

MG Audio Design Cables

(Or What My System Wanted To be When It Grew Up)

By Ted Brady

I am often an impatient (read: lazy) person when it comes to reviews. I often hate long reviews and wish I could just read the evaluation parts. So although I think the story of how I came to my conclusions is an interesting one, I have written this review in sections. If you are impatient, simply go to part three (eval) and start there. 😊

This review might look like it is about some cables, but really it is about how a loom of cables allowed me and my system to finally figure out what we wanted to be when we grow up.

Part One: My recent system evolution (2008-2012)

I have always battled the two sides of my audio needs; the love for dynamics, imaging and microdetail against the need to hear correct timbres, organic wet tones, and a rich midrange of colors. I'm probably not that different than the rest of you audio lovers; it takes quite a bit of work to get the recipe right for both sweet and salty. So, when I demo'd and eventually bought a wonderful tube hybrid preamp a few years ago (Concert Fidelity CF-080) I thought I had found the right balance. I had to live with single-ended cabling, but so be it.

As many of you know I had also become a dac-aholic (I've demo'd a couple dozen DACS in the past 24 months). And I decided to take my room treatments to the next level, too. So the recipe continued to shift, dart and move in directions that, to the outside observer, might be considered psychotic!! But the process of moving two steps forward and one point nine nine steps back did, theoretically, get me moving forward.

During one of my DAC demos (Antelope Gold) I stumbled upon the ability to go direct-to-amp and out went the Concert Fidelity preamp. I fell "in like" with the ability to reduce cable clutter, and the direct sound was as clear as a bell (note; the Gold's stepped relay attenuator direct volume control is indeed amazing, and best in any remote-volume DAC I've heard). I also liked the idea that I could put a \$20k list preamp on the market...but I guess I wasn't committed. But I lived with that sound and began to like it more and more. And promised myself I'd sell the damn CF. This will be great!

Fast forward to my discovering DSD, the Mytek DAC and a whole new world of hirez material. Out goes the Gold, in comes the Mytek...but it needed a good pre. The CF now sounded slightly veiled in comparison (although I wasn't sure why), the Mytek liked XLR's, so I dusted off my great (original) Bent TAP TVC active/passive pre and voila! All was good. The ASI Liveline cabling (a wonderful mix of metals fused together at certain lengths to produce low overall resonance) seemed to mix well with the new DSD-based system. Throw in a set of Furutech Evo II XLR's to complete the system. Incredible detail, great imaging, great dynamics. The tonality was nice, etc. So what was it I kept thinking was missing? And when the hell am I gonna sell that CF preamp??

The more and more I got into DSD the more I wanted to hear the higher end DSD equipment

(the Mytek is incredible at \$1500 but what would 4x sound like). I had the opportunity to hear the Meitner MA-1, Ed Meitner's new DAC with his new "value" line, Meitner Audio. I was hooked; I bought it (review coming). My system now seemed nicely fit for the new room treatments, the Bent preamp, etc. I experimented with some other cables but the ASI Liveline/Furutech combo provided a nice blend of detail and tonality. All was well.

Part Two: What Greg and Lee were doing during this time

At the same time all the above occurred, two gents by the names of Lee Matuszczak and Greg Graff were living the life of retired Colorado-ans, one an electrical engineer, the other a musician. What happened is that they began working together some 30 years ago building speakers. Early on they found that switching wires really dramatically altered the voicing and performance of the speaker. One day Greg got frustrated at having to re-voice the initial design after switching wires and asked Lee what the ideal wire would be. He said it would be a strip line. They spent months developing one which sounded very good. During listening panel sessions the people often focused on the wires instead of their latest speaker creation. People started wanting sets for themselves and they began to make them for people on request. Fast forward to two years ago when Lee retired and they started trying to improve the wires. Lee and Greg spent a year building prototypes of different configurations until they found something that worked even better than what they'd originally designed. they then decided, at the insistence of friends, to start marketing these new cables as well as the original designs.

