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"Ten Years After"

"Why don't you come along for dinner this evening?" is a phrase most audio journalists are happy enough to hear during a HI-Fi Show. (But let me tell you, it's usually the reviewer who turns out to be the main course!) In fact, with only a bit of diligence and a bright smile, a crafty scribe could avoid paying for sustenance altogether if he or she is of such a mind to do so. (I don't know about you, but I need to eat my breakfast in peace!)

And so it was during HI-FI '95, Stereophile's high-end Hi-Fi Show at the Doubletree Hotel in LA. At the end of a long day I'd stopped in to say hello to Matthew Bond and partner Merrill Bergs of TARA Labs in their impressive exhibition booth at the foot of the main escalator. Up to then I hadn't experienced TARA cables in our system, but I'd often heard them in other setups. Matthew is a soft-spoken, slim, and elegant

clotheshorse (damn him) who uncannily resembles double-oh-seven Pierce Brosnan. Although originally from He-Man Australia (where men are men, women are men, and sheep run for cover), I think he'd look perfectly at home in a London gentleman's club. While we were chatting, he shot his cuff and checked the hour on a slim gold timepiece. (This not sourced, I am told, from audio writer Ken Kessler, known far and wide 'round the audio circuit for selling timekeeping goodies.) He casually mentioned that he was hosting a dinner for a few people, and would I be interested in coming. But of course! A bit later I found myself surrounded by audio writers of many ilks. Our own Wes Phillips was seated just across from me; to his right, Steven Stone. Swatch Watch Ken Kessler was to my left, while the rest of the table was taken up by various and sundry industry persons.

Thinking of my wife Kathleen, I tried not to eat too much. (Always a stretch when mating the concepts "journalist" and "free meal." The conversation was animated, to say the least, one importer (who shall remain nameless) trashing his soon-to-be-ex-partner and the very products he still represented! (I looked around for a pooper-scooper, but none was handy.)

Then Matthew Bond made his Fateful Comment. "You know, Jonathan, the cable guys don't get any respect from the press. We never get to tell our story!"

His complaint resonated within me during the rest of the meal; I thought he was right. So in the months following the Show, I outed the wire guys I knew: Roger Skoff at XLO, Ted Denney at Synergistic Research, Eric Poulsen of Alpha-Core/Goertz, and Joe DePhillips of Discovery Cable. And finally I turned, step by step, TARA's way.

SYSTEM CONSIDERATIONS

I listened to the Decade interconnect on a wide range of solid-state and tubed equipment. These included the following digital front-ends: Jadis JD1/JS1; Forsell Air

Bearing transport and DAC; Ensemble Dichrono Drive and DAC; and the YBA CD 1 Blue Laser integrated player.

Analog music maker was the Forsell Air Force One with the Symphonic Line RG-8, vdH Grasshopper IV, and Clearaudio Insider cartridges. Preamps included the Jadis JP80MC, the dual-mono JP200MC, and YBA Signature 6 Chassis Phono. Amplifiers were our own Jadis JA 200s; Forsell's The Statement; VTL Wotan MB-1250s; and YBA Signature Alpha 1 monoblocks. Speakers included our trusty Avalon Ascents and the simply remarkable Avalon Radian HCs.

RSC DECADE INTERCONNECT

The silver-sleek [Decade interconnects](#) exude quality workmanship. Unscrewing an RCA connector, I found a neat looking solder job with a finishing shot of hot melt to stabilize and damp the connection. The so-called HCC connectors (High Conductivity Copper Alloy) are specially made for TARA in Japan.

The shield floats at the source-end of the interconnect, where hang the interesting (and nicely implemented) "star grounding" connectors that tie the shields together. (See my accompanying [interview](#) with Matthew Bond for details.)

Let's start with the imaging as it relates to hooking the shields together. First of all, in whatever configuration, the Decades image in an absolutely first class manner. (As they sit at the top of the line, statement products honoring TARA's 10 years of existence, that should be expected.)

