFI environment. The

construction looks very good and the blue and red braiding covering the wire is very good looking. It lends a polished look and feel to the cable. The only potential concern was where the wire entered the body of the XLR connector. This area seemed to be very thin and could be easily bent and damaged. I had no problems but I would be concerned if you were plugging or unplugging these cables on a consistent basis. If handled carefully, there should be no problem or concern with durability.

### **Snake River Audio Mamushi RCA with nextgen gold WBTs - \$1599.00**

So how do they sound? In a few words, very good; they do not interfere with the sound. They just join and complement your systems sound. They don't draw attention to themselves with any obvious aberrations. In comparison to the Cardas Clear interconnect; they are in the same family but with a "little less" in most areas. They are not as transparent as the Clear and the soundstage is smaller in scale. I can't hear as deeply into the soundstage, and small queues buried in the mix are just not as pure and distinct as the Cardas Clear. Recognize that the Cardas Clear XLR is \$2140 a meter and more expensive than the Snake River Audio Ma-

mushi cable. If money is an issue then the Snake River Audio Mamushi interconnects would be a good match in most systems. If you can afford the difference and want to get “more” of what is buried in the music then I would opt for the Cardas Clear.

### **Snake River Audio Cottonmouth speaker cables - \$1599.00**

Snake River Audio starts with 24k gold-plated wire with strands which are double-weaved to create a heavy, 16-gauge wire. They cover this heavy combination wire with an ether-based polyurethane coating. These are then tightly anti-parallel braided into place to minimize cross-contamination, creating integration and protection. It is then covered by an abrasive-resistant nylon braiding. The pair I reviewed had WBT 24k gold-plated spades.

I found the speaker cable to be good but not great. Maybe my expectations after the Cardas Clear Beyond were just too great. The Snake River Audio was competent but just not in the same league. While the interconnect was in the ballpark the speaker cable just wasn't in the running. Nothing was really bad or out of the ordinary but just not as refined and revealing as the Cardas Clear Beyond. Obviously I had been spoiled and found that going from a wire that was “fantastic” to the Snake River Audio was a

letdown.

To be fair, the Cottonmouth was very good with no apparent aberrations. The price is 5.5 times less than the Cardas Clear Beyond. Needless to say, this is a huge difference although the difference in sound is nowhere near 5.5 times. I found the Cottonmouth competitive with some Acoustic Zen cables and some Analysis Plus cables of equal value.

As in all reviews of wire sets, you have to be the judge based on what you listen to and your system architecture. My observations may not be applicable to your situation. The Snake River Audio Mamushi product is good enough for serious consideration. The Cottonmouth speaker cable is on par with other products in roughly the same price range. I would give each a try and see how they work in your system. I think the interconnect could be a keeper and the speaker cable could be a good match depending on your system and price range.

Although Snake River Audio isn't a well-known brand, they have definitely brought some serious products to the table. They offer some unique ideas at a reasonable price. While they may not compare to the Cardas Clear Beyond, they are worthwhile products that should be taken seriously and

listened to carefully in your system and situation.

*Art Tedeschi Comments ...*

*I don't have much to add to the excellent reviews by Steve and Brian, as I pretty much agree with their assessments.*

*Having met Jonny Wilson, the owner of Snake River Audio at RMAF this year, I was impressed with his enthusiasm and dedication to creating the best products possible in this product/price category. In my opinion, the strongest product in the Snake River line was the balanced interconnect that remained in my system for most of the overall cable evaluations (preamp-to-amp connection, though most of the evaluations were based upon a direct hookup from the Aeris DAC to the 625 amplifier).*

*In the super competitive market of high-end audio cables Snake River Audio stands out as a serious contender with a comprehensive product line at reasonable prices.*

*Jonny also asked me to mention that he would provide a fairly considerable discount to CAS members in conjunction with these reviews (\$400 savings). You can contact Snake River Audio at [snakeriveraudio@gmail.com](mailto:snakeriveraudio@gmail.com). Their website is <http://www.snakeriveraudio.com>.*

# Cables, Cables and More Cables

After mentioning to an audio reviewer friend that this Journal would be featuring reviews of audio cables, he responded that of all the products he is asked to review, cables are his least favorite.

