



Review Compilation

A few quotes.....

"The Flow Ultimas are my new references."
— Alan Taffel, The Absolute Sound

"Tonally, the Flow Ultimas are essentially neutral, with not a hint of brightness and clear, powerful bass."
— Michael Trei, Stereophile

"simply superior cables and in a multitude of ways" — Alan Taffel, The Absolute Sound

"Extracting more from my system than I have ever heard." — Michael Trei, Stereophile

They are warm, resolved, dynamic, dimensional, articulate, and highly musical.— Alan Taffel, The Absolute Sound

"a relaxed, nonmechanical quality that delivers natural and organic sound" — Michael Trei, Stereophile

Content

The Absolute Sound issue 367	Page 4
Audio Accessory Japan Spring 2026	Page 8
Stereophile Vol. 49 Issue 6	Page 12

Equipment Report



Argento Audio Flow Ultima Cables

Silver Surprise

Alan Taffel

Full disclosure: When it comes to cables, I'm not a silver kind of guy. I've just never liked the sound—and in my experience, there *is* a sound—of that metal. To me, silver cables and cords have always come off as cold and analytical. When I've had the chance to compare silver and copper cables, all other things being equal, I've invariably preferred copper.

So, when Robert Harley approached me with an offer to review some new silver cables from the 32-year-old Danish company Argento, I politely begged off. Given my past experience with silver, I explained, such a project would hardly be fair to the manufacturer. But Robert persisted. People whose ears he trusted had told him that these were no ordinary silver cables. I agreed to give them a listen, with no commitment to do a full review.

Well, the fact that you are reading this gives away the punchline. I tried the Argento Flow Ultima cables and power cords, and I liked them. I *really* liked them. In fact, I preferred them to my longtime Empirical Design reference cables—and that's saying a lot.

Preparation

My honeymoon with the Argentos did not begin immediately. In fact, at first I disliked them quite a bit. Compared to the energy

and extension of my reference cables, the Flow Ultimas were initially soft, polite, and closed in. The only silver lining, so to speak, was that they didn't sound like silver. In a bizarre way, that was encouraging.

In speaking with Argento, I learned that their cables require a *lot* of break-in. I had already submitted them to about 50 hours, but that, they told me, wasn't enough. The interconnects and speaker wire needed about 100 hours, while the power cords required several times that.

Sure enough, in reasonably short order the interconnects and speaker wire began to flourish. On the other hand, the power cords stubbornly refused to open up. Eventually I ran out of time and patience, at which point I asked Argento to simply send me some broken-in power cords. They complied, and when I put them in my system the difference was immediate and dramatic. The sound I'll describe below applies to the broken-in interconnects, speaker cable, and power

cords. They all have the same sonic imprint, so there's no need to describe them separately.

Once broken in, the sound of the Argento Flow Ultimas not only excelled but came as a complete surprise to me. They did not sound like any silver cable I'd ever heard. Rather than sounding cold, they were as warm as my copper references. Nor were they the slightest bit analytical. Instead, the Flow Ultimas delivered the same organic musicality as my references. This would have been news enough for me, but the fact is that the Flow Ultimas go well beyond upending expectations about silver. They are simply superior cables and in a multitude of ways.

The greatest asset of the Flow Ultimas is an uncanny level of resolution. They achieve this not by etching details, but rather by affording the signal an unobstructed path—no connections, no material or impedance changes, minimized crystalline defects—through the cable. (How did they do that? Please

Equipment Report Argento Flow Ultima Cables and Power Cords



see the sidebar.) In this way, the Argentos can deliver resolution without the usually attendant exaggerated detail.

You can hear this resolution easily in the way the Argentos handle decays and reverb. Listen, for example, to the percussion on the opening of London Grammar's "Hey Now." The decays ebbed and ebbed for far longer than I'm used to. And on Neil Young's peerless *Live at Massey Hall, 1971*, the hall reverb was far more evident than it is without the Argentos in the system.

The latter recording revealed another area of the Flow Ultima's superiority: dimensionality. Through these cables, both the acoustic guitar and Neil's voice took on a 3-D character I'd not previously heard on this LP. On orchestral recordings, the soundstage itself also became more 3-D, with significantly greater depth. In addition to this resolution in the spatial domain, the Flow Ultimas also better resolved timbres, making it easier to hear the difference between instruments.

Another area where the Argentos distinguished themselves—even beyond the already superb capabilities of my reference cables—was in transients. Bass, for example, took a leap in tautness. On a really dynamic track like "Los" by Rammstein, the Argento cables served up a formidable "pow" on the drums.

At this price point, a cable's ergonomics should be as excellent as its sound quality. This brings up another admirable quality of the Flow Ultima cables, and one that is far from universal within high-end cables: They're easy to work with. The Argentos aren't overly stiff, and their terminations are robust. I must say that I also appreciated the beautiful leather cases that enshroud the cables when they're delivered. The user experience here is as elevated as you could ask for.

