



The role of an AC power cord is simple: get the electrical energy from the wall to the equipment, don't lose any of it, and don't muck it up. Piece of cake.

Hmm...that last part, not mucking it up, is harder than it sounds. The first part also, possibly. Most hi-fi gear, regardless of its price, comes with a generic molded cord that costs about the price of a pack of gum. Generally it gets both items wrong, and may go wrong all three ways.

Yet the question of "audiophile" power cords is what triggers the most derision from alleged engineering graduates who believe the world begins and ends with Kirchoff's laws. Interconnects and speaker cables, at least, do carry the signal you are destined to hear, but a line cord? You plug it in, the pilot light glows, what more do you want?

We have done comparisons of power cords before, but even so the spectre of yet another evaluation is a little scary. Albert, in particular, would later admit to having come to the session with some trepidation. Would he really hear distinctions among so many cords? Would

he be forced to resort to splitting hairs in order to find a difference, *any* difference? When it was all done he confessed to having had a great time. Indeed we all did, and we didn't have to split a single hair. The differences from one power cord to another are that obvious.

SIX POWER CORDS

Choosing the battleground

Cable manufacturers like to tell us that, if we really want the best results, we absolutely need to use their AC cables (and perhaps their other cables too) on everything. But they always send just one, go figure.

In the past we have used the (single) test cable on our CD player, because experience told us that this will make the most difference. Digital gear is notorious for actually broadcasting digital noise out its power cord and into neighboring gear that really doesn't need to be distracted in this way. This time we had a better idea.

We decided that we would do the session with our Omega system. In the system is a GutWire MaxCon Squared

power line conditioner, feeding clean(er) power to our Copland preamp, our Counterpoint digital converter, and our Moon W-8 power amplifier. The MaxCon has a standard IEC 320 power jack, and can therefore be used with any standard IEC power cord. We have what you might call our "reference" cable

mounted on it. We could listen to the system as is, and then substitute the test

cables, one at a time. That would have three advantages. The test cable would actually feed power to three components, not just one, and it could be expected to make more difference. It would have to feed the very large Moon W-8 power amplifier, a task that might be beyond a cord with inadequate current capability. And because that cable comes before the filter, it carries the "dirtiest" power of the whole system.

But there was a hitch with that plan.

The cable we have been using on our MaxCon is similar, though not quite identical, to one of the cables to be tested. It wouldn't be fair. Instead, we decided to compare the six test cables to...well you'll see in a moment.

For each test we selected two CDs, which we played on our Linn Unidisk player, used in this case only as a transport, driving our Counterpoint converter. The Linn is not plugged into the MaxCon (it uses a Foundation Research LC1 filter in lieu of a power cord), but the Counterpoint is. The first selection was Margie Gibson's *The Best Thing For You* (from *Say It With Music*, Sheffield CD-36). The second was Doug McLeod's *Papa John* from the Audioquest album *You Can't Take My Blues* (AQCD1041). This is the long discontinued HDCD version, which was convenient because our converter includes HDCD decoding.

We would begin the hard way.



Cable I: generic hell

If, for reasons we have explained, we didn't want to use our own cable as a reference, we would use something else as a point of comparison: the worst cable imaginable.

That's it above. Most systems, even expensive ones, use cables much like it, because you can buy a \$12,000 amplifier, and chances are this is the cable that will be in the box. These molded cables cost hardly anything, but in this case you get what (they) pay for. The cable we selected was the fattest in our collection (don't ask us what gear it came with, because they all look alike, and they mostly come from the same manufacturers anyhow). The label says it's 14 gauge, which is better than the usual thinner 16 gauge, but don't get your hopes up. In such cables most of the power loss is not in the length of wire but in the connectors. Plug one into a large power amp, and an hour later the plugs will be warm. Or perhaps hot. After three years of use, you may even see smoke, but don't get us started.

This cable was new, since we never use stuff like this (but we hate to throw anything away). We plugged it between the dedicated circuit in the wall and our

THE "IEC" CONNECTOR

Everyone uses that name for the plug that fits most modern electronic gear, including computers. Actually, IEC is the acronym of the International Electrotechnical Commission, which, as you will have guessed, sets standards for things like electrical connectors.

The common "IEC" connector is actually the IEC 320, also known as the C-13. The male socket it fits is the C-14. In countries with 120 volt power, the C-13 is limited to 15 amperes. Appliances needing 20 ampere capability require a C-19 plug, which looks like the C-14 with the prongs rotated the other way.

filter and fired up the CD player.

Now remember, we had no real point of comparison yet, but we know the Omega system pretty well, and these two recordings well too. What we heard was, frankly, horrible!

On the Gibson recording, Mayorga's piano had a blurry, distorted tone, sounding more like a toy synthesizer than an actual grand piano. The voice was indistinct as well, and suggested Gibson was singing through a loud-hailer. On the McLeod Blues recording, the guitar and percussion were overly punchy and confused as well. The violin might as well have been a wind instrument. We didn't need any side-by-side comparisons to know that this is *not* how the Omega system usually sounds. "This is shocking!" said Albert. "I mean, we're talking about a piece of wire *to connect you to the power company*, and just listen to the damage it does!" Reine added, with a wry smile, that when she had first mentioned to her family that she was participating in comparisons of the sound of cables, they laughed.

