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Slippin' The Cable Fantastic!

Stereovox Studio Cables & Manley Laboratories Skipjack

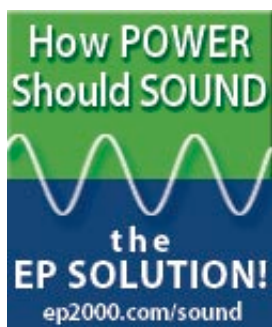
Review By Rick Becker
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Early on in my



introduction to high-end audio, I learned that cables make a difference. I was fortunate enough to find a dealer that would allow me to compare my mid-fi interconnects (with the red and white molded plastic RCA connectors) to a pair of entry level Audioquest interconnects. I could hear a substantial improvement. But I also surfed the Internet and learned about Mogami Star Quad, Canare GS-6, Video Brilliance by Belden, and eventually mil-spec cable. Each of these had a little something different to offer and they were all a whole lot better than molded mid-fi wire. And they were all a whole lot cheaper than any cable manufacturer's least expensive high-end cable.



Another thing I learned in those early years was that a good connector can make a substantial difference,



as does the competence of the person doing the soldering. Mostly, I had a friend with a temperature-controlled soldering iron do the work for me. In the early going, I had more important things to think about, like amplifiers, loudspeakers and all those old LPs I was collecting.

My first commercially made cable was an Illuminations D-60 digital cable. I had picked up a used muse model two dac at a good price and figured why not get a good cable. The D-60 was used by many of the writers at Stereophile, so I went for it. Illuminations merged with Kimber cable years later and Chris Sommovigo, the designer of the D-60, formed a new company, Stereovox. Chris' new digital cable, the HDXV, was given a rave review by Todd Warnke in the January 2004 issue of enjoythemusic.com in which Todd compared the HDXV with several much more expensive digital cables. In the April issue, I did a follow-up review of the HDXV in which I was able to compare it directly with the older D-60. There were easily discernable differences between the two and at less than half the price, the HDXV trounced it. This made me eager to try out the impending Stereovox Studio Series interconnect and loudspeaker cables.

Chris and I corresponded for over a year, during which time he moved into a new residence in Atlanta, GA, and became a married man. We even had a close encounter of the third kind when I bumped into him as I was getting off an elevator at the New York show. The verbal exchange totaled about a dozen words, but in our written exchanges I had already developed a good sense of the man. Quality and value are the two words that rise to the top of all his email. And those words were manifest in the product when I opened the box.

The hdse interconnects were packaged in a tinted cellophane zip-lock



sleeve with a heavy paper added for stiffness.

Printed on the paper were several paragraphs about



www.fatwyre.com

the hdse, most of which can be read on their website. Modest packaging materials with bold claims. After reading about trickle-down technologies from the telecommunications and electronic warfare industries, the most impressive fact is the use of thin round copper tubing as the main conductor which has a skin effect profile of a 32 AWG wire (0.008" in diameter), while maintaining a DC resistance equivalent to a 20 GA. wire. In other words, the tubular conductor provides a big reduction in skin effect without sacrificing current. A mil-spec silver plated copper woven shield protects the tubular strand and a clear FET coating protects the cable.

The cables themselves looked a bit like plastic coated inner brake cables used on bicycles. Close inspection revealed the very high quality construction and the Sommovigo-designed RCA connectors have an art-deco look about them with their sensuously shaped chrome plated barrels. The strain relief coils are anodized blue and red to differentiate the left and right channels. Aesthetically, this cable is breaking new ground. It is the antithesis of the Fat Cigar or Reptilian School of cable design. Not so much form following function, but rather form following material. They are a beautiful cable to ponder in hand, and relatively inconspicuous when installed.

I was leery of the design at first, but Chris assured me that the tube would withstand the rigors of equipment reviewing and the copper tube would not break under repeated installation and removal. In use the cable will take a slight set when bent and not return to the perfect form in which it was delivered. But due to its small diameter (approximately 1/8-inch) and neutral silver color, it is easily ignored. Once it is installed your attention flows to the components, the loudspeakers and ultimately to the music.