Which brings us to the matter of price. There is no question that the Flow Ultima cables are expensive. However, if you peruse the cable terrain, you'll see that they are nowhere near the outrageous end of the spectrum; they're more in the middle. Further, the Flow Ultimas contain a lot of pure silver—no alloy conductors or non-silver terminations here—and silver is expensive.

With the Flow Ultima, you are getting what you pay for.

For anyone who has internalized a concept of how silver cables sound, the Argento Flow Ultima will come as a surprise. They sound nothing like typical silver cables. They are warm, resolved, dynamic, dimensional, articulate, and highly musical.

Yet these are not simply better silver cables; they're better cables altogether. The Flow Ultima outperformed what I've come to feel are the best copper cable out there. I'm backing that up by making the first change in my reference cables in well over a decade. The Flow Ultimas are my new references.

Specs & Pricing

MUSICAL ARTISANS (U.S. Distributor)

4826 Main St.
Skokie, IL
(847) 877-2791
rreyes@musicalartisans.com
musicalartisans.com

Prices: 1m interconnect, \$6850; 1.2m phono cable, \$7750; 1m speaker cable, \$10,250; 2m power cord, \$6850

Associated Equipment

Analog source: Lyra Etna Lambda Edition cartridge, Goldmund Studietto turn-

table, Graham 2.2 tonearm

Digital source: Bryston BCD-3 CD player

Electronics: CH Precision I1 integrated amplifier (phonostage, DAC, streamer, linestage, power amplifier), Goldmund Telos 800 stereo power amp

Speaker: Wilson Audio Sasha V, Estelon Forza

Cables and cords (except Ethernet): Empirical Design

Network switch: Reiki Audio

Ethernet cable: Reiki Audio

Equipment Report Argento Flow Ultima Cables and Power Cords

The Argento Extreme Edition

AS SOPHISTICATED AS the Flow Ultima is, it's not Argento's range-topper. That would be the Extreme Edition Series. Whereas the Flow Ultima's single-conductor per polarity construction is a departure for Argento, the EE cables can be thought of as the company's standard multi-conductor design on steroids. For instance, the EE interconnects have over a *hundred* conductors, and the speaker cable contains 1.7 *miles* of wire.

With so much raw silver, it's no wonder that the EE cables weigh a ton and cost four times the price of the Flow Ultima. At that price, they *should* sound better. But do they?

I had the opportunity to find out when I visited Euphoria Audio, a high-end dealer in Dallas. Along with Argento cables, Euphoria carries all kinds of audio goodies, like the latest Soulution electronics and a range of Stenheim speakers. When I was there,



the top system on the floor consisted of said Soulution electronics, a Taiko Olympus music server, the impressive (and new to me) Kroma Atelier Turandot speakers (\$318k), and the Argento EE cables.

Comparing the Extreme Edition with the Flow Ultima was a simple matter of swapping. Did the Extreme Editions sound better? Yes. And clearly so. The Flow Ultima couldn't quite match the EE in terms of top-end openness and the speed of transients. On the other hand, both had the same dynamics and bass authority, and the less expensive cable was every bit as resolved as its more expensive sibling.

I'm not sure how apparent these differences would be without the benefit of a direct A/B comparison. However, based on what I heard, if I had the means, I'd definitely opt for the Extreme Edition cables, despite their costing a small fortune. They're that good.

Equipment Report Argento Flow Ultima Cables and Power Cords

How Did They Do It?

IF YOU'RE LIKE me, with an inquiring—though not always fully astute—mind, you hear something like the Flow Ultima and wonder how Argento managed to break the silver-cable paradigm. To understand that, I spoke with Ulrik Madsen, the founder, CEO, owner, and chief designer of Argento. I haven't studied physics like he has, but I think I got the gist of what he told me.

Be it known that Ulrik is a die-hard silver evangelist. Yet he agrees that most silver cables sound lousy. The reason, he says, is that "most of them do not actually contain much silver." He elaborates, "Silver is expensive, so manufacturers take shortcuts like using alloy conductors or brass terminators to keep costs down." With such cables, he says, you're not really hearing the full potential of silver.

But there are plenty of expensive silver cables out there that don't take such shortcuts. How come they don't sound like the Argentos? The difference, according to Ulrik, is in the way the silver is treated. Usually, in silver cables, the goal is to create one long crystal for each conductor that spans the length of the cable (excluding terminators).

That goal is admirable, says Ulrik, because "it is silver's ability to form long crystal strands that accounts for its sonic superiority over copper." Unfortunately, he warns, "There are inevitable defects in those strands that arise from the normal manufacturing process, and these defects are audible."

To get around this conundrum—you want long strands without the inevitable unwanted crystalline defects—Argento takes a novel approach. They increase the size of the single crystal. This process is called vacuum recrystallization, and it's done by mildly heating the conductor in a vacuum. The result is "our conductors contain as large a crystal as possible after vacuum recrystallization. Any piece of silver that starts out as a single crystal will not be that once the silver is drawn out into a conductor."

Argento also pays unusual attention to the mechanical side of its designs, the goal being to eliminate resonances within the cable. The company conducted an extensive search for a dielectric

material that not only did its job well but also had low resonance. Eventually, Argento hit on the idea of an injected mass. That substance is called VDM, for Vibration Damping Material. Ulrik claims that the use of VDM minimizes mechanical resonances, and, additionally, the VDM material becomes the dielectric once it is injected into the cable.

