

CABLES FROM ACTINOTE



Quick now, how many companies worldwide make audio cables? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? Not even close, though we can't even guess at the real number.

Every manufacturer has a secret formula, a (supposedly) exclusive ingredient that makes its cables sound right, whereas others, well... Some of those explanations seem to make sense, whereas others sound like Professor Snakey's Magic Reptile Oil. To its credit, possibly, the Belgian manufacturer Actinote doesn't go into extravagant claims. No, not even for the little boxes on the cables. Do they contain "termination networks" like those on MIT or Transparent cables? No, just some sort of electrical damping device with the enigmatic name of "bis-actif" to reduce resonances. Want to know more? Go do your own research!

We had previously heard lower-priced cables from Actinote, and we had never been moved to go further. At least not till now, when we received a large box with a full set of Actinote's top cables.

This time our impression was radically different.

We brought the box up to our

Alpha room, and began adding the Actinotes, one set at a time. Since a digital cable was included in the set, we did the listening with our two-box CD player: a CEC transport and a Counterpoint DA-10A converter.

The MN digital cable

Shown below, it looks much like Actinote's analog cables, with a box near one end, a tube near the other, and WBT locking connectors at each end. There is no obvious directional arrow. However the dot on the "i" of "Actinote" is shaped like an arrow. What's that you say? An instruction leaflet to point this out? Wouldn't that make it too easy?

In the past we haven't heard radical changes in tonal balance from different digital cables. However we have heard differences in coherence of complex pas-



sages, in reproduction of rhythm, and in handling of transients. To compare the MN with our Wireworld Gold Starlight, we selected Normal Dello Joio's *Fantasy on a Theme by Haydn* (Klavier K 11138), with its rich dissonant brass and its heart-stopping percussion.

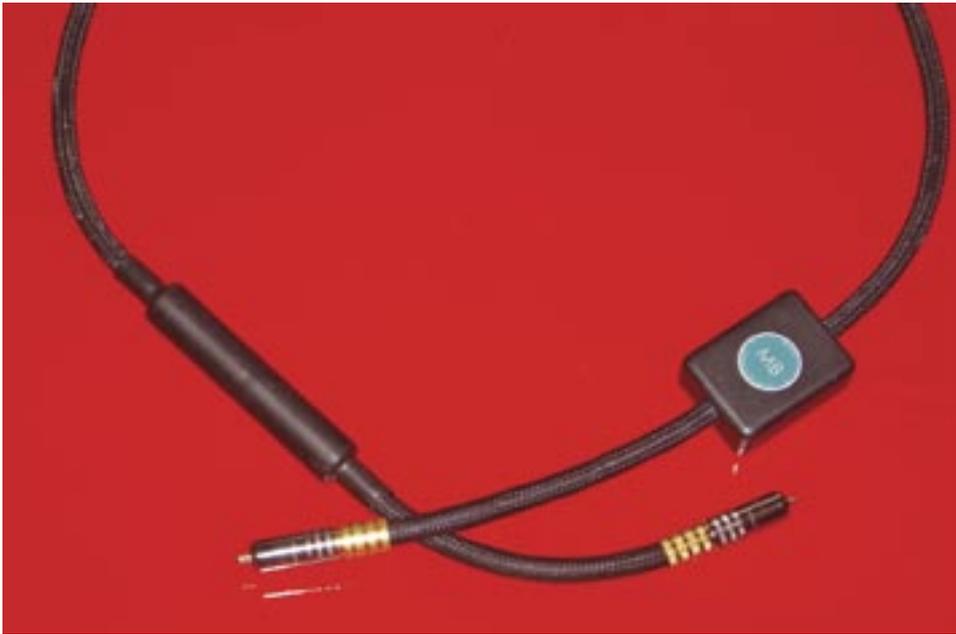
Did the two cables sound different? On first listen Reine thought the Actinote had a markedly different personality from the Gold Starlight, but changed her mind when we played the CD a second time. The differences were not all that clear. Certainly the music had energy and verve, with a broad, deep image. The transients on the tympani were excellent. Gerard did find the two cables at least a little different, with a bit more emphasis than expected on the actual contact of mallet and membrane.

