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audio
SOUND TO THE EXTREME

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Cardas Audio Golden Reference Interconnects and Speaker Cables

Entering the lists by a side door, backward

As cornucopias go, audio's is huge. High-end cables, for example: We always have new and novel designs to contemplate. Out of this *abbondanza*, why pick Cardas Audio to write about? That's easy: I recently reviewed -- then bought -- Aurum Acoustics' Integris CDP, a CD player-preamp. The Integris CDP is a sophisticated product, as is Aurum's fully integrated, indivisible Integris 300B system of active speakers, triamplification, and cables. I was curious to know why Aurum designer Derrick Moss had settled on all Cardas Golden Reference cable for the 300B.



My e-mail exchanges with Moss revealed a no-nonsense sort properly skeptical of audio voodoo, mojo, and fads. Admitting that he hadn't tried *every* audio cable -- who could? -- Moss set out his reasons for having opted for Cardas's Golden Reference. Thus motivated to see whether Cardas GR would apply equally well to a system consisting (apart from the Integris CDP) of radically different components, I asked Cardas for the loan of GR speaker cables (\$2106 USD per 8' pair), interconnects (\$917 per 1m pair), and a power cord (\$500, 2m). My contact graciously obliged before I mentioned any possibility of a review. It was only after having lived with the Golden References for a while that I felt impelled to write about these top-of-the-line Cardas products, and so put the suggestion to my editor. And here we are.

Or almost. I'll also be covering Aurum Acoustics' version of the Golden Reference power cord (\$720, 2m), which Cardas produces to Derrick Moss's specs. The difference is in the wall plug: The Integris version uses the expensive Wattgate 330i, the stock Cardas GR cord a less costly Cooper plug. Moss is big for symmetry's synergy: He favors the Wattgate 381 wall receptacle, and so, the Wattgate plug.

A brief moment of amateur techno

I can't say whether Wattgate receptacles would make an audible difference -- I use four dedicated FIM 880 duplex receptacles for my audio system. Like the Wattgate, the FIM 880 is a high-quality audiophile item, but even a specimen as extreme as oneself is willing to go only so far: An audiophile of my acquaintance urged me to implant a silver-plated copper spike in my cellar floor, to which I would ground my dedicated outlets. The spike would need to be kept wet. Best Beloved waters the houseplants daily. The spike would become one more such duty. Merely a speculation. Wives can have their spouses committed.

Remaining with symmetry, the GR power cord's IEC fitting is a Swiss-made Schurter, matching the Schurter IEC inlet in the Integris CDP. Derrick Moss: "A key feature of the standard Cardas GR power cord is the embedded filter at the cable-IEC junction. This filter complements the AC filter built into the CDP just perfectly. Each does separate things that together deliver a comprehensive treatment ideal for a digital source component." His power amp's GR cord omits the filter: "In a higher-current and/or

dynamic-current application (most power amps are both), the filter is a bit of a compromise. We need only one filtered cord in the system."

Moss doesn't recommend external line conditioning with his CDP and its GR power cord, and I've acted on the suggestion. Tweakwise, it's a bare-bones system -- probably the best way to go for a cable review. Apart from dedicated outlets, I use no line treatments. The electronics occupy isolation platforms: for the Mark Levinson No.33H amps on the floor, a pair of Silent Running Audio Ohio Class; for the Integris atop a low cabinet, three DH Ceramic Cones and DH Squares and a concrete tile. GutWire NotePads keep the speaker cables off the carpet. (I file this latter tweak under What Harm Can It Do?)

Packed with Cardas's GR cables is a leaflet cautioning that, even after a lengthy break-in period, the cables will need a few minutes' recovery time if they've been handled and will also require a short period of play-time to sound their best. It's been my experience that my sound system also requires some moments of play-time to come up to snuff. The following observations take into account the GR cables' needs -- the speaker cables did sound briefly congested after being disturbed. During cable swaps, my Nordost Valkyrjas remained in top form from the get-go. Why the difference in settling time I can't say, and I don't offer these observations in any way critically. In normal use, we don't move our cables about.

The Cardas website provides information about the Golden Reference line's technology that I'd be wasting space repeating here. How many of these claims and descriptions amend the laws of the physical universe I cannot say. I hear what I hear.

