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IN SEARCH OF THE EXCEPTIONAL

LISTENING BY ART DUDLEY

THIS ISSUE: Thoughts on the current state of high-end audio cables, and a report on the Expression interconnect from Canadian manufacturer BIS Audio.

How to Review Audio Cables

“I don’t know what I think on that one. I haven’t written about it yet.”

—WALTER LIPPMANN (ATTRIBUTED)

As sometimes happens, this started out to be a very different column. But by the time I was a thousand words into it, I found that my point of view had changed.

A number of months ago, I received from a Canadian company called **BIS Audio** a review sample of their **Expression** interconnect: a shielded, unbalanced interconnect terminated with Eichmann BulletPlugs (RCA). Priced at \$480 Canadian per 1m pair, the **Expression** falls squarely in the middle of **BIS**’s interconnect line: a lowish range for high-end audio, and suggestive of a manufacturer that values value.

Each **Expression** interconnect is approximately 9mm in diameter and distinctly flexible, though its terminations are finished with the sort of heat-shrunk tubing that makes the ends stiffer and more unwieldy than the rest of the length; the latter element confers some degree of strain relief, and compels the user to keep his or her gear no closer than 6" to the wall behind it. The **Expression** is covered in a light-gray sheath of braided polyethylene terephthalate (PET), which made my sample pleasant to handle, and allowed it to glide past rather than be snagged by its surroundings. I believe snakes are manufactured with the same idea in mind.

In e-conversations with **BIS Audio**’s Bernard Brien, I learned that the **Expression**’s Eichmann plugs are soldered rather than cold-welded to its conductors of oxygen-free copper (OFC), and that its shield is connected to the ground conductor at both ends. Thus, if the **Expression** is directional—Brien says that it is, and that the preferred direction is indicated with an extra piece of heat-shrunk tube at one end—that quality must derive from the conductors themselves. M. Brien doesn’t specify the dielectric used



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in the **Expression**, though he notes that the materials generally used by **BIS** for that task include Teflon, PVC, and low-noise, cross-linked polyethylene. He also says that different **BIS** cables use different conductor geometries, though he prefers not to emphasize such things—partly because he doesn’t wish to distract customers from the importance of choosing cables based on audible performance, and partly because, in his words, many audiophiles have preconceived notions of the contributions to sound made by different design elements—or, for

that matter, different pricing structures.

Compensation

Preconceived notions abound, even in reviewers—perhaps especially in reviewers. Like most of you, I’m a person of many prejudices. I am prejudiced against retrieving hot cookware from the oven without using potholders, I am prejudiced against pesto, I am prejudiced against picking up snakes with my bare hands, and I am prejudiced against listening to Celtic instrumentals for longer than 15 minutes at a time—reasonable prejudices all, as I’ve tried each more than once, always with unpleasant results.

For similar but less severe reasons, I am prejudiced against interconnects and speaker cables of excessive bulk, I am prejudiced against connectors of excessive bulk and

complexity, and I am prejudiced against interconnects or cables built with signal-processing devices of any sort, passive or active.

On the other hand, I am prejudiced toward cheap RadioShack RCA plugs, cheap Switchcraft RCA plugs, cheap Z-plugs, expensive Audio Note silver banana and RCA plugs, and most Eichmann connectors, though I wish their BulletPlugs were just a little smaller and a little less tight. I am inclined to like well-made cables of simple but not cheap appearance, with either copper or silver conductors. I tend not to like very inflexible cables. I think that any 1m interconnect pair that sells for \$1000 or more ought to sound amazingly, obviously good—something that, in my experience, very few do—and I think that any 1m interconnect pair that sells for \$5000 or more ought to sound amazingly, obviously good *and* increase the size and functionality of one's penis. Which is, of course, the primary reason men buy such things.

I am prejudiced toward perfectionist-quality wire in general, because I know from experience that one's choice in interconnects, speaker cables, and, in some applications, AC cords can influence the sound of one's audio system for good or ill. That said, in my support for the cable industry, I sometimes feel like the literary agent who believed in Dylan Thomas's poetry, yet hated to send that notorious drunk on reading tours: When even gifted people behave badly, it is better to pretend not to know them.