We judged the MN very close to our reference cable, but at C\$390, or US\$330, it is significantly cheaper.

The MB interconnect cable

These cables look much like the MN, with a box at one end and a tube at the other. It comes with WBT locking connectors. You can see it at the top of the next page.

Since two pairs had been supplied, we now disconnected our



Pierre Gabriel ML-1 silver cables from both the CD player and the preamplifier, and substituted the Actinotes. We should add that, for reasons of practicality, our own cables are longer than most: 2 meters and 1.5 meters respectively. The Actinotes were just 1 meter long.

We used three recordings for the comparison, starting with the lovely but fragile choral CD *Now the Green Blade Riseth* (Proprius PRCD9093). It was in no way diminished by the presence of the Actinote cables. The women's voices were smooth and gorgeous, the men's voices deep and resonant. The choral structure held together even on that difficult final crescendo, with layer upon layer of detailed sound. The accompanying instruments — bass, organ and flute — were natural, never blending into the landscape.

But was the sound better than it had been with the Pierre Gabriels? None of us was prepared to say so, though we did

think it may have seemed subjectively louder.

On the second recording (*Je n'aime pas* from Bia's *Carmin* CD, Audiogram ADCD10163) the sound was noticeably louder, though our preamp's volume setting was unaltered. We did in fact prefer the sound the Actinotes gave us. The large drums sounded with more impact and authority, and the lyrics were clearer. Rhythm was superb, and the trombone solo at the end delightful.

"Extreme *frisson*," said Reine.

We ended the comparison with the Gospel Blues *Ain't No Grave* from Doug McLeod's *Come to Find* (Audioquest AQCD1027). Once again the music seemed louder, but there were no accompanying artifacts. McLeod's voice was especially clear, the plucked bass gratifyingly solid. His guitar had a different sound, and whether it was more accurate or not, we liked it. The musicians were more convincingly present, and played

with satisfying resonance ("in the good sense," added Albert). The very strong rhythm in this piece was perfectly preserved. The accompanying female voices were clear, with fine harmony. The hand claps were startlingly natural.

Like our Pierre Gabriel cables, the Actinotes won't take well to sharp bends. What's more, the long connector plus the box can exert downward leverage on the jacks of your audio units. That may not matter if the jacks are first class, but that is unfortunately rarer than it should be. You may need to provide some sort of support for them.

Nice cables, these. At C\$750/US\$630, they are strictly for luxury systems, but they are not priced beyond their capabilities. We liked them.

The LB speaker cables

These cables, shown below, have two boxes, one near each end. They are fitted with WBT-0644 locking bananas, one of our favorites.

We expected the addition of these cables to make the most difference, for a very good reason. Our existing cable, which we have used for many years, is a Wireworld Eclipse II, very different from the excellent Eclipse III, and not nearly as good. Note that we do use the vastly superior Eclipse III between our Living Voice Avatar OBX-R speakers and their outboard crossover networks.

Indeed the substitution of the LB speaker cables made an audible difference, pretty much entirely in the right direction.

We began with *Now the Green Blade Riseth* once again. Good as it had sounded before, it was better now, with the choral voices easier to separate. Despite this degree of separation, the ensemble sound hung together remarkably well, and the final crescendo was formidable in its raw energy. The accompanying instruments came through clear and strong. That included the organ, which appears only at the end of the opening piece...if it appears at all!

Gerard found the Actinote's tonal balance a little cooler than with our Eclipse cable, and a little less mellow as well, though he suspected it might be closer to neutral.

It was on the second selection, from



Bia's *Carmin*, that we began to suspect we might have found a replacement for our aging Eclipse speaker cable.