Why they pay us the big bucks

I'll first describe my impressions of Cardas' Golden Reference line with the Integris version of the GR power cord, followed by a comparison with the unmodified GR power cord. I'll also compare GR balanced interconnects and speaker cables with Nordost's Valhalla interconnects and Valkyrja speaker cables. The Valkyrjas, when I reviewed them, seemed close to indistinguishable from that company's superb Valhalla speaker cable.

From what I've read and heard, Cardas cables have a rep: nice, but too forgiving -- sweet, a little tubby, a touch less authoritative than Audiophilia's crème de la crème. I'll start with speed -- the sense I had, when all was going optimally well, that, from whisper-scratchy to migraine-loud, I was hearing a recording's transients conveyed to the max. In terms of a good attack, the Nordost Valhalla stands at the head of the line. Indeed -- though before making any direct comparisons -- I got no sense of second-best with Golden Reference: even the most evanescent transients came through. However, when considered as separate qualities (again, before comparing), the GR's speed and dynamic subtlety deferred to something rather more significant.

One of the great percussion CDs, *Labyrinth* [hatART 105], features music composed between 1938 and 1942 by the late Lou Harrison. The Maelström Percussion Ensemble, under the direction of Jan Williams, performs the disc's eight works. The venue was the Slee Concert Hall, in Buffalo, New York, and the admirable Peter Pfister taped, mixed, and mastered.

In terms of music, performance, and production, *Labyrinth* is a spectacularly fine release that, by itself, would suffice to demonstrate the Golden Reference's qualities. Harrison was a West-Coast bohemian who looked to Asia for inspiration. In a highly original fashion, his percussion works of this period reflect the music of Japan, Indonesia, Korea, and India. Maelström's textures and timbres are deliciously various, the music's rhythms gut-satisfying. Wired with Golden Reference, the system conveyed deep bass and scintillating highs better than, or certainly as well as, anything I've ever used. What set the Golden References apart was my sense of absolute, spot-on coherence. Rather than great highs or



great bass -- or great whatever -- I focused on the overall lifelike presentation of the instruments. It was as if the GRs' strengths took command of the midrange and fanned out from there.

The Swiss label hatART has issued a number of great CDs of works by Guillermo Gregorio, an Argentinean performer-composer residing in Chicago. The music, understated and endlessly involving while rarely breaking a sweat, straddles the line between sedate takes on free-style jazz and art music's avant-garde. I played again a recent release, *Coplanar* [New World 80639-2], comprising eight works by Gregorio for small combos: female voice, tuba, cello; oboe, clarinet, tuba, cello; piano and strings; clarinets, bass clarinet, strings, piano; etc. The instrumentalists often engage in extended excursions into unconventional sound production, for the most part *pianissimo*. Some of the sounds on this disc are about as clamorous as falling feathers, and listening in the early morning, when my quiet little town is quieter still, is the best time to ferret out such sonic distinctions. When I did, again there was that seamless quality I can describe only as mouth-watering, along with a keen sense of the venue, a Chicago recording studio. The midrange magic was there. The GRs were neutral, uncolored, and truthful.

Tom Varner's *The Window Up Above: American Songs 1770-1998* [New World 80552-2] consists of the free-jazz-based French hornist's quirky arrangements of popular songs and spirituals, a couple of them with a vocalist, Thirsty Dave Hansen. My GR-cabled system nicely revealed subtle gradations of studio reverb, as well as a venue rather different from that of the minimalist Gregorio disc. An earlier Varner-led release, *Long Night Big Day* [New World 80410-2], for alto and tenor sax, French horn, double bass, and drums, was recorded live to analog two-track by Steve Gaboury in 1990. In a word, astonishing. Verisimilitude at this level of intensity needs to be taken in moderation lest one be spoiled rotten. The Cardas Golden References excelled at everything I threw at them.

Listening hard with knitted brow . . .

Ultimately, I settled on Guillermo Gregorio's *Coplanar* for my comparisons, including of the power cords, for which this fine recording's wide range of harmonic complexities, timbres, and dynamics, is ideal. There's never so much going on at one time that critical listening becomes a challenge, and I get a real kick out of the music's imaginative takes on allusionless abstraction.

A comparison between the Cardas Golden Reference and Nordost Valhalla interconnects (\$3300 per 1m pair), both balanced, bore out my early impressions. The same held true for the Cardas GR and Nordost Valkyrja speaker cables (\$2800 per 1m pair). Purely as a listener -- never mind the technologies' broader or finer points -- I heard both design concepts as consistent, ICs and speaker cables alike. The Nordost cables lived up to their enviable reputation of detail and resolution, and the Cardas GR cables did not come in second. Different, yes, and thoroughly endearing -- and just as good.

