

TWO NEW CABLES FROM ATLAS



That we are generally pleased with the cables made by Atlas won't come as much of a surprise. We first ran across Atlas when our Audiophile Store was searching for a new source of cables to replace a line we had decided to drop, and what struck us first was the relatively reasonable cost...especially — we quickly discovered — considering the often outstanding quality. To make sure we weren't indulging in wishful thinking, we put the cables they sent us through blind tests. Not all of them did well, but a sizeable number did. Our favorites weren't always the most expensive ones, because when you can't see the cable you can't see the price tag.

Now this Scottish company has gone further upscale, claiming to challenge the state of the art with expensive new cables, both interconnects and speaker cables. We were among the first to receive samples, and we ran hundred of hours of break-in time on them before putting them through...yes, another blind test.

The Mavros interconnects

"Mavros" is a fairly common Greek name (George Mavros was a Greek political leader), and we're not sure why a Scottish company has given it to an audio cable. The finish of this interconnect is impressive, with a tightly-knit outer jacket and gorgeous phono connectors. The conductors, as in several other Atlas products, are single-crystal copper, which means that the copper is drawn by a special process to harden without crystal boundaries. The connectors

are also monocrystal. The dielectric is porous Teflon.

The 1 metre cable supplied has a list price of US\$1395. A balanced version, using Atlas's own monocrystal XLR connectors, is slightly more at US\$1760.

A first, very casual, listen seemed promising, but that's no way to evaluate a cable. Once again we set up a blind test, though it was not *double* blind (in a double blind test even the experimenter doesn't know what is being evaluated). Gerard knew what the cables were, but he kept his notes to himself, and offered no reaction until the session was over. Albert and Reine were told only that they would be listening to cables, and that each listen would be preceded by our reference cable, but they knew neither the brand nor the price, and they were not permitted to examine either cable.

We used three recordings for each cable test, returning to our reference between each test in order to avoid the absurd situation of inadvertently comparing an interconnect to a speaker cable. We first listened to the discs in our Alpha system, with our Linn Unidisk player as a source. Our reference interconnect in that system is a Pierre Gabriel ML-1, which was at the time we acquired it slightly more expensive than the Mavros. The test cable was placed between the CD player and our Copland preamplifier.

We began with organ music, Bach's *Tocatta & Fugue in D Minor* (from *Organ Treasures*, Opus 3 CD22031). This is challenging music, and to make the challenge even tougher, it is an SACD.

Neither Reine nor Albert ranked

the Mavros as high as our reference cable. Reine found the organ sound less rich, and not quite as lifelike as it had been with our reference. Albert was less certain what difference there was, but judged there was less substance to the organ, which made the piece therefore less moving. "The reverberation is linear, left to right," he said, "whereas before it was three-dimensional."

The second selection was the Pauline Viardot art song *Haï Luli* (Analekta AN 2 9903). This is a song that can be stunning in its beauty, though it is also disappointingly fragile when poorly reproduced. The Mavros did very well, rendering Isabel Bayrakdarian's delicious voice with clarity and detail. Even so there were some notable differences in comparison with the reference. Reine thought the piano, normally flawless, would sometimes cover up syllables. Albert admired the finesse of the highs, and wasn't sure where the difference lay. "With this cable she is excellent," he said of the soprano, "but with our reference cable she was bewitching."

We ended the session with another female voice, that of Margie Gibson singing Irving Berlin's *The Best Thing For You*. It was nearly flawless, the best of the three recordings. The clarity was exemplary, the rhythm excellent, with the piano, percussion and bass very good as well. "Why is the cable better with this recording than with the other two?" asked Reine rhetorically.

Gerard, who had thus far kept his notes to himself, had rated the Mavros slightly higher than his "blind" colleagues, finding the two cables very close in the Bach. In the Viardot song he had found Bayrakdarian's voice to have more punch, and wasn't sure that was a good thing. He had noted some loss of microdetails. And like his colleagues, he had judged the Gibson recording to be virtually perfect, with spaciousness, excellent sibilants, and satisfying transparency.

Should the Mavros replace our cable? None of us thought so, though when we went over our notes from the last



issue, it was evident that the Mavros had scored better than the present-day Pierre Gabriel.

The Mavros also sounds considerably better than the less expensive Atlas Navigator All-Cu, which we had been using between the phono stage and the preamplifier in our Omega system. We installed it there, happy we would have the use of it during our phono preamp test, which was then coming up.

The Mavros is a very good interconnect cable, just a little short of a reference cable that is, alas, no longer made.

The Mavros loudspeaker cable

This speaker cable has the same characteristics as the interconnect, but it contains two pairs of monocrystal wires to allow biwiring. For the lower frequencies the wires are multistranded, and for the highs they are solid core. Atlas has not identified them, and you can distinguish them only by the fact that the multistranded (bass) wires are more flexible.

The Mavros is available with a choice of three possible connectors. A 3 metre pair using either oxygen-free copper spades or bananas would cost US\$2560. Both are cold-welded under pressure, not soldered. Our sample was terminated with gold-plated OCC (monocrystal) spades, which boost the price to US\$3015. And we had asked for 5 metre cables, which brought the price to US\$4670. We would soon see whether these prices are sheer madness, or whether they somehow represent value.

We compared the Mavros to our Actinote LBD cables, to which we had added silver jumpers from Pierre Gabriel. With the Mavros we would of course not need the jumpers. The comparison was once again organized as a blind test, with only a mute Gerard having any idea what was being reviewed.

We began with the Bach recording, which greatly pleased both Reine and Albert, who praised the clarity of the reverberation and the huge sense of space. "There's detail, detail, detail!" said Albert. Was the reproduction perfect? Reine initially thought the multitude of small pipes playing so rapidly in the fugue were a little more strident, though in listening again with the reference cable she changed her mind. Albert thought the very lowest pedal was not quite as powerful, but otherwise had only praise.

There would be no more complaints coming.

After the Pauline Viardot song, Reine pronounced herself delighted, praising whatever this cable turned out to be without reservation. So did Albert, who however reached for more adjectives. "It's beautiful, it's moving, the detail is refined. There's a beautiful balance with the piano, which is warm and limpid." Would this cable turn out to be *better* than our reference? We had one more recording to come.

The Margie Gibson recording confirmed the superiority of this cable. "It's magnificent," exclaimed Reine, "her voice is even more detailed. What a surprise." Albert agreed. "And it's not

as though this were an easy recording," he said. "Everything is well positioned in space, timbres are natural, the voice is clear. Everything is *there*, it's *alive*."

Gerard uncovered his notes, which were in sync with those of his colleagues. He had found the organ farther back than with the reference cable, but no less clear. "It's because there's more depth," he said. He had praised the Viardot song not only for the same reasons as his colleagues, but for "the delicious dying syllables against a velvety black background." In the Gibson song he has noted an almost eerily realistic sound of drumsticks on snare drum. "I noticed that too," said Reine.

We needed only the shortest of discussions before we decided to leave the Mavros cables right where they were, to become a part of the Alpha system. Our only hesitation concerned the connectors. When you work for an audio magazine and you are constantly connecting and disconnecting things, bananas have an obvious advantage over spades. Fortunately these spades are well-shaped, and they slip with ease into the binding posts of both our Moon W-5LE amplifier and our Living Voice Avatar-OBXR loudspeakers. We would live with that.

We were happy with our decision. Though this review appears last in the magazine, it was among the first to be done. In listening sessions to come, there was more than one comment that the Alpha system sounded better than it ever had before. Why?

The answer seems obvious.

