

# FOUR AUDIO INTERCONNECTS

So here we were, with our two-box player newly fitted with the winner of our four-cable digital shootout. Now it was time to compare some interconnects. We decided to use a pair of particularly good SACDs as the source material, and so we installed our Linn Unidisk player. And why not continue the way we were, with a blind test?

Once again Albert and Reine knew the test cables only by number. Gerard knew which was which, but had no idea which “should” sound better. The only cable not thus hidden was of course our Pierre Gabriel ML-1 reference.

The two discs were *Now the Green Blade Risetb* (Proprius PRSACD9093) and the *Comes Love* jazz piece from Opus 3’s *Showcase* disc (CD21000).



## The Stager Silver Solids

There’s no model name, because Marc Stager (pronounced with a hard G) makes only one cable. His main business (marc.stager.com) is rental of sound and AV gear in New York City. This, his sole interconnect, is sold directly on the Internet.

At first glance it looks rather like Kimber KCAG cable, and it does have some features in common. Like the Kimber, the Stager is pure silver (20 gauge), in transparent Teflon insulation. The most noticeable difference, besides the fact that the Kimber looks machine-made and the Stager doesn’t, is that Kimber favors WBT connectors (indeed, Kimber is WBT’s US distributor), whereas Stager uses Canare F-10’s. That could account for a lot of the price difference in fact.

Our own experiences with the Canares or their clones under other names have not been the happiest ones. Nor have our experiences with unshielded cables. In one early listening

session the Stagers actually pulled in the sound from a radio station whose playlist is aimed at a demographic we wouldn’t join. We should add that our Alpha room is vulnerable to radio-frequency noise, but fortunately there was no such problem the day of our review (these things come and go).

On the choral recording, the plucked bass that marks the rhythm was solid, as was the organ at the end of the first piece, yet the overall weight of the ensemble was reduced. The voices, which as we know can be fragile, were attractive. However all three of us noted that the stereo image was more distant, and the depth considerably reduced. “It’s not bad,” said Gerard, “but this cable makes the SACD sound more like the conventional CD.

Albert warmed to the cable on the jazz piece. “This is highly acceptable,” he said. “The banjo is especially clear. The ensemble is still lighter than with our reference, but the rhythm isn’t affected.”

Reine and Gerard also found the bottom end lighter, yet paradoxically the sousaphone remained solid. The clarinet? Its tone was lovely, but Reine complained that some of its magic was gone.

The Stager Silver Solids will not give you everything that’s on your recordings, but we’ve heard some cables whose performance was catastrophic, and there was nothing like that here. Consider that this is, by most standards, an inexpensive cable (US\$129 for a one-meter pair), and you may find it a good choice for some systems.



## The BIS copper cable

Like Stager, BIS Audio has largely been selling its cables directly, though that is just beginning to change. This silver-plated copper cable is fitted with Eichmann Bullet Plugs (reviewed with

some enthusiasm in *UHF* No. 71). BIS sells a one-metre pair for C\$300 (about US\$250 as we wrote this).

Of course the higher price makes superior performance pretty well mandatory, and we can’t say the BIS disappointed us. On the choral recording we found the illusion of depth persuasive. The clarity was much improved over the previous cable. This recording is loaded with fine, natural detail, and it came through as it should, and that enhanced the illusion that the singers were really there in our room. The plucked bass had solid impact.

Perfection? Not quite. Though the women’s voices were clear and mostly pleasant, they grew slightly grainy in louder passages, and Reine complained of the counterpoint in the second half of the piece, which had lost its usual coherence.

The cable did very well on the jazz recording. Once again there was plenty of detail. Kenny Davern’s clarinet sounded properly “woody,” and Reine was the only one of the group to find it somewhat “acid” at the very top of its range. The piano sounded gorgeous. The stereo image was exemplary.

It was unanimous: this is a nice cable.



## The BIS silver cable

The two BIS cables look nearly alike, except for the color of the tubing. Inside is silver rather than copper. And the connectors are Eichmann Silver Bullets, made of — you guessed it — solid silver.

Of course this nobler metal (the best of all electrical conductors, marred only by its tendency to tarnish, as your maid can no doubt testify) has an effect on the price, which is C\$480 for a one-metre pair.