I can understand why. This is not to say that the differences heard in audio cables are necessarily subtle or difficult to discern, but that the ability to isolate the sonic contributions of the cable from the rest of the system's components in any sort of practical way requires constant swapping of a multitude of different cables in order to achieve anything resembling a baseline standard to the reviewing process.

After years of listening, I've come to the conclusion that a big factor in an audio system's ability to provide the emotional response we all crave from our music is its ability to reproduce the overall tonal balance of the recording. A system's (lower) bass and (upper) treble should be at the same relative balance as recorded on the source in order to achieve a relaxed musical presentation; but only now, with the latest state-of-the-art analog and digital components do I realize that this achievement also allows for a peek into the human dynamics of the per-

formance. And this level of musical insight, for me, powerfully provides for the emotional side of music listening.

Haven't we all heard some music on a car stereo or clock radio when we were able to relate emotionally to the music? I believe we've all experienced this reaction, but I've only begun to understand why the same piece of music heard earlier on the cheap radio brought about this feeling when the same piece played over the high-end system sounded cold and sterile. Is it possible that most car stereos and clock radios benefit from the fact that the frequency extremes are so limited that the relative amplitudes between the highs and lows are always near equal (due to their non-existence)?

While listening to the cables under review, I focused upon another thought: of primary importance in selecting cables for an audio system is the achievement of that overall tonal frequency balance. Inserting a relatively "hot" cable, whether interconnect, speaker or power cord, into a system favoring the upper treble will nearly always result in a distorted sonic picture.

Conversely, adding a cable with accentuated

bass proclivities into a system that favors the lower ranges will also result in a bad outcome. It doesn't matter how prominent the cable's reputation if its overall tonal balance is off kilter relative to the rest of the system; none of its positive characteristics can be totally appreciated. Our listening senses will always tend to focus on the most prominent part of the frequency spectrum, causing a distraction that prevents us from relaxing our attention, making it difficult to focus deeply into the music. So we need to get this balancing concept right, and the only way I know of making this happen would be to borrow a bunch of cables and listen. I've been lucky enough to do this with the excellent cables mentioned in this Journal, and as a side benefit I have learned much about my system. I assume this can also be accomplished with a friendly dealer willing to lend out cables – The Cable Company is one.

Getting the balance right can be accomplished with low-to-medium-quality cables, so this should be the main priority, whatever the budget. So once we get the bottom and top ends singing in harmony, we can attend to talking about the icing on the cake, those proverbial points of diminishing returns.

## ***Resolution of Inner Detail***

A system that can dig down deeply to resolve tiny sonic nuances can be a huge factor in getting that glimpse into the performer's acoustic space. Minute environmental sounds, the thud of a hammer pounding the strings on the piano microseconds prior to the note's launch, a cough from the audience, a vocal mike being actuated just prior to the singer's voice with its accordant rush of a ripple in the air of the soundstage – all these subtleties are powerful hints to experiencing the same acoustic as the performer. A perfect example of inner detail is the opening minute of Diana Krall's version of Joni Mitchell's, "A Case of You" from her *Live in Paris* album. Notice the woman in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> row coughing twice during the song's piano introduction. How about the premature single clap from the far back of the audience in the middle of the song's ending? Inner detail can only be achieved with cables that allow for a silent background (i.e., an absence of low-level noise) where these delicate nuances can exist and be noticed without distraction. This noise can be polluted by radio frequency interference (RFI) that constantly bombards the cables, especially those that carry low energy such as tonearm cables and interconnects. AC current traveling down power cables can cause them to "ring" if not properly damped for 60 Hz frequencies and other electrical hash trav-

eling down the power line from the utility grid.