In another departure from cable norms, Argento avoids all magnetic parts in its power cords. That means no steel or iron, so screws are made of either ceramics or titanium. The conductors and blades are, of course, pure silver.

Argento takes the above steps in all its silver cables, including the Flow Ultima. However, in one key way, the Flow Ultima diverges radically from its brothers: It eschews the company's usual practice of employing multiple conductors per polarity. Instead, the strategy with the Flow Ultima Interconnects is to form a single large conductor per polarity from one end of the cable—including terminators—to the other, with no electrical or mechanical breaks.

This approach, says Ulrik, "allows the possibility to have no standard terminator whatsoever on the cable. The terminator merely holds the end of the conductor in place." In other words, unlike virtually all other cable terminators, the Flow Ultima terminator has no breaks, no connections,

no changes in metal, and no variation in thickness between the conductor and the terminator.

Ulrik claims several benefits to this approach. First, the signal sees only one path, which, as mentioned in the review, permits resolution without edge or loss of musicality. Next, it lowers capacitance. The technique also eliminates variations in impedance that typically arise when different thicknesses of metal are joined. Obviously, a single-conductor cable is also less expensive to build than multi-conductor cables. (The Flow Ultima line is about one-fourth the cost of the higher Extreme Edition line.) Finally, from a musical perspective, Ulrik hears "a level of intimacy and performance that wouldn't otherwise be possible." My listening bears that out. **tas**



銀にこだわるアルジェント・オーディオ 代表モデルFLOWが刷新 先鋭的なコネクターにも注目

Profile: デンマークのハイエンド・ケーブルブランド、アルジェント・オーディオの代表モデル「FLOW」がリファインされ、「FLOW Ultima」に生まれ変わった。長結晶高純度銀線、導体そのものを接点とするコネクター、振動を減衰させる独自の誘電体「VDM」など、最先端のテクノロジーが結集している。

Text by
井上千岳
Chitake Inoue
Photo by 田代法生

**BEST HiFi
Accessory**
2026 SPRING

Argento Audio FLOW Ultima Series

写真左上からRCAインターコネクトケーブル「FLOW Ultima Interconnect Cable」、写真左下 スピーカーケーブル「FLOW Ultima Speaker Cable」、写真右 XLRインターコネクトケーブル「FLOW Ultima Interconnect Cable」

Audio Accessory

導体がそのまま接点となる 画期的なコネクターを開発

アルジェント・オーディオは1991年にスタートしたデンマークのケーブルブランドだ。線材、絶縁材、構造などあらゆる面で完璧を求め、一切の妥協を許さず究極のケーブルを追求してきた。その中核となる代表的な製品が18年前に発表された「FLOW」シリーズだが、今回発表された「FLOW Ultima」はそのリニューアル・バージョンである。

同社の基本コンセプトは高純度（99.997%）の純銀線導体、厳密に長さを揃えた極細の燃線構造、表面の皮膜を取り除く研磨、2回のクライオ処理などにある。絶縁にはポリマーとは違う電氣的絶縁と機械的ダンピング性能を備えた独自の特殊素材VDMを開発し、真空・高圧化でケーブル内に注入される。コネクターは接点を導体と同一の純銀を使用した高圧圧着とし、繊維を織り込んだ特殊コンポジット絶縁と中空ピンを採用している。接触圧を高めるハウジング構造は特許技術だという。

これら基本構造をベースに、本シリーズでは超長結晶純銀線を新たに採用。従来の準備円リボンに

代わる新しい形状に構成した。

さらにこの導体そのまま接点となるコネクター構造を開発。既に特許が出現されているという。このコネクターもリニューアルの大きなポイントとなっている。シールドとしては、新規にカーボンファイバー吸収型シールドを全モデルに搭載した。外来の電磁エネルギーを反射・遮断するだけでなく、これを吸収・減衰させる技術で、高周波やグラウンド由来のノイズに特に効果的だという。また全パーツから鉄分を排除し、高強度セラミック・ジルコニア製ネジやチタン製ネジが全面的に採用されている。なおスピーカーケーブルと電源ケーブルは、極性ごとに独立とした構造である。

阻害要素を一切排除した 純粹そのものの鳴り方

音質は全て統一されているので、ソースからスピーカーまで一度に接続して試聴した。

極めて豊富な情報量を、伸びやかでストレスのない鳴り方で再現した音調である。エネルギー・バランスやレスポンスには全くと言ってはどうか、偏りがなく、信号が正確に平坦に伝わっているのが分かる。そのうえでディテールの

隅の隅まで深い尽くしたようなきめ細かな音が、何の障害物もなしに真つ直ぐ滑らかに流れてくる。その精緻な音には汚れや歪みが一切感じられず、鮮度が驚くほど高い。そこで繰り返される再現はニユーtralで誇張も変質もなく、ソースの信号そのものが正確に音に変換されたという一種理想的な状態になっているのを感じる。