Its superiority over its copper twin



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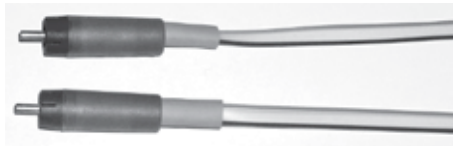
was evident. Depth was very good, and Reine praised the “clean” sound of both voices and instruments on *Now the Green Blade Riseth*. We could follow every syllable, as well as the flute solo which is sometimes covered by the singers, and the tinkle of the triangle near the end. The plucked bass was solid, and it marked rhythm with power. This time, said Reine, the counterpoint didn’t get lost.

There is a common myth — or perhaps it’s not entirely a myth — that says silver cables sound bright. Our own reference cables are silver, and they don’t add brightness to either of our systems. Did the BIS? Barely. Gerard found the ending, with full choir and orchestra, just a touch shrill, but overall the balance was very good. “It manages to be at once clear and warm,” said Albert.

It was all that on the jazz piece too, and we were delighted with what we heard. The musicians of the Swedish Jazz Kings played with gusto, their coherent ensemble sound never masking the individual instruments: clarinet, piano, a tireless banjo and a joyously smiling sou-

saphone. All of them sounded natural, with the piano drawing particular praise. The top end of the clarinet’s range was a bit sharper than with our own cables, but not enough to dim the pleasure we had in hearing this piece once more (you don’t tire of music like this).

Really everything worked. What more can we say?



### The DNM Lucky B\*\*\*

Oh the heck with asterisks, how many children read *UHF* anyway? This cable is known as the “Lucky Bastard,” and thereby hangs a tale.

A Calgary Store, General Audio, became a dealer for DNM Reson speaker cable, shown in the photo above. DNM’s Canadian distributor is also the distributor for Eichmann’s minimum metal Bullet Plugs. Store owner George Siemens put the two together and figured he had found a hit. Since the match came about by pure accident, he dubbed the cable “the Lucky Bastard.”

But that isn’t all. At an international show he handed a sample of the cable to a critic for the UK’s *What HiFi*, which, in 2002, gave the cable one of its awards. Some time later, Siemens gave us a sample too.

The DNM cable itself looks like a slightly shrunken version of 300 ohm TV twin lead decked up in patriotic red-white-and-blue colors. It contains quite thin solid core copper wire. The raw cable, by the way, has a list price of C\$10/foot (\$32.80/meter), and a set of Eichmann Bullet Plugs goes for \$57.95 at The Audiophile Store. That suggests an opportunity for do-it-yourselfers, because the finished one-metre Lucky B goes for C\$199.

We weren’t sure what to expect, because frankly we read those endless lists of awards from British magazines with wry smiles, and doubly so if the award winner is British (as the wire is, though the connectors are Australian). We were also concerned by the fact that, like the Stager cable, the Lucky B is unshielded.

But we were having a good day in the Alpha room, because the noise level was fine (your mileage may vary, and so might ours). What we heard was something of a surprise.

On *Now the Green Blade Riseth*, the depth had been flattened a bit, but the music suffered from none of the sonic damage we had been fearing. The flute solo that opens the recording was smooth and attractive, and so were the choral voices. By now we are used to hearing an unattractive “grain” to the blended male and female voices, but we heard none of that with this cable. Our comprehension of Swedish doesn’t seem to be improving much, but we can say that we heard each syllable clearly. Even the final crescendo was surprisingly good, without hardness.

We would have liked more in the way of roundness and you-are-there presence, and Albert was less enthusiastic than he had been with the previous cable, to stay nothing of our reference. Still, if the Lucky B had sinned, it was by omission rather than commission, and that was good.

We were rather more enthusiastic about the way it reproduced the *Comes Love* jazz piece. There was less of the three-dimensional feel we hear with our reference cable, but all of the instruments were there, and all sounded most attractive. Kenny Davern’s clarinet was smooth and sensuous, and the banjo’s insistent rhythm was downright irresistible. Then there’s the sousaphone, which can sometimes be too discreet, losing the music’s contagious good humor. Not with this cable. It was rollicking and delightful. You can’t listen to it without smiling.

Perhaps this mix of wire and connector really is a lucky one!

### A final note

You would have to be inobservant in the extreme not to notice that three of the four cables in this review use the same connectors. Should we be surprised? We did a blind test on various connectors in *UHF* No. 71, and we concluded that there really is something to Eichmann’s theory that the amount of metal should be minimized. Is this more proof yet?



