

The Right Chord

Jon Myles brings together a one-make cable system from Chord to show how just such a consistent approach can pay dividends.

Apart from a few vocal sceptics, most hi-fi enthusiasts accept that cables can make a tremendous difference to a system. Even a moderately-priced set of components can be given a healthy sonic boost by choosing the right loudspeaker leads, interconnects or digital links.

But there's no getting away from the fact that products from different manufacturers all have their own trademark sound. Try a set of 'speaker cables from Company A and you might get more bass compared to one from Company B – but lose out on some pace and timing.

Add in interconnects from Company C and something might change again. Then bring in after-market power leads from Company D and you can see the sonic permutations start to multiply exponentially when you mix and match (if I'd paid more attention to my Business Studies statistics module at university I could probably give you some exact figures!).

An obvious solution is to build a coherent wiring loom from one company. The advantages are there's likely to be a house sound due to the use of similar materials and geometry of construction, the products will



Chord Signature Reference speaker cables.

have been designed to work together and there's the opportunity to move up the company's range in stages as funds allow.

Which led me towards choosing a set of cables from the Wiltshire-based Chord company's Signature range just to see how well this can work. Specifically the Signature Reference 'speaker cable, Signature Tuned Array XLR interconnects, Signature Array Power lead and Signature Super Array streaming cable

The set-up was simple: one system comprising a Cambridge Audio Azur 851N network player, McIntosh MC152 power amplifier

and Spondor D7 loudspeakers – a combination costing a shade over £10,000.

And then, for comparison, a rather more budget but still excellent set of components comprising an Oppo BDP-105D disc player, Creek Evolution 100A amplifier and Epos K3 floorstanding loudspeakers.

SOUND VALUE

Plugging the Signature Reference loudspeaker cables into the McIntosh/Spondor set-up immediately revealed what its intentions are. This is a cable that majors on timing, detail and openness: it allowed the McIntosh to convey all of its controlled power to the wonderfully detailed Spondor D7s.

Streaming Primal Scream's 'Screamadelica' (24/96) via the Azur 951N the female vocals on 'Come Together' rang out as clear as a bell, while Jesse Jackson's sampled concert speech was spine-tinglingly good.

I then added the Signature Tuned Array XLR interconnects between the Azur and the McIntosh, instead of a set of stock cables, and started to see the synergy of a coherent approach. The details and dynamics evidenced by the 'speaker cables became even more sharply focussed. Jackson's voice wasn't just there – it moved



Chord Signature Tuned Array XLR cables.

forward into the listening room and out and above the 'speakers. Perhaps most impressive was the way I could hear more into the mix and feel enveloped by the music.

Next, a pair of Signature Array power cables were used for both the McIntosh and 851N, instead of their stock leads. Here the improvement was more subtle – but noticeable. There was an obvious firming up of bass notes and a smoother midband. The low-end did not go any deeper but it did sound obviously more tuneful and rounded. This was something I became more aware of when I reverted back to the original power leads, hearing the sound take a step back.

Finally, using the Super Array streaming cable to go from my router to the Cambridge Audio Azur proved digital connections do make a difference. Some people still dispute this – but there are good reasons as to why it works (see this issue's Letters for a more detailed explanation).

Again the Chord built on all the qualities of its stablemates, bringing a better sense of timing and coherence to the mix. Dave Brubeck's 'Take Five' never sounds bad – but when you hear the syncopation and drum beats at their best it moves to a different level. With the entire Chord cabling in place this is just what happened.

All of a sudden the kick-drum halfway through the piece wasn't just a thwack – it actually punched me in the chest with its power, but did not linger to slow the tempo. Instead it was there like a bolt from the blue and then gone – an absolute stunning moment that elevated the track from merely good to spine-tinglingly

Chord Signature Array power cable.



memorable.

Switching the entire cable loom over to the Oppo/Creek/Epos system proved even more instructive. It might seem a mismatch – cables costing around £3200 employed on the end of a £4000 set-up. But, actually, the increase in performance was quite startling – akin to upgrading each individual component to the next level.

The Reference 'speaker cable and Tuned Array XLR work together to give a much cleaner and sharper sound to the Oppo and Epos 'speakers. But most crucially they seemed to let the two breathe and open up. It's as though a constriction in the pipeline was removed and this let more of the essential elements of the music flow freely.

Wendy James's roar of 'Wooooaaahhh' at the start of Transvision Vamp's 'Baby I Don't Care' (a classic rock 'n' roll moment that never fails to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up) was

visceral – her voice having just the right amount of edge.

Leading edges of guitars were also more distinct, while on massed strings I could hear the sound of bow on string, instead of just a wall of sound.

TUNED ARRAY

Chord's proprietary Tuned Array technology was originally developed for the company's digital cables – but it was soon found it also brought improvements to analogue interconnects and power leads.

It originated when Technical Director Nigel Finn was looking at ways to reduce reflections in digital coaxial cables – and found that adding a short additional tail to one end of the cable had a profound effect. An effect that was heightened when the tail was 'tuned' to the length of the cable.

It was then discovered that the same technique brought improvements to the company's RCA and XLR interconnects, streaming cables and power leads.

The beauty here is that with the Chord loom in place you can happily look to upgrade your components over time with obvious benefit.

Swap the Creek to something of the level of a McIntosh and the difference will be immediately evident, such is the transparency of the interconnects and loudspeaker leads.

On those terms, Chord's Tuned Array cable loom makes a very impressive long-term investment.

Chord Signature Super Array streaming cable.



CABLES

Signature Reference Speaker: £900 2m terminated pair
Signature Tuned Array XLR: £1000
Signature Array Power: £550
Signature Super Array Streaming: £750

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