Insertion and removal are important considerations for a reviewer, but less so for the typical consumer who isn't constantly reconfiguring his or her rig. As I mentioned, the strain relief coils are coded blue and red and are easily spotted when bending over or peering behind components from the side. Insertion required a conscious effort, even on my CAT preamplifier that seems to have slightly undersized

jacks. Normally, I prefer locking RCA connectors for this reason, as they guarantee a tight fit. Not to worry with the hdse; the connection will be tight and secure. The downside here is you have to be careful to brace your equipment if it is supported on Symposium Rollerblocks or something similar. Likewise, when you remove the hdse. Removal poses another challenge as the smooth barrel offers little to grip except the slightly flared taper as you pull the plug away from the component. A few choice words will sometimes help, but chose them wisely, lest you get your spouse excited.

That's the extent of the bad news, which really isn't all that significant when you consider that this cable is so good you will probably not be removing it for a long time. And besides, once made, a tight connection is a good thing.

How Good Is It?

Well, that depends. I promised Chris I wouldn't do a "Shoot-Out" so I won't mention other brands by name, but it is necessary to compare a product with a reference and helpful to compare it with other brands. When I replaced my much more expensive reference interconnects with the hdse, after a lengthy break-in period of a week or so (which it desperately needed), I thought I noticed a slight increase in the focus of the music and a slightly more neutral, slightly drier presentation. Tonal balance, soundscape, timbre and dynamic contrast all stayed pretty much the same. At first, this was a big disappointment to me, as I was hoping for the magnitude of improvement I experienced when I went from the Illuminations D-60 to the hdxv digital interconnect. But I rationalized that my system is pretty well balanced and functioning at a very high level. Dedicated lines, ERS paper and vibration absorbing footers have all aided in raising the bar considerably higher than one might expect from my components. Plus, the room itself is well suited for listening. I compared the hdse to another cable from a third manufacturer and similarly found very little difference, and surmised that if my wife were to change the

cables without my knowledge, I probably would not notice the difference. Again, this was good news, of sort, since this second set was also more expensive than the hdse.

About this time I received an email from Eve Anna Manley and in my reply, I suggested her new Skipjack switchbox might help me out with this cable evaluation. I had seen it at the New York show in April 2005, and I was intrigued with the possibilities of this unusual little unit. To both my surprise and my delight, she offered to make one up for me!

The Manley Skipjack

Enter, from the left coast, the Manley Skipjack. At one rack unit in height, and less



than a half rack width, it is a brick, weighing slightly more than six pounds. It was designed primarily as a complementary unit for the Steelhead phonostage, which happens to have a single line input, making the Steelhead somewhat of a preamplifier. Adding the Skipjack to the frying pan allows four line inputs to be added to the Steelhead, with remote switching via an umbilical cord with a push button. The button has a small light in it that blinks once for input #1, twice for input #2, and so on — very cool and very useful if the unit is out of sight. The heavy weight of the Skipjack is a design parameter to keep the weight of multiple sets of interconnects from dragging the unit off the shelf. Inside are four electrically activated relay switches that can be programmed to cycle through a variety of sequences. And since it is a simple in and out switchbox with no electronics in the signal path, it can be used in either direction, e.g. one source into four different inputs, or four sources into one input — such as the one on the back of the Steelhead. And

since one of the inputs can be changed into an output, you can also do 3 into 2, or 2 into 3. Whew! The Manley website also shows a couple of interesting ways it can be integrated into a rig in conjunction with the Steelhead phonostage.

Using the dual outputs of my CAT preamplifier I ran two different sets of interconnects to the Skipjack, and then used another interconnect between the Skipjack and my Manley Mahi monoblocks. Just for fun, I invited my friend Arnie over with some of his various interconnects. He brought four sets, ranging from about \$75 a pair to \$750 a pair. Round and round we went, comparing whole songs and ten second sound bites with each of his cables up against the Stereovox. The differences ranged from miniscule to complete uncertainty. Arnie had spent a lot of money on those cables and it was clear when he left that a lot of illusions had been shattered. I didn't hear from him for weeks until finally he sent me a cartoon. Sure enough, he had been depressed, but was coming out of it since he began experimenting with removing the TV set from between his loudspeakers. Big gains, there, but moving his equipment rack and the TV over to the side of the room would mean he would have to re-cable the system a bit. And this was an idea he did not relish in light of our recent experiments.

Continuing with the Skipjack on my own, I compared the Stereovox with some of my home brew cables and even with a pair of mid-fi interconnects that were a healthy cut above the bargain basement molded plastic variety. The mil-spec home brew interconnects were neck and neck with the Stereovox, but the mid-fi lagged considerably behind, most obviously in focus. But even then, the system sounded basically the same, requiring concentrated listening to pick up the loss of focus with the mid-fi wire. Casual listening was not sufficient for me to pick up the difference and nothing of jaw-dropping proportions ever occurred.

