

## Shootout!

# 13 Interconnects From \$122 to \$250

Paul Seydor & Neil Gader

**Neil's Equanimous Intro:** With so many of today's interconnects costing as much as a good integrated amplifier, Paul Seydor and I decided to conduct a comprehensive listening comparison of interconnects priced at about \$200 per meter per pair. To facilitate repeated swapping, we requested two-meter pairs, the manufacturers assuring us our findings would not be compromised by that length. All were broken in for a minimum of 200 continuous hours via an FM classical station (subsequent improvements may occur over time, but they will be tiny). All were single-ended (though several are available in balanced configuration).

We acknowledge all arguments for conductor type, formulation, dielectrics, and jacking. But this survey is about *listening*. We evaluated the cables in our reference systems separately and together. Though our rooms are quite different, our systems share many sonic traits. Paul and I also share similar listening preferences: tonal neutrality, midrange transparency, and those difficult-to-define qualities of coherence and harmonic integrity. Musically, Paul leans toward classical, traditional popular, and jazz, and I toward popular and rock.

The reference cables we refer to are Kimber Kable's Select KS-1021 and Nordost's Valhalla.

One final note: Fine-tuning a system with wiring is like taking 600-grade sandpaper to a marble sculpture: It's a finishing detail. Audiophiles should not hope to fix *large* sonic problems with any interconnect or loudspeaker cable. Careful selection of wire products can enhance performance, but no cable will fix everything, nor should it be used as an equalizer.

### Paul Seydor's Seven

Audience Maestro: \$199  
Audience Conductor: \$122

The least pretentious of the lot, these Audience offerings pitch the tonal balance a little to the Yin. The Maestro is pleasant and laid-back, and though it can get slightly edgy in the upper midrange, it is dimensional—instru-

ments are realistically separated. To my ears, the less expensive Conductor might be the better: equally dimensional, but at all times smooth and listenable. "A nice, easy sound," reads one of my notes. Solo vocals are forward in a good way, and like the Maestro, the Conductor has room-filling bass. Transparency and detailing also quite good. In the Toccata movement of Hillary Hahn's new Stravinsky *Violin Concerto* [Sony 89649, SACD], the Conductor was a trifle small-scaled but evinced natural-sounding timbres and excellent dynamics; the Maestro was fractionally more transparent and dynamic, with exceptionally precise lateral imaging (excellent depth, too—listen to the trumpets near the end). These same



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virtues extend to Jacintha's "Something's Got To Give" [Groove Note GRV-1006-3, SACD], where both interconnects performed among the best: lively, involving, and dynamic, the drum set explosive, the piano hard-driving, the saxophone warm. Both retrieved detail well; they suffered only a little veiling in direct comparison to the best of the survey and to the reference.

Monster Cable Z200i Reference: \$199

Both physically and sonically this was one of the bigger interconnects of the group, with full if blowzy bass, a smooth extreme top, and a forward midrange that imparted some welcome smoke to Mary Chapin Carpenter's voice on *time\*sex\*love* [Columbia CS85176, SACD]. Unfortunately, the upper midrange could also get brash, even harsh: Sonny Rollins's sax on *Way Out West* [Analog Productions CAP 7530 SA, SACD] was edgier than usual, Hahn's violin wiry, and the trumpet on "Something's Got To Give" a little pinched. The cello on Carpenter's "Alone But Not Lonely" sounded distinctly nasal. In the Stravinsky, the soundstage was a flat ribbon stretched tight across the plane of the speakers,

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with orchestral images bunching a little toward either side. The Z200i suggests a lack of real integration up and down the scale that translates into an equal lack of involvement in the presentation.

#### Siltech Paris Mxt: \$199

**A** superb interconnect with a really slight midrange recessiveness that throws the tonal balance about three degrees to the Yin side of neutral, albeit not unmusically. Otherwise, it has a smooth, tube-like sound that's not sibilant, while the low end is rich, warm, and detailed, the plucked basses in the Stravinsky displaying marvelous bloom and presence, the cello on Carpenter's "Alone But Not Lonely" sounding like a cello. Despite the presence anomaly, on *Way Out West*, Rollins' sax is lifelike and dynamic. As for soundstaging, like many components with a midrange trough, the Siltech sets the entire presentation back somewhat, with a rather conspicuous rendering of depth. "Something's Got To Give" doesn't cook as it does with the Kimber Hero, but it's otherwise involving. An analytical description cannot adequately convey how wonderfully the Paris reproduces the totality of a musical event. One afternoon when all the evaluating was done, Neil played Mary Stallings's "Sunday Kind of Love" [*Live at the Village Vanguard* (MaxxJazz 112)] with this interconnect in place: stunningly detailed, transparent, realistic.