バロックの音数の豊かさをまず特筆しておきたい。古楽器のヴァイオリンやチェロの音が潤いに富んで瑞々しく、その響きが細かな輝きに覆われているのが見える。チェンバロやリユートにも同様の響きがあり、それが音楽を至ってリアルなものにしている。そしてどの楽器にも均等なエネルギーが備わり、新鮮で明快、デリケートな陰影に彩られた再現が続く。

ピアノの出力がまた自然そのものだ。タッチの感触は丸みを帯びて暖かく、低音部の底の方まで滑らかに伸びてあくまで透明に澄んでいる。高域へかけても芯が厚く肉質感も豊かだ。透明なのは濁りがないからで、どんな音型でも和音が潰れない。聴き手との間に何もなく、音が直に聴こえてくるような実在感がある。

オーケストラにも音色の美しさが

が随所に感じられる。汚れない。そしてきめ細かい。目の前に実物があるような生々しい感触が、楽器本来の音色を美しく感じさせるのである。立ち上がりのスピードや音と音の分離の良さ、瞬時のエネルギーの高さなど、あらゆる美質が集積されてこれ以上ないほどの鮮やかでリアルな再現を展開する。阻害要素を一切排除した純粹そのものの鳴り方。もう目の前に何も無い。オーディオの行き着ける極致の世界を垣間見た気がする。



Flow Ultimaシリーズは磁性部品を使用しておらず、ネジはセラミックがチタン製を採用。導体として使用する長結晶銀線がそのまま信号接点として機能する構造を実現したことにより、信号伝達の純度と精度が大幅に高まったという



FLOW Ultimaシリーズの開発に携ったウルリック・ギデセン・マドセン氏。創業者のひとりでもある



FLOW Ultima Speaker Cable

スピーカーケーブル
1.0m→¥1,210,000(税込)、
1.5m→¥1,512,000(税込)、
2.0m→¥1,815,000(税込)

Specifications

- 導体:超長結晶・高純度銀
- コネクターハウジング:ジルコニアセラミック
- ネジ:高強度セラミック製、チタン製(高強度部)
- 取り扱い:(株)ステラ



FLOW Ultima Interconnect Cable

インターコネクトケーブル
※右がRCA、左がXLR
1.0m→¥759,000(税込)、1.5m→¥910,800(税込)、2.0m→¥1,062,600(税込)

Specifications

- 導体:超長結晶・高純度銀
- コネクターハウジング:ジルコニアセラミック
- ネジ:高強度セラミック製、チタン製(高強度部)

Audio Accessory

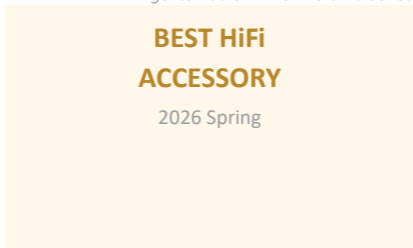
試聴音源【CD】「アルベニス:入江のざわめき スペイン・ピアノ名曲集」細川夏子(ピアノ)【CD】「ヴィヴァルディ:四季、海の嵐 ほか」フェデリコ・グリエルモ(Vn)、新イタリア合奏団【CD】「サン＝サーンス:交響詩集」フランソワ・グザヴィエ・ロト(指揮)、レ・シエクル

Argento Audio — Devoted to Silver

Flagship Model FLOW Renewed — Cutting-Edge Connectors Take the Spotlight

Argento Audio **FLOW Ultima Series**

Text by Chitake Inoue · Photography by Norio Tashiro · Audio Accessory, Spring 2026



PROFILE The flagship FLOW model from the Danish high-end cable specialist Argento Audio has been refined and reborn as FLOW Ultima. The series brings together the brand's most advanced technologies — long-crystal high-purity silver conductors, a new connector in which the conductor itself serves as the contact point, and the proprietary VDM dielectric developed to damp mechanical vibration.

A Groundbreaking Connector — Where the Conductor Itself Becomes the Contact Point

Argento Audio is a Danish cable brand founded in 1991. Pursuing the ultimate cable without compromise, the company has refined every aspect of its products — conductor material, insulation, mechanical structure, and more. The FLOW Ultima Series announced this time is the renewed version of the FLOW Series introduced 18 years ago.

The brand's foundational concept is a high-purity silver conductor of 99.997%. The structure consists of extremely fine stranded wires whose lengths are matched with strict precision, with their surface oxide layer polished away and the assembly treated with two rounds of cryogenic processing. For insulation, Argento has developed its own special material called VDM, which — unlike conventional polymers — offers both electrical insulation and mechanical damping properties. Inside the cable, the interior is sealed under high pressure and vacuum. The connectors employ a high-pressure crimped termination using the same pure silver as the conductor, together with a composite insulation made of a special fibre-woven material and a hollow pin design. The housing structure that raises the contact pressure is patented technology.

New Long-Crystal Silver Conductor and a Reimagined Connector

Building on these foundations, the FLOW Ultima Series newly adopts long-crystal pure silver conductors, with the previous quasi-elliptical ribbon geometry replaced by a new shape. More importantly, the conductor itself now serves directly as the contact point — a new connector structure has been developed for this purpose, and a patent has already been filed. This connector is one of the most significant elements of the renewal.

