This review of five cables from Atlas is from UHF Magazine No. 71

Five Atlas Cables

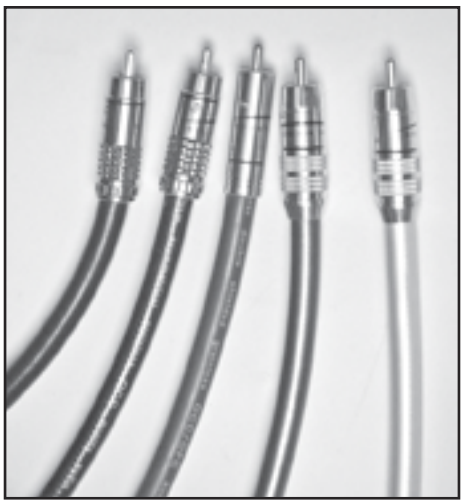
We first ran across this British company at CES last January. Its cables looked nice enough, but you wouldn't believe how saturated we are with cables. Would we like samples? Hmm, all right, if you must…

With CES over, we looked through the literature. The cables were more interesting than we had first assumed. Most were made up of strands of continuous cast copper, each containing not thousands or millions of copper crystals, but just *one* crystal. We had run across the Ohno continuous casting technology before: Harmonic Technologies (*UHF* No. 63) also uses copper with no crystal boundaries, as do other companies, from Granite Audio to Acoustic Zen. Some of the Atlas models are optionally available with plugs that are also fashioned from monocrystal copper.

The price list was interesting as well, with North American prices corresponding closely to UK prices. We sent for samples and did a first listening session in our Omega system. It was enough for us to add three cables to our store, but now we wanted to give them the full treatment.

We should add that we had made the mistake of too quickly sending back the samples we had not found interesting. That's the reason all of the cables in this series turned out to be at least pretty good…and in some cases *more* than just pretty good.

The comparisons were done the same way we had done the connector test: Gerard knew which cable was which, but the other two reviewers did not, and they gave their opinion first. We used the same two recorded selections: Margie Gibson singing *The Best Thing For You Would Be Me* (from *Say It With Music*, Sheffield CD-36), and the *Sanctus* from the Opus 3 SACD *Musica Sacra*. The cables were brought out in random order. Albert and Reine referred to them only by number, and were told nothing more until all discussions were completed.



Atlas Voyager All-Cu

This mid-priced black-colored cable is made from strands of continuous cast copper. Though it is available with conventional connectors that look much like everyone else's, the version reviewed here has the optional monocrystal connectors. The "All-Cu" designation refers to the material used for the connectors' mating surfaces: pure copper, plated with silver. No, the "ordinary" version doesn't sound quite the same (see the previous review if you don't think connectors matter), but it fits tightly, avoiding the grainy sound of connectors that touch only if the wind is blowing right.

The Voyager is double-shielded, with a continuous cast braid that is also one of the cable's two conductors, plus a metallized Mylar foil. The dielectric is polyethylene foam.

Albert and Reine were struck by the cable's neutrality. On the Gibson song, Reine noted the solidity of the plucked bass and the excellent audibility of subtle voice inflections, including those elusive ends of syllables. Albert agreed. "Its sound doesn't really attract attention one way or the other," he said, "and that's good."

On the choral piece, once again there were few flaws, though the differences between the Voyager and our Pierre Gabriel ML-1 reference cable became more evident. The recording's great depth was somewhat reduced, and that in turn made it more difficult to make out the differences in the timbres of the different voices. Both Reine and Albert had similar notes. Albert found the sound slightly thinner, but praised the cable for the smoothness of the highs.

Gerard, speaking only once the other two had finished, largely agreed, though he also found the sibilance slightly too prominent.

The 1 m cable as tested costs £170, or US$315, or C$375. The version with conventional connectors costs £110/US$204/C$235.

Atlas Equator

This is the company's economy cable, the only one not to use Ohno continuous cast copper. The same dielectric is used as in the Voyager, but there is no extra shielding. The connectors are gold-plated and nicely made, fitting snugly into the jacks of both our CD player and our preamplifier. The base metal is brass, as it is on many connectors…at least the ones that are not made from recycled boat anchors.

The first thing that struck us was that the sound was not as loud as with either our reference or the Voyager cable, despite the fact that the volume control had not been touched. We should add that this is not something that can be checked with a voltmeter, since cable resistance is so low (less than 0.03 ohms) that attenuation is negligible. Indeed, a quick A-B test done with our preamplifier's input selector did *not* reveal a drop in level (we don't do evaluations with A-B tests for reasons already discussed). The apparent level drop, then, is subjective, and may be caused by a certain softening of transients by the cable.

Still, softening doesn't mean smearing. On the *Sanctus* the separation of timbres was quite good, and more importantly the tone of the singers' voices was attractive. Was this cable comparable to the Voyager? As the piece progressed, Albert and Reine (who thought of the two cables only as "number one" and "number two") weren't so sure. Depth was certainly reduced, and so was the sheer size of the sound field.

Gerard, the only one to know that this was an economy cable, also liked the sound of the voices, though he was less enthusiastic about what it did to syllables with "S" sounds.

He made the same complaint on the Margie Gibson song, once Albert and Reine had praised the cable. Reine did find the top end somewhat less smooth than with either our reference or the Voyager, but she liked the expressive quality of the music.

The unanimous conclusion is that this is a very good cable, and it is especially praiseworthy when you consider its price: £40/US$75/C$90. Most cables of this price sound grainy, thin, and — in all too many cases — shrill. The Equator is a refreshing exception.

Atlas Questor

With this cable we were pretty much on an equal footing, because even Gerard knew nothing about it beyond its name. This was a sample, and at the time it was not included on any price lists, in either pounds or US dollars.

