

Cables have gone mainstream. Not that many years ago, when you walked into a big-box store you were hard-pressed to find a decent cable in the place. Now the cheapest HDMI cable you can find in the local big box pushes \$100 – which is crazy, considering that most people use them to hook up mediocre, \$150 DVD players. Where's the value proposition in a cable that costs two-thirds what you paid for the source you're connecting with it?

To make the cut in my house, a cable must offer a threshold of value – measured by how much it enhances my system's performance – commensurate with its cost. For the vast majority of my friends, to whom audio and video quality are far less important than their checkbook balance, I recommend a number of good-quality, inexpensive cables. For the handful who've passed over to our Dark Side, more careful consideration is warranted.

In the past, I mainly recommended speaker cables and interconnects to run between key components. It wasn't until I reviewed the Blue Circle BC606 that I began to place much credence in the ability of power cables to significantly improve a system's sound. After all, electrical power passes through miles of garbage wire before it gets to your house – how much difference can those last few feet of high-tech wire make? It turns out there are ways in which those last few feet can make a big difference.

From the start, what piqued my interest in Wireworld's 5² line of power cables was what seemed to be the scientifically sound reasoning behind their design. Wireworld makes no wild assertions that cables must be bathed in the light from a crystal of kryptonite, or other such nonsense. Instead, they designed their cables' geometry and construction to drive the cables' inductance and capacitance values as high as possible, to create a cable that is also a passive filter. The basic idea is that every 5² cable naturally rejects frequencies above the 60Hz electrical carrier, effectively making it the equivalent of a power conditioner. This may sound strange, but it makes a lot of sense. All cables have properties of inductance, capacitance, and resistance, which are all that's required to create a filter. The idea of tweaking a cable design to generate a filter effect is not only far from crazy, it borders on genius.

The power coming into my house from the electric company is not clean to begin with. By the time it gets to my wall outlets, it's been polluted by enough additional grunge from electrical appliances and fluorescent lights to make Donny Osmond sound like Nirvana. This is why, for years, I've used power conditioners of varying capability. However, a few years ago I moved into a house that backs up to fields of corn and beans. Suddenly, my house and the electric poles behind it were the tallest things for about a mile in every direction. In the last four years, two minor lightning strikes have killed a surge protector and a power conditioner and lightly damaged an amplifier. Out here in the fields, power conditioning has taken a back seat to high-quality – and affordably replaceable – surge protection.

What now pass for power conditioners in my house are inexpensive Monster and Belkin units that were selected more for their surge-suppression abilities and the fact that I was able to get them at low prices. If one of them is zapped in the next electrical storm, I won't lose any sleep over it. In addition to this, Anthem states that my reference AVM 20 preamplifier-processor

should not be plugged into a power conditioner, so it's generally plugged directly into a nonconditioning power strip. In this house, any additional power conditioning that isn't easily subject to electrical damage is very welcome.

Setup

Wireworld sent along a substantial pile of 5² power cords for consideration, as well as one of their Tundra Shielded Power Cord Extender (\$69.95 USD), or power strip. I tried a variety of permutations, trying different components with different cords, and ultimately settled on configurations that placed the more expensive cords on the preamp-processor and amplifiers. At the time the 5²s arrived, I had three NuForce Reference 8.5 monoblocks on hand for review that I'd had to plug into a power strip. I replaced my standard power strip with the Tundra and plugged it into the wall outlet with a Wireworld Silver Electra 5² cord (\$699.95). The processor got a second Silver Electra 5². The left- and right-channel amps were fed power via a pair of standard Electra 5²s (\$359.95). The only other IEC-equipped component in my system at the time was a Toshiba HD-A1 HD DVD player, which I plugged in with a Stratus 5² cord (\$99.95). Later in the review cycle, I replaced the Anthem pre-pro and NuForce amps with an Anthem Statement D2 and Anthem PVA 7 amplifier, both fed power by Silver Electra 5²s. Because the new arrangement freed up a handful of AC cords, I then swapped out the stock cord of my Cayin TA-30 tube amp in the family room with one of the standard Electra 5² cords I'd used on the NuForces. There were a few other devices I'd have liked to try with the Wireworld 5²s, but in some cases was prevented by hardwired and/or proprietary connectors. Most notable among these was the Panasonic PT-AE900 projector, which I think might benefit substantially from a little power conditioning and a better-built cord. It would also have been interesting to see what impact a Stratus 5² might have had on my scaling DVD players, but these all have non-IEC cords for which I had no adapter plugs.

