

GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

BY HERBERT REICHERT

THIS ISSUE: Power cables from AudioQuest & Triode Wire Labs.

Power Cords & Puzzlements

Before I spin this 23rd edition of “Gramophone Dreams,” I must ask: How many of you are using zip-cord as your speaker cables? RadioShack interconnects? Those black universal 18/3 power cords that come standard with virtually every audio amplifier?

AudioQuest Storm Tornado/ High-Current power cord

A few months after I wrote about AudioQuest’s Niagara 1000 power-line conditioner (\$1000),¹ my friend Sphere asked if I’d ever then *removed* the Niagara from my system, listened, and still thought it improved the sound.

I had not. So next morning I removed the Niagara and plugged everything into two plastic power strips from Home Depot. Instantly, the sound became darker, thicker, fuzzier. Also warmer, more relaxed, and—maybe—more enjoyable. Low-level hash returned, but so did a greater ease of musical flow. The tones of voices and instruments affected my feelings more. I liked this naturalness enough that I didn’t reinstate the Niagara.

One day, John Atkinson came by, noticed that I wasn’t using the Niagara, and asked why.

“Right now, I like my music better without it.” When he left, he took the Niagara with him.

A month later, I acquired a single Triode Wire Labs Digital-American Series power cord (\$499/up to 5’), which I installed between my DAC and one of the plastic power strips. The difference seemed subtle but positive, so I left it in. After a while, I wondered: If the Triode cord helped the sound of my DAC even when plugged into a \$799 plastic power strip, what might it do when plugged into AudioQuest’s \$1000 Niagara?

I wrote to AudioQuest’s CEO, Bill Low, and told him that JA had stolen my Niagara. A few weeks later, a new one arrived, along with a second box containing two extremely stiff, three-conductor (braided), Storm Tornado/High-Current power cords. They cost \$949.95 for a 1m cord. *Groan*. But the Storm Tornadoes came packed in a hard, pro-audio-style carrying case the perfect size for carrying a dozen

or so LPs. Repurposing is even better than recycling.

With power cords and conditioners, it’s reasonable to expect clearer, less fuzzy, less noisy sound. Likewise, it’s reasonable to expect “blacker” backgrounds. But when I plugged AQ’s new, nearly \$1000 power cord into the back of a Pass Laboratories XA25 stereo power amp and that plastic Home Depot strip, what I heard was far more than less fuzz and “blacker” backgrounds.

I immediately noticed a change in the fundamental shape and tone character of the music coming out of my speakers. Instruments and voices seemed bigger, stronger, more three-dimensional. A sleeping dog would have been startled by these differences.

Curious, I streamed from Tidal a series of tracks of various genres, and the next day replaced the \$950 AQ cord with a generic cord. Again the change was obvious. The generic cord reduced the essence (or presence) of performers’ images. Drumbeats and bass lines were less distinct, harder to follow. Dynamics seemed truncated. All precisely the opposite of what the AudioQuest Tornado did.

Next, I wrestled the Pass Labs XA25 and the heinously stiff AQ cord into an awkward-looking relationship with my stock wall socket. The character of the sound again changed, even more than the first time I’d used the Tornado.

The most exciting change caused by plugging the XA25 directly into the wall with the fat AQ cord was that music now sounded more direct, solid, and three-dimensional—more physical, more *there*. This increase in body was not subtle, and it was really impressive.

Conclusion #1

AudioQuest’s Storm Tornado/High-Current power cord could do much of whatever it does even when connected

to a cheap power strip. Plugged directly into the wall, this \$950 cord did *all* of what it does. And what it did was anything but subtle.

I woke up early. The May sun was bright. But when I replaced the Tornado with a \$1 black generic cord, it was like putting on scratched sunglasses and a wool coat on a hot day. I didn’t care. Mississippi Fred McDowell singing “Wished I Was in Heaven Sitting Down,” from The Alan Lomax Collection’s *Southern Journey, Volume 1: Voices from the American South—Blues, Ballads, Hymns, Reels, Shouts, Chanteys and Work Songs* (CD, Rounder 1701), still sounded 100% satisfying. The music was now slightly muffled, but it had a naturalness of tone and temper that seemed true to McDowell’s spirit, voice, and guitar skills. I didn’t need a Tornado to enjoy his music.