Imaging doesn't exist as a thing in itself, of course. It relates to the soundstage: its size and proportions, whether 'stage forward or rearward in aspect; the sense of air; and finally transparency, focus, and detail. And let's not forget speed and dynamics, both

micro and macro. At any rate, in a generalist sense, all the elements of Building The Soundstage were adroitly handled by the Decade, both line-level and phono.

As well as these key elements were rendered, they all improved - in some ways dramatically - when I connected the shields. What I heard most noticeably was a quieter soundstage, more airy in construction, which faded at its soundfield boundaries in a more finely graduated fashion.

An old Columbia six-eye I always turn to when the subject is soundstaging and air is Duke Ellington's Jazz Party in Stereo (CS 8127). Attaching and releasing the snap-fit connectors that bind the shields during play was an interesting experience. As the presentation became quieter, the soundstage went from impressively big to truly enormous. Life is full of compromise; usually a gain in one area will lead to a loss in another. But coincident with the increase in 'stage size and quietness, I discovered to my delight yet more transparency, not less.

(In fact, balancing the electrical potential riding the shields proved a real boon for low-level analog signals. In this respect, the Decade was squeaky-close almost-there as good as the XLO 3.1 phono cable, long our reference.)

It's quite easy to see that the more see-through things become, the more detail may be available to the listener. The shield-balanced Decades were superb in this fashion, and I never failed to tie them together when they were installed in the system. I found that, as the transparency and detail increased, so too did the sense of palpability of performers within the soundfield.

This was as true with ol' six-eye Ellington as with more contemporary digital recordings. Take Laurie Anderson. (Actually she's already taken...by Lou Reed! They're in love. It's so poetic.) I've always felt Laurie's LPs to be true works of art, but they've mostly been recorded rather poorly. On the CD side, I've tended to listen (in the audiophile sense) more to Bright Red (Warner Bros. 45534-2) than the more textured and narrative The

Ugly One With The Jewels (Warners 35847-2). (It's true that Bright Red lends itself more to demo track jumping.)

To make the point, I'll refer to a memorable listening session with TARA'd Wotans, the Jadis JP200MC, and the Forsell digital front-end (marks of disparate origin, yet wildly similar in function and effect). Listening to Jewels... really left me feeling very close indeed to the performance.

I've noted in these pages single-ended's tendency to communicate vocals well, especially female vocals. Through their artistry - a definition I can live with - single-ended triodes make the connection with an enhanced emotional and cognitive impact. The TARA/ VTL/Jadis/Forsell setup managed to bring me the Laurie Anderson Experience in a more profound manner than I had ever experienced before. I sat captivated by the huge and extreme palp factor the cable allowed these fine components to pass my way.

Eyes closed in the ribbon chair, I truly felt it. "Daddy Daddy it was just like you said / Now that the living outnumber the dead / Where I come from it's a long thin thread / Across an ocean down a river of red / Now that the living / Outnumber the dead / Speak my language..."

As it happens, Laurie Anderson is the Ugly One with the Jewels, and when you hear the narrative behind it, I predict you will find yourself, as I was, moved by the imagery.

With imaging highjinks in mind, I played Kraftwerk's Autobahn on LP

(Phonogram/Vertigo VEL-2003) for a little fun fun fun on the Au-to-bahn! My notes speak of a tight and punchy bass, an attractive midrange, extended highs, and sound effects that showed off the layering and the enormous acoustic on tap with this setup. I never heard the sound effects and synthesizer riffs so well separated from the music, whipping back and forth across the listening space.

Given all the positive aspects of connecting the shields, I still found the image boundaries less perfectly defined than when lashing up XLO Signature or Synergistic

Research Resolution Reference. A cable's nature is still its nature after all, shields connected or no. This particular aspect of the Decade's performance was noticeable with tubes (Jadis/ VTL) or solid-state (Forsell's The Statement or the YBA components). To illustrate this quality, I'll refer to an old favorite, Bill Henderson's Live at the Times (Discovery D5CD-779). (George Cardas has this recording on LP; he mentioned he'd picked it up in Japan. Frankly, I'd kill for the privilege of owning the vinyl.)

