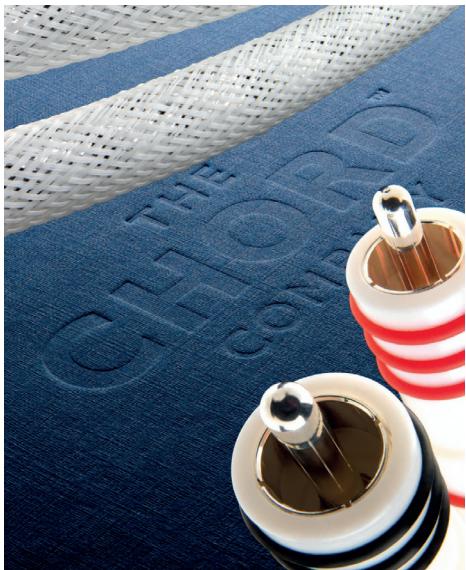


EQUIPMENT REVIEW

The Chord Company ChordMusic Cables

by Chris Thomas



As anybody who has put together a music system of separates will tell you, cabling is not just important, it's vital. Cables are the arteries of the system, carrying anything from potentially deadly voltages to the smallest and most fragile, complex signals, between the components. They do a lot of work, far more than is often thought and need to be right. Speak to any cable designer and they will tell you just how many issues there are to overcome and a look at the market will show that there are a huge number of designs available claiming to have come up with the answers. The fact that all cables sound different lets you know that, like audio reproduction generally, there is no absolute truth, only variations on a hopefully musical theme. Each designer will have their own way

of meeting the challenges which is presumably why there are so many flavours of sound available.

Cables are an antenna and they receive (and broadcast) all sorts of stuff at all sorts of frequencies, yet some of the very best are unshielded. But one thing all cable designers I have spoken to agree on is the importance of the dielectric. That's the material that covers the wire itself, the first layer of insulation. Its performance is critical given the way that a signal moves through the metal with the high frequencies apparently travelling along the outside surface. Zero material would be the best and least intrusive dielectric but, unless you are dealing with very short lengths within a component, an air dielectric where nothing comes into contact with the conductors between the end connectors is an impractical ideal. But, for a cable designer it is obviously of crucial importance and they are forever looking at new options to minimise or even eliminate the endemic side effects from this critical interface completely while maintaining the physical integrity of the design.

The Chord Company has been designing and manufacturing cables for over 30 years now and along the way it has gained a considerable reputation for quality and value. Chord's high-end models have been getting better and better, but it was a chance conversation that led to the creation of ChordMusic. When the company heard about what later became known as Taylor, it was by pure chance. But, after much negotiation, samples were sourced, and Chord's Nigel Finn eventually sat to listen to a cable shrouded in the new material. He realised, within very little time, that this was a game-changer. The objective then became to design a whole new suite of cables utilising Taylor's remarkable and desirable properties. The result is ChordMusic, a range of high-end audio cables that must be seen as their most accomplished and musically complete offerings to date. It is also the most expensive and musically certainly the most expansive. Ask The Chord Company what is so special about Taylor as a dielectric and they will certainly quote the fact that it is phase stable at room temperatures. I never really understood what this terminology meant but, after a long chat with the company's Alan Gibb I began to understand that this directly relates to the speed and sense of timing which was one of the first things they noted from the early listening sessions. I can see why. Listen to music on ChordMusic and you are immediately struck with the ease and clarity of musical movement which is only enhanced by its added sense of resolution and exceptionally clean focus.

Taylor is apparently one of those materials widely used by the military under another name and has never been incorporated into a design for linking audio electronics before. It goes without saying that it is expensive. It was



decided to enhance the construction of their Tuned ARAY designs even further and call it Super ARAY for the analogue and digital cables. This tuning system is different for each type of cable. Building a ChordMusic cable, in very general terms, begins with a slow extrusion of very high purity copper. Each strand must be as close to cylindrical as possible and is immediately micro-polished before being silver plated in an inert gas atmosphere to avoid any chance of oxidisation. Then, after further polishing, the Taylon is directly applied. Three further layers of noise reducing materials are then introduced along each cable's entire length. The first one is designed to reduce levels of mechanical noise, the second to accurately constrain the noise reducing layer and then a metal braiding that is visible beneath the white covering and sparkles in sunlight.