# THREE LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

If it's difficult to ferry a signal from a CD player to an amplifier (say), it's tougher yet to go from the final power amplifier output to a loudspeaker.

Let us count the ways.

Consider the difference in impedance. Impedance, as the name suggests, *impedes* the transfer of electricity. Impedance is, for alternating currents such as audio signals, what *resistance* is to the direct current from a battery or a power supply. Is it a bad thing? No, and anyway it's unavoidable.

So let's have a look at the impedances cables have to deal with. A typical solid state input (in an amplifier, preamplifier, etc.) will be in the order of 30,000 ohms. That is to say, the input will appear to have a 30,000 ohm resistor across it...if it were zero ohms it would be short-circuited. It's easy to see that an ohm or two in the wire or in the connection will make little difference.

A loudspeaker, on the other hand, has a typical impedance of just 8 ohms, or perhaps 4 ohms, and at some frequencies more like 2 ohms. Will an ohm or two in the cable matter? Oh yes! And of course the connectors may add to the problem. To complicate matters, a cable will have not only resistance but also inductance in series with it, and capacitance across it. Inductance and capacitance behave as though they were resistances whose value varies with frequency. Oh oh!

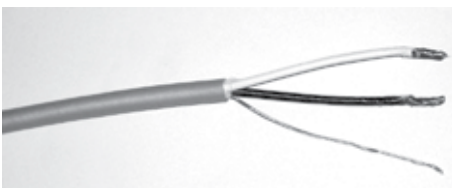
And just to complicate things, the transfer function of a cable — the relation between what goes in and what comes out — may not even be linear. That is to say, it can vary with loudness of the signal, and it may not be the same as the signal increases as it is when it decreases. That's not even the end of the list, but feel free to wave it in the face of anyone who claims that, for a given resistance, capacitance and inductance, all cables sound the same.

Just so you realize you won't get no satisfaction!

For these three listening tests we proceeded much as we did for the four interconnects preceding, with the same

two SACD selections played from our Linn Unidisk 1.1 player. Of course we first listened with our reference speaker cable, the Actinote LB.

In our Alpha room it is not possible to switch cables without everyone seeing, and so this was not quite a blind test. However only Gerard knew which cable was which, and which was "expected" to be better, and he always spoke last. During the session the three cables under test were identified only by number.



## The Atlas Ascent 3.0

This fairly thick but highly flexible cable is made from fine strands of OCC copper, each one made up of one single crystal. Like other Atlas speaker cables, it is also shielded — that's the reason for the third wire you see in the photo. It may seem odd to have a shielded speaker cable when we've just reviewed two *interconnects* that were *not* shielded. Does this make any sense? It's a mystery to us.

Atlas offers Ascent 3.0 assembled with banana plugs, but we are not fond of the connectors used, and so our sample came in bulk. We chose to fit it with Michell bananas because they are so easy to install...and also to remove if we chose not hang on to the cable. We like the Michell bananas because they are so well machined, but we are aware that the cable might well sound different with other connectors: Eichmann, WBT, etc.

Despite our doubts about the need for a ground wire, we did connect it to ground at the amplifier end.

Ascent is a moderately-priced cable, at £25/US\$46/C\$48, not counting connectors.

Our choral recording, *Now the Green Blade Riseth*, came through rather well, without graininess, and with an increase

in sibilance that was barely detectable. We did note some loss of depth compared to our reference, however, and also a certain reduction of substance and weight. The notorious final crescendo in the opening track was slightly less coherent, but there was nothing dramatically wrong.

Note that we had not touched the volume after we had listened with our reference cables. But Albert thought the piece now sounded as though we had backed up a few rows in the concert hall, and wondered whether it might sound fuller with perhaps 3 dB more juice. Actually we all did.

And it was *much* better with the extra volume. The depth — which this SACD has in wholesale quantity — was much more apparent, and the male singers had found the vigor they had seemed to lack. The bottom end seemed bulked up as well.

We should add that this phenomenon is something we've run across before: we make a change in a cable, and we have the impression that the volume knob needs a twist. That effect does *not* correspond to a drop in level that a meter could measure. Whatever its cause, we much prefer it to the opposite effect, in which we have the impression that the music is now way too *loud*.


