

Equipment Report



Esprit Audio Beta Speaker Cable and Interconnect

French Soufflé

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It's not often that I evaluate audio products from France. But when I do, something, well, odd happens. My mind starts to wander from the critical high-end issues of the day and suddenly I'm following my nose to France's other high-end artform—its cuisine. So, as I began this review of the fine cables from Esprit Audio, its wares hand-made to order in the village of Épenède, I unexpectedly found myself walking along the Seine, past the patisseries and the smell of freshly baked croissants—and fantasizing of the dessert that's quintessentially French, the chocolate soufflé. You may ask what does Esprit cable have to do with that classic concoction? What parallels, philosophical or otherwise, can conductor geometry and gastronomy possibly share? Think about it. Beyond their obvious French origins, each uses a small but exacting list of ingredients in finicky amounts that are painstakingly assembled and prepared. Further, and in spite of the apparent simplicity of the “recipe,” a lot can go wrong. I know from personal experience that in matters of audio or pastry, execution à la perfection is never a foregone conclusion.

I have to confess that up until a few months ago I was unfamiliar with Esprit Audio. The company was founded more than 20 years ago by designer Richard Cesari. Trained in electro-mechanics, Cesari oversees the complete cable manufacturing process of products that are still entirely made in France. Until recently Esprit's distribution network was mostly limited to France, where the company has an impressive 45 high-end dealers. However,

new European export markets have been opening up, including key vendors in the U.S. and Canada.

Esprit Audio offers a diverse collection of speaker cables and interconnects—eight series in all. These spread over a wide range of price points, from the down-to-earth Alpha speaker cable (\$280/2m) to the summit with Esprit's “laboratory standard” Eureka series (\$7300/2m). Additionally, there are collections of power cords and digital interconnect options, as well as power distribution. One constant through the Esprit line is the use of fine, multi-strand, high-purity copper conductors—the number of strands commensurate with the level of performance and price. Throughout its line Esprit selects silver and copper conductor material for their low resistance characteristics, which is why you won't see higher resistance materials like gold and rhodium employed in its products.

I elected to review one of Esprit's budget models, Beta (a series above the entry-level Alpha). However, for comparison and to get a taste of Esprit's higher performance models I listened to the upper-middle range Aura wire

as well. Beta cables employ multi-strand construction (720 strands, interconnect) using five-nines (99.9995) copper conductors and high-temperature air-layer silicone PVC insulation. The speaker connectors, whether spades or bananas, are plated with 20 microns of silver over copper. Construction quality appeared excellent and terminations robust—comparable to the vastly more expensive Aura cable. Beta is also an easy, compliant cable to handle, which I'm thankful for since I tend to swap out cables more frequently than most hobbyists.

Compared with Beta, Aura speaker cable more than doubles the multi-strand conductor configuration with 1680 copper strands of six-nines (99.99995) per each positive and neutral run. (Interconnects are 810 strands.) Insulation is silicone PVC with air and glass layers. The banana connectors are pure silver, while spades are plated with 40 microns of silver over copper. Aura is also equipped with dielectric polarization via an attached battery pack. In Richard Cesari's words, “We polarize the insulators which has the effect of making them more efficient and creates an

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anti-vibratory system by the effect of the DC bias.”

Like the aforementioned soufflé my expectations for moderately priced cable have been rising steadily over the years. Today’s marketplace is packed with competition, and weakness in a product line means not being invited back to the party next season. For this reason alone, it didn’t surprise me just how good the Beta series performed. Beta is not a cable of excesses. This wire played it pretty straight, neither intensifying the treble nor boosting the bass. In overall sonic character, Esprit Beta wire had a mid-range-centric sound. Thus, vocal detail was clean and expressive on baritones and sopranos alike. Beta cabling was sensitive to small textural and timbral gradations, conveying a throatier, chestier Tom Waits or Renee Fleming or Jen Chapin or Norah Jones. Its treble was somewhat rolled on top but with a smooth sibilance region—a factor that made it easily listenable, and helped loudspeakers that tend to emphasize the 4-8kHz range. During “Autumn Leaves” from the Manhattan Jazz Quintet, Beta displayed good composure on the soaring trumpet transients and dynamic pyrotechnics. There was a hint of astringency and constriction in the top end, but this was hardly obtrusive. Beta also reproduced a lively rendition of Dave Brubeck’s signature track “Take Five,” brimming with shimmering cymbals and the full-bodied harmonics of Paul Desmond’s alto saxophone. Even Brubeck’s soft, backing piano chords, which can easily be smeared by lesser cables, remained sharply focused throughout. Solo