And the cable industry has, at times, behaved badly. It saddens me to see, every season, so many companies push prices to ridiculous new heights. I'm discouraged by gross overstatements from some manufacturers—and reviewers—of the audible differences between various cables. I'm sick of the unfiltered nonsense used by many manufacturers to explain why their cables and other accessories are a zillion times better than the ones they made last year, let alone the ones made by their long-tailed, tree-dwelling competitors. I'm disgusted by the silly packaging cynically used by some companies to promote their goods and help justify their high prices. And I grow weary of the sour desperation of some newcomers to the industry, as they strive for the same remarkable profitability as their predecessors.

Indeed, at audio shows, I have seen cable and accessory vendors all but hurl themselves through the air in their haste to tackle anyone wearing a press pass. (Now you know why those badges are color coded—and why the press usually gets the brightest

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color.) And I've noted that, on those occasions at shows when I have been interrupted while trying to actually listen to music, it is usually not by the makers of the source components or the electronics or the loudspeakers, but by the makers of the cables or accessories in use: people who want me to know that, when their product was added to the system, low-frequency extension increased by a full octave and, as a consequence, the jaw of every skeptical listener in the room literally hit the floor. *Literally*, I say.

Such behavior—the desperation, not the spontaneous, catastrophic failure of temporomandibular ligaments—can be traced to the fact that cable manufacturers, like most everyone else, are hungry, and newcomers to the cable industry seem especially fervent in their belief that one good review is all they need to put their products on the map.

I am not unsympathetic. Back in the day when high-end audio was still “dreaming itself together,” as one sage put it, virtually any resourceful cable company could get its products into the stores. Just as there was a brief time when any Merseybeat band—even Freddie and the Dreamers—could land a recording contract. But those days are gone. Today, any new cable company has a simple choice: They can advertise, or they can get someone to write about their products, preferably in a magazine or on a website that people actually read. Word of mouth, once a valuable commodity, has been cheapened by both the overabundance of opinion on the Internet and the fact that user testimonies for new audio companies tend to be needlessly pugilistic in tone—suggesting that it is impossible or perhaps merely immoral to express

admiration for the products of one company without also expressing hatred for the products of everyone else.

As planned, my next sentence was to be: “Taking out an ad and soliciting a product review are two very different things: One costs money; the other does not.” But then I remembered: That's no longer precisely true. Some magazines and websites now require manufacturers to purchase advertising space before a single drop of ink is spilled on their products. *Policy*, which used to be a perfectly nice word, is soiled and smudged and utterly profaned by that sort of moneygrubbing, antijournalistic mischief. (By contrast, *Stereophile* does not force companies to advertise as a condition of having their products reviewed. The same is true of *Stereophile.com* and its sister sites, *Analogplanet.com*, *Audiostream.com*, and *Innerfidelity.com*.)

How to review audio cables

Still, it is in the interests of some cable and accessory manufacturers to attempt to get their products reviewed, and inevitably, virtually all of us in the reviewing fraternity will, at times, agree to do so. Here's my approach:

STEP 1: This is the easiest step of all: Do nothing. Once you've hung out your shingle as a reviewer, cable offers will come your way. I promise.

STEP 2: This is the hardest step of all: Accept the offer of a review loaner, but limit yourself to only a single product, be it a pair of interconnects or speaker cables, an AC cord, or a stochastic Kirlian-field generator. This is difficult, because the manufacturer will try to persuade you to accept and to review as many products as possible, apparently in the belief that more products on loan equals more publicity. This reaches a savage extreme in the cases of those manufacturers that attempt not only to load up reviewers with multiple products, but that also try to persuade reviewers to write “think” pieces describing the scintillating experience of upgrading their way through the company's product line, from cheapest to dearest, and never mind that most people would rather view nude pictures of Dominique Strauss-Kahn than read such dreary junk. (And I say that as one who has, to his present-day shame, actually written such dreary junk.)

Accept only one product because you can judge with accuracy only one system variable at a time, and because you are not a publicist but a journalist, and because a reviewer should not allow her or his home to be used as a storage facility for expensive, high-markup accessories that will, within a year or two, be replaced by second-generation versions of same.¹

STEP 3: Before installing the new cable or interconnect, play a few selections on your music system as is, paying attention both to the way the system sounds and to the success with which it does or does not communicate the emotional, intellectual, and physical gist of the music.

Next, install the new cable or interconnect in place of its predecessor and listen to the same selections. Relax, but take notes—a tricky balancing act. Try to enjoy yourself, but be brutally frank with yourself about the differences you do or do not hear. Then, leave the new wire in your system and go do something else for a couple of hours—anything but listen to or even think about music. Then go back to your system and play some recordings you haven't heard for a while. After you're done with that, reinstall your original wire, relisten to the same tracks, and make more notes.