We continued with the second recording, and once again we needed to make some fine adjustment in volume before we were fully satisfied with what we heard. And there was a lot to like in this lively jazz piece. Instrumental timbres were mostly attractive, though the piano had a cooler tone and Kenny Davern's soaring clarinet had lost a bit of its deliciously woody sound. The sousaphone had good body but seemed less transparent, sometimes hiding other instruments.

Rhythm was excellent, though, and the rhythm *has* to work in this sort of music. Details of individual instruments were mostly clear. "That gives immediacy and a presence," said Albert, "as though the musicians were really here in the room with us."

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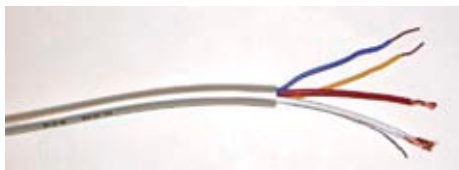


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Of course that was true only once we had the volume set right. "But it's not a problem," added Albert, "because people just set the volume to what sounds right to them anyhow."

And this cable can make a system sound *very* right.



### Atlas 2.0+1.1

Somehow this cable's pearly finish makes it seem as though it needs to cost more than the Ascent. And besides it's bi-wire ready, with four wires plus the ground.

In fact it's a fraction of the price, at £5.49/US\$10.15 per metre. A bargain? But there's more to a bargain than just low price.

The four wires are not the same. The red and white wires, intended for the low frequencies, are multi-stranded, whereas the yellow and blue, which are of course for the high frequencies, are smaller solid-core wires. The much more expensive Atlas Ichor bi-wire cable has a similar configuration, though it is made from single-crystal copper, and this cable uses more conventional oxygen-free copper.

Like the Ascent, it is available terminated with Atlas's own bananas. We terminated ours with Michell bananas, joining the two pairs and the ground at the amplifier end.

And then we proceeded to the listening session. Once again the speaker was identified only by number, but its attractiveness and the fact it allows bi-wiring could lead one to expect upscale performance. And it would have been nice if we had been able to get it.

All considered what we heard was not too shabby. The spaciousness was reasonable, and the bottom end was quite good, with the plucked bass solid and rhythmic and the elusive organ quite audible.

The voices? They were pleasant enough, and they never got shrill, as they often can, but Gerard complained of a certain graininess in both male and female voices. "There's a noticeable thickening of the textures when they sing loud," said Gerard. "It's not unpleasant, but it's not right. I got tired of it before it was over." Albert agreed, finding the timbres of the men and the women a little too similar, as of course they should not be.

The cable's weaknesses were also evident with the jazz piece. The clarinet was a little thin, and the piano lost some of its magic as well. "There's something hard to define that is just missing," said

Reine. "The osmosis among the musicians is gone. The sound is confused too."

It wasn't a mess by any means. The bottom end was adequate, with a solid sousaphone, though it seemed tone deaf somehow. The depth, the image and the magic had all sprung a leak.

Despite some good news, it makes no sense to bi-wire at this price. A better *single* cable would give you superior results. We can't recommend this one.



### BIS HP1 speaker cable

This is the same Montreal-area company two of whose interconnect cables are in the previous test. It's a nicely-finished copper cable, fitted with Eichmann Bayonet Bananas. The people at BIS are definitely on Eichmann's Rolodex...but so are we, come to think of it.

Actually BIS makes these cables up to order, and would probably fit them with acupuncture needles if you paid them enough. The base price is C\$24/foot (\$78.75/meter) plus the connectors. It is thereby the most expensive of the cables reviewed here, though it costs only a fraction of the price of the cables we use in our reference systems.

We quickly determined that what it offers for that price is worth having. On the choral recording the voices of both men and woman were magnificent, with a coherent ensemble sound but good individual detail as well. The underlying rhythm of the plucked bass was both solid and rich. Depth and image were both judged good. "It's not quite as natural as with our reference cable," said Gerard, "but it certainly is nice."

We gave the HP1 very good marks on the jazz piece too. The clarinet had a particularly attractive texture, and we could actually picture the pianist. The sousaphone was solid, but at no time did it cover the action. "The musicians play together as though by telepathy," offered Reine.

The BIS price list doesn't include connectors, but we figure a 3 m pair would run about C\$600 (equivalent to US\$505). It's worth a listen.