Part Three: Greg meet Ted (the evaluation)

I got a call from my dear friend Terry London (also a Concert Fidelity owner, but he uses the damn thing), that the guys at StereoMojo had just done a wonderful review of some new ribbon cables, and that he was seriously thinking of calling the folks at MG Audio Design for some samples. I did the same. Why? Cuz Terry had not heard my system yet (I've heard his wonderful one a few times now, visiting my son in Chicago) but knew my preferences, often better than I do, and felt that I might like these cables; and moreover, wanted to compare notes. So, what the heck. Plus, the StereoMojo review was well done, and the conclusions seemed no-brainers.

I called Greg and we struck up a long conversation (one of many, now, over the past few months) and he sent me a complete loom of cables, both speaker and interconnect. I explained my system, listening preferences, etc. MG Audio Designs produces copper ribbon speaker cables (called Planus I and II, difference is size/width and price) and both copper and silver ribbon interconnects, named Planus CU and Planus AG respectively. The silvers (AG) are their flagship, but can be "incompatible" with a system that is too tipped to begin with. I had Greg send me some of both, but assumed the silvers, in my system, might fall into that incompatible category

When the speaker cables and XLR's arrived I broke them in for 72 hours and then created a matrix for evaluation. I had three pieces to evaluate: source IC (Meitner to pre), amp IC (preamp to monoblock Modwright KWA-150's) and speaker cables (to SP Tech Revelation's external crossover boxes). I also had silver and copper iterations, so the combinations were numerous

(silver/silver/copper, copper/silver/copper, etc). Also, I wanted to replace one at a time, so as to create a baseline with one variable. Good luck with that!!

My eval music consists of a variety of music that I am both intimately aware of, and create a test bed of different styles and sonic hurdles. They include redbook, 24 bit and DSD music. Tracks include:

Rickie Lee Jones, Dat Dere (Pop Pop, redbook)

Bill Frisell, Nature's Symphony (gone, like a train, redbook)

Sara K, Waterfalls (Waterfalls, redbook)

Cowboy Junkies, State Trooper (Whites Off Earth Now, DSD)

Keith Greeninger, Immaculately Blessed (Blue Coast ESE Sessions Vol 1, DSD)

Mari Kodama, various tracks (Beethoven Piano Sonatas 16-18, DSD)

Charlie Haden, Anna (Heartplay, 24-96)

Norah Jones, Broken (Not Too Late, 24-192)

Among others.....

My first target was the speaker cables, so I replaced my tried and true ASI Livelines with Greg's Planus II (6ft, \$850) ribbon cables. They are well-built, but as ribbons are somewhat delicate, so should one treat the Mg Audio Cables. The directional ends (rough silver spades at amp, clean rhodium at speaker) were well secured and did not feel as delicate as the actual length of cabling they connected.



My system transformation began at that moment. The unusual combination of both the lifting of veils (i.e more micro-detail) and improved timbre/tonality was quite amazing (and the Livelines strength was in tonality). These large copper ribbons were transforming, as they allowed a clearer picture into the system, yet showed zero hint of harshness, edge or the squinty feeling one gets when more light is allowed in. Simply, those beautiful colors that the artist painted were shown in much better light now, and the colors became more vivid. Note to self: do not remove these cables! Second note to self: get some sleep!

I was tempted to throw the whole loom of cables in, but gave the speaker change a day or so of intense listening. Pure DSD through the Meitner is a thing to behold, and with the Planus II's Mari Kodama's native DSD recordings of Beethoven's piano sonatas went from great recordings to realism in the room. Subtle foot movements and piano decays were palpable. Cookie Marengo's great DSD recordings of Keith Greeninger's modern folk songs, like Immaculately Blessed, shone through with a slightly better organic feel than the ASI's, and a better overall sense of the recording space. But something began to emerge that had me troubled (not cable related, but I didn't know what it was at the time).