Do all of that several more times over the course of the next few days, taking care to change up the order: Sometimes the thing you listen to first has the upper hand, and sometimes the act of changing over and listening again seems to confer an advantage. You want to filter out such artifacts of the testing regimen. Keep your notes simple and honest. Then, after a week or so, go back and look for patterns.

STEP 4: Write—but write like a journalist, not a copywriter. Practice the craft of attribution, and try not to be too disappointed when that turns out to be something many readers do not themselves grasp. Instead of saying, “This cable incorporates separate conductors for male and female electrons,” you must say, “According to the manufacturer, this cable incorporates separate conductors for male and female electrons.” Feel free to note your accordance with or incredulity at such claims, as appropriate, but don't go overboard: Assume that most of your readers are smart enough to sort those things out for themselves.

Put yourself in the position of the reader: Try to imagine what he or she

wants to get out of your review. Of course, all writers and editors imagine their readers somewhat differently, so it's natural for each of us to come up with a different way of addressing the challenge. My thinking is that readers want to know what's technically special

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about the product, they want to know how well it's made, they want to know what it sounded like and how well it played music in my system, and they want to know whether or not I think it's worth the money. Those are the questions I try to answer.

STEP 5: Duck and cover.

I wasn't kidding when I suggested that some people do not understand attribution, just as some people don't understand self-deprecation, humility, the possibility of harmony between people of differing viewpoints, sonnets on man's inhumanity to man, or humor. Because people cannot recognize, let alone appreciate, that which does not exist within themselves in at least trace amounts, the mere act of reporting on, say, a manufacturer's views on cable burn-in will get you tarred, in some quarters, as an apologist for same. Pity them, and thank God you had teachers who stressed reading comprehension.

If you write a purple paean of love to the cable you're reviewing, liken the audibility of its distinctions to those encountered when upgrading from an Edison cylinder player to a system that runs on electricity, and—best of all—make up an entire new performance parameter for which listeners must listen, you will be hailed in some high-end circles, even as your piece provokes howls of anger from non-audiophiles, especially those who consider themselves technologically savvy. On the other hand, the latter group will praise your piece if you declare that the sound of the review cable was indistinguishable from that of a pair of wires extracted from a rusty screen

door, but they will cast your verdict in a negative light—momentary lapse of dementia, revenge for a company that doesn't advertise, whatever lie they feel like telling that day—to telegraph their disdain for anyone and everyone who would dare to review gear based on listening. High-end audiophiles, on the other hand, will fall into a funk as deep as their soundstage, and will henceforth banish you from their hearts and minds.

The best approach is to forget about pleasing one side or the other and simply tell the truth: a course of action that quite often pleases no one.

The horse we rode in on

At the top of my list of reasons for writing about a **BIS** interconnect is the company's generally low prices. Not only do I enjoy writing about products that people stand a chance of affording, I dislike being saddled with a product that's more expensive than the one I already own, yet that appears to offer little or no chance of even matching the performance level I already enjoy. I don't shrink from writing negative reviews—but in a case such as that, what would be the point? I was also impressed by Bernard Brien's genial, soft-spoken approach, and by the fact that he not only agreed to send me only one product, he actually followed through on that promise. I won't say that's precisely rare in cable and accessory circles, but my expectations have been confounded more than once.

So I tried the 2m-long **BIS Expression** (\$640 Canadian) in my system,² more or less following the review procedure described above, and compared its sound to that of both my Shindo Silver interconnect and my Audio Note AN-Vx silver interconnect, each of which is 1.5m long. (A 2m Shindo sells for \$2590, a 2m Audio Note AN-Vx for \$2225.)

The Audio Note was beautifully, realistically soft, with timbral colors that were very slightly warm: nothing “silvery” at all about this silver interconnect. From top to bottom, music was in perfect balance through the AN-Vx, and I heard an excellent sense of touch, and beautiful timing and momentum. The Shindo Silver sounded very similar. Timbrally it was a little meatier than the Audio Note, but I doubt I could tell one from the other in a blind test: The distinction was

¹ My wife refers to our interior-decorating style as Early Loading Dock.

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exceedingly slight.

