

Equipment Report



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Esprit Audio Lumina Interconnects and Loudspeaker Cable

Superb Encore

Neil Gader

For a surprising number of high-end enthusiasts audio cables are basically just wires—a means to an end, a conduit for the audio signal, best heard but not seen, a necessary evil. I could go on, but you get my drift. I've even had some respected colleagues admit that the prospect of launching into a cable review was about as entertaining as cleaning out a rain gutter. And yes, I understand where all these opinions are coming from. Wire is wire right? And then you come across a cable like Lumina from Esprit Audio of France. With its deluxe hard-shell presentation case and packaging, the mirror finish gleam of its connectors, its high-tech jacketing and polished carbon-fiber accents, its not-insubstantial weight and girth, everything about Lumina oozes quality and opulence. All of which would go for naught if its sonic performance were a flop, which I assure you was not the case. Not by a long shot.

My earliest flirtation with Esprit cables dates back to Issue 290 where I reviewed the budget Beta and got to know the up-

per-middle-range Aura wires. This time it's Lumina, a big step up from Aura, and one that approaches the summit of the Esprit lineup. Only the Eureka series and the just-introduced Gala models top it.

A little background. Esprit Audio was founded more than twenty years ago by designer Richard Cesari. Cesari who trained in electro-mechanics, still oversees the complete cable manufacturing process—his products that are still assembled by hand and entirely made in France.

Esprit Audio offers a variety of speaker cables and

interconnects—eight series in all, spread over a wide range of price points. There are also collections of power cords, digital interconnects, and power distributors. One constant through the Esprit line is the use of fine, multi-strand, high-purity copper conductors, the number of strands commensurate with the level of performance and price. Throughout its line Esprit selects copper conductor materials for their low resistance, rather than going for higher-resistance materials like gold and rhodium.

In the Lumina speaker cable, Esprit raises its multi-strand geometry to a more sophisticated level and ramps up the conductor count to a heady 6800 strands of 0.08mm (roughly the diameter of a human hair), 6N OCC copper, arranged in ten bundles of 680 strands each for about 25 square mm, with two of these arrangements per cable. The dielectric structure is asymmetrical and polarized. The cable is semi-shielded for very low capacitance. The positive and negative runs are independently jacketed, and coiled around one another to reduce the skin effect.

Similarly, Lumina RCA and XLR interconnects use 6N OCC copper connectors and

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Specs & Pricing

Interconnect: RCA, \$3400/0.6m; XLR, \$3700/0.6m

Loudspeaker cable: \$4400/2m, \$6100/3m

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silver multilayer plating (20 micrometers worth) in a symmetrical star-assembly configuration. The dielectric structure is asymmetrical, using two different materials (high temperature PVC and silicone) for the two polarities. Lumina comes equipped with dielectric polarization via an attached battery pack, batteries included. In Cesari's words, "We polarize the insulators which has the effect of making them more efficient and creates an anti-vibratory system by means of the DC bias." Lumina cabling also employs strategically positioned ferrites to reduce RF effects.

Before I delve into sonic performance, I should note that the cable products I've encountered in recent years haven't shown broad tonal aberrations, as in a rising treble or sucked-out bass and the like. In this sense, materials, technology, and measurements (resistance and inductance) have matured the breed. Cables in the Lumina range converge much more than they diverge. That's not to say that distortions, timing, and articulation are not real things. They are. And as with every component in the audio chain, cables do possess their own unique character or voice, however understated. A word of caution—cable

swaps will not turn a system on its head. Or at least they shouldn't. They will not up-end carefully sought after and acquired voicings and balances. But at their best, cables will further hone, polish, reveal, and make transparent the performance of an audio system. If you really want to shake things up, change the loudspeakers, not the cables.