#### Van den Hul Integration Hybrid: \$250

**O**ne of the best of the survey. On *Way Out West*, my notes read: "Smooth,

sweet, perhaps a little tubey but dynamic and involving. Cymbals may have a little less metal than some others, but sound natural. Drum set has great control, with notably good lateral imaging." The Stravinsky Toccata tells much about a component's composure, its ability to maintain grip when a lot is going. The Van den Hul matched the reference for sheer control. This interconnect has wonderful air, space, and dimensionality, without being harsh, topky, or grating (indeed, in this regard I believe I prefer it to the reference). Instruments are at once focused yet situated in a space of their own (e.g., Hahn's violin is less bunched in with the orchestra). The drum set on "Something's Got To Give" is spread medium-distance right across the center behind the singer and rendered with engaging punch and vitality. I can't be sure how much the tonal balance of the Integration veers from absolute neutrality (not much, whatever it may be), but I can say that none in the survey was musically richer or more pleasing.

#### Straightwire Maestro II Reference: \$220

**T**his rather midrangy-sounding interconnect throws a big soundstage, but not a lot of detail, with more grain than I like and some congestion in thickly scored music. With the superb Michael Tilson Thomas Mahler *Sixth* [San Francisco Symphony 821936-0001, SACD], it yielded a big, forward soundstage, though rather short on depth (by contrast, Kimber Hero projected both outstanding depth and width, with fabulous instrumental colors, at all times

clean and clear, no matter how dense the orchestration). On the Mary Chapin Carpenter, the background vocal is far less distinct than with several other interconnects; and though nicely balanced, the bass line lacks articulation. With the Hahn/Stravinsky, the composer's acerbic orchestration was rather prettified and dynamics were reduced. Listenable but a little veiled and uninvolved, and rather heavy going on the hard-driving Jacintha selection. Clearly, this product's characteristics do not complement my or Neil's systems well, but it might find a happy home in some that are more clinical.

#### Kimber Hero: \$150



**N**ot surprisingly, this is a near-twin to my longstanding reference, Kimber Select KS-1021, yielding by direct comparison only a *tiny* bit to the latter in ultimate control, top-end transparency, and detailing. To my ears, this has the most accurate-sounding tonal balance of the group, and ties with the Synergistic as the most detailed and transparent. On the Mary Chapin Carpenter, the male background vocal is heard far more clearly and distinctly than on any of the others except the Synergistic, while the Hero's bass is the best in the survey: truly prodigious in amplitude and definition (rather better even than the reference). On the Hahn/Stravinsky, the presentation is exceptionally bold and vivid, with quite ear-opening clarification of textures and rendering of soundstage. Compared to the Integration and the Paris, the Hero is either dead neutral or

tilts a notch to the Yang, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in a grain-free presentation. Add to this clarity and definition an overall sound that is exceptionally natural (especially throughout the midrange), and it's obvious that Ray Kimber once again demonstrates his leadership in designing a superior performer at a reasonable price.

**PAUL SEYDOR'S**

**ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS:**

Quad 988 speakers with Audio Physic Minos Subwoofer; Quad 909 and Carver AV705X amplifiers; Placette Audio preamplifier; Sony XA777ES CD/SACD player

## Neil Gader's Six

### Audio Magic Excaliber II: \$250

The Audio Magic Excaliber II was a solid middle-of-the-pack performer, joining the Maestro and AudioQuest cables in a pleasant, non-aggressive character that emphasized midrange tonality. It possessed a whiter, less airy character in the upper octaves, the classic signature of silver conductors, but without the leanness of earlier silver cable. Soundstaging on orchestral material was good, even spacious. Images were well defined and dimensional. On Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West*, the acoustic bass was less refined and punchy than it should have been, and there were traces of dynamic constriction from the saxophone and some grain on the high-hat. On Clark Terry's "Liza, All the Clouds'll

Roll" (*One on One* (Chesky SACD231)), Eric Lewis' piano veered to the warmer side of neutral as if some of the microdynamic nuance were lightly muted. The snappy interplay between trumpet and piano was not quite immediate. The energy of this recording was not up to the top tier in this survey, but the Excaliber made no serious missteps. Highly listenable and polished, but not quite as involving as the best.