We have since learned the details. It is an economy cable, a little costlier than the Equator, with what seems to be similar connectors. The difference is that its conductors are made of Ohno continuous cast copper. Though we have not carried out an exhaustive survey, we suspect the number of monocrystal cables at this price must be quite small.

And we would later be especially surprised to learn its price, because we quickly concluded that this cable was a class act. On the Gibson song, both piano and voice were admirably well reproduced. Transparency was excellent, letting us hear background details. The bottom end was very good, with both the cello and the plucked bass solid and natural. Rhythm was strong. "It's moving," said Reine, "and it's convincing." Gerard noted approvingly that Gibson's notoriously difficult esses sounded normal.

The Questor also did well on the choral recording. Albert had noted that, with the economy Equator cable, it had been difficult to follow the male voices when they first come in behind

the women. No such problem here. The ensemble sound was smooth and effortless. "There's great smoothness coupled with large volume," said Albert.

The sibilance? Normal, judged Gerard. "It really has no major flaws."

Indeed, the results were good enough that all three of us assumed this must be an expensive cable. It isn't. The price of our 1 m pair is £60/US$109/C$135. It's in the bargain category.

Atlas Explorer

This cable is the same blue color as the Questor, and the same size too, but with two notable differences. One is the addition of a second shield, of metallized Mylar foil. The other is the slimmer "self-cleaning" plug used on some of the more expensive Atlas cables.

Albert liked the smoothness of the Gibson song coming through this cable. "The sound is simple," he said, "but I mean that in a good sense." Reine thought the cable made the plucked bass sound unlike the way it did with any of the other cables tried so far. There seemed to be a touch of reverberation not discernible with other cables. Gibson's voice emotional and sensitive.

Gerard, who of course knew what this cable cost, gave it a poorer mark. "I don't like the sibilance," he said. "I kept dreading the next word that had an 'S' in it, and that rather spoiled the song for me."

The cable seemed much better on the difficult choral *Sanctus*. The difficult higher frequencies were smooth and natural. "Even the sibilance is pretty good," would add Gerard later.

But there was more. All the vocal registers were easy to follow, including the voices of the tenors as they emerge from the background. Better yet, they were attractive and natural. The acoustic space, which is huge on this wonderfully-recorded SACD, was reasonably ample.

Any misgivings? Reine had one: "The sopranos sound pure, not at all hard, but you know what? They don't seem to be coming in at the same time." That led to the obvious discussion…was that because the Explorer was messing something up, or because it was revealing something that other cables, including our reference, were hiding? We had a pretty good idea of the answer.

The price? For a 1 m pair, it's £90 or US$167.

We haven't noted a Canadian price, because we didn't pick up the Explorer for our Audiophile Store. It costs half again as much as the Questor, and we weren't convinced it offered sufficient value.

Atlas Navigator All-Cu

This is the company's top cable, and its structure is different from that of any of the others. Of course it is also made from monocrystal copper, but it has two internal conductors plus shield, instead of a single central conductor, with the shield serving as the second signal conductor. That means the shield is connected at only one end, so that the signal cannot travel along it. This is a far superior arrangement. A number of other companies have similar configurations, usually billed as "semi-balanced." A *true* balanced cable, of course, would have signal travelling along all three conductors, and so Atlas prefers the term "pseudo-balanced." So do we.

The shield is augmented by a metallized Mylar foil, also connected at only one end. Such hypershielding increases cable capacitance, but it also avoids picking up all sorts of electronic garbage. The conductors are packed with fibre strands to prevent mechanical movement. Bizarre at may seem, under some circumstances a cable can act like a microphone, albeit not a very good one.

Like the Voyager, the Navigator is available with either conventional connectors (the "self-cleaning" ones also used on the Explorer), or the single-crystal copper connectors like the ones on our sample Voyager cable. We had the latter. The connectors add a lot to the cost, but either you believe in connectors or you don't. We do.

We began with the *Sanctus*. Reine and Albert couldn't know that this was the top Atlas cable, but they quickly guessed. "There's lots more there," said Reine, "and no 'buts' this time. You can hear the esses, for example, but they sound the way they would at a concert." Albert praised the separation and the sheer musicality of the blended voices. "It's at once clear and smooth. There's no insistence on any aspect of the music."

The Margie Gibson song came through wonderfully well too, with a rendition that Albert rated just behind our reference cable. Both piano and voice were natural and attractive. The tone was joyous. Cello and plucked bass were solid and clear, and minor percussion instruments stood out starkly against a velvety background. Reine, who didn't know what cable this was, gave the Navigator the final half star she had been holding back. Gerard, who *did* know what it was, rated the cable at the top of the Atlas line, commenting that the clarity let through the nuances of Gibson's ever so slight Italian accent.

As already mentioned, a preliminary listening session had been so positive that we had already adopted two of the Navigators for our reference systems. One of them is on the Audiomeca J-1 turntable in our Alpha system, replacing a Wireworld Equinox. The Navigator greatly improved the sound of our turntable. The other links the phono stage to the preamplifier in our Omega system.

Oh yes, the price.

The All-Cu version reviewed here costs £185/US$345/C$405. The version with conventional connectors is much less expensive, at £120/US$220/C$265.

Hold on…did we say that the Navigator was the top Atlas cable? In fact that would be the Elektra, which costs £450. Our preliminary session had led us to rate the Elektra similar to the Navigator All-Cu. We had, unfortunately, sent back our sample before this session, and it wasn't possible to listen again.

After we had completed the session and the veritable identities of the cables was finally revealed, we had one final reflection. Despite differences in technologies, the Atlas cables manage to maintain a consistent family sound. That could easily be the mark of people who know what they're doing.