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TARA Labs RSC Air 1 Interconnects and Speaker Cables, RSC Air 75 Coaxial and RSC Air 110 AES/EBU Digital Cables

by **Marc Mickelson**



TARA Labs RSC Air 1 interconnect

TARA Labs and I go *way* back. My first true high-end system -- Vandersteen 2 speakers, Adcom GFA-555 amplifier, Conrad-Johnson PV11a preamp, Micromega DAC -- was lashed together with TARA Labs Quantum interconnects and hose-like speaker cables (two runs -- I was bi-wiring even then!). I upgraded the equipment, but I held onto the cables, eventually replacing them with TARA's original RSC Master interconnects and speaker cables (the trade-up deal was impossible to ignore). What I liked about those older TARA Labs designs was their smoothness and relative lack of character. They seemed made for tubes, as I discovered when I finally went all tube -- and all

Conrad-Johnson -- and there was something about the whole Rectangular Solid Core issue that appealed to me: a conductor shape that seemed to make a difference, at least to my ears. Maybe TARA Labs' marketing was more effective than I thought.

I then got to hear the fine cables from JPS Labs and found them to be, among other things, even more neutral than the TARA cables. Thus I've used either TARA Labs or JPS Labs cables as my reference for about ten

Review Summary

- Sound** "Seamless presentation," "the sense that the sound produced is a single tapestry and not a collection of separate entities"; "ultra clean and clear" treble along with midrange performance that "is crystalline in its purity and ability to let the equipment shine through."
- Features** Air dielectric materials and TARA Labs' proprietary RSC conductor; speaker cables offer interchangeable terminations.
- Use** Thick but easy to bend and snake around components; interchangeable terminations on the speaker cables are very convenient; RSC Air 110 AES/EBU cable is the best of its type that Marc has used.
- Value** Will compete with top-of-the-line cables from other companies and given their sound may better them by a wide margin for some listeners.

years, which is commendable for an audiophile and downright amazing for a reviewer. So with this review, I come full circle -- back to the brand of cables with which I started. Will these new TARA Labs cables live up to the impression I have of the older ones in my aural memory?

The air in there

As their name implies, the TARA Labs RSC Air 1 interconnects use the company's Air-Tube technology to suspend the conductors inside Teflon tubes and thus "prevent the adverse sonic effects caused by typical dielectric material, such as fiber or PVC." These bad materials, according to TARA Labs, "absorb energy and release it back into the conductor out of phase with the audio signal, causing distortion and coloration in the highly audible midbass and midrange frequencies." In use, the conductor in the RSC Air 1, Tara Labs' well-known Rectangular Solid Core type, rests in an isolated channel of a special tube and is thus virtually surrounded by air, which has long been known to be a very good -- even the best -- dielectric. This tube is then sheathed in a bronze-colored mesh that gives the cables a distinctive look (the RSC Air 1 digital cables are adorned in blue mesh instead). The cables are thick but rather flexible, so fishing them behind your equipment racks is a cinch. As with other of TARA Labs' higher-priced designs, the shield of RSC Air 1 interconnects is meant to be connected at the source end via a small banana-like plug and matching socket, which reportedly has the effect of canceling noise. The locking RCAs of the RSC Air 1 interconnects are made especially for TARA Labs, and their impeccable gold tone along with the overall finish of the interconnects makes the cables some eye-catching pieces of audio jewelry.

The RSC Air 1 speaker cable utilizes the same materials and similar construction techniques, but also more conductors -- 24 to be exact. The RSC Air 1 speaker cables are also noteworthy for their use of interchangeable connectors that screw onto the ends. Thus changing from spades to bananas and back again doesn't require permanent retermination -- or worse, the sale of your cables. The connectors themselves are gold-plated and substantial, leaving no doubt in my mind that they are as good-sounding as they are convenient. Note to cable manufacturers: Copy what TARA Labs is doing here.



