

EQUIPMENT REPORT

JPS Labs Aluminata

Art Dudley

INTERCONNECT, SPEAKER CABLE, AC CORD

DESCRIPTION Solid-core alloy conductors with granular aluminum shielding, configured as interconnect pairs, single-wire speaker cables, and AC cords.

DIMENSIONS Interconnect: 1m, 2m, 6m. Speaker cables: 8'. AC cord: 2m. Other lengths available.

SERIAL NUMBERS OF UNITS REVIEWED Interconnect pairs: 1m, 63068, 63069; 2m, 63066, 63067; 6m, 63070, 63071. Speaker-cable pair: 54353, 54354. AC cords: 32304, 32305.

PRICES Aluminata interconnect: \$2999/1m pair with WBT locking phono plugs; \$600 each additional 0.5m. Aluminata speaker cable: \$6099/4' pair with WBT spade lugs or WBT locking bananas, \$1200 each additional 2' pair. Aluminata AC cord: \$3499/2m. Approximate number of dealers: 25.

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Taken together, these unusual interconnect, loudspeaker, and AC cables brought a new measure of spaciousness, scale, smoothness, heretofore unimagined detail, and overall musical ease and naturalness to my music system. And they did it while sounding neither dull nor bright—just right.

I start with that observation not in an effort to be cute, but as a good-natured warning to ill-natured skeptics: Unless you're open to the idea that such a thing is possible, the 2300 words that follow will be little more than nonsense, howsoever differently I intend them.

There's more: From the moment JPS Labs offered to loan me these review samples, right up through the bulk of my listening and note-taking, I didn't know how much they cost. Of course I assumed they weren't cheap, given that designer Joe Skubinski described the Aluminatas, in genuinely excited tones, as his best ever. But it never dawned on me that a 1m interconnect pair, for example, would retail for \$2999. And when I did look at the Aluminata portion of JPS Labs' price list, I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

Description

Just as Audio Note has its silver wire and Cardas its golden ratio, JPS has a calling card of its own: a proprietary conductor material called Alumiloy. Nominal appear-

ances aside, pure aluminum is not the main ingredient of Alumiloy—although it plays a role, and may well give the finished product some of its signature strengths. Aluminum is low in density, nonmagnetic, and highly malleable. It also conducts electricity well, being surpassed in that regard only by the usual suspects: copper, gold, and silver.

But the greatest distinction of JPS's Aluminata line lies beyond its choice of conductors, in a realm where aluminum does play a decisive role. As Joe Skubinski sees it, the main challenge faced by a connecting cable of low reactance and resistance, where conductor mass and configuration are already appropriate to the current being passed, is that of outside interference. So he developed a cable shield to end all cable shields: Skubinski surrounded his insulated conductor cores with a thick blanket of granulated aluminum, densely packed and held in place with a polymer jacket. The result, called a Particle Aluminum Shield or PAS, is more flexible than a solid tube, yet manytimes thicker than a braided shield, with the potential for vastly better RFI and EMI shielding than any other practical solution—and a few that aren't.

That wasn't quite enough: Surrounding an electrical conductor with a metal tube and separating the two with a dielectric creates a crude sort of capacitor, with high-frequency AC finding a fairly easy route from the former to the latter. For the tube to function as a shield within an electrical system, it must be grounded at one end: common practice, in any event. Unfortunately, as Skubinski says, RFI sees that connection to ground as an impedance: Noise picked up by the antenna-like shield is dispersed through the system, and little of that energy actually makes its way to the electrical ground.

Skubinski wanted to make a cable that could itself absorb and dispense with any RFI and EMI energy, so he came up with an interesting variation on grounding the shield: He added a length of absorptive material—the precise substance remains undisclosed—between that thick layer of aluminum particles and the ground reference point of each Aluminata cable, which follows a conductive path to the ground. For the Aluminata interconnects, the ground point is at the source end; for the speaker cables, it's at the amplifier end; and for the AC cords, the ground path is at the same end as the wall receptacle.

Apart from their common approach to shielding, the three types of Aluminata cable I tried are built with different conductor sizes and configurations—not to mention their obviously different terminations. Aluminata interconnect begins life as a quartet of 15-gauge solid-core Alumiloy conductors, insulated with the flexible polyimide Kapton and terminated with WBT locking phono plugs. Aluminata AC has three 8-gauge Alumiloy conductors, also insulated with Kapton, and uses a Wattgate plug and IEC connector, both with gold-plated contacts. JPS's largest Alumiloy conductors are reserved for the Aluminata speaker cable: a twisted pair of 5-gauge solid-core, insulated by hand—using cotton gloves, so skin oils won't be left behind on the otherwise clean alloy surfaces. The 6" leads at the ends of the Aluminata speaker cables are 8-gauge stranded alloy wires insulated with Teflon. Those leads are crimped and soldered to the 5-gauge Alumiloy conductors inside the cable structure itself, and are terminated with the buyer's choice of WBT spade lugs or locking banana plugs. Crimped connections on all JPS Aluminata cables are made and remade several times before the cable is finished—a prudent move, given the tendency of certain alloys to expand and contract with greater ease than others. Only lead-free solders are used.