Mixing it up

I remained with the Gregorio CD. The first track, "Coplanar 1 + 2," for guitar, ARP synthesizer, reeds, accordion, viola, cello, and bass, is long: 16:24, with lots of quiet, "experimental" moments. The cable combinations were: GR ICs and Valkyrja speaker, Valhalla ICs and Valkyrja speaker, GR ICs and GR speaker, and Valhalla ICs and GR speaker.

In terms of my involvement -- the sense of "thereness" -- the all-Nordost pairing (Valhalla ICs and Valkyrja speaker) was the least engaging. The midrange sounded a tad bleached. Conversely -- I was surprised -- the GR ICs with the Valkyrja speaker cables conveyed a sound I can describe only as ravishing: exquisitely detailed yet lifelike and full. This was a pairing I could live with forever. Its opposite, Valhalla ICs and GR speaker, didn't work as well. The all-GR combination -- no surprise here -- was also something I could happily live with: gossamer detail sharing space with upticks in "body" and warmth.

Change of pace: With the GR ICs as the constant and alternating between Valkyrja and GR speaker cables, I concentrated on Vol.1, disc 1 of John Eliot Gardiner's continuing cycle of J.S. Bach's cantatas [Monteverdi Productions SDG 101]. With male and female vocalists and instrumental accompaniment, purely instrumental ensembles, and choruses, the Valkyrja seemed to emphasize the music's filigree edges. The Valkyrja is a marvelous speaker cable, beautifully detailed yet sweet. However, after settling in, the GR speaker cable's ways with midrange presence, a firm low end, and an exquisite top end made

it, for me, the easy choice.

The clincher came the following day. Just for the pleasure of it, I took a break from household chores and hunkered down with disc 2 of the Gardiner Bach set. In hi-fi's early days, most speaker systems stood against walls or occupied shelves. During long moments of near-epiphany, I reminded myself that audiophiles have long preferred freestanding speakers for their superior imaging. My sense of the music's dimensionality is at least as important as any other quality I attempt to cultivate in a good two-channel sound system.

How do cables figure in this? With the GR, the image achieved a likeness to life I've not heard bettered. The vocalists and instrumentalists occupied the kind of three-dimensional space we perceive with the naked eye. That's what I mean by *near-epiphany* (actual epiphanies being held in reserve for flat-out religious experiences): the sort of ear-popping, eye-opening event that makes our crazy hobby worth the sweat, blood, and money we shed in its realization.

Those power cords . . .

I removed the Aurum Acoustics version of the GR power cord and replaced it with Cardas's less expensive, stock GR. I noticed a difference and was curious to know what Derrick Moss heard. He came back with an interesting response. With a conventional receptacle, he doesn't hear much difference between his GR and the unmodified cord. However, he does hear his Wattgate version as better detailed when it's plugged into a Wattgate receptacle -- as you'd expect of someone whose design philosophy hinges on system integration and a belief in symmetry equaling synergy. I heard pretty much the same difference with the Wattgate-terminated GR plugged into my FIM 880 receptacle: an uptick in detail. The unmodified power cord's midrange seemed more prominent. I present these perceptions absent a clear understanding of why or how different power cords can produce different sonic results. Cardas might consider offering the Wattgate mod as an option. When you're spending this kind of money, the difference in price isn't all that prohibitive.

Afterword: an acquaintance confirms

Because the Cardas Golden References struck me as ideal matches for my Wilson Audio Specialties WATT/Puppy 7 speakers, I e-mailed an acquaintance at Wilson with my impressions. Seems he hadn't experienced Cardas cables for several years and was pleasantly surprised, during a visit to an audio showroom, by how good Wilson's Alexandria X-2 speaker system sounded with the GRs the dealer had been using. One is never so secure in one's impressions that a little corroboration fails to help. I *love* these cables!

...Mike Silverton
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Cardas Audio Golden Reference Interconnects and Speaker Cables

Prices: Interconnect: \$917 USD per meter pair. Speaker cable: \$2106 per 8' pair. Power cord: \$500 per 2m cord (\$720 for Aurum Acoustics version).

Warranty: Lifetime.

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