For shielding, all models now incorporate a newly developed carbon-fibre absorption-type shield. Rather than merely blocking external electromagnetic energy, this technology reflects, absorbs and attenuates it, and is said to be particularly effective against high-frequency noise and ground-borne interference. All iron content has been eliminated from every part; high-strength zirconia ceramic screws and titanium screws are used throughout. Speaker cables and power cables are constructed with an independent structure for each polarity.

A Pure Sound With Every Obstruction Removed

For the listening evaluation, the cables were installed from source through to loudspeakers simultaneously, since the sound quality across the line is unified. The overall character is calm and entirely free of stress. Balance and response have no quirks or bias of any kind — one can plainly hear the signal being transmitted flatly and accurately. Layered on top of this is an extraordinary wealth of detail, extension and energy. It feels as though the source signal is being converted directly into sound in something close to an ideal state.

Neutral, with no exaggeration and no alteration, the reproduction shows no trace of dirt or distortion in its precise, finely drawn sound. Freshness is astonishingly high; fine details flow straight to the ear, with nothing standing in their way. The richness of Baroque writing is delivered as if every last corner had been swept clean. The delicate, finely shaded reproduction continues — fresh, clear, with even energy across every instrument. Period violin and cello have a moist richness, with a fine sparkling resonance wrapped around the body of the tone. Harpsichord and lute carry the same kind of resonance, lending the music an utterly real quality.

The piano, too, is rendered with complete naturalness. The touch has a rounded warmth; the bottom of the bass register extends smoothly while remaining transparent and clear; and even in the upper registers there is a thick core to the sound, with abundant body and substance. The transparency comes from the absence of any muddiness — no matter how dense the chord, nothing collapses. There is no interposed barrier between listener and music: the sound seems to arrive directly, with a sense of real presence.

The orchestra, too, has tonal beauty — as if the real instruments were standing right in front of you, vivid and finely detailed, their true timbres made to shine. Speed of attack, separation between notes, instantaneous energy — every desirable quality is accumulated here, producing a vivid, true-to-life reproduction beyond which there is nothing more to ask. A pure sound, with every obstruction removed. Now there is nothing left standing between you and the music. This feels like a glimpse of the ultimate destination towards which audio reproduction strives.

Captions from the Original Layout

Designer photograph — Ulrik Gydesen Madsen, who led the development of the FLOW Ultima Series and is one of the founders of Argento Audio.

Main cable photograph — From upper left: FLOW Ultima Interconnect Cable (RCA); FLOW Ultima Speaker Cable (lower left); FLOW Ultima Interconnect Cable (XLR, right).

Inset, connector close-up — The FLOW Ultima Series uses no magnetic parts; all screws are ceramic or titanium. Having the long-crystal silver wire used as the conductor function directly as the signal contact point has greatly improved the purity and accuracy of signal transmission.

FLOW Ultima Interconnect Cable (RCA / XLR)

1.0 m	¥759,000 (incl. tax)
1.5 m	¥910,800 (incl. tax)
2.0 m	¥1,062,600 (incl. tax)

FLOW Ultima Speaker Cable

1.0 m	¥1,210,000 (incl. tax)
1.5 m	¥1,512,000 (incl. tax)
2.0 m	¥1,815,000 (incl. tax)

Specifications

- **Conductor:** Long-crystal high-purity silver
- **Connector housing:** Zirconia ceramic
- **Screws:** High-strength ceramic; titanium for high-load sections
- **Japanese distributor:** Stella Inc.

Listening Sources (CDs)

- Albéniz — Iberia, from “Spanish Piano Masterpieces” (Natsuko Hosokawa, piano)
- Vivaldi — The Four Seasons; La Tempesta di Mare and other concertos (Federico Guglielmo, violin; Nuova Accademia degli Italiani)
- Saint-Saëns — Symphonic Poems (François-Xavier Roth, conductor; Les Siècles)

Translated from the original Japanese article in Audio Accessory, Spring 2026, where the FLOW Ultima Series received the publication's “Best HiFi Accessory” award. Original text by Chitake Inoue; photography by Norio Tashiro. Pricing and distributor details refer to the Japanese market.

VINYLPHYLE & DEFINITIVE SOUNDS

NEW HIGH-END VINYL SERIES FROM UNIVERSAL

stereophile

ONLINE AUTHORITY: STEREOPHILE.COM

Ø AUDIO VERDANDE

LUXURY HORNS FROM NORWAY EXCEL WITH AMERICAN ROCK & BLUES

T+A MP 3100 HV
SMOOTH
EASY FLOWING
DELECTABLE
TONE



DEVIALET ASTRA
SLEEK BEAUTY
VERSATILITY
FIDELITY
POWER



EMM LABS PREI
ALLOWS ARTISTS
TO SING DIRECTLY
TO THE SOUL



» JUNE 2026
\$8.99 US \$10.99 CANADA



» BAIRD TALKS TO DON DIXON » METTLER TALKS TO DEREK TRUCKS



WE COME SPINNING OUT OF NOTHINGNESS, SCATTERING STARS LIKE DUST.—RUMI

SPIN DOCTOR BY MICHAEL TREI

THIS ISSUE: The Spin Doctor tries fancy silver cables from Argento Audio of Denmark and checks out a new vibration damping device (aka record weight) from Collaro.

