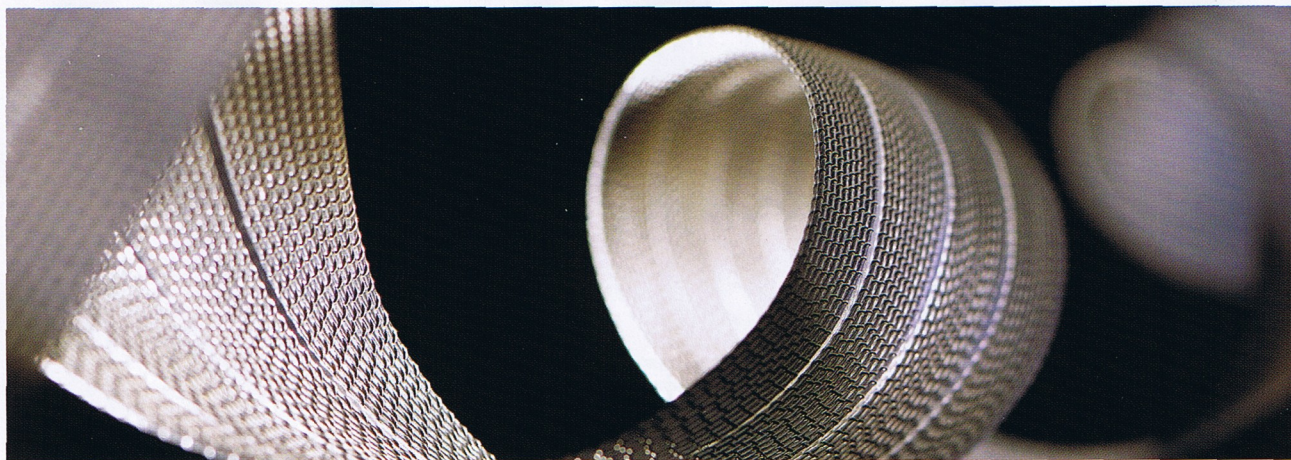


Down to the Wire

Audiophiles explore the connection between stellar sound and high-end audio cables



After carefully selecting state-of-the-art components for your home theater, arranging them like a master florist and meticulously calibrating everything for optimum performance, you remember a small but significant detail: What about the wires?

Once commonly treated as an afterthought, audio and video cables have lately emerged as specialty components. Speaker cables, in particular, have become prestige items, subject to as much debate and envy among audiophiles as speakers or amplifiers.

"It makes sense to treat cables as a component," says Vin Garino, president of cable manufacturer Nordost, whose Valhalla line is regarded by many as the *ne plus ultra* of speaker cables. "All of these inductive and capacitance properties in a cable can change the signal. If you don't maintain the integrity of the signal, what the next component sees is that much less."

Like most high-end manufacturers, Nordost offers several lines of speaker cables. An average home theater might benefit from the company's Blue Heaven line, which costs about \$500 per 6.5 feet of cable. Musicians, audio pros and those very serious about sound, however, will settle for nothing less than the Valhallas, which run \$5,000 for just over 3 feet of cable or \$7,000 for twice as much.

Don't expect to get much in the way of visual zing for your money, though. Aside from gold-plated connector plugs, most high-end speaker cables don't look

much more distinctive than a typical extension cord. What you're paying for is the metal inside. Serious cable makers produce their own copper wiring, employing sophisticated techniques to ensure the cable carries electrical signals with absolute integrity, so none of the audio signal is lost between amplifier and speaker.

While there's a lot of engineering behind cables, audiophiles are divided on how much of a difference cables make. Skeptics such as Peter Aczel, editor of *The Audio Critic*, a consumer publication that evaluates audio components, insists there is no difference in basic electrical performance between costly cables and "a nice pair of straightened-out wire coat hangers."

But the ears know better, says Michael Silver, owner of specialty audio shop Audio High in Mountain View, California. "Most people, even if they aren't real audio purists, can come in and hear a difference between two different sets of cables," he says.

At best, however, cables can only reveal what's already there. Use expensive cables to connect weak speakers to a wimpy amplifier, and you won't hear much difference. "Cables are a hard thing—they're a lot more difficult to choose than some other components," Silver says. "The key is to find someone you trust who will help you put together a balanced system that meets your needs." —David Becker

SOURCES: *The Audio Critic*, theaudiocritic.com; Audio High, (650) 964-4000, audiohigh.com; Nordost, (800) 836-2750, nordost.com