

PNF Audio Cables

By David Milford

Do your tastes run to turquoise, orange, purple, or gaudy yellow-green? PNF Audio can customize the braiding on their cables to match your desires. I approve of non-drab audio gear! Normally, cable companies will either assign a color to a particular model or performance level or have a common color throughout the line (black or gray usually). Interesting. The question is do they glow in ultraviolet light?

FEATURES

Most of PNF's cables utilize CC (continuous cast) OFHC (oxygen-free high conductivity) copper. PNF touts the fact that the CC process eliminates most of the crystal barriers found in standard OFHC copper. Apparently, as many as tens of thousands of barriers per meter exist in normal cold-cast samples. Their hot-cast CC copper reportedly has less than one barrier per meter. I have heard of this method of producing copper before, but have not listened to any in my own system until now.

They further assert that capacitance, inductance, and resistance are noticeably affected by the multitude of crystal barriers in standard copper. It makes sense from a scientific standpoint that crystal barriers might be bad for signal

propagation. It is certainly an inhomogeneity that could have unexpected and asymmetrical effects on the purity of the music. Does the listening give evidence of the theoretical benefits? Because I did not have an identical but non-continuously cast set of cables for comparison, I can't say for sure. But I did find them to have some very nice qualities.

The Icon interconnects reviewed here are their top-shelf offerings. At \$199.95 per meter pair, you could buy a few and outfit your entire system for what you would spend on a single pair of some other company's flagship offerings. They use CC process, 23awg OFHC, silver-plated copper for the conductors. The company further states that the skin effect penetrates the entire diameter of the conductor at audio frequencies.

PNF claims that the dielectric has the ability to absorb the electrostatic energy stored in the conductor (electrostatic energy in music? I thought nothing was static in music?). To absorb as little of the energy as possible, PNF uses what they call Airlon dielectric material, which is Teflon (PTFE) foamed into a honeycomb matrix with air pockets. They state the Airlon achieves a 1.4 dielectric constant, the lowest currently possible with a solid material. For comparison, unfoamed Teflon is 2.1 (praised

for its sonic performance), and a perfect vacuum (the ideal) is 1.0.

PNF uses a solid foil 100% coverage shield in the Icon, to reject external EMF and RF noise. A PVC jacket lends the outside of the package toughness and flexibility. The connectors are a high copper content alloy, locking RCA with a conductivity rating of 93.3%.

The PNF Audio Symphony speaker cable uses CC copper OFHC conductors and a custom polyethylene dielectric. The spiral geometry and proprietary burn-in process all work together to produce a very neutral cable, according to the company. They come with either gold-plated spades or gold-plated banana plugs, depending on your needs. They are both crimped and "silver soldered." This termination method should be robust enough for plenty of amp or speaker swapping. There are four 12-gauge conductors per bundle, yielding approximately 10-gauge overall.

PNF offers a 30-day no-questions refund. Quite a convenient way to try things out in your own home when buying from their website. All the cables also come with a one-year parts and labor warranty.

LISTENING TESTS

When I commenced listening—I must

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Icon interconnects: \$199.95 1m pair with RCA.

Symphony speaker cable: \$314.95 8' pair with spades.

Associated equipment: Rotel RDD-980 transport, Assemblage DAC-3 D/A, home-built STAMINA Zen/Bride of Zen integrated amp monoblocks, Muse 150 power amps, B&W Matrix 804 speakers.



be honest—I was immediately taken by the detail and natural quality of the sound. My favorite interconnects right now are the Kimber Hero and Kimber Silver Streak, both affordable over-achievers. The Hero is a better balance for my system frequency-wise, and the PNF Icon came very close to it in that department. The Icon was actually a touch livelier on the top, but somehow it all came forward as extra musical information and not anything unwanted. I tried not to pay close attention until all the cables had been broken in for 50 hours or so, but it was hard. The music was so alive it drew me in.

With Incubus's *Morning View* (Epic EK 85227) all the information was there, without slapping you in the face with it. The exciting distorted guitars made my temperature rise. The melodic singing on "Wish You Were Here" brought back to me why this song is one of my favorites. I was a bit surprised the Icon lived up to my expectations. They disappointed in no department, no matter how hard I searched for sonic flaws. My ultra-simple amps are more revealing than most, a picky person's dream (or sometimes nightmare). The Icon left me wanting nothing. And, more important, there were little or no additive distortions that called attention to themselves.

I also tried a pair of balanced Icon interconnects with XLR connectors, running fully balanced from D/A to Muse 150 power amps. With no volume control, the only things I could listen to were very quiet recordings, such as *A Meeting By The River* (Water Lily WLA-CS-29-CD). My nature trip continued at a volume as high as I would want to listen.