piano, like Evgeny Kissin’s reading of Vaughan Williams’ “The Lark,” exhibited a nicely balanced combination of transient detail and keyboard attack and sustain. Bass response was very good for this cable range. Acoustic bass could have evinced greater bloom and decay—as the Esprit Aura later proved—but this was solid LF performance, nonetheless.

Beta’s imaging was stable, and its soundstaging was convincing in width and dimensionality. However, as I listened to Vaughan Williams’ *The Wasps* Overture, I noted that the Beta tended to push the stage back a bit farther than I expected. (Not to get ahead of myself but the Esprit’s Aura did not have this recessive characteristic.) Part of this, to my mind is due to the conservative nature of the cable. It’s gently subtractive and moderately compressed in micro-dynamics, and this flagging of inner dynamics within the orchestra tended to reduce sparkle and immediacy. I noted this same trait during Peter, Paul & Mary’s “All My Trials,” where the crescendo of voices seemed less immediate, as if the singers had each pulled back slightly from the microphone.

Contrasting the Aura wire with the Beta wire returned me to my soufflé analogy. Aura was the puffer, darker chocolate version to the Beta’s lighter milk chocolate. Where Beta was a well-executed, high-value confection, Aura, less cost constrained, served up the music with more air, better dynamics, and greater sensitivity to the ebb and flow of music’s emotions. Aura performed with an outgoing energy akin to having a vitamin B12 shot. It ramped

Specs & Pricing

Esprit Beta

Speaker: \$390/2m;
\$580/3m with spades

Interconnect: \$420/1.2m
pr. RCA; \$450/1.2m pr. XLR

Esprit Aura

Speaker: \$2500/2m;
\$3800/3m with spades

Interconnect:
\$3000/1.2m pr. RCA;
\$3400/1.2m pr. XLR;
\$1280/1.20m RJ45 Ethernet cable

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up inner detail and elicited superior micro-dynamic gradients. The Aura was simultaneously more exacting even as it was more composed and relaxed. During James Taylor’s “Long Ago and Far Away,” the Esprit Aura evinced greater vocal presence and a more forward tilt overall. Even loudness appeared to increase, so much that I initially wanted to back off the volume a dB or so. There was also a shade more weight and focus to JT’s guitar bass line, a trademark characteristic of his finger-picking style.

As I listened again to “All My Trials,” the Aura fashioned a firmer more stable central image of Mary Travers, a vision virtually fixed in space. In comparison the Beta was a little more amorphous. Whereas Beta’s tonality skewed a bit whiter with some traces of grain structure on top, Aura was so relaxed it was almost chill, imbuing this vintage recording with greater intimacy. Low-level resolution was such that I would often allow my ear to get sidetracked following each singer’s harmonic line as far as I could into the song.

The Aura’s take on classical music was more upfront and impactful. For example, Anne-Sophie Mutter’s performance of the Tchaikovsky/Korngold violin concertos placed the soloist more forward, with the orchestra revealing more of the vast sweep and dimension of the venue itself. While my reference cables tended to make the violin slightly sweeter and more fluid, the Esprit was more resolute on pizzicatos and more rosiny off the bow. The dynamics and grip helped to elevate the quality of orchestral bass, laying a firm foundation for the music to play off of.

If there’s one thing that audiophiles learn early on, it’s that system components are not assembled in isolation. It’s all about context. In that light Esprit Beta—finely tailored to a price point—performed superbly. Forgiving to a fault, it’s an ideal partner for a good two-way compact or medium-scale floorstander (entrants from PSB, Elac, and Totem come to mind, among others). In foodie terms, Esprit’s Beta, was excellent bistro fare. Esprit’s Aura, on the other hand, was pure Michelin-starred fine dining, capable of lifting the performance of the most elite rig. My first experience with Esprit Audio cables was a rewarding one. Always entertaining, always musical, both wires were excellent on their own terms, and both are highly recommended. **tas**