## ***Reproduction of the Soundstage***

Excellent soundstaging depends on the overall musical spectrum arriving intact and in phase. A system's ability to preserve phase integrity along with passing the nuances of the recording (see above) can make for a spectacular holographic reproduction of the recording site. This characteristic is most notable in a well-recorded full orchestral piece or a more intimate recording, such as Neil Young's recording in "*Live at Massey Hall 1971*" where the size of the acoustic space can be sensed based upon the ambience cues of Neil's voice and guitar reverberating through the hall. I admit that I have a bias for soundstage reproduction, especially with live concert and orchestral recordings. For me, it's the difference between looking onto a flat plane of sound or sitting in the hall at the actual event. Unfortunately, poorly designed cables can diminish or destroy a system's ability to soundstage. Cables that are unable to pass the signal's full frequency spectrum unscathed in time are usually poor performers in preserving depth and width. Typically, a wider and deeper soundstage reflects the system's ability to preserve phase integrity. The good news is that nearly all cables marketed as "high end" can preserve a soundstage, some better than

others. The trick, of course, is to provide a solid soundstage along with the low-level ambience cues made apparent by a system with great inner detail, the result of which accounts for soundstage "bloom".

## ***The Highs and the Lows***

How a system reproduces the frequency extremes is always a point of interest to audiophiles. Of course, the most important factor is maintaining the balance between the highs and the lows, but the quality of those highs and lows contributes to the system's success in making voices and instruments sound like the original source (and if it's a great recording, it should also sound more like the real thing). Excellent high-frequency transient response makes for an exciting sound, as it does in real life. A super-fast treble response along with a slow bass response can be observed as a speed incongruity that permeates all of the music you hear and can be a huge distraction in the worst cases. This problem is demonstrated by the traditional difficulty in mating hybrid electrostatics with their dynamic-driven bass drivers. Rarely does this work well, but I have heard exceptions. Cables that can be characterized as "slow" tend to attenuate or blur the upper ranges relative to the midrange and bass. None of the cables auditioned can be characterized as "slow", but some were better than others. - *Art Tedeschi*

## NVS Sound Speaker and Power Cables

Art Tedeschi

### Products Reviewed

- Copper 1 SE power cord (\$3,000 for 6')
- Copper 1 speaker cable (\$4,250 for 8', \$3,700 for 6')

NVS Sound (Nathan Vander Stoep) is a Denver-based manufacturer of high-end audio cables. NVS' Principal, the aforementioned Nathan Vander Stoep is an accomplished musician and dancer who has leveraged his love for music and audio into a company that offers a comprehensive line of cables.

### Construction

Both cables use NVS' most advanced powder, which is designed specifically to pack very densely, maintain flexibility, as well as to provide RFI and EMI shielding capabilities.

The speaker cables reviewed are terminated in gold Furutechs, though the rhodium-plated spades will be standard. They use a non-litz, braided conductor with an aggregate size of 9awg per leg.

The SE power cord uses a similar conductor as the speaker wire, with a different braiding scheme. Having three chambers for vibra-

tion, it has the most weight of any cable NVS makes, but also the best vibration control over each individual conductor. The positive and neutral legs are braided in similar fashion to the speaker wire, but each goes through two vibration chambers, and the ground wire throughout the third. All these chambers are then braided loosely which NVS claims to open up the soundstage. Effective wire size 9awg per leg.

### The Listening Process

I thought a lot about how to audition the cables while preserving the goal of providing a relatively useful description of their relative strengths and weaknesses. I finally decided that the process of reviewing the cables should be no process at all. I concluded that I would use a "law of the jungle" approach to evaluating the cables. Once a cable was inserted into the system, whether interconnect, speaker cable or power cord, it remained in the system until something better usurped it. This also ensured that I would be spending most of my time listening to the best stuff. I would then, near the end of the reviewing period, reinstall all the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> stringers (npi) to verify my initial impressions. If I had a change of heart, that cable

would stay in the system for a longer period of time, and then again replaced with the 1<sup>st</sup>-placer to reaffirm or modify my opinion. It's important to note that my 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> stringers could easily be someone else's 1<sup>st</sup> stringers if they provided a better balance to their own audio system. Beyond that, I'm hoping that the cables' sonic descriptions can be considered somewhat objective.

### The Reference System

- SoundLab A-1 Electrostatic Speakers
- Rowland Model 625 driven directly by a Rowland Aeris DAC
- Dell XPS Laptop/Windows 7, Fubar 2000 music program (kernel-streaming mode), M2Tech HiFace USB to SPDIF



BNC adapter capable of playing 16x44.1, 24 x 96, and 24 x 192 recordings

- Rowland Model 625 driven by a (battery-powered) Rowland Synergy II Preamp \*, itself driven by my analog front end consisting of:
- Sota Star Turntable
- Eminent Technology ETII Linear-Tracking Tonearm
- Rowland Strain Gauge Cartridge System

\* Most listening was accomplished with the Aeris DAC driving the 625 directly, bypassing the preamp. When analog or other sources were heard, the preamp fed the 625.