It was time to try the various MG audio interconnects. I had both copper (1M, \$500) and silver

(1M, \$1k) XLR's, and dual of each, so I could set up a an all-copper, all-silver or combo with my DAC-to-pre and and pre-to-amp needs. To further complicate things, a Fed Ex box arrived with a newer XLR that MG Audio Designs created, called the XLR hybrid (copper ribbon with silver fused at the receiving end for the last several inches, 1M \$800). Since XLR's are by their nature directional there was no need to worry about inverting them. But it made my matrix of combinations explode, so I literally created an Excel spreadsheet (Greg and my close buddies laughed at my obsession)..

Over the next 3 weeks I tried every possible combination (realize, for a second, that copper-silver can be very different from silver-copper, argh!!). I will go into some detail, but it soon became clear (no pun intended) that, at a very high level, simple math was making my job easier. If I gave silver content a number (silver equals 1, hybrid equals half, copper equals zero) then my silver overload quotient, regardless of where the cables resided, was somewhere between 1 and 1.5. It remained consistent through the evaluation, even though placement of the silver content was quite important. The silver magic of Greg's cables (that StereoMojo talked about) was evident. The dynamics were most affected (which is nice cuz I am a dynamics freak) but so was timbre, at least that's what I thought at first impression. It was as if colors (timbre/tonality) were highlighted by natural light, but could be over-saturated at some point. Not harsh, not digititis, but too lit to actually become somewhat hot. So silver-silver was not an option for me, but copper-silver was beautiful, and hybrid-silver, on the right recordings, was jaw dropping.

The overall effect of the interconnects was the same as the speaker cables, but to a very slightly lesser effect (i.e pull the speaker cables out and the improvements aren't as grandiose, yet the silver math issue remained constant). The cumulative effect of lifting veils, creating organic color schemes, and deepening the soundstage was mesmerizing (I took awhile to choose that word, which connotes a little stupor and light-headedness too 😊). And on top of all that the little troubling bug in my ear kept coming back ("this could be so much better but something is in the way").

One morning I got a call from my close buddy Terry London (goes by teajay) asking how the previous night had gone...we kept in constant contact as we were both trying to figure out how to use all this cable power at our fingertips!! It was as if he read my mind (which often happens) cuz we began trying to figure out that he could send me his single-ended MG Audio Design silvers and coppers (they don't make an RCA hybrid to-date) in order to try, one last time, my Concert Fidelity CF-080. A stay of execution? I mean, many industry pundits called this pre "state of the art" yet I couldn't find synergy with it, except to think its sale would help me buy more music. 😞

Well, when I earlier said that putting in the speaker cables was the day my system transformation began, the day I put my CF-080 back in, connected to Greg's cables, was the day the transformation exploded into a huge wide big grin!! WOW! F---k! (sorry). "Where have you been??" The simple combination of Msada San's tube hybrid preamp and Lee/Greg's copper-silver combo, along with their copper Planus II speaker cables, created a soundstage that extended almost infinitely wide and several dozen feet further back than I'd ever experienced. And even more interesting (especially when I later introduced my new CAPS V2+ music server)

was the effect on imaging. Now individual instruments or voices had meat on them, depth and width and height (I could have described them as 3D but that sounds like a trick or a lesser description of what really happened). I have no scientific idea what was going on, but I suspect categories like distortion, phase and impedance all became “correct; in some aural way. I kinda really don’t care, but would love to understand someday.