Conclusion #2

If you want to get closer to the *sound* stored on your discs and files, its force and body—if you want to “see” farther into those recordings—then you’ll need the AudioQuest Tornado or its equivalent. But if all you want is to *connect with* and *enjoy* those ballads, hymns, and work songs, you’re probably okay without a length of fancy wire.

At this point in my experiments, I remembered that music is beholden to pace and rhythm for its powers of seduction. I listened for extended periods with the Tornado cord connecting my amp directly to the wall, hearing no such negatives as loss of rhythmic mojo or fractures in the music’s internal coherence. Actually, all of music’s core strengths—rhythm, melody, tone—were enhanced.

Greedy for more insight—and more of what I was beginning to perceive as A Good Thing—I connected the Pass Labs XA25 to the AudioQuest Niagara 1000 with one Tornado, and the Niagara to the wall outlet with the other. That’s \$2900 worth of wire and power

¹ See www.stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-15-audioquest-niagara-1000-hifiman-he1000-v2.

conditioning between a \$4000 solid-state amp and a Lutron duplex outlet with verified ground and polarity.

“Sweet Roseanne,” sung and played by the Bright Light Quartet on *Southern Journey, Volume 1*, was perfect for this comparison between the \$799 and \$2900 connections. But before I explain why, I must demand that if you are one o’ them ABX/double-blind-can’t-measure-it-can’t-hear-it cable deniers, please don’t waste your time demanding “proof” of what I’m about to say. Just repeat my own simple experiments.

I ask you to do this because I believe that *anyone* would hear—and probably appreciate—the dramatic increase in presence, density, and musical textures I heard when I replaced the generic cord with the Tornado-Niagara-Tornado combination. The full-tilt AQ combo clarified and strengthened the music in ways I have never before experienced with a change in components. For example, changing from a \$3000 DAC to a \$10,000 DAC would likely not effect as radical a change in the sound as I heard with the Tornado-Niagara-Tornado.

I like to hear microphones, and

clean vibrating air between the mikes and the musicians. Well, that’s exactly what I heard through all of *Southern Journey, Volume 1*. Vocal and instrumental textures were more vibrant and corporeal. I could count the voices in each choir. But there was something strange, something difficult to discern, that made me uncomfortable with what I was experiencing. I loved all those individual voices a lot—they hypnotized me. But now something was missing from these intimate, simply miked recordings made by Alan Lomax in the late 1950s and early ’60s. Beat and boogie were full and present, but, after wrestling with my feelings and watching my mind as I listened to song after song, it hit me: The Tornado-Niagara-Tornado combo sounded too mechanical for my taste. It lacked blood and soul.

I unhooked the Pass Labs XA25 from the Niagara 1000 conditioner and returned to what I’d liked better: the Storm Tornado plugged into the amp and directly into the wall. It was a Goldilocks moment. Well, actually, it was a “Sweet Roseanne” and “Po’ Lazarus” moment. The Bright Light Quartet once again appeared solid as

life in front of me. The Pass XA25, always forceful and transparent, sounded even more so.

In audio playback, presence = essence, and essence = music + truth. But you tell me: How could a few short lengths of wire twisted together so dramatically increase corporeality.

Conclusion #3

AudioQuest’s Storm Tornado/High-Current power cord revealed so much force and dense three-dimensional life in the sound of the Pass Labs XA25 that it would be sad to live without it.

A little foreplay

Sometime in the late 1970s, an engineer named Richard Marsh was bench-testing audio capacitors. He discovered that capacitors of equal value and voltage rating, but made of different materials, could sound different when inserted in the same audio circuit.² I remembered how outraged American audiophiles were. That some were willing to pay more for boutique capacitors claimed to sound better was proof to others that perfectionist hi-fi was nothing but snake oil designed to liberate fools from their money.