**TARA Labs RSC
Air 1 speaker
cable**

Given the high quality of the RSC Air 1 cables' fit and finish, I was expecting them to cost a bundle, which they do, but a smaller bundle than I expected: \$695 per meter pair of interconnects, \$2600 per ten-foot pair of speaker cables (you'll need two pairs to bi-wire). The coaxial and AES/EBU digital cables are \$295 and \$395 per meter length respectively.

Although the cables are at the top of TARA Labs' RSC Air line, the company does make more expensive, and presumably higher-performing, cables, so the RSC Air 1 misses nose-bleed territory.

Review system

I received a full complement of RSC Air 1 cables -- two sets of speaker cables, two pairs of RCA-terminated interconnects, coaxial and AES/EBU digital cables -- that I used along with my regular setup and a vast array of review equipment: ProAc Response Four, Silverline Sonata and Sonatina speakers; Lamm ML2, Audio Aero Capitole and Simaudio W-5 amps; Lamm L1 preamp; Linn Ikemi and Mark Levinson No.39 CD players; Timbre TT-1 2000 and Bel Canto DAC1 DACs. On hand for comparison were my reference JPS Labs Superconductor2 interconnects and NC Series speaker cables. I also used at various times the Audio Magic Tubed Interconnect and Ortho Spectrum AR-2 Analogue Reconstructor box, which [Doug Schneider reviews](#) this month. Power cords were a melange of JPS Labs, ESP, API, Sonic Horizon and Audio Magic models. Have I forgotten anything? Only the music....

Something in the air

As I listen to more and more top-flight interconnects and speaker cables, I find that their sound is converging -- much more than the sound of electronics and especially speakers. Perhaps the wire-is-wire crowd knows more than I think -- or the wire itself is more alike than different. However, the TARA Labs RSC Air 1 cables had a distinct quality that I discovered was not only consonant with long-term musical enjoyment but also my personal biases. The RSC Air 1's sound was not earth-shatteringly different from that of my reference cables or even easily describable when they were first installed in my system; it was a matter of the sound having a little more of some sonic properties without diminishing anything about the music or the overall reproduction my system was capable of.

The most noticeable trait of the RSC Air 1 cables is their seamless presentation, the sense that the sound produced is a single tapestry and not a collection of separate entities. This doesn't mean that images ran together or that image outlines were not strong; rather, it's a matter of the sound being continuous from right to left and front to back. What causes this? My ears tell me it's a matter of no one region being highlighted or attenuated in even the slightest way, so no sonic region or characteristic stands out. On Guy Clark's great *Cold Dog Soup* [Sugar Hill SUG-CD-1063], Clark's voice on "Fort Worth Blues" mingles with Emmylou Harris' to create almost one vocal line -- with the characteristics of both singers, of course. Yes, this is a by product of the production, but the RSC Air 1 cables help it along, even enhance it. This song, as sung by Clark and

Harris, will tug at your heart.

And the way my system sounds with the RSC Air 1 cables compels me to discuss their midrange performance, which is crystalline in its purity and ability to let the equipment shine through. The Audio Aero Capitole amp sounds terrifically spacious with the RSC Air 1 cables in my system, as it should, but the mighty Lamm ML2s seem made for these cables, their multifaceted and complexly satisfying presentation, especially with voices, coming through without hindrance. Again, the sound with the Lamms has a cut-from-the-same-cloth quality to it that, if anything, seemingly makes the amps and other electronics less of a factor. Or perhaps it's that my enjoyment of the music is heightened, causing me to analyze what I hear less than usual. I can live happily with either of these conclusions.

The highs the RSC Air 1 cables displayed were ultra clean and clear, lacking any sort of unnatural edge or emphasis. This is not something that can be said for every cable on the market, and so it's welcome here. However, hard, steely recordings like Wayne Kramer's raucous *The Hard Stuff* [Epitaph 86447] or the live Marshall Crenshaw disc *My Truck is My Home* [Razor & Tie RT 2815] don't lose their personalities, but they are more listenable, mostly due, once again, to the RSC Air 1 cables' panoramic way with all music: nothing emphasized. Does this then mean that treble information is somehow diminished? No chance. It's all there, and so is everything else, in the same amounts.