### AudioQuest Coral: \$139

AudioQuest's Coral attended to the middle range with a perspective that was slightly less forward than the Nordost and Kimber. It conveyed a warmer, rounder personality that would match well with leaner, cooler systems. Its soundstaging was appreciably wide and deep on orchestral material. Its tran-

sients were a bit muted, owing in part to a darker treble that soothed aggressive vocals and zippy string sections but remained transparent. Thus the sense of orchestral instruments on a definable soundstage was less than precise. On the other hand, the Coral had terrific recovery time on such fast piano passages as Evgeny Kissin playing Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* [RCA 63884]. There was no harmonic slurring from the cascade of notes, as some of the other cables here did. On Mary Chapin Carpenter's "Alone But Not Lonely," the Coral occasionally grew peaky on loud vocal transients, but this was found to varying degrees with many of the cables. While not the last word in accuracy, the Coral was a solid performer with an unhyped, relaxed, even "pretty" sound that will match up well with brighter systems.

#### Tara Labs RSC Prime: \$179

**T**ara's RSC Prime was a lively interconnect that extracted the quietest details from the mix. It reproduced well the low-frequency foundations and soundstage on the Scherzo movement of Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 4* [Cleveland/Maazel; Telarc SACD-60563], and presented orchestral passages well, remaining focused during even the most complex moments. Its character in the upper octaves was on the dryer, more clinical side, however, and transients sounded etched and edgy at times. The upper octaves of flute and piccolo were not as harmonically integrated as they should be. On *Way Out West*, Rollins' sax sounded a bit strident and gave up some of the harmonic bloom. A slightly spot-lit cymbal and high-hat suggested a light emphasis on the upper middle/lower treble range. Female vocalists like Jacintha fared similarly, becoming a little dryer and more sibilant than on our reference Kimber and Nordost cables.

#### Wireworld Equinox III+: \$199

**A**n earlier version of the Equinox has been a part of my reference system

for three years. The sound of this version remains substantially the same: a rich, dark character with a lower midrange that can at moments sound a bit thick. On the Sonny Rollins, the sax was not as forward as on the reference. Transient behavior was almost a little rounded and saxophone dynamics were not as expansive as I've come to expect. The soundstage on Clark Terry's *One On One* was a little less open, and I didn't hear the residual airiness riding on top of Terry's trumpet as I do on the reference. On the piano solo from Mary Stallings' "Sunday Kind of Love," the high-speed upper-octave improvisations lost some focus and there was an added warmth on her vocal. This cable is like the utility baseball player: It can play every position smoothly. For its intrinsic warmth and unhyped character, the Equinox may find its best audience in neutral to leaner systems.

#### Nordost Blue Heaven: \$199

**T**he combination of low-level detail, upper-octave smoothness, and transient speed made the Blue Heaven a top choice in this survey. It resides on the cooler, leaner side of neutral, contrasting with the moderately warmer Siltech Paris. Still, both take the prize in terms of earthy harmonics and near-effortless dynamics, approaching my reference interconnects. On *Way Out West*, it was lively and slightly forward in personality, with a grain-free top that on occasion sounded a little spot-lit, for example, on a high-pitched percussion instrument like a ride cymbal, which was feathery with microdynamics but also a trace too present. On Mary Stallings's voice, the Nordost imparted a bit more transient attack than the Siltech, but I preferred the latter's warmer, more rounded, more human touch here.

The Blue Heaven demonstrated terrific pitch definition on instruments like acoustic bass or drums where pitch has to wrestle with powerful acoustic resonances. But it doesn't sacrifice a drum kit's well-defined physicality and dimensionality. There was never a trace of hollowness, and soundstage retrieval

was excellent. A cable with exceptional inner detail and nuance, it created one of the quietest backgrounds for music to emerge from.

#### Synergistic Research Alpha Sterling:

**T**he Synergistic Alpha Sterling really clicked with my system. Its character was richly midrange, sweet and smooth, detailed where necessary but never forced or strident in the lower treble. Its greatest strength was its balance and transparency: It was open across the spectrum, with excellent imaging and instrumental layering. Background vocals and soft acoustic instrumentation emerged with new details and body. While it scaled the soundstage down in comparison to the Kimber Hero, it also suggested a neutrality and smoothness in the treble that I missed with the Kimber. String sections on Mahler's *Sixth* rarely hinted at edginess. While the Hero was a leader in bass extension and focus, the Alpha was tops in the upper midrange and well into the treble. It performed effortlessly, suggesting music reproduction with hardly any artificiality—no peakiness, sweet details without etching. While it challenged my high-priced reference, the Nordost Valhalla, in virtually all sonic criteria, the Synergistic ultimately couldn't achieve the robust harmonic liveliness or effortless extension that makes the Valhalla seem not of this world. The comparison provided a glimpse of how narrow the performance gap is and how quickly it's closing. No cable in this survey ranked higher overall than the Synergistic, for me.