Installation and setup

I tried the Aluminata cables, both individually and as a more or less complete connection rig (minus the tonearm lead and various remaining AC cords), in my main system: Linn LP12 record player and Sony SCD-777 SACD player, Artemis and Lamm preamplifiers, Quad and Lamm amplifiers, and Quad ESL loudspeakers.

All of the Aluminata cables were at least somewhat unwieldy: Bending them to a radius much smaller than 6" took more coaxing than usual, although they were far from the stiffest I've used. The more severe challenge was posed by the cables' substantial weight: The granulated aluminum shielding alone adds over a pound to every meter of stereo interconnect, and even more to the speaker cables and AC cords. Taken as a whole, the 1m Aluminata interconnect pair weighed approximately 2.5 lbs, and a single Aluminata AC weighed over 5 lbs. By comparison, a Quad monoblock amplifier weighs about 16 lbs.

Weight was more of an issue with the speaker cables than the other Aluminata models: Their stranded termination leads were, of course, significantly more flexible than the rest of the cable; in my system, with the Quad ESLs raised somewhat inelegantly off the floor, the combination of heavy cables and floppy leads made hooking up a clumsier procedure than usual. Those WBT locking bananas weren't just a luxury, they were a necessity—without them, the Aluminata speaker cables disconnected themselves.

During their stay here, the JPS Aluminatas all worked without a hitch, and even the most careful listening failed to detect any change in their performance during that time.

Listening

The first Aluminata cable I tried was the 6m interconnect pair, which seemed to lock in with my Lamm electronics from the start. Going from the very good Nordost Heimdall interconnect pair (reviewed in the January 2007 *Stereophile*) to the JPS Aluminata made for one of the most remarkable differences I can remember hearing between two nondefective audio cables. With the Aluminata in place, my system's performance was spacious and smooth—extremely smooth—and noticeably, obviously noiseless. Silences and spaces between notes and sonic "images" weren't even black. They were just dead-empty. Tunefulness, rhythm, and musical flow were all superb. Electric bass notes, as on the Jayhawks' "I'd Run Away," from Tomorrow the Green Grass (LP, American 43006-1), were dead-on in terms of pitch, with extremely well-defined attack and decay components. The long Aluminata interconnects, used from preamp to amp, also made my system sound larger overall, with a more convincing gradation of scale between the extremes.

Over the next few days I added the remaining Aluminata cables, one at a time: the 1m interconnect pair between phono preamp and preamp, the 2m pair between CD player and preamp, the speaker cables, and the AC cords with various components. The strengths I described above only expanded—especially the noiselessness, and my system's consequent gains in detail retrieval.

Remarkably, the last application I selected for the two Aluminata AC

cords—powering my Quad ESL loudspeakers—made the largest qualitative leap of all. And to think that, as recently as 2003, I was an AC-cord skeptic!

With all of the JPS Aluminata products in place, my system had the same essential qualities as before: realistic texture and presence, an emphasis on musical flow and momentum, a bit of softness up top, not the world's highest ceiling in terms of drama and scale but convincing enough within those constraints. Yet my system's flaws were now less glaring, and almost all of its better qualities were enhanced. It was as if the whole system had been given an easier task.

I mentioned detail retrieval at the start, and on that count I scarcely know where to begin. There were a number of specific things I noticed for the first time with the Aluminatas in place, such as the neat chord changes played on the banjo in Randy Newman's cleverly arranged "Lonely at the Top," on *Sail Away* (LP, Reprise MS 2064), or the simple pleasure of hearing Newman tapping his foot during "God's Song," varying his intensity as the lyric progressed. And while I'd heard it plenty of times before, I now had a clearer glimpse of George declaring "I fucked it up!" just before the three-minute mark in "Hey Jude"—that and the fact that it's John, not Paul, who begins singing the lead at 6:48, just before the song fades out.

On the Band's "Strawberry Wine," from *Stage Fright* (LP, Capitol SW-425), the improvement wrought by the JPS cable combination was downright amazing. Richard Manuel's beautifully loose, crazy drumming gained impact and tone—the latter especially in the kick drum and floor tom, which now resonated more richly and believably than before. Robbie Robertson's guitar playing seemed less calculated, more spontaneous than usual. And, again, a wealth of subtle details was uncovered, such as Levon Helm's enthusiastic guitar strumming, and the backing vocals that were left unused for the LP mix—wisely, I think—but that nonetheless bled into an adjacent track.

Classical records enjoyed similar gains. That most mysterious and spiritual-sounding of all recordings of Wagner's Parsifal the one made at Bayreuth in 1962 with Hans Knappertsbusch and erstwhile Lohengrin Jess Thomas, sounded even more mysterious and spiritual. Audience noise was easier to hear,

of course—yet so were the players' subtlest intentions, with triplets and dotted notes becoming clearer in their rhythmic nuances. The clarity of intent that characterizes most of Knappertsbusch's recordings—his ability to make a large orchestra play like a smaller ensemble, while retaining its sheer scale and power—was brought to the fore.