Listening

During the course of this review, I kept listening to "Autumn Perspective," from Vanessa Daou's Zipless [Lotus 1278]. The entire album – song settings of a handful of poems by Erica Jong – is a fine piece of minimalist music. The soundstage of this sparse musical score is wide and deep to begin with, but with any of the Wireworld 5² cords in the system it opened up dramatically, playing against a deeply silent backdrop.

This review might require a parental advisory. The second CD I listened to was Ween's Chocolate and Cheese [Elektra 61639], which carries a Parental Advisory label. You should probably expect that from an album with a track titled "Don't **** Where You Eat." However, that track turned out to be good review fodder for the 5²s, which seemed to help separate the vocal elements into a mesh of distinctly independent voices. The soundstage also opened up, adding a greater sense of air around individual performers.

One of the hot new HD DVDs out right now is Grand Prix, which has transferred to HD incredibly well by any standard, particularly for a film now 40 years old. The racing sequences are still some of the best ever filmed, and are incredibly sharp. If you get motion sickness easily, make sure you sit a good distance back from the screen. For this reissue, the soundtrack has been given the full 5.1-channel Dolby Digital Plus treatment. There's not much in the rear channels beyond a little ambient information, but the front channels are just fine, aided in this instance by the increased openness and transparency imparted by a pile of Wireworld 5²s.

I also watched and listened to the HD DVD of The Phantom of the Opera. At the risk of inciting angry letters from fans of Andrew Lloyd Weber, let me state that I'm not a huge fan of this movie. It's not the worst film I use for evaluating equipment (that honor belongs to Driven), but I find the acting pedestrian and the singing uninspired. For all the attention lavished on sets and costumes, Phantom could and should have been so much better. The only reason I bought this edition was for its decent HD DVD transfer and Dolby TrueHD soundtrack. The good news is that the latter lives up to the TrueHD hype, at least technically. The additional audio resolution provides a noticeable improvement over the original in just about every area, and gives a high-performance audio system more to work with. It was with this soundtrack, more than any other, that the Wireworld 5²s provided the most benefit, sharpening the focus on individual elements in the soundfield while opening up the depth and breadth of the soundstage.

Random thoughts

Being something of a cable skeptic, I've mostly stuck with the stock IEC power cords provided with my various components, and run a power conditioner between the components and the wall outlet. Figuring that the conditioner would take care of the worst of the grunge coming down the AC line, I worried more about surge protection. It stood to reason, at least in my mind, that a few feet of high-quality wire at the end of the chain weren't going to fix the ills the current had gathered from its travel through the several miles of low-grade wire it passes through before it gets to the outlet. The design of the 5² cables threw a wrench into that line of thinking.

The truth is that the difference between the stock cords and any of the Wireworld cords was immediate and obvious. The soundstage opened up, the clarity improved, and the entire fabric of the music was set against a dead-silent backdrop. To be sure, the difference was more pronounced in my acoustically treated and optimized home theater than in the tubed system in my family room, but the theater system was designed from the start to be more revealing.

The hard part about all of this is deciding where something like Wireworld's 5² cords fit in the grand scheme of system upgrades. Because all audio signals travel through both the preamp-processor and amplifier, this seems the logical place to start, and because of that it's where I'd be willing to spend a larger sum of money. One thing to keep in mind is that technological advances are not likely to make your power cords obsolete any time soon; this is one audio investment that should still be viable many years into the future, thus greatly reducing the long-term cost of ownership.

Where the Wireworld 5² cables fit in the upgrade path will of course be highly dependent on your budget and current quality of components. For better-quality amps and preamps, the Electra 5² and Silver Electra 5² seem to make the most sense; lesser components, such as the Toshiba HD-A1, would be most logically served by the Stratus 5². If money is tight, start at the low end of the 5² line and upgrade as your budget allows, shuffling the less expensive cords out to source components.

Conclusion

I've never much advocated spending a lot of money on cables; in too many cases, the return on investment simply doesn't make sense to me. However, there are exceptions to every rule, and Wireworld has provided one in their 5² line of power cables. Starting at just under \$100 for the Stratus 5², this is one long-term audio investment that makes perfect sense.