### ***Cables Available for Comparison***

- Nordost Odin Balanced Interconnect
- MG Audio Design Speaker Cables and Balanced Interconnects
- MIT Magnum 1.3 Speaker Cable and Balanced Interconnect.
- Various other cables that I have on hand including those from Cardas, Nordost, StraightWire, Acrotec, PS Audio, Transparent, and Snake River Audio.

Most of the above cables were included in this assessment for comparison. The Snake River Audio and MG Audio Design cables were reviewed elsewhere in this Journal.

### ***Sonic Characteristics of the Reference System***

It would be helpful for audio reviewers to describe their reference system's sonic character. Any product review will reflect positively or negatively based upon the system in which it resides.

The SoundLab A1 electrostatic speakers share all of the positive traits common to most speakers of this type: extremely fast and extended high-frequency response, excellent transparency, palpable soundstaging, and very tight bass and midbass. These speakers are massive, with a width of 36" and height of 84". This provides for a huge soundstage with a you-are-there palpability.

Though micro-dynamics are rendered effortlessly, macro-dynamics cannot compete with cone-based dynamic drivers. Bass on the A1's reaches extremely low, but not with the authority of a large piston driver. The speakers are notoriously inefficient, but are successfully driven by the Rowland 300-watt 625 stereo amplifier.

Up until this series of reviews, the speaker cables residing in the system were the MIT Magnum 1.3, which were reviewed extensively in Journal 10. These are extremely large network-driven cables that retail for

\$6500/pair. Also on hand was a borrowed set of Nordost Odin 1-meter balanced interconnects that retail at approximately \$17,000 per pair. Both of these cables served as baselines (among others) for these reviews.

### ***NVS Copper 1 Speaker Cable***

The low- and mid-bass performance of the Copper 1 speaker cable was excellent, and went far to ameliorate the relatively mild low-range dynamics characteristic of the SoundLabs. Lows were tight and deep (not unlike the MITs), and double-basses and organ notes were rendered with authority. Christmastime is always a great time to pull out the Proprius *Cantate Domino* record with its immense dynamics and gut-wrenching organ sound. The NVS acquitted itself well against this torture test and allowed the full measure of this music to shake the walls and windows in the listening room.

As most of the music resides in the mid-range, any component that handles this portion of the audio spectrum cannot be considered "high end", and the NVS acquitted itself well. Vocals, both male and female, were smooth and detailed. Neil Young's performance from *Massey Hall* clearly placed Neil's image in the listening room with Martin (D series, I think) guitar in hand. Diana Krall's voice on *Live in Paris* was sultry and seduc-

tive, as well it should be. Piano notes came off clearly and bell-like with a natural decay following the attack.

Where the SoundLab/Rowland combination really excels is in the upper ranges, where everything is revealed, both good and bad. This is where cables usually meet their Waterloo in my system, and the NVS speaker cable, though not as extended as some, provided for an excellent balance with the rest of the sonic presentation. Transient response was more than competent, and compared well with other cables in their price range.

Imaging was excellent, and all instruments and voices were placed in their correct respective cushions of air within the sound-space.

### ***NVS Copper 1 SE Power Cord***

I've always been somewhat skeptical about the value of high-end power cords and suspected that manufacturers might be taking advantage of the paranoia that exists in all of us regarding potential weak spots in our systems. The engineering side of me further strengthened these doubts when I contemplated the fact that my townhome probably has at least 1000 feet of 12-2 WG Romex wiring inside its walls. How could another 6

or 8 feet of wiring plugged into the end of this long chain of copper make any difference? Certainly, I heard small improvements in past upscale cables I had borrowed, but power cords in the multi-kilobuck range?

