

Esprit Audio Gaia interconnects and loudspeaker cables

by Alan Sircom

In this game, you get to know the couriers quite well, and they you. So, it wasn't perhaps that surprising when a courier I know rocked up with 34kg's worth of Esprit Audio Gaia cables in a black-wrapped box about the size of a V8 engine block, he asked the question. "It says 'Contents: Audio Cables' ... really?". "Yep!" I replied... "a few sets of cables for a hi-fi system, and they probably cost more than your van, and everything inside that van!" He laughed until he realised I was deadly serious.

In fairness, Esprit – somewhat understandably – places great importance on the packaging of each cable, so the three sets of interconnects and one set of loudspeaker cables were each packed in a box the size of a pilot's case, which adds to the bulk (for once, however, the packaging is more than just something you'd dispose of, or sling in the loft...

I can see these cases being retasked as CD storage boxes, general purpose gubbins boxes, or any one of a dozen man-cave uses). But the cables themselves are substantial too, as befits the upper slopes of the French cable expert's product line. Gaia comes shipped with a little ID card for each cable (corresponding to the serial number) and a neat velveteen bag; these might be less suitable for the man-cave.

Richard Cesari's extensive line of cables ranges from the affordable Alpha and Beta products (see Issue 177) to the heady regions occupied by Eureka and now Gaia at the top of the tree. As with Esprit's range, each Gaia conductor is made of thousands of minute high-purity oxygen-free copper strands, bundled together into ten separate groups. The layout of the cable is deliberately asymmetric (right down to the asymmetric use of dielectric materials depending on ▶



► polarity), with positive and negative conductors individually jacketed and braided around one another. It is a semi-shielded design, but also the outer jacket is both polarised and RF controlled through ferrite rings. On the speaker cable, two ferrites are used, both at the loudspeaker end and both on the black (negative) terminal, and the terminals themselves are all custom-made silver-plated copper designs. This is all the result of extensive listening tests.

The cable is polarised by use of a small battery box at the 'from' side of the cable. This polarises the insulators, which uses the DC bias to create an anti-vibrational effect as well as to improve efficiency of said insulators.

The downside to this system is it makes cable break-in long. Like really, really long. And not the kind of break-in you can side-step by using a burn-in box or one of those discs that plays odd wubby-wubby tones (I miss dubstep sometimes). You are looking at potentially hundreds and hundreds of hours of music playing run-in, and while the cable sounds good at the outset – and most importantly, its tonality doesn't change – the cable out of the suitcase is a very different beast to the cable with hundreds of hours on the clock. Fortunately, it's not

the sort of running in that has a short fuse, and if you have to swap out components or even use other cables (because, say, you are a jobbing reviewer and have other cables to review), the running in doesn't roll back, but in fairness I enjoyed Gaia enough that it didn't see that much time out of the system. Nevertheless, know that the space and scale of the cable on day one is very, very different to the sense of space and scale you hear after a couple of hundred hours of music played through the device. Some get quite animated about long run-in times, possibly because their speed of box-swap means they will never get to hear what a product can do at its best, but I think of it like a three-month present to your ears. Listen and like it out the box, then three months later you are in a very happy place indeed.

What I like about Gaia (and what I like about Esprit in general) is the tonal balance. The cable is just the right side of rich without it being overly warm or too cuddly sounding. It's more a good Margaux than an over-rich Châteauneuf-du-Pape. In Gaia's case, make that a Premier Grand Cru Margaux from the Château itself; rich and enticing rather than so full-bodied you feel as if you have been clouted by the music itself. ►



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► This is a perfect balance, too; it plumbs the depths perfectly, gives the midrange free rein to just be itself, and the treble is free from zing and clang (the speaker itself notwithstanding). That means a more adult approach to system building, because any notion of using Gaia as a filter or tuning system should be cast from your mind. This is a cable that demands a finely balanced system and brings the best from it.

Surprisingly, though, that finely balanced system need not be entirely neutral. If you have a warm, euphonic sounding system, a heavily beat-oriented system or a system that attempts to recreate soundstage depth, detail, coherence or what have you, Gaia is there for you. It doesn't judge, doesn't take sides. So often with very high-end audio components, they end up being so uncompromising that they almost pre-select the rest of the system and even the music you end up playing; I'm not going to play Britney Spears' 'Toxic' single [Jive Records, on Tidal] through a gazillion-pound system because it sounds hard, brash and thin. Gaia doesn't make that sound soft, sumptuous and rich; but it helps make it more listenable, which is what I think a good system should do, and more importantly it does that regardless of 'direction' of the system itself. In short, Gaia helps extract both more of the music and more of the spirit of the system, and that's a good thing.

There are two big areas where Gaia scores highly. First is in terms of overall musical coherence, and soundstage size. The coherence thing is something truly special; lots of cables have good frequency-led coherence in that the tonality of something like a piano remains constant from left to right side of the keyboard. The Gaia is no exception. But what it also has is a temporal and melodic coherence that is rare. Music holds together more holistically, like it does in the real world when well-rehearsed musicians get together to play. I've been playing a lot of *Orange* by Caroline Shaw and the Attacca Quartet [Nonesuch] recently, because it's a difficult modern classical work that is at once incredibly frustrating when played badly and incredibly rewarding when played well. It's all about the interplay between instruments, which is often atonal, using odd rhythms and is almost like ambient music played on classical instruments. And here this shows what Gaia does so well; yes it has all the rhythmic properties and sheer detail needed to play this music well, but more

importantly it makes this angular piece tie together well; not imposing its own structure on the music, but allowing the music's own delicate structure to emerge with less of the audio scaffolding around it.

Soundstage is also outstanding, although it's actually merely one outstanding part of an all-over outstanding performance. But here the soundstage is wide, deep and high, with a 'just-right' sense of scale to instruments within that image. That means when you move from 'Riverside' by Agnes Obel [*Philharmonics*, Play It Again Sam], her voice is slightly larger than life and the piano is about right, but move to a later recording of hers [the title track of *Myopia*, DG], and the sound is more expansive, but her voice smaller and more diffuse. At all times it sounds incredibly 'there' like a band in the room. It's uncanny, and uncannily good.

Finally, there is excellent consistency here. I couldn't fault either interconnects or speaker cable and if you separate them, their overarching balance, soundstage extension programme and sense of fair play toward the system to which they are connected shines through. Put together the whole is not much better than the sum of the parts, but primarily because the parts themselves are so good.

There is no truly peerless product in audio. The best of the best of the best is always one new product launch away from being challenged by a rival. When it comes to cables, this is perhaps one of the most hotly contended markets out there. Everyone wants a seat at the top table, and not all who get there really deserve to be there. Esprit Audio Gaia is more than deserving of such a place. It's not cheap, but if you pay for the best, that's what you get here. +

PRICES AND CONTACT DETAILS

As tested

Gaia Interconnect Cables: £10,800/1.2m RCA

Gaia Loudspeaker Cables: £19,700/3m pair

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