Now, this recording is not "sharp"-imaged by nature. Listening to track eight, "Bring In the Clowns," one notes the huge and airy club venue, Bill's voice emerging from slightly stage right and rear. There's a wealth of ambient detail to keep the listener entertained: soft conversation, the clink of glass and silverware, even the amusing pop of a bottle opening. (With the TARA, you can determine the vintage! Just kidding...) What I found interesting was the overall effect as seen through TARA'd eyes on all-YBA with the Radians. Even though Bill's voice is a bit diffuse, the detail, nuance, and tonal balance were so superbly balanced, the transparency so enhanced, that as an entire musical construct and experience, I felt I'd never heard it better.

As regards overall speed and the handling of leading-edge transients, I noted once again that the Decade was still a touch behind XLO (as far as we're concerned, the very original cable speed demon) or the next-best Synergistic Research. This is hardly a condemnation; it should be taken in the context of a beaming Damon Hill at the top of the podium, surrounded by second-place Jean Alesi and third-place Jacques Villeneuve, as seen at the end of this year's German Grand Prix at the Hockenheimring. Third in this company is far, far from bad!

While I wouldn't issue a speeding ticket to The Buxtehude Project - Vol II: Harpsichord Music (PGM 105) on the TARA'd system, I would say that this ultraclean recording shows off the fine initial transient-handling the Decade does manage. And the follow-on harmonic burst and decay of each struck note was beautifully integrated with the initial plucking attack so as to craft a very believable and palpable musical event.

On the back side of the issue, one might also say that speed is required to capture (properly) the sense of acoustic decay. For example, I positively wallowed in the rich harmonic interplay encoded on Keith Jarrett's Koln Concert (ECM 1064/65), especially on LP (ECM-2-1064). The powerful musical ebb 'n' flow was simply mesmerizing. Jarrett often plays with an open pedal, and the manner in which the complicated and resonant tones of the piano melded and died away was extraordinary, and added immeasurably to the musical experience.

Anyway, rather than their speed, I'd prefer to point out how sweet the Decades sounded, without any of the negative connotation such an "accusation" might incur. (I once had an audiophile acquaintance who nearly killed me when I innocently told him his system was sweet-sounding.)

Whether listening to the Bill Henderson recording or the new Classic Records re-release of Jennifer Warnes's Famous Blue Raincoat (RTHCD 5052) - which needs whatever sweetness is available to counter the slightly digital nature of the master tape so evident here - the Decade always imparted a lovely, lyrical, and, yes, sweet sound to the upper registers when the music was so recorded.

To be precise, the Decade's presentation was a far cry from the liquid-gold constructs of my first high-end preamp, the peaches 'n' cream Conrad-Johnson PV-5. Rather, the Decade's sweetness lay between the notes, in the micro-quiet between the strike, harmonic bloom, and complex decay one hears in Jarrett's Koln Concert mentioned above.

Or in the sweet, full development of vocals as embodied in the lovely "Moon Maiden," from The Intimate Ellington (Pablo 2310-787). The slightly soft top end, along with the quietness of soundstage and wonderful shimmer of the celeste that accompanies the Duke will have you shivering with pleasure.

The celeste came across clear and pellucid, fast and acoustic, not sounding the least rolled-off. The softness I'm referring to relates to the delicacy of the upper registers

rather than any gross blunting of leading-edge transients - simply not the case at all with the Decade. Its sweetness of presentation seemed born of an utter neutrality and a smooth frequency response that let the music out of the bag in all its glory.

Below decks in the bass, I will probably now always turn to the Classic Records mastering of Dean Peer's *Ucross*, on both CD (Jazz Planet JPCD 5002) and its remarkable companion on LP (JP 5002-1). Run, don't walk, ladies and germs...you need these recordings in your collections.