I befriended Marsh, and told him to ignore the naysayers and trust his ears. I explained that, for decades, Japanese designers of amplifiers had felt the same way about wires, resistors, even tube sockets. I told him that I thought the differences he heard were likely caused by combinations of electrical, atmospheric, and mechanical phenomena, just as in vacuum tubes. I imagined that alternating audio currents were pulsing electromagnetic shock waves emanating like periodic tremors from magnetic tape heads or phonograph cartridges. These pulsing waves impress themselves on the complete complex impedance of the audio chain. Therefore, I told him, every part of the so-called signal path—resistors, capacitors, transformers, chassis, wires, interconnects, cables—was microscopically vibrating like marimba keys and, in like manner, blurring and coloring the signal with its own resonant character.

Eventually, I began to wonder if AC power cords were no different from all those parts. Imagining that power cords might need to be improved, and keeping in the DIY spirit, I build the heaviest cords I could afford by weaving together three lengths of 8AWG

(0.128") stranded copper wire and attaching them to industrial-grade plugs. I even had to drill out the chassis of my Dynaco amp to accommodate my fatter, *improved* cords.

When I compared my homemade cord to 18/2 zip-cord, the difference in the sound was subtle, but I believed it was real.

Around 1987, I noticed when I put a 500-milliamp (or larger) power transformer in front of a 100mA power supply, my amplifiers' sound became quieter, distinctly more transparent and three-dimensional, with stronger, more articulate bass, and more details exposed. It wasn't long before I realized that the more pure *metal* I put between an amplifier's tube rectifier and the AC breaker panel, the more solid and life-like the amp's sound became.

The Outrage Began

Around 1976, Polk Audio and Fulton Musical Industries were the first to make and sell audio cables intended to sound better than zip-cord and cheap giveaways of an *improved* or specialized nature. I remember how outraged audiophiles were. I remember how every audio magazine, including *Stereophile*,

condemned the whole idea of paying extra for specialty wire.

Through *Audio Amateur* magazine, I'd made friends with Bob Fulton, who sent me a pair of his Fulton Gold speaker cables (\$5/foot). "Tell me what you think, Herb."

I compared the Fulton Golds to generic lamp cord and told him that the difference, while nowhere near as dramatic as with the AudioQuest Storm Tornado described above, was conspicuous. New York City audio dealer Sound by Singer sold Fulton cables with a 30-day return policy. My friend Sphere, who then worked at Singer, said, "No more than 25% of buyers returned the expensive wires."

Triode Wire Labs High Power (HP) Digital American power cord

"High-end audiophile cables at budget friendly prices" reads the slogan on the homepage of Triode Wire Labs' website. At audio shows, I always see Triode Wire's Peter Grzybowski, aka Triode Pete, hanging and showing with my ol' runnin' buddy Gary Dews, of Border Patrol (amplification), and Greg

² See www.reliablecapacitors.com/pickcap.htm.

Roberts, of Volti Audio (horn loudspeakers). Together, the three manufacturers make consistently smooth and delicious sounds that pack a sure punch and generate a Scotch-whisky high.

In the Triode-Border-Volti room at Axpona 2017, in addition to the intoxicating sound, I noticed that Triode Wire Labs cables are unusually pliant, well made, and sensibly priced. This combination of virtues encouraged me to ask for a review set comprising their Spirit interconnect (\$349/m), American Series speaker cables (\$699/6'), and High Power (HP) Digital American power cord (\$499/up to 5'). According to Triode Wire's website, this cord was designed for such power-gulping electronics as power amplifiers, power conditioners and regenerators, and power bars. When it arrived, the appearance of Digital in the model name encouraged me to absentmindedly assume that I should use it only with my DACs—which at first I did.

My eyes (and ears) popped wide open when I exchanged a generic un-supple power cord for the oh-so-supple High Power (HP) Digital American.

Schiit Audio's Yggdrasil DAC (\$2399) always sounded more vigorous and lively than Mytek HiFi's similarly priced Brooklyn DAC+ (\$2195), which tends toward a tighter, pro-studio sound. When I ran the Triode Wire Labs cord between the Yggy and the wall socket, I was surprised to hear even more vigor, more distinctly drawn images, and a lot more physicality. The Yggdrasil's ability to reach into the bitstream and reconstitute a recording dramatically increased.

A few days later, curious, I reinstated the generic cord. Immediately, I felt uncomfortable. After only two CDs, I became impatient. "That's enough."

More often than not, line conditioning and boutique power cords don't just clean up a component's sound—they tighten it. Often, this tightening feels unnatural. With the Triode Wire cord, Schiit's new Yggdrasil Analog 2 DAC (\$550) sounded more transparent and felt more relaxed. I really liked that.