Weights and wires

A lot of us are vulnerable to marketing and hype, especially when we are young and impressionable. As a young kid, I was convinced that Sea Monkeys for a dollar from the back of a comic book would bring me a bowlful of happiness, until my Uncle Jim convinced me that not all was what it seemed.

Uncle Jim was my dad's lifelong best friend, the closest thing to an Ernest Hemingway type I ever knew.¹ Jim flew helicopters for the US Navy in Antarctica and had double the flying hours of any other pilot on that continent. He was the pilot during two fatal accidents caused by engine failures in the frigid weather, and he managed to survive both. After the Navy, Jim's idea of a relaxed retirement was to go, with my dad, to the San Fermín festival in Pamplona, Spain, each year for the famous running of the bulls. In 2002, he was gored by a bull but survived that too and returned to his home in Albuquerque to take up a more sedate hobby, hot air ballooning. In 2008, I received an invitation to Jim's 75th birthday party: The invitation was a ski trail map for Taos, New Mexico, with an arrow pointing to a cabin several hundred feet above the end of the ski lift. The words "party here" were written on the map. Apparently, only two guests made it up to the cabin; the three of them skied to the base chalet to join the other guests. Four years later, Jim died when his big heart gave out while he was hiking on New Mexico's tallest mountain, Wheeler Peak. I expect that's how he would have scripted it.

Uncle Jim was a smart guy, and I trusted him implicitly. So as a 10-year-old I took his advice and didn't waste a buck on Sea Monkeys. If only he had been there a few years later when I was trying to put together my first real hi-fi system.

When I arrived for my freshman year at Syracuse University in 1980, there were two requirements for dorm life: a good supply of weed and a kick-ass stereo. I was a budding audiophile and had never partaken in the former, so getting a stereo together was priority number one. My first roommate was a crew jock called Stu, and he brought some of the parts we needed, but not all. His turntable was a classic Dual 1019 handed down from his parents, and he had a surprisingly good-sounding pair of homemade speakers that had been built by his brother.

What we still needed were the bits that go between the turntable and the speakers—that is, an amplifier with a phono pre-amp. I had brought my boombox, an Aiwa TPR-920, which I still had from my last year at boarding school in England. It had a built-in phono preamp and loudspeaker output jacks, so I figured we should be able to cobble it all together to make a working system, albeit an unconventional one.

To connect Stu's homemade speakers to the Aiwa, we would need some speaker cables. Being an audiophile, I knew that cables would affect the sound quality and that good cables were important. Back in

What I learned from this experience is the importance of perspective and balance in system building.

England, the budget cable of choice was something called QED 79 strand, but that didn't seem to be available in the States, so I settled on something I'd seen advertised in the pages of *Audio* magazine, from a new company called Monster Cable.

In Syracuse, the local stockist was a store called Gordon Electronics on Erie Boulevard East. On a map it looked pretty close to my dorm, so I figured I would walk there. Having grown up mostly in England, I didn't understand that a single street in a US city can stretch for miles. Gordon's address was actually a good three miles from my dorm. Still, I persevered, walking along a busy road that clearly was not designed for pedestrian traffic, until I reached the store and procured my Monster Cables. Back at the dorm, I somehow managed to find a way to connect the big fat cables to the Aiwa's 3.5mm mini jack speaker outputs and got it all to work, convinced that the big Monster Cables would be an important part of the equation. Stu, however, soon grew tired of this assembled mess, and after his next visit home, he returned with another hand-me-down from his parents, a Sansui AU-217 integrated amp. This clearly blew the Aiwa's puny 3.7Wpc amp out of

the water, despite my only being able to connect it using lamp cord for some forgotten reason.

What I learned from this experience is the importance of perspective and balance in system building. No single component change is going to make the imaging holographic, the bass thunderous, and the midrange rich and creamy. What you really need is a thousand of those little changes, so they all add up to achieve those goals. Better cables definitely can make a difference in your sound, but it's critical to get the fundamentals right first. It makes little sense to spend an ungodly sum on cables if budget pressure forces you to compromise on the basic components.

After that early Monster Cable boom box experience, I became a bit ambivalent about the make-or-break nature of the cables in a system, but then one day my friend Jeff called and asked me to come over and help him decide between three AC power cables. Really? What's more, he wanted to compare them powering his phono pre-amp. To be honest, I was worried whether I would be able to hear any repeatable differences in a quick A/B/C test. Normally, I like to embed anything I'm auditioning into my system for a few days or weeks, and only then switch back to my regular setup so I can focus on the differences. Surprisingly, not only was it pretty easy to hear clear and repeatable differences between the power cables, I even disagreed with Jeff at first about which one was the best but eventually got him to agree with me. Score one for my powers of persuasion.