Of special note is the RSC Air 110 AES/EBU cable, which is the very best cable of its type that I've used. I've always known that the type of digital connection makes a greater difference to the overall sound produced than the cable used, and AES/EBU connections are generally the darkest-sounding and consequently the most software friendly too. The RSC Air 110 AES/EBU cable sounds more linear than all the other cables I've heard, seemingly mixing the various traits of the connections themselves: AES/EBU's friendliness, AT&T's speed and detail, coaxial's middle-of-the-road position. The RSC Air 110 is detailed and relaxed at the same time; it's the best-sounding AES/EBU cable that I've used.

So as I try to come to a definitive statement about the TARA RSC Air 1 cables, I'm left thinking about what kind of audiophile will admire them most. I think if you have electronics that you love, and for me this means of the tube variety, you'll find a lot to like with the RSC Air 1 cables. I can't say for sure if they get out of the way more than other cables or just impose their even-handed nature on the components they connect, but in any case, they made my system sing and never sound some new way. If, on the other hand, you are chasing the elusive signal from your source medium and you've balanced your solid-state system toward speed and leading-edge definition, the TARA Labs RSC Air 1 cables may seem

editorial because they don't add to what your system already does, making you think you are hearing more of what's on every recording when you may only be hearing an anomaly. To my ears and in my system, even with all of the components I connected, the RSC Air 1 cables sounded wonderful.

Lab vs. Lab

As I mentioned in the opening of this review, I've used essentially two brands of cable for the duration of my time as an audiophile, TARA Labs and most recently JPS Labs. In the case of JPS, I first used the original Superconductors, but now use the even better Superconductor2 interconnects and NC Series speaker cables. The prices of these are close or equal to the price of the RSC Air 1 cables I had for review.

How do the two sound in comparison to each other? Overall, what I say about the RSC Air 1 cables in this review is derived from knowing the JPS Labs cables so well. First, these are two top-flight cable lines that, like other cables of their pedigree, do not wildly change the sound of any system in which they will be used. They're too good for that. But they do differ in one way that I've already mentioned. The JPS Labs cables are more direct in their presentation, perhaps more transparent in an absolute sense too. With piano, for instance, the notes sound detailed and individual; they resonate back into the soundstage. The TARA Labs cables, on the other hand, sound silkier. They don't obscure detail but rather let it coalesce into a continuous phenomena. They are at their best with small-ensemble jazz, but they will flatter any music you play through them -- and any equipment connected to them. Your choice of these two cable lines will almost certainly rest more on your personal likes and dislikes, or your equipment, than an obvious sense of one being better than the other.

Deja vu

I found the RSC Air 1 cables to mesh with my listening preferences very well, which is no surprise to me given that I've always liked TARA Labs cables. What makes these air-dielectric cables worth your consideration is the way they cast a seamless soundstage -- one that may have you redefining your idea of seamlessness. I also like their even tonal characteristics -- nothing sticks out -- and their way with tubes, which is never bad in my book. Their construction is top-notch, making their price all the more justifiable.

If you've written and asked me about this or that cable I've reviewed or mentioned in the past, you know I always recommend in-system audition. Cables are the frosting on the cake, and as such, you want to make sure

they top things off for you properly. The TARA Labs cables, like those from JPS Labs, come as close as possible to earning a blanket endorsement from me given the wide array of equipment I've personally used them with to good effect. No cable is universal, just as no piece of audio gear is, but the various cables I've used from TARA Labs have all performed with great merit, making them worthy competition for *anything* you can buy from another maker.

...Marc Mickelson

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TARA Labs RSC Air 1 Interconnects and Speaker Cables, RSC Air 75 Coaxial and RSC Air 110 AES/EBU Digital Cables

Prices: Interconnects, \$695 USD per meter pair; speaker cables, \$2600 per ten-foot pair; RSC Air 75 coaxial digital cable, \$295 per meter length; RSC Air 110 AES/EBU digital cable, \$395 per meter length.

Warranty: Lifetime.

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