The Rowland Aeris DAC utilizes an external power source umbilically connected to the DAC. The day that Nathan visited, he suggested that I try replacing the power cord on the external supply (I was using an older Cardas power cord) with his Copper 1 SE Power Cord. This power cord is extremely heavy with exotic connectors on both ends, so making the connections was not an easy chore, plus I wasn't so sure that using this cable on an external power supply would make that big of a difference. But we were here to listen to cables, so I played along. After switching the music back on (and regaining my composure), I was shocked at the improvement I heard from this cable. My immediate response was to the instant upgrade in macro-dynamics I was hearing from the system. Bass and mid-bass sounds had substantially more impact. It was as if I doubled the amplifier power. Even more puzzling was the fact that Jeff Rowland utilizes a power factor correction device in the Aeris' external supply which I felt would additionally minimize the power cord's influence. The next realization was an improvement in soundstage silence, or black-

ness. Images seemed to emanate from a quieter background. My only theory as to the efficacy of this power cord is its ability to dampen ringing and other noises traveling down the power line. Of course, it could just be magic.

Well, go figure. This product does the job in spades, much more so than any other power cord in my experience. I will be hesitant to return the cable to Nathan. In summary, the NVS products I auditioned were of excellent quality and handily delivered the promised results. The speaker cable competed successfully with others priced much higher, but the SE power cord, even at its somewhat hefty cost, is not something you may want to casually audition in your system — you may not be able to live without it.

<http://www.nvssound.com>

## MG Audio Design Cables

Art Tedeschi

### Products Reviewed

- Planus Spira 8' Speaker Cable (\$1080)
- Planus Ag Interconnect (1 Meter Balanced—\$1000)
- Planus Cu Interconnect (1 Meter Balanced—\$500)

MG Audio Design is a newly-formed collaboration between long-time CAS members Lee Matuszczak and Greg Graff. Now before you go running off assuming that this is some “homer” review to promote the products of two CAS members, I caution against it. Read on and you will see what I mean.

Both the speaker and the interconnect cables are formed from high-purity copper (or silver for the Planus Ag) foil with the legs of the conductors running side-by-side to minimize both inductance and capacitance. The two foil conductors are then held together by a high-quality insulation covering both the top and the bottom of the cable. The conductors are then terminated (the really tricky part) onto hand-picked spades or RCA/XLRs for the interconnects.

The original concept behind these cables was hatched several years ago with many iterations between the first versions and the ones

we are reviewing today. Much experimenting and listening resulted in the final designs. Various materials were tested, to include terminations, insulation, etc. before a final version of the product was decided upon. For several years I had owned a pair of the original speaker cables, and one I thought highly of, especially when considering the cost, but it was only over the past year or so when Lee and Greg decided to seriously take the design to a higher level, and they did so in spades (npi).

Word began to spread several months ago among friends that MG had come upon a new design that was significantly improved over the original version. I must admit that I was intrigued, but also a bit skeptical that cables at these price points could compete favorably with the big boys (which were the claims being bandied about). So after speaking with Greg and mentioning that I would be reviewing other cables in this Journal, he offered to lend me a pair of speaker cables for a listen. These were relatively simple upgrades from my original cables with new terminations and other processes they had applied to the cables.

In a word, I was amazed at the improvements

compared to the originals. I was hearing extended highs, improved soundstaging and dynamics, tighter bass — everything had moved up several notches. These cables bested my reference cables in several areas, but were still lagging a bit in low and mid-bass extension, but not by much. It wasn't more than a few days later that I was informed that a newer, more sophisticated design was in the works (based upon the same physical concept), but utilizing improved materials and construction. So one Sunday, Greg dropped by with his new speaker and interconnects, the copper cables under review today.

### *Planus Spira Speaker Cable*

Immediately upon inserting the Planus Spira into the system, I focused upon the extended highs that I was hearing for the first time on my system. My first reaction was that the cables must be wrong, as all the others I'd auditioned (including some of the big boys) did not approach the high-frequency extension I was now hearing from my system. After several minutes of listening and focusing my attention on the upper ranges, I was then convinced that the Planus was providing a component of the musical spectrum that I

had been missing altogether. This heightened resolution also contributed to my ability to hear tiny nuances in the performance while expanding the soundstage to new levels of depth and width.