For most of the last 35 years, I have mostly used cables from Cardas Audio in my system. I find they match well with the equipment I use and offer excellent value at various price levels. I got to know George Cardas and his family back in the late 1980s while working at Sound by Singer, and we became one of Cardas's first dealers. More recently, I upgraded many of my 30-year-old Cardas cables to more current versions, resulting in a clear uptick in performance. These days Cardas Audio remains a family business, with George's youngest daughter Angela at the helm.

¹ You can read about Uncle Jim at wikipedia.org/wiki/James_F_Brandau.

SPIN DOCTOR

It takes bravery to review audio cables, especially if they cost more than some Amazon Basics interconnects or a roll of 16-gauge lamp cord purchased from the local Home Depot. Any suggestion that something more ambitious might actually sound better will be met with slings and arrows from the “you couldn’t tell them apart from coat hangers” crowd, many of whom seem convinced that loop resistance is the only characteristic that matters.

If you want a simple test that anyone can try to show that there’s more to cable performance than simple loop resistance, try my scratch test. Just turn up the volume of your phono input with no record playing, then tap the tonearm cable with a pen, or scratch it with your fingernail. In most setups, you will clearly hear the noise through your speakers or headphones. That experiment shows the importance of designing (and using) a cable that minimizes microphonics. For a deeper understanding of why cables *really do* sound different, I usually point people toward the papers written by Dr. Malcolm Hawksford. Professor Hawksford is a man whose deep knowledge of cable theory goes magnitudes beyond my own simplistic high school physics understanding. For a primer, see the article in *Stereophile*.²

Part of the problem is that the cost of top-quality cables seems to increase at a rate much faster than inflation. I remember in the mid-1980s when Monster Cable introduced their Interlink Reference A interconnects. Everyone was aghast at the stratospheric price of \$80 for a 1m pair. Fast-forward a decade to when I reviewed the Hovland tonearm cable for Art Dudley’s *Listener* magazine; even I was balking at the \$800 price tag.

Three decades later comes the Argento Audio Flow Ultima phono cable. Again we must add a zero to the price tag.

The Argento Audio Flow Ultima

Founded in Denmark in 1991, Argento built its reputation on bespoke silver-wire cables that use wire configurations and connectors of their own design. I received two cables from Argento’s most affordable line of silver wire, Flow Ultima. The cables themselves use ultrapure six-nines long-crystal (as in, extruded single-crystal) silver, with a carbon fiber absorptive shield. To minimize microphonics, they inject something uncreatively called VDM (Vibration Damping Material) at high pressure into the cable itself. The connectors are made from a hard polymer called PEEK, preferred for its mechanical and electrical

SPIN DOCTOR



and once I stopped complaining, I realized that the Flow Ultimas were extracting more from my system than I have ever heard.

If you can swing them, go for it, though I don’t advise connecting them to an Aiwa boom box.

The Collaro Audio Triscription record weight

In the nearly three years since I last wrote about record weights and clamps in Spin Doctor #4,³ I have noticed several new devices that take a less heavy-handed approach to record stabilization. The goal with these devices is to tamp down microvibrations rather than slamming them (and the record) flat with brute force.

A few weeks back, I got a distressed-sounding call from a regular customer named John, for whom I had recently set up a new Technics SL-1200G turntable with a Hana Umami Blue cartridge. This is an excellent combination, and everything was sounding great when I finished dialing it in. When he called, he told me that it was suddenly sounding bright and unfocused, so I headed over to check out what could possibly be wrong.

It turned out that after I left, he had acquired a heavy record weight and was using it to hold his records down. I prefer to use the SL-1200 with no weight. The thick rubber mat that’s standard with Technics turntables is excellent; even makers of other, more exotic turntables like the Dr. Feickert Volare and the Primary Control Kinea have chosen the Technics mat for its

fine performance. One quirk is that it has a deeper-than-usual recessed label area to account for the slightly thicker vinyl in that part of a record.

What was happening with John’s 1200G is, the heavy weight was pushing the label area down into the recess, which in turn was causing the playing area to get pushed up, with a visible gap between it and the rubber mat. With no mat to support the record and damp vibrations, it was resonating in the free air. When the heavy weight was removed, the brightness disappeared, and all was clear and detailed again. What John really needs is a more carefully considered weight that works using damping technology rather than sheer brute force.

In that Spin Doctor #4 piece mentioned above, I checked out Collaro’s Precision Cloth Turntable Mat, which was designed to appeal to fickle Linn LP12 enthusiasts. Since then, Collaro has introduced a thicker version of their cloth mat, called the Tempest, that’s optimized for rigid turntables like idlers and direct drives. They also introduced two versions of a record weight called the Triscription. While Collaro still uses the word “weight” to describe the Triscription, at 325gm (11.46oz) it has less than half the heft of the Acoustic Signature Load-S (715gm) or the Ultra Carbon TC-40 (985gm), which I reviewed previously. For smaller, lighter turntables, like the Rega

Planars, and suspended turntables like Linn LP12s, Collaro also offers a 145gm Triscription Lite. These two weights join other vibration-damping “weights” already marketed, including the Tangerine Audio Evenstar, StackAudio Serene, Black Ravioli Record Ground, and Origin Live Gravity Two, as the preferred approach for those types of turntable.