Of course the methodology comes into play when doing such a comparison and an electrical engineering friend who works at a very highly ranked company in town was quick to point that out to me. Granted, I was using multiple brands of cable in the

rig in addition to the two being directly compared. In going from the Skipjack to the power amplifiers, I would sometimes use the same model of interconnect as one of the pairs being tested, and sometimes I would use a third brand. That variable didn't seem to be a factor in this type of quick comparison. The differences were just as small or non-existent either way.

Secondly, it could be argued that the Skipjack was masking the differences between the pair of interconnects. This was considered, but when I compared a *single* pair of Stereovox interconnects between the preamplifier and power amplifiers with *two pairs* of Stereovox interconnects *and* the Skipjack between the preamplifier and the power amplifiers, I could hear no difference. The Skipjack is incredibly clean!

And for those who would have me perform the testing blind, I was able to do that, too. If I concentrated on listening to the music and randomly hit the button to change between cables several times without thinking about it, I could easily lose track of which cable was playing. (I didn't need to do this with machine gun rapidity; my brain simply ignores my hand when listening to music). Just as often, I would choose the cable that was *not* in the circuit. At this point in the review process, it seemed as if most cables were equal, provided they had decent wire and good connectors. The home brew interconnects matched the more expensive name brand cables in this quick A-B comparison format.

As for the Skipjack, it was virtually transparent. Pressing the button produced a very slight "click" through the loudspeakers that was usually inaudible if music was playing at moderate volume. Under normal use in conjunction with the Steelhead, the button would be used to change sources and this click would not be disruptive. I would highly recommend it for use with the Steelhead, or for anyone needing a virtually transparent switchbox with RCA jacks. Its price, when combined with the Steelhead, is certainly appropriate for its build quality. But anyone seeking to put together a system on the cheap with say a switchbox and a pair of

attenuators on the back of a power amplifier would best be advised to look elsewhere. The Skipjack is a serious, multi-purpose built piece of equipment, equally at home in an audio lab as in a high-end system when mated to the Steelhead.

Long Term Listening

The traditional way to subjectively evaluate cables is through longer term listening, and an optimal situation developed when a KR 340 integrated amplifier arrived for review. This would require only a single interconnect between the DAC and the power output to the loudspeaker. I'll save the specifics of the KR for the upcoming review. Some minor differences between the Stereovox hdse and the other two brands in house became apparent. Keep in mind, here, that I've changed the system significantly. Earlier, between the DAC and the speaker cables I had three sets of interconnects, a preamplifier, the Skipjack and the power amplifiers. Now, I have one pair of interconnects and the integrated amplifier.

While I was able to ascertain differences between the Stereovox hdse interconnect and the two other brands, these differences were very small and all three combinations produced a very high level of exceedingly enjoyable music.

In no case did the big bad wolf blow down any pig's home. While other reviewers might huff and puff with superlatives and references from vast selections of music, I will be brief.

Of the three, my **reference interconnect** was on the warm and full side of neutral. The sound was not bloated, but there was no empty space between the musicians. The soundstage, while wide, focused and deep, was nonetheless full.

And of the three, this was the most liquid presentation. In my reference rig with the EL 84 tubes in the Manley Mahis, this interconnect came closer to neutral than it did with the 300 BXLs tubes in the KR amplifier, and there was discernable space or air between the instruments in my reference rig.

The **second pair**, priced between the reference pair and the Stereovox, was a little cooler in presentation, very close to neutral, but had a very slight touch of hiss in the treble with the S's. With a loudspeaker such as the recently reviewed Escalante Design Pinyon with its magnificent tweeter, this would not have been a problem, but the S's were slightly more pronounced with the Kharmas. The soundstage was very good and there was some space between the musicians with this second cable.

The **Stereovox hdse** was the most neutral sounding of the three with the KR amplifier and the presentation was slightly drier than the other two, particularly the reference. The slight grain I heard in the treble was probably attributable to the tweeter in the Kharmas or the reference speaker cable, as when I switched to the hdls speaker cable, the grain disappeared. Early on, when I used the Stereovox hdse with the Escalante Design Pinyons and the Manley amplifiers the treble was superb. With the KR amplifier and the Kharma loudspeakers, the Stereovox hdse provided a very spacious soundscape with lots of space between the musicians, and the greatest soundstage depth of the three cables.