On Diana Krall's "*A Case of You*" I could now pick out individual noises coming from the audience as well as their relative positions in the hall. These are all sounds I was able to hear from other cables, but I could now clearly delineate a sound's distance from the stage as well as its lateral position. On the Neil Young Massey Hall recording, I was now hearing a fuller extension of the guitar strings' harmonics, adding to a more realistic representation of the guitar's sound. This level of transparency extended down into the midrange, providing palpable vocal inflections previously unheard by either of us. I was stunned that I could hear into the vocal cavities of closely-miked singers, and all instruments suddenly became more life-like and more present within the listening room.

Bass and midbass were suddenly more apparent and dynamic. Bass tightness had improved and matched or even surpassed the reference cables in this regard. The overall improvement in sound is difficult to describe, but a new level of excitement had been added to the musical presentation. This

transformation, and it was a transformation, allowed the system to sing in a way I hadn't previously experienced. It was as if a window onto the soundstage had been cleaned, allowing me to more clearly see into the original recording venue. This initial experience caused me to question all my previously-held notions regarding the system's capabilities. My first thought was that the cable must be accentuating the highs in an unnatural fashion, but after extended listening, I knew this was not the case. We've all heard components or even cables in the past that had seemingly enhanced various portions of the musical spectrum, but none, in my experience, exhibited this level of transparency from top to bottom.

#### ***Planus Cu Interconnect***

Replacing the reference interconnect with the Planus Cu provided a similar improvement, extending the highs even more, and removing more layers obscuring the sound of the original recording. At this point, I was totally blown over with the sound I was hearing from my once-polite but accurate system. Of course, none of this would be possible were it not for the efficacy of the Rowland DAC and 625 amplifier combination. I am now benefiting from their true strengths.

#### ***Planus Ag Interconnect***

The final cable that MG provided for evaluation was their silver interconnect which shared the same physical makeup as the copper, except with silver conductors. Here we had a compromise of sorts. The astonishing characteristic of this cable is that it was able to best the copper interconnect in the areas of sheer openness and transparency of the soundstage and all instruments in residence. Upper highs were extended to a level exceeding even the copper and only when totally cleaning and treating every connection in the system were all vestiges of high-frequency grunge eliminated, noise that I hadn't heard in the past (thanks to Bill Ernst for acting as the Cleaner). I mentioned that this cable was a compromise, but I don't mean this as a put-down. In my system the copper interconnect was a touch warmer and more organic sounding, thus more pleasing over long listening sessions, but for that ultimate see-through quality, the silver is unmatched.

The MG cables represent an amazing bargain considering their cost and performance. In my system they provided a transformation I would've never believed could be wrought by cables alone.

Contact Greg at [ggraff@q.com](mailto:ggraff@q.com) for special CAS pricing in conjunction with this review.

## David's Dollop

David Tyree

### The Plan

I have always distrusted "10 Best" lists. I know we are a nation that likes to give awards for achievement. We even go so far as to present special awards to those who have received numerous awards in the past with things like lifetime achievement awards, Kennedy Center Honors, and so on. 'Rewarding the awarded' I call it, and I keep wondering if in the process we are missing a great deal that is worthy of attention.

To put this more in context, I do not think I could tell you with any degree of objectivity what are my 10 favorite (let alone what are the 10 best) recordings ever made. On any given day, though, I could come up with several recordings that have recently captured my attention. In fact, I find so many recordings that I genuinely admire and am proud to have in my collection that the distinction of which ones are the best is pointless to me.

That being the case, what I would like to do is give you just a brief sampling of recent finds that I think are worth passing along. No lengthy dissertations, just quick summaries of why the recordings have appeal. I

will aim for a variety of music and for recordings that are not expensive and hopefully not already familiar to you. And off we go...

### LPs

#### **Biber – Consort Music on Original Instruments**

The Leonhardt Consort  
Telefunken Das Alte Werk SAWT 9556-B  
Ex (recorded 1969)

You can never have too much Biber! Early music is a passion of mine, and I find Biber's music to be some of the most interesting of the Baroque era. It is well performed for this recording. Recording quality is sublime for its time, with plenty of air, liveness, and sense of space. I could wish for a copy in better condition, but I am happy to at least have a copy.