I received the standard Triscription weight, which contacts the record label through three stainless steel balls near the perimeter of its flat underside. The balls are compliantly mounted, supported by three red sleeves filled with unspecified damping material. These transfer the vibrations from the record via the three balls and dump it into a hidden weight supported by the three red towers. Collaro says the technology is derived from a system developed in the 1990s to isolate spinning computer hard drives in a hovering helicopter during measurement flights. While I hope your turntable doesn’t vibrate as much as a hovering helicopter, we have also learned that even the tiniest unwanted vibrations can dramatically affect turntable performance.

I didn’t have an idler-drive turntable set up and ready to go, so I used the Triscription with my trusty Brinkmann La Grange, a heavy German belt-drive turntable with a glass-topped 35lb platter. Normally this

Tonally, the Flow Ultimas are essentially neutral, with not a hint of brightness and clear, powerful bass.

properties. The contacts are also pure silver, connected to the wire using a pressure fit: no solder.

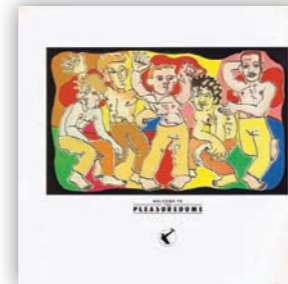
I received a 2m pair of the RCA to RCA Flow Ultima phono cables to go from my Brinkmann La Grange turntable and 10.5 tonearm to the CH Precision P1 phono preamp, and a 2m Flow Ultima power cable to use with the P1. Argento representative Ralph Sorrentino warned me that these cables take a long time to break in, so I hooked them up in my system when I wasn’t auditioning anything and used them for casual listening two months before sitting down to do focused listening.

Despite being Argento’s lowest-cost silver cables, the Flow Ultima Phono RCA to RCA costs an eye-popping \$8850 for a 1m pair, and the 2m power cable is \$6850. That puts them in the luxury-goods category for sure. They were packaged to suit, in zippered, fragrant, ultrasoft leather cases any Hermès owner would find familiar. In contrast to many cables I have used, the Flow Ultimas are flexible and won’t force

you to move your rack out so there’s enough clearance to run them.

There’s a cliché that silver cables tend to sound bright, but I learned long ago, when I was distributing Audio Note/Kondo, that with their silver cables at least, it isn’t necessarily true. Like those AN silver cables, the broken-in Flow Ultimas have a relaxed, nonmechanical quality that delivers natural and organic sound. What was especially impressive is how they reveal astonishing levels of detail while still maintaining that relaxed quality. Loud and noisy recordings, like the title track from Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s *Welcome to the Pleasuredome* (Island Records ZTT 7 90232-1-H), took on an open and clear quality I wasn’t used to, allowing me to enjoy the music more with less teeth-gritting at the compressed sound. The usual tinge of glare was now replaced by detail and resolution.

To dig deeper into the Flow Ultima’s res-



olution capabilities, I put on “Ladies of the Calabash” from Jim Brock’s album *Tropic Affair* (Reference Recordings RR-31). This smooth-jazz groove has plenty of Latin percussion, played by Brock himself, and captured perfectly by Reference Recordings engineer Keith Johnson. With the Flow Ultimas hooked up, I was able to get a better sense of space and the dimensionality and timbre of each instrument. Tonally, the Flow Ultimas are essentially neutral, with not a hint of brightness and clear, powerful bass.

As my dad liked to say when presented with something expensive, “I’ve bought cars for less.” Indeed, many of the 25+ vintage Mercedes cars I’ve bought over the last 30 years cost less than a pair of Flow Ultimas. But you can say that about pretty much anything,

² See stereophile.com/content/essex-echo-1995-electrical-signal-propagation-cable-theory.

³ See stereophile.com/content/spin-doctor-4-platter-mats-clamps-weights-timerette.

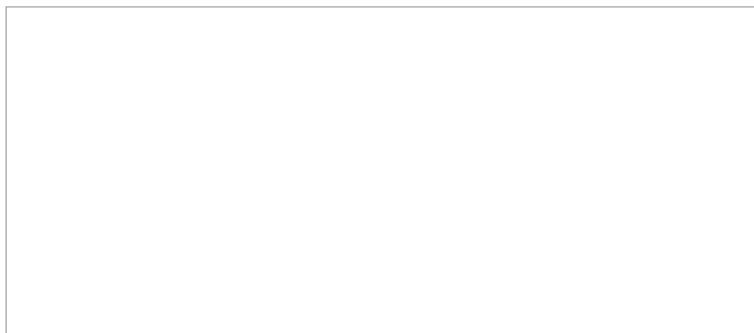
Low-level details become easier to hear, so things like reverb tails and the leading edge of piano and bass notes become more sharply defined and clearer.



perfection, further...

Flow
ULTIMA

To contact your exclusive Argento Audio distributor :



WWW.ARGENTOAUDIO.COM