The most stunning difference of all was in the hall sound itself: The full suite of Aluminata cables made that aspect of this very good recording even more obvious. It was exciting to hear how the ambient sounds changed as the soloists moved about on stage, and even more so with the full choir of Grail knights, as during the finale. Dramatic inflections in Knappertsbusch's subtle (and temporally drawn out) performance were also magnified with all of the Aluminatas. Similar ambient gains were obvious when I listened to the recording of Richard Strauss's Intermezzo that Joseph Keilberth and the Bavarian State Orchestra made in the 1960s at Munich's historic National Theater (Telefunken SLT 43085). The JPS cables gave the already generous hall sound on that LP a greater sense of physical depth, while allowing the instruments themselves to sound more substantial, less wispy and fussy.

As my time with the Aluminatas played out, I went back to the beginning and again experimented with different cable applications on their own, one at a time. Even the least expensive of the Aluminata samples—the 1m interconnect pair—made a clear and unambiguous change for the better in the sound of my system. Yet still, the Aluminata AC cords, used on my Quads, made the most significant improvements of all.

Conclusions

Raving about any cable, let alone ones so costly, makes me nervous. But, as a spin through my reviews in *Stereophile* Web archives will demonstrate, I've never hesitated to suggest when a sonic difference was so slight that I might have imagined it.

That reticence isn't appropriate here: The differences made by the JPS Aluminata products were by far the most drastic changes I've ever heard when going from one interconnect, speaker cable, or AC cord to another. Put a little more bluntly, I've never heard wire do this before.

But as I write this, in mid-January,

my property taxes are due, I have two usurious credit-card accounts loaded down with Christmas expenses (and amplifiers and resistors and tubes), everyone in the house needs new eyeglasses, my family would like very much to return to Martha's Vineyard this summer, at least for a weekend . . . and so would I. And here I am dancing around the fact that someone has sent me \$40,193 worth of wire—and, gee whiz, whaddaya know, I want to tell the world how great it is.

But it is great, and there's not much I can do to change that.

Are the JPS Aluminata cables worth the money? Yes and no. Yes in the sense that one little company has worked like hell to design some evidently noiseless cables, then built the things up, virtually from scratch. Yes in the sense that, if listening to recorded music is the most important thing in your life and you have barrelsful of money, you should do everything in your power to maximize your playback system—including this. No in the sense that it's unreasonable to spend \$40,193 on a set of audio cables—an amount of money that could otherwise buy a luxury automobile, or perhaps an evening of abdominal surgery.

It's your call. At the end of the day, all I can say is that the Aluminatas are, without a doubt and by a significant margin, the best audio cables I've used.

MANUFACTURER'S COMMENTS

I love the excitement one can get from a good audio system. I've had the pleasure of experiencing this for over 20 years personally and second-hand from speaking with countless audiophiles, movie aficionados, and musicians from all around the world, and I'm happy to say the results coming at it from any angle are the same. When information is offered in such a form that it very closely resembles that of life experiences, or life itself, it touches you in a way not so easily excused, and there is no missing it, and no going back. For some of us it comes from listening to fine music on the best system we can afford, often spending many years optimizing it all. An amazing hobby, isn't it?

What's even more amazing is being able to transfer this wisdom to the next generation and beyond. My three sons grew up surrounded with good tunes, and now as they all work through college I find when it comes to listening they are years ahead of where I was at their age. Our home has five audio systems (equaled only by the TV count), some multi-channel, some not, with sources including CD, DVD, SACD, IPOD, satellite radio, cable TV, computer, and internet- enough to drive most of us mad but not enough for these kids. The cool thing is that listening to music is now an inseparable part of their lives, and while it vies for a portion of their day along with all of life's distractions I can't help but feel good about the fact that they at least have one lifetime hobby, and a good one.

When using cable at this level of resolution and refinement, any remaining flaws are much easier to pick out and deal with as they no longer are confused within the background of others. In other words, by minimizing multiplicative flaws within the system chain to your ears, what ultimately remains is the true source, along with all of it's emotion (or lack thereof) intact- as opposed to introducing flaws to compensate for others, an educational but endless loop.

Many of today's high-end components are sonically very good, and still improving after all these years. It's simply a matter of the interface the signal (and noise) takes from each to the next that determines ultimate performance of the system as a whole. In the case of Aluminata, what we have are cables that by design are capable of separating the signal from the noise, transferring the former with minimal effect, and reducing the latter to negligible amounts.

Many, many thanks to Art Dudley for taking on the task of reviewing these products, and to Stereophile and all of their supporting staff for publishing the same. We exist in part because of their ongoing efforts.

Joe Skubinski
JPS Labs LLC