The **BIS Expression** sounded distinctly different from the other two: a greater distinction than that between the Shindo and Audio Note. Curiously, the **BIS** was consistently, notably louder, with good drive and momentum. It lacked the timbral and textural nuance of the other two interconnects, and, through the **BIS**, music never had quite the same easy, natural flow as through the Shindo and Audio Note. But the **BIS** consistently sounded pleasant and involving, never harsh or tipped toward one or the other frequency extreme.

During those comparisons, I played a few selections from *Genuine Negro Jig*, the debut collection by the Carolina Chocolate Drops (CD, Nonesuch 516995-2), relying in particular on Rhiannon Giddens's a cappella version of the traditional song "Reynadine." The **BIS**'s comparative "loudness," though slight—on a par with the difference one hears between normal and phase-inverted playback—was apparent from the sound of her intake of breath at the recording's start, and the music itself was served in a similar way: slightly clearer, slightly more forward. Precisely the same qualities followed the **BIS** to other music, such as Jeremy Backhouse and the Vasari Singers' recording of the Herbert Howells Requiem (CD, United 88033), there the harmonic subtleties concealed within the grouped voices were revealed explicitly. And on the wildly ahead-of-its-time "Pastime Paradise," from Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life* (CD, Motown 3746303402), the sounds of percussion instruments were more prominent than through the Shindo or Audio Note—though, again, the latter two allowed the music a somewhat more natural flow.

Again, without meaning to beat a dead hose: The sonic distinctions I've described were just about as small as small can be—which, notwithstanding

2 See the review of the Harbeth Super HL5plus loudspeaker elsewhere in this issue for details of system.

The mere act of reporting on, say, a manufacturer's views on cable burn-in will get you tarred, in some quarters, as an apologist for same.

my efforts to keep an open mind, was pretty much what I'd expected.

There now exist so many manufacturers of perfectionist-quality audio cables, and the newer companies seem so conservative in their designs,³ that there remains little justification for that hoariest of high-end audio clichés: that cables are best regarded as tone controls. I can scarcely remember the last time I heard cables so egregiously bright or so egregiously dull or so egregiously anything else that such a point of view had any basis in reality.

But I suppose that's progress, isn't it? As sonic distinctions recede into the background, differences of a more musical sort are more free to command our attention. So it goes in the world of perfectionist-quality cables, where the best choice is that which simply allows one's system to sing: to play music with realistic momentum, note-to-note flow, and the same ineffable naturalness that has always characterized the finest playback gear, of any era or price. And there the **BIS Expression** performed well—somewhat better, in fact, than its relatively humble price predicted.

Because **BIS** products aren't sold in any US shops, hobbyists on my side of the border must call the company's Laval, Quebec headquarters for the US prices of the various models described on their website. Bernard Brien says that home trials of standard-length (*ie*, non-custom) cables are available, so potential buyers can see which, if any, of the **BIS** cables or interconnects seem to jell with their systems. That is, of course, the best approach to selecting interconnects, speaker cables, and power cords from any manufacturer. As we say in our recent *Special Collector's Issue 2015: Recommended Components*: Audition as many products as you reasonably can. The key word is borrow—and although an essay

3 One sees the same in other fields in which making the sale is more important than sticking to one's guns. On the surface, there are almost as few differences between new cable lines as there are between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Jeb Bush. (Worry not, O defenders of the nonpoliticization of *Stereophile*: I say that with equally generous disdain for both.)

such as this is no place for a specific recommendation, I believe that an Internet search on the words *audio cable loan* will turn up a dealer that will let you try before you buy. ■

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Manufacturers' Comments BIS Audio Expression

Editor:

Although we are newcomers to the US market, we are not so in our Canadian market. From 1993 to 2004, we were known for our repair and restoration of high-end equipment. In 1997, we started making special cables for our customers. By 2004, the cable aspect of our business took over the repair, so we had to give it up.

Our philosophy is KISS: Keep It Simple, Stupid. That's why our cables do not have excessive bulk and signal-processing devices.

After extensive testing, regardless of the price, we chose Eichmann BulletPlugs simply because the overall end product sounds best by using them. I understand that sometimes they are a bit stiff at first. They are built with "memory plastic," so when you use them, after a while, they fit easily.

This KISS philosophy is also applied to prices through our complete line. We strive to find ways of keeping prices as low as possible, and at the same time supply the customer with the best value. After all, when everything is said and done, one must enjoy the most touching result possible.

Bernard Brien
BIS Audio

