Class 1a Featured Pick:

Von Gaylord (Legend) Audio VI Interconnect Cable

As you may know from our previous reviews, we're very critical of cables, and we hear (and report) flaws that other reviewers seem to miss entirely in their indiscriminate and unreserved praise for countless cables. Cables do sound very different from one another, so it's easy for a naïve listener to confuse different with better, and think that he's hearing something new (and therefore better) when he plugs in a different cable and is in fact merely hearing something different than the previous cable. Perhaps, for example, the new cable has an artificial coloration peak in the midrange, thereby bringing voices forward with more presence, which misleads a naïve reviewer into gushing, "Gee, I put on a recording of Bon Jovi with this new cable, and wow, like he was right there in the room with me."

The assessment of cables (or any audio product) has to be more analytical, more grounded in objective fact, to be of any scientific value. Thanks to years of detailed analysis of the sound of countless products, our ear/brain has been trained to work like a spectrum analyzer, instantly spotting colorations, distortions, incoherence, fuzziness, etc. Virtually all cables evince these kinds of sonic flaws, so obvious that we easily can instantly target and analyze them. In short, it's very hard to impress us.

Thus, when a cable comes along that does impress us, it's big news, and cause for celebration. This interconnect from von Gaylord (formerly called Legend) Audio is the first interconnect to really impress us since Dave Magnan's still superb cables. The von Gaylord VI is now the next-to-top model among von Gaylord Audio's interconnect offerings, and sells for $975 for a 1 metre pair. It uses top quality WBT plugs, and from its sound we would guess that its internals employ expensive materials, including judicious use of silver and Teflon.

The von Gaylord VI is superbly transparent, articulate, and clean. Fewer than 1% of the audiophile cables out there can even meet these three basic desiderata, these three basic requirements for high fidelity (they are veiled, and/or fuzzy-defocused, and or dirty-grundgy, for at least some portion of the musical spectrum). As we continue to improve the extraordinary resolution of our lab system, we can hear and evaluate every improvement clearly through Legend VI, which means that the intrinsic resolution of this cable is incredible, even higher than that of our very special lab system.

Von Gaylord VI has very wide bandwidth, covering both extremes of the spectrum with ease. In handling treble transients, it is very fast, extended, open, articulate, clean, neutral (neither too hard nor too soft), and coherent, with excellent intertransient silence. Treble transients are the most difficult material for almost every product to handle, and are the downfall of most other cables. Most other cables smear or splatter treble transients over time, sometimes also making them defocused or fuzzy soft and veiled (the veiling arises in part because they smear transient energy over time, thereby obscuring music's temporally succeeding details, and filling in what should be black intertransient silence with time smeared noise).

Von Gaylord VI's refusal to smear, and its consequently superior intertransient silence, also enable its superior stereo imaging. That's because the subtle sonic cues that define the most elusive and most prized aspects of stereo imaging, like depth and hall ambience, consist of reflections off the hall walls that are there to be heard only in the momentary silence after the triggering musical transient (whose sound is being reflected a split second later off the walls). And you can't hear these subtle post-transient cues if the cable smears the energy of a musical transient in time, filling in what should be intertransient silence (immediately after the transient) with smeared noise that then obscures those subtle hall reflection cues you need in order to hear great stereo imaging.

At the other end of the spectrum, von Gaylord VI allows music's natural rich warmth to come through, and its bass is strong and well defined. This also endows von Gaylord VI with a very satisfying overall tonal balance, since its rich and strong bottom end effectively counterbalances the very articulate high frequencies, insuring that the latter do not make the cable sound too lean and

bright.

Von Gaylord VI is very neutral overall, and is superb at letting the character of other links in the chain shine through. If a recording or preamp ahead of a link of von Gaylord VI is liquid, then this cable lets that liquidity shine. Or, if a solid state stage is brittle, then von Gaylord VI lets that quality right through. In other words, von Gaylord VI is neutral in the best audio sense, being a neutral arbiter of whatever sound it is presented with, and letting that sound through, without imposing its own sonic stamp on everything. Of course, this also means that you can't use von Gaylord VI as a euphonic mask to hide ills elsewhere in your system, as you can some other cables (for example, those cables that impose a wooly, warm, soft sound on all music are effective coloration tools for filtering out the hard upper frequency glare imposed by IC chips and/or close miked recordings).

Von Gaylord VI tells you the truth about the rest of your system. And it tells you the truth about the music. That's the definition of high fidelity, and that's the highest complement you can pay a cable.