And the colors!! Wild colors; acoustic guitars now sounded very different from one another, and cymbals took on sheen and a burnished feel. One of the more tonally exciting albums in recent years is Bill Frisell’s “gone, like a train”. With the MG Audio Design cabling loom Bill’s use of textures, tones and phase takes on a completely new feel for me. It’s as if I had been listening to this album in 16 colors, now I have 16 million. And his phase tricks, like in Egg Radio, make sense now, with perfect out-of-phase lead guitar floating across the otherwise solid soundstage. In “Nature’s Symphony” the microcues are all there, all in the seemingly right place, with beautiful decays. Now, is this the result of the cables? The preamp? Dunno, don’t care. 😊

All of this took a toll. My wallet is slightly lighter (these are ridiculous bargains, based on their results), my wine collection is wayyy lighter, my sleep deprivation is beyond the “unhealthy” stage, and my music collection has been unearthed. Gone are the few audiophile playlists. I haven’t heard R.E.M’s Murmur (MFSL) that well in years! Oh, and my goal of selling my Concert Fidelity to buy more music is no longer attainable. But boy did I find more music!!

Postscript1: Teajay sold \$12,000 (list) worth of Stealth cables once he put these into his very hi-end system. His review will be forthcoming in HomeTheaterReview.com (he is one of their hi-end 2 channel only guys). I’ve spoken with several others who have replaced ultimate hi-end cabling with Lee and Greg’s stuff. Are there better cables out there? Probably, but...dunno, don’t care 😊

Postscript2: I asked Greg if I could interview him about the business. Attached is that interview. Enjoy.

Greg, why did you and Lee decide, in retirement, to get into the highly competitive and highly debated audiophile cable market?

We can only play so many rounds of golf. No seriously, we got into the wire business because friends in the Colorado Audio Society (and outside of the Society) kept saying these wires are so good you should sell them. Before, we had made them as a favor to friends and word kept getting out on how good they were. We are in the business for two different reasons. The first reason is because I wanted to validate that Lee’s basic design philosophy is correct and that he has designed a very good sounding set of wires. The second was to have fun meeting people interested in good music/sound and to give back something to the hobby we love. Heaven knows it’s not for the money. We will be very happy if we break even in this endeavor.

What are your goals for good sound (i.e when do you know a product is ready for market)?

This is a very difficult question- how do you know when a product is right? My primary listening

bias is does the piece allow me to hear the musicianship of the performer. I was a (mediocre on a good day) performing artist many years ago and maybe I am trying to figure what they are doing to be such a good musician. I don't know for sure if this is why it's the most important criteria to me, but I have to hear the musician's expressions in a piece of gear. I have many other criteria as well, but if I can't hear musical expression in our designs, it won't be part of our product line. Lee has a number of other criteria and those are reflected in our products as well. We also use a listening panel to get feedback on what they like and don't like about a particular design. No one can produce a product that satisfies everyone's criteria or biases, but we try to address the most common complaints about a particular design before releasing it to the audiophile community as a whole. Maybe you haven't figured this out yet, but you are now part of our expanded listening panel. We're kinda sneaky that way.

I know this is not the typical audiophile response you may have been expecting, but we are not typical. We are concerned first and foremost about being able to capture the essence of the music performance. Maybe the easiest way to respond to this question is to say that if it doesn't sound musical, we won't put it on the market.

Do you have any future plans to expand the product line?

We have some new designs in the prototype stage and some others on the drawing board. I don't want to go into too much detail on these, but suffice it to say we will continue to bring high performance/value products to the market. That is unless it stops being fun. If that happens, we will just shut the whole thing down. Like I said, it sure isn't about the money. For all of the time we spend on the business, we could make more money as a WalMart greeters.

Can you tell our readers where at RMAF will you be demoing your cables?

We will be sharing a room with Angel City Audio, its Room 442. We may have wires in other rooms, but nothing is firm on those. I suspect that Thursday I will be shamelessly hawking our wires to other vendors. We'll see if anyone bites. I suspect we are too young and unknown for other vendors to take a chance on us. I can't blame them, they invest a lot of money in these shows.

Thanks for taking the time to interview us and giving us the opportunity to share our design philosophies with the audiophile community.

Final caveat: I am now a customer! I bought the copper-silver-copper combo! 🍷👍

Website: <http://www.mgaudiodesign.com/index.htm>