Only we weren't laughing. Throw away that free cable. Replace it with... let's see, now.



Cable II: GutWire B-12

This is a fat 12-gauge shielded cable with a bright blue jacket whose color

would not have been our first choice. It actually looks fatter than 12-gauge, because the jacket also contains three polyethylene tubes to maintain proper internal geometry. The cable is shielded with a braid, but, unlike GutWire's earlier 12-gauge cable, it does not have the additional Mylar shield and drain wire.

GutWire does not offer this cable as a finished product, and our test cable was therefore one we had assembled in-house. Indeed, it was a prototype for a cable we were considering for our Audiophile Store. On the day this test was done, however, it was not yet listed, and it would not ever *be* listed unless it did very well in comparison with other cables. If it didn't, we would look for something else.

The AC plug we mounted on the B-12 was the same Hubbell 8215 hospital grade plug we have long favored. It was mounted on some other cables as well, and for good reason. Its internal connections are industrial grade, capable of clamping wire under great pressure, yet it is inexpensive. At the other end was a Furutech FI-11 all-copper IEC 320 plug.

Of course we knew this cable would be better than the horrifying generic wire of the first session, and we weren't disappointed. "They bought a better piano," said Reine only a few seconds after the Margie Gibson song began. Indeed, not only did the piano sound better, but above all it sounded *natural*, with no cheating. Gibson's voice had become not only clear but also warm and sensuous. The plucked bass was clear and strong, the subtle percussion present and effective.

In short we liked it. "I can't imagine

TESTING FOR THE STORE

Anything that winds up in our Audiophile Store will have been evaluated by us, and we don't feel obliged to carry anything we don't like ourselves.

Often the listening session is a private one, whose results are not actually published. We have half a dozen speaker cables, for instance, waiting for a session that will allow us to decide which, if any, we want to recommend.

Now and then the session makes it into print, as in this series, but the criterion is always the same. It has to pass the test, otherwise we never want to see it again.

someone spending a lot of money on equipment and then plugging that other cable into it," said Albert. "Would you buy a Porsche and put bald tires on it?"

Of course *Papa John* sounded better too, with the violin taking back its natural color, and soaring with plentiful energy. The guitar, which had sounded like a toy before, was attractive and drew us right in. Percussion was solid and detailed, and McLeod's voice was clear and natural.

We noticed the transients, too, those percussive sounds that start fast and stop just as fast. Nothing got in their way.

Clearly this was a very good cable. We would see which of the others, if any, could give it a run for its money.

The cable's target price was C\$285. Of course we had not yet decided whether it would ever be more than a prototype, but its fate was now looking good.



Cable III: GutWire C Clef Squared

Though we have had a lot of pleasant experiences with GutWire power cords, this one was new to us. And we would assume that, with a price tag of C\$799, it isn't for everyone.

If the price shocks you, we'll give it to you quick: there are *three models* above the C Clef, including the X Clef, which costs C\$3399.

The C Clef uses the same hospital grade Hubbell 8215 we used on the B-12, along with a Wattgate IEC 320 plug at the other end. It uses individual shields

for each of the conductors, plus an overall braid shield, and an extra electrostatic shield connected to a little cord with a clip, so that you can connect it or not, however it sounds better.

We began with the Margie Gibson song, and we were immediately impressed. The piano notes seemed to float in the air, and her voice emerged from the surrounding blackness as though it glowed. The clarity was impressive too, and Reine noted, during one passage, a bit of reverberation she had not noticed before.

But was what we heard *better*? Or more natural? Neither Albert nor Reine thought so. "The piano is very clear, but it no longer seems to be accompanying," said Reine. "There's great separation of timbres, but the sound is so cold."

Papa John gave us the same impression. Heather Hardy's violin was fiery, but it got strident at times, and the same was true even of Doug McLeod's voice. We could hear all that the C Clef brought to the table, such as tight and powerful bass, quick transients, and an immense variety of textures filling the wide space. "In strictly sonic terms this cable is a champion," said Gerard. "It lets a lot of subtle sounds through."

"Everything but emotion," said Reine, and we all nodded.



Cable IV: Harmonix X-DC2

This power cable is standard equipment on the Reimyo DAP-777 converter, reviewed elsewhere in this issue, but it

is also available separately at C\$840 or US\$745. The distributor's site shows it with a Hubbell AC plug, but ours had Furutech plugs at both ends. We don't know anything about the wire used, though we noted with interest that it was the most flexible of all these power cords, even more so than the generic cord.

With the Harmonix, the sound was smooth as velvet, though we thought it might also be losing detail. "It seems to slip from note to another the way Margie Gibson herself does," said Reine. Only on louder passages did the sound harden up a little. The image was very good, as was the depth. The sound was airy and restful.

On *Papa John*, the violin was like silk...possibly too much so. "It's so smooth in the introduction to the song that you barely notice it," said Gerard, "but you *should* notice it." Paradoxically the violin, like Margie Gibson's voice on the previous recordings, hardened up on louder passages, with one long wailing note taking on a tone like a siren. The guitar was uneven too.