Class 1a Featured Pick:

Magic Diamond Blue Phono Cartridge

This phono cartridge sounds very unlike any and every other phono cartridge we have ever heard. Simply put, the Magic Diamond Blue (MDB) sounds more like a master tape and less like a vibrating mechanical tracing process. It's as though this cartridge somehow magically did a bypass around the imperfect mechanical links in the LP chain, putting you directly in touch with the master tape, and thereby putting you much closer to the original live music.

As we discussed extensively in IAR Journals 1-2 and 5, the process, by which a cartridge mechanically reads an LP groove, mechanically transmits that mechanical movement and vibration to its electrical generator, and eventually outputs that hopeful facsimile of music in electrical form, is a process laden with pitfalls, compromises, and crude approximation. It's a wonder that it sounds as good as it does. Of course, its very imperfection means that there is always room for improvement, which is why we have seen continual refinement in the LP playing process, even in the years since CD first favored us with perfect sound forever.

The very first step in a cartridge's job is for the stylus to trace the groove wall accurately. Note that we said trace, not track. We should pause to outline a crucial distinction here. There is a big difference between tracing and tracking; they are two distinct abilities, and relate to different portions of a phono cartridge's design. The commonly used term "tracking" refers to a cartridge's ability to stay in contact with the groove during large, violent undulations of the path of the overall groove, caused by loud bass passages. Tracking ability is chiefly a function of the cantilever and cantilever suspension design. In contrast, the rarely used term "tracing" refers to the cartridge's ability to accurately follow small detail changes of groove wall, even when the overall path of the groove is generally straight and does not undulate. Tracing ability is chiefly a function of stylus design, since it is the stylus that has to accurately read music's many small details, as represented by small changes of the groove wall.

Styli differ in their ability to respond to the small, fast, and/or subtle changes in the groove wall that correspond to the true inner detail of music. Many styli miss or skip these small valleys and bumps. And, in missing them, these styli engender two sonic errors. First, they simply miss valuable musical information, especially the deep inner detail that makes music sound real instead of canned. Second, in skipping past some little valleys and bumps, they wind up doing spurious chattering (bouncing and rattling and shaking) that does not correspond at all to any recorded musical information. It's similar to the rattling and shaking you feel when your car is bouncing along on a washboard road. And of course you can hear this spurious stylus chatter as a foreign mechanical sound added to music, since this spurious stylus chatter vibrates the cartridge cantilever, which in turn causes the cartridge generator to create an electrical facsimile of this stylus mechanical chatter that gets sent to your amplifiers and speakers. You hear this spurious noise, you can recognize it as

representing mechanical chatter, and so you hear the music from other cartridges corrupted by these foreign mechanical sounds. You can always tell that a mechanical process is intervening between you and the master tape.

The diamond stylus for the MDB cartridge has a unique shape, designed and hand cut in Switzerland. This unique shape, and the quality with which it is executed, seems to be the key to this cartridge's unprecedented ability at cleanly and accurately tracing the groove. It extracts more true musical information than styli of other cartridges. And it adds far less of the usual foreign mechanical artifacts than styli of other cartridges. Thus, with the MDB, you hear more music, and you hear less intervening mechanics. It sounds as though you're listening directly to the master tape. Even the usual groove noise is quieter with the MDB, giving you no clue that the stylus is rapidly scraping a landscape, and a rough landscape at that.

This is the first cartridge we've ever heard that can play one of the original classic Mercury pressings, and have it sound like we're hearing the master tape directly, without any intervening mechanical process. And we have a good idea what these Mercury tapes actually sound like, because we have dubs of a number of them (tape to tape copies with no intervening mechanical process). All other cartridges have an especially difficult time tracing the uncompromisingly cut grooves of these Mercury LPs, adding mechanical chatter, noise, and/or glare to the music.

The MDB is itself uncompromising in its transparent revelation of the musical information cut into the groove. It sounds smooth, in that it does not introduce mechanical chatter or glare as other cartridges do. But it does not smooth over, or smooth down, the details of the music. It does not give you a lushly romanticized version of the music, as many other cartridges do. It sounds alert, direct, and immediate. Some of you, accustomed to cartridges that act as a romantic intermediary between your ears and the reality of the groove, might find the MDB too truth telling for your taste. But if you want to hear everything that was on the master tape, more cleanly, clearly, and quietly revealed than by other cartridges, then the MDB is for you.

The MDB is a medium output moving coil, and sells for $5500. There are also some Signature models in the Magic Diamond cartridge lineup, selling for $15,000 to $30,000. But the waiting list for these Signature models is over a year long, which tells you how high this cartridge's reputation is among those cognoscenti of the international audiophile community who can afford to buy any cartridge they want.

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