#### **James Galway Plays Reinecke**

James Galway, flute; Phillip Moll, piano;  
London Philharmonic, Hiroyuki Iwaki, conductor  
RCA Red Seal Digital ATC1-4034 (1981)

Being a flutist myself, I long ago declared myself as belonging to the Rampal camp as

opposed to the Galway camp. Nevertheless, Galway is a fine player irrespective of individual taste, and this recording is a welcome addition to my collection. Especially good is the side recorded with piano, which vividly recalls the many flute recitals I attended years ago. The orchestra side is somewhat less well recorded, but is still probably above average.

#### **Spears**

Scott Henderson and Tribal Tech  
Passport Jazz PJ88010 (1986)

Delicious fretless bass guitar work from Gary Willis makes this a don't-miss recording. Willis would come to share top billing with Henderson on the many albums that followed, and this early recording clearly demonstrates why. Side 2 is the most interesting musically, and contains some wonderful percussion and sparse grooves.

#### **Le Bebop Montreux**

Chaffey College Jazz Ensemble, Jack Mason, director  
????? (recorded live in 1981 at Montreux Jazz Festival)

For one glorious semester in 1980 I had the

privilege of playing baritone saxophone and flute in the University of Iowa's top jazz ensemble. At that time there was such a spirit of pushing the boundaries of big band jazz, and the competition among music schools was fierce. I occasionally came across recordings made by such ensembles ("jazz lab bands" might be a good term) and they are always exciting stuff. This one is no exception. It is recorded just well enough to be enjoyed for the enthusiastic live performance it is.

#### CD/HDCD/SACD

##### **Derek Bermel: Voices**

Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Gil Rose, conductor; Derek Bermel, clarinet  
BMOP/sound 1008 (2008)

This hybrid SACD was recorded DSD and sounds glorious on the Red Book layer. Bermel, a turn-of-the-millennium composer, is superbly entertaining. Elements of Copland and Gershwin, and an occasional whiff of Glass lend the familiarity of great American composers, but there is a majesty here that seems innate, not borrowed. The first 3 pieces (*Dust Dances*, *Thracian Echoes*, *Elixir*) are absolute gems. Accounting for 70% of the 55 minutes on tap, the CD is worth having for them alone. The remaining 30% is devoted to the title work *Voices* that, disappointingly, opens with the bleak austerity of so many

modern works. So, think of this CD as an EP of absolute brilliance accompanied by a "bonus disk" you might someday develop a taste for (or not).

**Beethoven: String Quartets, Op.18, No.6 in B-flat Major and Op.59, No.1 in F Major**  
Cleveland Quartet  
Telarc CD-80229 (1993)

Beethoven is not my favorite, I'll admit. However, I am a sucker for achingly gorgeous violin tone, and I find that in William Preucil, the leader of this exceptional quartet. Perhaps more than any other recording I've heard, this CD engulfs you in string quartet splendor. The instrumental voices are so full and in your face, you feel like you are sitting before a private rehearsal by a group that plays together for the joy of it, not because they need the practice. If this were the only string quartet recording in my collection, I could not call myself impoverished. Then again, I would really miss that Kronos/Glass CD...

##### **Some Rainy Morning**

Robert Cray  
Mercury P2 26867 (1995)

This album may be familiar to many of you, but I somehow missed it until recently. Truth is, I had a hard time letting go of the Midnight Stroll album (1990) with its masterful use of

the Memphis Horns. I've gotten over that, and I can accept Cray on his own terms now (big of me, I know). Sound-wise, it's better than most electric blues recordings I've heard. One thing I admire about Robert Cray – he has a knack for incorporating riffs that throw the groove off balance, sort of like a musical aneurism. Moments like that can be found on this album, and I find they make for a more durable listening experience.

#### Books

##### **Providence**

Paul Di Filippo  
The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction, Volume III, edited by George Mann; Solaris (2009)

Got spiral? If you're not into vinyl and not into science fiction, you may want to skip ahead. Okay, fellow 'freaks, I could not pass this one up. "Providence", a short story by Paul Di Filippo takes place on Earth at a time when humans – a.k.a. "carnals" – no longer survive, but their machines live on. The story is about a robot named Reddy K who gets his kicks from scoring "fresh spiral"; i.e. caches of LPs and 45s. The pleasure of the story is mainly in the offbeat way it is told, as we get to eavesdrop on the dealings of a vinyl junkie of the future. It just goes to show you, NEVER give up your vinyl collection!