The Icon spoke with ample liquidity to do credit to this phenomenal recording. I could feel the tension on the heads of the tablas, hear the subtlest resonances of the guitars, and even get a feel for the space the musicians were playing in. Really very fine balance to everything.

I had balanced Kimber Hero on hand and Straight Wire Maestro for comparisons. The Icon won out over the Maestro in many categories. Between the Icon and the Hero, however, the choice was ambiguous—a good thing. Sometimes I thought I preferred one or the other in

a particular area, then my choice would flip-flop. The Icon had maybe a touch more detail, but then the Hero was the champion when it came to warmth.

Then I switched back to the STAMINA amps, using both Icon interconnects and also an 8' pair of Symphony speaker cable. With an all-PNF cabled system (except digital), the dynamics were impressive. It was just as I like it—all the detail with no harshness. To be fair, the top octave was just a touch more noticeable than with the high capacitance Goertz MI-2 T-series that are my favorites. It was a slight difference in frequency balance, and in many systems I think the Symphony would be preferable.

I put on Simple Minds' *Live In The City Of Light* (A&M CD 6850) for some very familiar material. The natural reverb bouncing off the Paris buildings in this concert bled back through the mikes to produce a wonderful sense of spaciousness. It is not a flawless recording, yet there are great depths of detail to explore. I was nothing short of enthralled while hearing this served up via PNF cabling. The quantity of detail was almost staggering. Even the crowd noise showed off the realism these cables are capable of.

As with the interconnects, the top octave was something special. Though perhaps a tiny bit too much for my system, which is already over-gifted in this department. In many systems, the PNF's top octave will be a welcome blessing.

What of bass and midrange, you might ask? Well, these were strongly delivered as well. Bass had a pleasing roundness when provided by the recording. Voices had plenty of in-room intimacy, evidence of midrange quality. Wooden piano soundboards seemed as large as they are in real life. Melodic lines drew in the listener with as much importance as they deserved.

I very much enjoyed my time with the PNF CC cables. I recommend both the Icon interconnects and the Symphony speaker cable. They manage to deliver impressive detail as well as smoothness at this price point. In most areas, they compete well with my other favorite cables. They brought life and excitement to any and all types of music that I threw at them. **AX**

CONTRIBUTORS

Rudy Godmaire ("A Flexible Subwoofer Amp Pt. 3," p. 6), a sales consultant for Bell Canada, has been interested in DIY audio since 1998.

Simon Brown ("Amplifier War and Peace," p. 14) is a Professional Engineer and has worked in Product Design in New Zealand and England. Simon has long been involved in DIY HiFi, having built speakers, amplifiers, and turntables. This led him to set up Design Build Listen Ltd. to supply DIY HiFi components. Simon has had over a dozen articles published in HiFi magazines. Contact him via www.designbuildlisten.com.

Ed Simon ("Speech Intelligibility, Part 1," p. 24) received his B.S.E.E. at Carnegie-Mellon University, and has installed over 500 sound systems at venues including Jacob's Field, Cleveland, Ohio; Museum of Modern Art Restaurants, New York; The Forum, Los Angeles; and Fisher Cats Stadium, Manchester, N.H.

Dennis Colin ("An Audio Isolation Box" p. 30) has demonstrated the audibility of phase distortion at Boston Audio Society, and has designed the "Omni-Focus" speaker (bipolar coincidental with phase-linear first-order crossover), ARP 2600 analog music synthesizer, 1kW biamp and PWM supply at A/D/S, and Class D amps.

Bjorn Johannesen ("TABAQ: Tang Band Quarter Wave," p. 38) is an avid DIY hobbyist involved in building amplifiers and loudspeakers. His speaker designs have included horns, full-range, and transmission lines. The interest in quarterwave designs has accelerated in the last few years, thanks to audioXpress, www.t-linespeakers.org, and www.quarter-wave.com. Bjorn lives in Denmark, just outside Copenhagen. His e-mail address is bjohannesen@post.cybercity.dk.

Ramkumar Ramaswamy ("A Prototyping System for Passive Crossovers," p. 42) is an information technology professional. He owns Audesine (www.audesine.com), a firm that provides loud-speaker design services. He is a doctoral Fellow of the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta and is a member of the AES.

Charles Hansen (Product Review: Terk VR-1 TV Volume Regulator, p. 46) holds five patents in his field of engineering and enjoys modifying guitar amplifiers and effects to reduce noise and distortion. With hundreds of articles to his name, he is a frequent collaborator to the magazines of Audio Amateur Publications.

David Milford (Product Review: PNF Audio Cables, p. 54) received a bachelor's in physics from Oberlin College. He was a contributing editor with *Stereophile* magazine for three years. He has enjoyed modifying all sorts of audio equipment.

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