"This is a good power cable, but it's not my favorite," said Gerard, who still preferred the B-12.

So far we all did.



Cable V: BIS Audio AC II

BIS is a small company in suburban Montreal. We first became aware of it when it was offering upgrades and repairs on vintage equipment, as well as making cables, because it was placing classified ads in *UHF*. Now it does *only* cables, which it sells directly and through a small dealer network. We have reviewed its audio cables in a previous issue.

The AC II is the company's economy cable, with a price of C\$200. Despite the price, BIS says there are three levels of shielding. The connectors are from Marinco.

What we heard was more than listen-

able, with a lightness that was refreshing, and especially a lack of coloration. (For anyone who thinks a power cable can't add coloration to sound, re-read our evaluation of the first cable in this session.) But a lack of coloration doesn't always mean true-to-life timbres. The voice and piano were different from the way they sounded with the other cables, and higher notes were too hard.

On *Papa John*, we were disappointed with the sound of Heather Hardy's violin, which was abundantly detailed but which lacked body and failed to take flight. Doug McLeod's guitar was somewhat altered too, and Reine found it irritating. Conclusion: the music flows well, and it was pleasant to listen to, but we found the AC II interesting only for its price.



Cable VI: BIS Audio AC iFW

This power cable, from the same company, uses what are clearly the same Maringo connectors as the AC II, but the cable itself is different. BIS Audio isn't the sort to publish white papers, but what differentiates this cable is the level of shielding that is used. Each of the three conductors (hot, neutral and ground) is individually shielded, and then there is an overall shield. BIS says that "iFW" stands for "interference-free wire."

The price is considerably higher, nearly double at C\$350. It's easy to see, however, that it is pretty much in line with other power cables that have much in the way of audiophile creds.

And it turns out that nearly doubling the price more than doubles the pleasure. Margie Gibson came through with wonderful presence, the timbre of her voice startlingly lifelike. "The string bass is excellent," said Reine, "though actually it's all good."

It was the balance among voice and instruments that especially pleased us, though. This was the cable that, so far, had sounded most like the GutWire

B-12, and it was perhaps a worthy competitor.



Cable VII: BIS Audio Maestro

How many hi-fi companies have called their most expensive models by this name? The BIS Maestro is a *much* more expensive cable than any of its brandmates, and the most expensive in this test series: C\$1200.

It shares the AC iFW's shielding scheme, but is made from superior materials. BIS won't get any more specific than that. What we quickly realized, however, is that, however the money has been spent, it gets results.

With the Margie Gibson recording the sound was dazzling, with every subtle voice inflection clearly audible. The piano was magnificent. "Instead of the piano just accompanying her," suggested Reine, "the two are wed." The sound was warm, attractive. Best of all, this was done without any particular sonic element standing out and calling attention to itself. Only the music stood out.

The McLeod piece was every bit as superb. This time Heather Hardy's demon violin was gorgeous over its entire range, not just certain passages, and we could hear its resonance as well as the silkiness of its strings. McLeod's voice had a natural "live" tone throughout, without exaggeration of any of its elements. "With this cable," said Reine, "I can finally realize what I'm missing with all the others."

Comparing with our own cable

We mentioned earlier in this article that we had not wanted to compare the test cables with the cable we usually used, because it was too similar to one of the cables to be tested.

That cable is in fact a GutWire B-12, an early sample we had tried and liked. Might it be interesting to plug it into our filter and compare it to the cables we had just heard?

We did, and not surprisingly it sounded very much like the B-12 review sample, yet it wasn't *quite* as good. The instruments did not hang together as well. On the Gibson song, notably, harmony between piano and voice was less clean, less coherent. The difference was not major, but we all noticed it.

The difference between the two B-12's. Our earlier cable was slightly longer — 2 meters long rather than 1.5 meters — and it used a Wattgate IEC connector, whereas the test cable had a Furutech FI-11.

Some conclusions

It's obvious that there are more than six audiophile cables in the world, and we both know about and own some cables that were not in this test. One of those, or one we have never run across, might be right for you.

It's worth emphasizing that all of the power cables we tested were superior to the cheap off-the-shelf wire we began with, not in one or two ways, but in every single aspect. Whether you pay a lot or a little for a replacement cable, it is going to make a big difference.

In discussing the session afterwards, we had little difficulty identifying our favorites. Among reasonably-priced cables (using that term in its relative sense), our favorite was the GutWire B-12 for its excellent and well-balanced performance. If price is not an object, we have high praise for the BIS Maestro.

You may not agree with us, of course, and if you don't you won't get an argument from us. The GutWire C Clef will let through sounds other power cables will hide, and in sonic terms it is astonishing. You may find the Harmonix more soothing, and though we think it alters sound, something we don't think a piece of wire should do, it may sound particularly good with some systems. The BIS AC iFW is very close in performance to the B-12, note.

We'll probably get hate mail telling us we're full of it, that any power cable large enough to let adequate current through is all you need. "I have a curse I want to put on those people," said Gerard at the end of the session, "an eternity of listening to music through a system built on their preconceptions."