On the *Wotan/Ascent* setup they sounded fantastic: powerful, dynamic, and redolent, impressive in size, scale, and ambience. On the *YBA/Statement/Radian HC* setup, it was totally over the top. The coupling of the enormous bloom factor embodied in this solid-state powerhouse of an amp - 400+ watts into 8 ohms - and the precision, transparency, speed, and huge soundstage of the *Radians*, proved a match truly made in musical heaven. It was so inspiring that I wanted to run up the steps to our roof and shout it out for all the world to hear.

The *Radians'* faster, tighter (than the *Ascents*) bass served this recording... Peerlessly? The power and control, perfectly integrated transients, and follow-on bloom and decay, were delightfully reproduced by the *Decade's* light and agile touch.

Turning to classical acoustic bass, the new Telefunken LP re-release of Ludwig *Streicher spielt Bottesini* (Telefunken 6.42230 AS) sounded wonderful as well. Buzz, bloom, and power mixed together in a sonic cocktail that really worked. BIG BASS, both electronic and acoustic, on a wide variety of symphonic and pop recordings from *Dead Can Dance* to *Stravinsky* never failed to impress.

RSC DECADE DIGITAL

Elegant and discrete in light blue livery, this beautifully made coax (RCA or BNC) delivered a coherent, wide-band, neutral, yet fully harmonic presentation that showed a light and quick touch with transients and dynamics.

While I almost always preferred the Illuminati D-60 on the Forsell and Jadis digital front-ends, I thought it sounded perhaps a touch too robust on the Ensemble Dichrono DAC and Drive that I reviewed last month. With these highly neutral Swiss components, I preferred the TARA's slightly lighter overall balance. This was, it's true, dependent on the recording. Sometimes I preferred the Illuminati, other times not.

The TARA datalink was all elegant gesture and nuance, while still delivering a colorful tonal palette along with the rich power of the music. And while Ensemble's own Digiflux is a very fine cable indeed - I mean it no disrespect - with so much riding on the all-important digital connection, I felt it was just a shade too evenhanded for my taste. As far as the specifics of its presentation, just cast an eye back to the body of this review. I'm not being lazy; the Decade cable was unique among all the cables we've tried in our system in that its quality of sound remained absolutely consistent across interconnect, digital datalink, and even the speaker cable!

Speaking of which...

RSC DECADE SPEAKER CABLE

K-10 (Kathleen's cyberhandle) enjoyed the [speaker cable's](#) sensuous flesh-toned color. "That's the natural color of the copper beneath," explained Monsieur Bond. It's surprisingly light in weight (see the accompanying [interview](#) for details), and proved easy to handle and strap to the various amplifiers in play. The well-made spade lugs come in a variety of sizes to fit most applications. K-10 also appreciated that they curved very nicely when installed. (For my part, I noted it was time to stop playing around with cables and appreciate my wife!)

Once again, let me briefly note that literally all the qualities I've ascribed to the interconnect applied forthwith to the Decade speaker cables. We tried them on their

own, tri-wired to both the Ascents and the Radians with YBA, XLO, and Synergistic Research interconnects. And while they mated supremely well with these cables, I preferred to use them for best effect with their matching Decade interconnects. Whether in an all-Decade lashup or in combination with other interconnects - if that's your wish - you will find few better.

CONCLUSION

Rarely, in my experience, does anyone get the balance just so, having to compromise in one area to serve another. So does the Decade line of cables compromise? Well, yes...just a little. They sound a touch light. Argh! Stampede! Return All TARA!! Just settle down for a second. The interconnect, digital datalink, and speaker cable have a light, elegant touch on the signal and the music. Images were never shadowy, wispy, or lacking in body. The Decade was quiet, wide-band, lithe, and agile; fast enough to deliver the detail necessary to hang such a palpable image before me, as they always did. Yes, ultimate bass was also a tad lighter than Synergistic or XLO, for example, but this never disturbed me even for a moment. A supremely balanced line of cables in all aspects. Highest recommendation for music lovers everywhere.