With the 300 BXLS tubes, these cables had much more in common than the slight differences I have highlighted in the preceding three paragraphs. In the bass region, the 300 BXLS tubes go much deeper than I anticipated, but with the Stereovox speaker cables the sound in the bass region was softer and probably obscured any differences that might have existed among the interconnects down low. Looking at it from another angle, the changes in components produced much larger differences than changing interconnects, and the optimum interconnect depended more on the particular component than on which interconnect was selected. We've all read reviews of components that really hit their stride when the reviewer chanced upon a special cable combination that really brought the component alive. I didn't have any such revelation with these interconnects. The differences were exceedingly small, and if the tooth fairy were to visit and swap the cables around tonight, I probably would not notice the

difference.

Moving On To The Studio hdls Speaker Cable

Here again, form follows material, and cost is determined by the cost of manufacturing rather than some hypothetical value it may or may not add to your system. With a diameter of about 8 mm, or 5/8", it is not unduly large, but its dark blue housing will stand out against a light colored rug. While plain looking at a distance, its beauty lies in the ease of handling. First of all, it is extremely flexible, and therefore very easy to position and tuck out of the way or lay up on cable risers. Secondly, it is not heavy enough or stiff enough to wrestle a monitor off its stand. Instead, it simply drops politely to the ground behind the loudspeaker. Nor will it slide around on you. Given the coefficient of friction of its PVC jacket, it stays put. And when you *do* release one end, it will not spring away and scratch a treasured component or loudspeaker. (Does it sound like I've been around a few years?)

Inside, there are two of the same tubular copper conductors found in the hdse interconnect. The speaker cable, like the interconnect; also uses a silver-plated copper mil-spec woven shield and PTFE Teflon as an insulator. The effective gauge of the wire in the speaker cable is 18 AWG. But the ends are where things really get interesting. Chris Sommovigo never takes a connector for granted and the connectors on the hdls are no exception. The xhadow connector used here comes from Chris' long-standing friendship with Stuart Marcus of Vampire Wire and Sound Connections International fame. They designed this connector together and it is not available for sale to the public as a separate item.

When first attaching the spade ends to the Pinyon monitors, three design benefits were immediately apparent. First, the two leads that emerge from the main jacket are small and also very flexible, as you would expect, and they emerge more than 7 inches from the end of the spade connector, which gives you lots of room to work when attaching them to binding posts. Usually, it is the posts on the amp that present

the greatest challenge. And thirdly, the spade end actually swivels to facilitate approaching the binding post from unusual angles. When I mentioned this to Chris, he pointed out to me that I had missed the most important feature of all: the spade end pulls straight off the cable to reveal a banana plug! Alas, the perfect solution to the Euro-Nanny binding posts on European components. The spade end has a slight angle on it that facilitates placement on more typical binding posts, but this is somewhat problematic with the European post with its plastic shroud. Not to worry. Just slip off the spade end and insert the banana plug straight in the end of the binding post...or in the end of any 5-way binding post for that matter. Say you have a bi-wire situation? No problem. At the amp, use the spade ends on one set of cables and the banana plugs on the other set. The hdls is also available in shotgun configuration for twice the price. Both the banana plug and spades are silver plated copper and the spades on current production are designed for both 0.25-inch and 8mm posts as well as being thicker than the 0.25-inch spades that came on my review sample.

Hdls — The Listening Experience

Almost all of my listening for the interconnect review was done with the hdls so they were very well broken in by the time I compared it to the reference loudspeaker cable. As I mentioned above, all of the listening was very pleasurable and any one of the interconnects could serve me as long term investments. Switching from the Manley Mahis to the KR 340 integrated amplifier brought about some softness in the bass that I thought was due to the nature of the 300 BXLs tubes. When I switched back to my reference speaker cables, the deep bass tightened up.

I then ran a series of listening sessions using the banana plug ends of the hdls. The banana ends seemed to be a bit more focused and transparent than the spades, but I would never bet any money on that assertion. With the banana plug ends and the KR amplifier, the hdls was the equal of the reference

speaker cable in focus from the upper bass through the lower treble, and surpassed the reference in the mid treble. Transparency was perhaps slightly better with the hdls as well. But what emerged was a slightly upward tilt of the tonal balance, and a more obvious absence of deep bass. Female voices seemed a bit higher, and the cymbals had more energy with the hdls. The focus, attack & decay, pace & rhythm were excellent. The focus, of course benefits the inner detail and hence the timbre. Transparency was excellent, perhaps as a result of the slight upward tilt of the tonal balance. Again, with a loudspeaker not capable of deep bass, the softness in the deep bass and possibly the upward tilt in the tonal balance might not have been noticed, but with the Kharmas, good to about 32 Hz, it was.