The same thing happened with the Mytek Brooklyn and the Triode Wire cord: The Mytek's sound became simultaneously more solid and relaxed. Its best traits were enhanced.

Conclusion #4

My limited experiments suggest that DACs respond well to premium power cords and line conditioning

(more about this later). I now keep whatever DAC I'm using connected to the AudioQuest Niagara 1000 via the Triode Wire Labs American—High Power (HP) Digital American.

I'm continually vexed and bewildered by cable deniers' unwillingness to do any of what I've described above. What is the argument against just *trying* it? Several retailers offer extended free home trials of cables, so why not stick a Tornado on your amp or a Triode Wire American on your DAC? Then, at the very least, you could say, "Herb, I tried it and didn't hear any difference!" And I would believe you.

My review sample of the HoloAudio Spring "Kitsuné Tuned Edition" Level 3 DAC, which I reviewed in the May 2018 issue,³ didn't come with a power cord. I used the Triode Wire Labs cord plugged directly into the wall and forgot about it. Stereophile's policy is to review products as manufactured and delivered: without tube rolling, modifications, or power conditioning. But I unwittingly reviewed—and strongly praised—the HoloAudio Spring as used with the Triode Wire Labs cord. Yesterday was the first time I'd heard the Spring with a generic power cord. Big frown moment.

The Spring's extraordinary ability to remove digital sound's reflective glass wall { remained intact—the Spring was still the most musically satisfying DAC I've heard in my home. But! In my review, I'd raved about the literalness of its transparency, how many subtle textural and dynamic intricacies it revealed, how much digital artificiality it eliminated, how "un-mechanical" it sounded. When I finally played it with the cheap black cord, I realized how much the Triode Wire Labs cord was supercharging the Spring's inherent virtues. I highly recommend this combination of DAC and power cord.

I was unable to compare Triode Wire Labs' High Power (HP) Digital American cord with AudioQuest's Storm Tornado because the AQ was too short and stiff to connect to the HoloAudio Spring. But I've used the Triode cord with all of my phono stages and preamps, and have consistently noticed subtle increases in punch, clarity, and dynamism.

I did finally try the Triode cord with the Pass Labs XA25. The result was nowhere near as transparent or as powerfully assertive as with the AQ Tornado; in comparison, it sounded a tiny bit flat and unremarkable.

For the moment . . .

I've settled on using whatever DAC I'm listening to with a Triode Wire Labs High Power (HP) Digital American cord plugged into the AudioQuest Niagara 1000 conditioner, this in turn plugged into the wall with a 1m-long AQ Storm Tornado/High-Current cord. And I have definitely settled on plugging whatever power amp I'm using directly into the wall with a 1m-long Storm Tornado.

For the record, I have yet to hear musically satisfying sound from any power amplifier connected to any power conditioner or isolation transformer—I always sense some amount of dynamic repression or current strangulation.

Of course, the elimination of purely electrical contaminations will likely benefit *any* low-level source; but the greater senses of force, power, and mass that I observed with both the AudioQuest and Triode Wire Labs power cords took me by surprise.

I have a strong feeling that the enhancements I'm discovering are not simply the result of electrical filtering, isolating, or impedance matching. There seems to be a lot more happening in that meter-long cord than I've so far imagined.

As a result of these surprising experiences, I've decided to learn more about how audiophile power cords are built, and what sorts of engineering considerations inform their design. I will keep you posted. Meanwhile, I encourage you to duplicate my experiments and see what you discover. Peace and good wires. ■

When Herb Reichert (STLetters@stereophile.com) isn't outside writing in his booth, he's indoors playing records in his bunker in Brooklyn's hip Bedford-Stuyvesant 'hood.

³ See www.stereophile.com/content/holoaudio-spring-kitsun%C3%A9-tuned-edition-level-3-dac-processor.

CONTACTS

AudioQuest

2621 White Road
Irvine, CA 92614
Tel: (949) 585-0111
Web: www.audioquest.com

Triode Wire Labs

PO Box 32
Massapequa Park, NY 11762
Tel: (516) 659-6748
Web: www.triodewirelabs.com