**Paul Seydor's Comment** Neil has folded my impressions into his, so I have little to add. I do counsel reading his remarks on the Nordost *very* carefully, because while objectively his description is accurate to a T, the Blue Heaven is much in the Yang camp, its lean, whitish character best suited to warmer systems. On the other hand, I completely second his endorsement of the Wireworld.

As for my preferences, in my system the Kimber emerged—the pun is

unavoidable—the Hero by a stride; the Van den Hul, Siltech, and Synergistic Research offerings followed close enough to let system characteristics determine the choice. Virtually neck-and-neck with these are Audience’s Conductor and Maestro, siblings I liked better every time I returned to them. The Conductor’s mere \$122/meter makes it a bargain, but for just \$28/meter/pair more, the Kimber Hero obviously takes the “best buy,” as well as the top, honors of the survey. But these interconnects are all well built and fairly priced, giving the lie to assertions that it’s necessary to spend thousands of dollars for high-quality cables.

#### NEIL GADER’S

##### ASSOCIATED COMPONENTS

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; Sony C222ES SACD Multi-Channel, Sony DVP-9000ES; Plinius 8200 integrated amp; Placette Volume Control preamp; Rotel RMB-1075 amp; ATC SCM 20SL, Infinity Intermezzo 2.6, Snell K.5 speakers; Nordost Valhalla & Blue Heaven cabling; Kimber Kable BiFocal XL, Wireworld Equinox III, CPCC, Wireworld Silver Electra power cords; Poly Crystal rack; AudioPrism Quiet Lines, Sanus Systems equipment stands

**Neil Gader’s Comment** Our subjective disagreement over the Nordost Blue Heaven interconnects has more to do with key

differences in loudspeakers and listening-room size. My reference speaker ATC SCM20-SL is a compact British monitor derived from ATC’s active pro model. It was designed for quasi-near-field recording applications and correspondingly rolls the top octave slightly so that it’s down about 6dB at 20kHz. This further contributes to an already warm midrange character by slightly darkening the upper treble. I don’t hear this characteristic in Paul’s Quad-based system. The Nordost as a result complements my system in a subtle way that it does not with Paul’s. Further evidence that you should audition two or three cables over a weekend before choosing.

As I regarded the shoestring-gauge Audience Conductor, it occurred to me that even reviewers are not immune to marketing hype. As Paul suggests and I nearly agree, the Conductor is the closest thing to a best buy in this group. I found no outright winner in this survey, but rather a cluster in a photo finish. For my system and tastes, the Siltech would nose ahead; the Synergistic and the Nordost might edge by the cooler Kimber, with the rich, smooth Van den Hul and ripe Wireworld a short distance behind. The others were close at their heels. I found these conclusions highly reassuring. It says to me that all these manufacturers have applied sound design criteria, resulting in products that don’t attempt to play fast and loose with the truth.

#### Paul’s Curmudgeonly Conclusion

It is difficult to think of an activity more meaningless than subjectively comparing and evaluating any sort of wire. Unless wire does something obviously wrong—like, in Peter Walker’s dry observation, failing to pass current, causing an amplifier to oscillate (as a few speaker cables once did), or picking up noise—there is no way of knowing whether its contribution to the sound is more accurate than the “reference.” I use quotation marks because the so-called accuracy of the reference is itself an unknown inasmuch as its only claim to being a reference is that it happens to be the wire one has been using for awhile.<sup>1</sup> But it’s like surveying on quicksand: Not only won’t the reference stay put, it’s not even precisely locatable. All one can say is that one likes the sound of the new wire better, worse, or both than the old one.

Then there is the question of *why* wire sounds the way it does. Robert E. Greene once fretted, “What’s frustrating about interconnects is that no one has come up with a coherent theoretical model as to how they work. Has anyone, for example, ever found [a] cable that measures well according to all the accepted criteria of capacitance, resistance, and inductance and that sounds consistently, system to system, *bad*?”