This brings up the problem of system balance or integration. Different amplifiers like to see different loads — both upstream and downstream. And different loudspeakers will pose different challenges for both amplifiers and speaker cables. The wire that works best with one amplifier and loudspeaker may not produce the same result when you upgrade one or the other, or both.

Given the different results with the reference speaker cable and the hdls, I left the reference connected to the KR amplifier and repeated my trials with the three commercial interconnect cables. The differences among interconnects remained qualitatively the same and just as minute as with the hdls speaker cable in the system. This was no surprise, as the interconnect was upstream from the integrated amplifier, but I wanted to check it out to be sure. Color me curious.

Curious enough to swap out the reference speaker cable for a twisted pair of 16-gauge silver-plated copper mil-spec wires? You betcha! Well...the system didn't slide into mid-fi, that's for sure. The soundscape widened considerably, and the entire stage fell back a foot or so. Focus dropped a bit and the images were not as solid. There was still high-end quality music, but not as high as you would expect from the level of components in the system. The system was out of balance. Of course the mil-spec wire only cost a couple of bucks, not hundreds

or thousands and it served me well until many of my components had been upgraded at least once. Now, it does yeoman duty in my video rig. My point here is that you can climb pretty high up the mountain with just some basic wire, and then fine tune your system with more expensive cables when your upgrade spiral has leveled off. Some people end up with a closet full of cables that were merely bandages for components that were eventually upgraded. This should sound familiar to you if you've been around this hobby a few years, even if the malady hasn't struck you personally.

If it seems like this review is more about the components than about the cables themselves, then perhaps I've succeeded to some degree. The components have a big impact on how a particular cable will affect the sound of the system. Change the components (loudspeakers, in particular), and the system changes a lot. Change the cables and the system changes slightly. And if all this should trigger another cable war headed in my direction, I have my ski poles and hiking boots already loaded in the Tracker. At the first sight of any axe wielding Huns in my 'hood, I'm heading for the mountains.

Summary

There are a lot of reviewers who dread reviewing cables. I can certainly empathize with them. In the two systems I was able to construct as a reference, the Stereovox hdse interconnect differed only slightly from two other high quality cables that were both significantly more expensive. That should be taken not only as a clue, but also as a very high recommendation. It is a cable that should last you many turns on the upgrade merry-go-round and its minimal visual impact establishes a new aesthetic direction that will be appreciated by many.

The hdls speaker cable is a flexible, lightweight cable that is probably better suited for loudspeakers without aspirations of real deep bass that would call for high current. It should be excellent with almost anything down to 40Hz. While highly focused, with a slight upward tilt toward the treble, it delivered a very

listenable sound with a smooth midrange. It also tamed the treble of my reference loudspeaker, which can be aggressive with poor source material. Its clever connectors should make it adaptable to a wide variety of amplifier and loudspeaker combinations. Try before you buy to be sure that it gives you what you want from your particular rig.

The Manley Skipjack proved to be extremely transparent and it would surely be a useful adjunct to the Manley Steelhead for those wishing to build a system around this very highly rated phonostage. As a cable comparator, it was less useful than I had hoped it would be — not because of any failing of the Skipjack, but more likely the inability of the brain to recognize small differences over relatively short spans of time. Set up as a comparator of various components, where the differences are likely to be larger than what I found with the interconnects, the Skipjack may well be much more useful, but I was unable to take it down that road.

Specifications

Type: multi-input switch box

Signal Level Handling: Phono or line input levels

Switching via dual contact NAIS relays per leg per input

Internal Wire Length: six inches total; silver stranded 18 awg

Channel Separation: 116dB (22Hz to 22kHz)

Internal Signal Loss: less than 1/10dB (.045dB)

Frequency Response: DC to 200kHz (+/- 0.1dB @ 200kHz)

Signal To Noise Ratio: 117dB

THD: Non existing

Power Supply: 9vDC external, 2.2A, 100 to 240VAC
input, 50/60Hz, 74VA

Power Cord: IEC detachable standard

Dimensions: 7.75 x 7 x 2 (DxWxH in inches)

Price: \$900

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