There wasn't an element of this wonderfully sly and mischievous song that wasn't improved by the presence of the Actinote LB. The opening percussion had greater impact, though without the loss of an iota of naturalness. The trombone at the finale was exactly as it must have sounded in the studio, and we laughed out loud. As for Bia herself, her voice fairly glowed, each syllable easy to hear. Minor instruments hung in space, never covered up. The depth was most satisfying.

Much the same could be said of *Ain't No Grave*. The detail recovered from this superb CD was breathtaking. McLeod's voice was clearer, though at the same time he seemed a little hoarser. The stereo image and the depth were increased. The rhythm, always a strong element in McLeod's songs, made it impossible to sit still.

The 3 meter version of the LB costs C\$1690, or US\$1420. This is about half the price of the reference cables on our other (Omega) system, which is definitely good news. For our own system, however, we ordered the 5 meter pair, which runs to \$2360. Ouch!

Then again it could have been worse.

The CS power cords

Oh yes, the power cords. In our box were three of them, to fit our digital transport, our Counterpoint converter, and our Copland tube preamplifier. We left behind our Gut-Wire cables and substituted the CS cords.

Like the audio cables, these cords sport a box near one end and a tube near the other. The connectors are familiar ones, with the IEC plug seeming to be a Schurter. The cable is shielded, as an audiophile power cable should always be.

Could we actually hear a difference? We had to listen twice to be sure. Was there a more spacious sound with these cords? There might have been, or at least it was filled in slightly better. The background was a bit cleaner and quieter, letting us hear such details as the timbres of individual hand claps near the end of the piece.

The price of these cables is well above average, at C\$490 or US\$410. There wasn't a noticeable gain in musicality, though. These are, in sort, good cords, but not as convincing a value as their brandmates.



Conclusion

We must reiterate that it is difficult to identify a cable as "the best." At the same time, we don't believe in choosing cables to behave as some sort of tone control, to correct something wrong with the rest of the system. Design errors don't cancel, they always add.

Among all the would-be magicians peddling cables that promise to cure all your ills, there is a handful whose designers know what they're doing, and who don't try to milk your savings for dubious nostrums. Count Actinote among them.

It may seem odd to apply the word "value" to cables of these prices. It is, however, entirely appropriate.



CROSSTALK

What were those other Actinote cables I had heard before? I can't remember. It seemed to me they were neither good nor bad...in short, they were like a lot of other cables that are always choking our mailbox. New cables are even more common than new speakers!

These are something else. For one thing they're *all* good. And all of them (except perhaps the power cables) are great value, meaning they are not outlandishly priced considering their prodigious performance.

Yes, prodigious. The speaker cable is especially good, or perhaps it seems that way because our own was ripe for change. And we've found the cable to change it for.

—Gerard Rejskind

There was something very special about these cables and the way they worked to-

gether, something that is difficult to explain. It's easy to hear it, though.

When used together, linking the different components from source to speakers, they do a thorough cleanup job. No residues, no lingering dust, no smearing, just a gleaming surface, like a well-polished floor that reveals all the depth and beauty of the wood.

When used individually, I'd be ready to bet a whole dollar that you'll notice a striking contrast to whatever you already have. And chances are your present cables may then appear to act as filters by comparison (no offence intended, this is only a bet which I'll be glad to lose in your favor if you're fully satisfied with what you already have). Give them try and see for yourself. If you lose, you win.

—Albert Simon

What an exciting experience, this test, with the review cables replacing our magnificent reference cables. Dipping our toes into the waters gingerly (sorry, Gerard, but that's how I saw the process), we began with the digital cable and heard an improvement. Then came the interconnects, with results that were more than satisfying. Thus emboldened, we switched the speaker cables, which brought us to the peak of this joyous and astonishing adventure.

Oh yes, you want to know what I really think? Fine, then, the Actinotes are my first choice. Too bad for the other cables we have much loved, and which certainly haven't lost their qualities. I can say only that these are the best cables I've heard yet.

A conclusion that hints at a change in our system? We'll see...

—Reine Lessard