My own belief is that observed differences in interconnects—assuming no gross misbehavior—have to do with tiny anomalies in apparent frequency response that owe to shield-

<sup>1</sup> As noted, my reference happens to be Kimber Select KS-1021, but when I call it a “reference” I am speaking descriptively, not evaluatively. It happens to produce consistently excellent results in systems I’ve assembled over the years (though conditions of late have made me wish Ray Kimber would rethink the desirability of leaving his interconnects unshielded).

ing, length, their behavior as noise, degrees of compatibility with other equipment, and so on. Consider the irony that for 20 years, the audiophile community has rejected tone controls as a corruption of signal purity even as it has re-embraced the *function* of tone controls by way of interconnects, cables, line cords, connectors, not to mention pods, pads, cones, tips, stands.<sup>2</sup> My experience suggests that if substituting an interconnect makes a huge difference in your system, the likelihood is that one or the other is doing something grievously wrong or that the frequency response of your speakers is seriously amiss.


Not only did we find the differences among these interconnects rather small and not always consistent from one source to another, but rapid A/B comparisons were just about the only way we could be sure we were hearing the differences most of the time.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, I would not bet that I could tell which was playing several hours after an A/B session.

The principal value of this survey, then, is of a paradigmatic sort. Since any interconnect may make at least a tiny difference and the only tools most of us have are our ears, audio systems, favorite recordings, and live-music references, all we can do is what we've done here: Hook them up, listen, and buy the one that seems to work best in our own systems.

Recently a self-proclaimed instant-internet guru wrote (on his Web site) that if at least half the system budget isn't allocated to wire, it cannot be regarded as a serious system. The thought that people not only believe this but act upon it is depressing. When I told an audiophile friend that we were doing a survey of interconnects costing \$200/meter, he said, "But cables don't *start* to get good until \$500 a meter." I did not have the heart to inform him that one of the finest sys-

tems he and I have ever heard—wide-range, resolution of the highest, magnificently musical, with almost perfect tonal balance—uses mostly generic interconnects, 14-gauge outdoor-extension cable (the orange stuff) for the speakers, and power cords supplied by the electronics' manufacturers.

I won't argue with anyone who

insists that wire costing thousands of dollars a meter makes his system sound better to him. But nobody—*nobody*—has ever convincingly demonstrated any real correlation between price and performance. If this survey does nothing more than persuade a few readers that this is the truth, it will have taken on some meaning. 

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#### MANUFACTURER/DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

##### **Audience Maestro & Conductor**

Audience  
1525 Brian Place  
Escondido, California 92025  
Phone: 800-565-4390  
www.audience-av.com

##### **Monster Cable Z200i Reference**

Monster Cable  
455 Valley Drive  
Brisbane California 94005  
Phone: (415) 840-2000  
www.monstercable.com

##### **Siltech Paris Mxt**

Siltech America, Inc.  
76 Green Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02130  
Phone: (617) 522-7740  
www.siltechcables.com

##### **Van den Hul Integration Hybrid**

Distributor: May Audio Marketing  
2150 Liberty Drive, Unit 7  
Niagara Falls, New York  
Phone: (716) 283-4434  
www.mayaudio.co; www.vandenhul.com

##### **Kimber Hero**

Kimber Kable  
2752 S. 1900 W.  
Ogden, Utah 84401  
Phone: 800-223-4039  
www.kimber.com

##### **Straightwire Maestro II Reference**

Straightwire, Inc.  
2032 Scott Street  
Hollywood, Florida 33020  
Phone: (954) 925-2470  
www.straightwire.com

##### **Audio Magic Excalibur II**

Audio Magic, Inc.  
18063 E. Gunnison Place  
Aurora, Colorado 80017  
Phone: (303) 369-1814  
www.audio-magic.com

##### **AudioQuest Coral**

Audioquest  
8710 Research Drive  
Irvine, California 92618  
Phone: (949) 585-0111  
www.audioquest.com

##### **Nordost Blue Heaven**

Nordost Corporation  
200 Homer Avenue  
Ashland Massachusetts 01721  
Phone: (508) 881-1116  
www.nordost.com

##### **Synergistic Research Alpha Sterling**

Synergistic Research  
501 Superior Avenue  
Newport Beach, California 92663  
Phone: (949) 642-2800  
www.synergisticresearch.com

##### **Tara Labs RSC Prime**

Tara Labs  
2245 Ashland Street  
Ashland, Oregon 97520  
Phone: (541) 488-6465  
www.taralabs.com

##### **Wireworld Equinox III +**

Wireworld, Inc.  
12349 SW 53rd Street  
Cooper City, Florida 33330  
Phone: (954) 680-3848  
www.wireworldaudio.com

<sup>2</sup> None of these things is capable of the consistency, repeatability, and predictability of tone controls.

<sup>3</sup> Bear in mind that we evaluated these only as a CD interconnect; you'll probably get different results in pre-amp-to-amp applications.