



Paul Speltz's Anti-Cable Speaker Cable

Paul Speltz's "anti-cable" speaker cables are a godsend to those of us who want good sound but are repulsed by the astronomically high prices some cable manufacturers are asking for their goods. I know cable manufacturers need to make a living, and I have no problem with that, but there's a limit to what I can conceive of spending on a hunk of wire. (And yes, I know how essential that hunk of wire can be to the sonic integrity of one's system, but when all is said and done, it's still a hunk of wire.) Thus the name "anti-cables." This stuff goes against everything most high-end speaker cables are typical known for—like ridiculously high prices, haute couture designer jackets, and compromised sonics.

At this point, I've only had a few weeks to audition them, so it's possible that extended listening could reveal a shortcoming or two. But so far, I have to say I'm blown away by the neutrality and lack of coloration I'm hearing—and by the absence of any apparent downside. The high frequencies are open and clear with no tizziness; the midrange has exceptional clarity, transparency, and detail; and the bass is extended, with remarkable articulation. Miraculously, the cost is only \$80 for an 8-foot pair with spades.

If you visit Paul Speltz's anti-cable Web site you can read the story behind these cables along with technical info and testimonials up the ying-yang. In a nutshell, the anti-cables are constructed of 12-gauge solid-core copper wire with a very thin red coating or dielectric. According to Speltz, it's the minimal dielectric that accounts for the amazing clarity and virtual lack of sonic signature. These cables are a bit stiff, but still easy to work with. They do require shaping to keep off the carpeting and away from other components and cables, but I'd say the bending and shaping, at most, might take an extra few minutes per cable.

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package. (Note: the "Ultra" designation replaces the former "Transcendence Series" moniker for the DAC and preamp and "EXR" moniker for the power amp.) While the AVA trio was initially set up as a system, I opted to spend most of my time evaluating each component individually. All three units utilize Van Alstine's patented hybrid vacuum tube circuits, including high-gain 12AT7A tubes where applicable.

Ultra DAC

Not having played around with an outboard DAC since I moved last year, I had to spend a few days of search-and-rescue to unearth my bag of sundry coaxial and other orphaned cables. It was well worth the effort. While I don't advocate spending large green on a digital cable, a little experimenting transformed the Ultra DAC from simply a nice-sounding component to one I would consider buying. That's a huge step. For those who are curious, I liked the sound best with a Virtual Dynamics David coax, but there are certainly many other options. The worst performance was with a bottom-of-the-bag generic video cable that must have come free with a \$39 DVD player.

Those who read my budget system review might remember the Marantz PMD-320 CD player I bought from Parts Express for \$279. I began using it again recently when I finally had the time to set up a second system in the spare bedroom. Although the Marantz isn't a bad player on its own, using it as a transport in combination with the Ultra DAC was a fairly dramatic as well as a sonically pleasing upgrade. The vastly improved spaciousness, clarity, and resolution were immediately evident, as was the greater extension at both ends of the frequency spectrum. While I wouldn't classify the Ultra DAC as being the last word in finesse or sophistication, the sound was invitingly pure and smooth, leaning a bit to the warm side without being overly lush or tubey. But even more essential than the aforementioned attributes, the Ultra DAC has what it takes to make me want to listen. This "listenability" or "magic" or whatever quality it is that draws us into the music has little to do with a component's price tag. I've heard products selling for substantially more that didn't have what it takes to keep me interested. The Ultra DAC has it, and then some. Just don't forget the importance of a reliable transport and suitably matched digital cable in the equation.

Ultra SL preamplifier

The Ultra SL (straight line) preamplifier is similar to the EC version but with fewer bells and whistles. The SL is available with a few options such as remote volume control, phono circuit, and buffered tape input/output, but that's about it. Given my druthers, I'd do away with the tethered lamp-cord plug in favor of an IEC jack on the back panel and detachable power cord. But then again, if it were up to me, and I had the technical wherewithal to know which end of a soldering iron is hot, I'd probably have an Elrod Statement power cord on all my kitchen appliances. Truth be told, both the Ultra preamp and DAC sounded pretty damn good, captive cords and all, and I