Having said that, Lumina had a faithful tonal balance that hewed ever so *slightly* to the richer, warm-blooded, calming side of the spectrum. Central to my experience with Lumina was the weight and intensity of its midrange response, which, if it were a bar of chocolate, would be of a darker variety, complex and savory. There's a density and foundation that backs every

note in accordance with the timbre of the originating instrument. A prime example was the eerie realism I heard listening to the LP from The Oslo Consort, *Italian and French Baroque Music* [Simax]. Recorded in the Skedsmo Church, a stone building near Oslo that dates back to the 12th century, the music was written primarily for soprano voice, recorder, lute, chittaroni, and harpsichord. Recorded to a Nagra with a pair of Schoeps omnis, these tracks capture air, acoustic bloom and ambience, and the preternatural sensation of "being there" like few other discs I own. They also give the listener's ear a quick clinic in the distinctive sonic character of old world harpsichords—the feathery, small-



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boned delicacy of the Italian instrument featured on side one versus the fleshier, deeper range of the antique Flemish harpsichord featured on side two.

In many respects Lumina's voicing echoed my impressions of Esprit Aura, picking up pretty much where that cable left off. Lumina was more fluid and rounded. It really sings on top, displaying a combination of sweetness and speed that reveals the tonal color and complex harmonics of violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter's performance of the Tchaikovsky/Korngold violin concertos to a greater degree than other "wires." Further, brass sections had a deeper, more burnished finish, and winds spoke with greater timbral conviction. It has the same degree of orchestral grip and dynamism that I experienced with Aura, but is even more precise, tuneful, and sustaining. Low-frequency responsiveness and extension were significantly upgraded. Lumina followed the bass line during Blood, Sweat & Tears' "He's A Runner" with the unshakable determination of a bloodhound. The buoyancy, pitch control, and timbre of Ray Brown's acoustic bass during Sonny Rollins "I'm an Old Cowhand" [*Way Out West*] were almost shocking in their verisimilitude.

The most striking aspect of the Lumina's performance was its replication of dimension, distance, and soundstage.

It made large acoustic spaces more present and reverberantly alive. The acoustics of a symphony hall shimmered with air movement. Perspective was expanded rather than flattened. On a disc like the Rutter Requiem the vast chorale seemed to glow, creating a thick reverberant field suspended in the voluminous air of the Meyerson Symphony Center. During musical rests I could catch the chorus individually and collectively taking breaths.

For classical music aficionados Lumina has few equals in the presentation of spatiality in general, and as it applies to soundstage reproduction in particular. And those listening to an abundance of vinyl may want to pay even closer attention. For reasons that I cannot fully fathom the three-dimensional world created between Lumina and LP playback was particularly affecting. (Made all the more so since my LP rig—a Sota Cosmos vacuum turntable—was recently upgraded to Eclipse status with, among other features, a magnetic bearing. The tonearm is an SME V with Clearaudio Charisma mm cartridge. I'll be writing an article on the complete Sota upgrade in a forthcoming issue.)

A prime example of this soundstaging magic occurred while I was listening to the Decca pressing of Beethoven's Ninth. The performance by Solti conducting the Chicago Symphony produced acoustics that were cavernous, but did so without crushing the image focus required to outline the large chorale and define specific soloists within that vast space. This balance of warm, ambient information and layered orchestral dynamics was, at least to these ears, well-nigh ideal, and akin in many ways to the live event. On a smaller-scale

all-analog recording, like Vadim Nesselovsky's *Bes Granitz Trio* [Studio Concert], piano micro-dynamics were delicately graduated, weightier chords as ripe as plums. The positions of the jazz players in the studio were explicitly mapped. Their instruments had a level of harmonic bloom that, even during heavy crescendos, touched my ear with a soft, natural landing.

Mind you Lumina is not without competition. Contenders I've recently reviewed like MIT Evo One (Issue 305), Wireworld Silver Eclipse 8 (Issue 301), and Analysis Plus Silver Apex (also Issue 301) made noteworthy impressions and had subtly distinctive overall voices and perspectives—luminous and open articulation in the case of the MIT, the highly resolved and remarkable overall balance that I've come to expect from Wireworld, and the artifact-free transparency and deep water immersiveness of the Analysis Plus. For Lumina it was its warm-neutral voicing, more rounded appeal, and dimensional strengths that made it so winning. I consider each of these cables prime candidates for auditioning.

Esprit Lumina is among the most musically satisfying cables I've heard in my system. It represents a significant upgrade from Esprit's own Aura series and assumes a very high position on my list of top-flight cables that I've had the pleasure of reviewing. A superb encore from this fine French company. **tas**