ChordMusic speaker cable is a thick, rather inflexible design that will go round a corner but only in gentle curves. The terminations are supplied to order and as you might imagine, some of these have been specially designed for use with the new flagship range. RCA (now PTFE-bodied rather than acrylic), XLR and even DIN connectors are available and the streaming cables come fitted with high-speed RJ45 connectors in custom lengths to suit requirements. The speaker cable can be ordered with silver-plated (rather than gold-plated) 4mm plugs, made to The Chord Company specifications or spade connectors,

again silver-plated. The digital interconnects are made in both coaxial digital and AES EBU versions and even custom terminations can be accommodated like RCA to XLR for use with Devialet amplifiers. The message is that these are at the very top of The Chord Company catalogue and are custom-constructed cables in every sense of those terms.

I was supplied with enough ChordMusic to fit the whole of my home system. This currently comprises a dCS Vivaldi and DAC, a Vitus SIA-025 integrated and a pair of Wilson Audio Duette II speakers although I also use a pair of the superb Radio D1.1 models too. This is quite a cable-hungry system, especially when mains leads are taken into consideration. A USB cable is under development, but wasn't available in time for the review. ▶



It just got tighter as the sound grew more honed and precise.

Yes, the cabling is tonally rich, very smooth, and notably powerful. Actually you might well need to adjust the position of your speakers if you try it because it asks a lot of them, particularly in the bass. But, if you like to listen to music with a sense of narrative or like the story that a piece can tell then I might suggest that ChordMusic is something you should seriously consider. For me there's daytime listening and then there is still-of-the-night involvement when I find myself wanting to listen to different, perhaps more challenging music. These were the times when I could really appreciate the ChordMusic's fuller potential. It is extremely articulate and the closer you look and listen the more relevance this has. The way a violin, in a great concerto allows the player to speak through the orchestral backdrop can make the hairs on your neck rise. You understand that the soloist is great because of the communication you feel as they use their technique with feeling. Emotionally it should be powerful. It should ►

► As I see it, a review like this can really only ever present a limited snapshot of any cable's wider capabilities. It's one unique system installation, in one room. I decided to dive in and change all the supplied cabling in a single go. I am not a particularly firm advocate of the system cabling needing to come from the same manufacturer as I doubt this is the way that most installations are arrived at, but it's not a bad idea. I had been assured that all the supplied cables had undergone a degree of running-in, but chose to delay the review for several weeks to give them a chance to settle and myself the opportunity to get used to what I anticipated was going to be a considerable change in the musical experience.

Initially ChordMusic was certainly quite different from the cables I had been using. Tonally and speed-wise the music was presented differently enough that I could almost believe I was listening to alternative mixes of material on my current playlist. The ChordMusic was immediately bigger, the music more ambient and reverberant, and had a slightly darker overall tonality. But it was powerful, very delicate when it needed to be, and carried impressive weight and strength of delivery. Those early experiences and thoughts never really changed fundamentally as the weeks passed and the system seemed to get quicker and more dynamic. The balance grew leaner, which was good and the music gained agility. The slightly dark tonality lifted, or was it that I grew more used to it? The bandwidth seemed to grow and grow as the system became more eloquent at the frequency extremes, but the large-scale view remained.

“ChordMusic has a natural quality of vocal texture and instrumental timbre that can be beguiling.”

► speak to you and involve you and if your system does this then it's a great system. Not for the hi-fi factor, but because it is telling a story and for the time you are listening to it, you are surely a part of it. Every good story deserves a listener. That kind of system is priceless and it isn't arrived at easily, especially now that audio is moving into a new world of hi-res musical file storage and often into a kind of hyper-realistic sound that can easily lean toward the detached and sterile.

I can't let the opportunity to mention its considerable ability with backing vocals slip either. I have been on a vocal group binge for a while now. On all types of bands from all era ChordMusic is superb with vocal generally, but the way it deals with multi-vocals and their interaction is among the best I have heard. It's the shape and rock-solid stability of the harmonies that is so fascinating to me and the way they weave themselves in and around the music, supporting the main vocal, and adding richness and harmonic polish. ChordMusic has a natural quality of vocal texture and instrumental timbre that can be beguiling. There is no noticeable compression or sense that the music is being squeezed out of the speakers. In short, it is remarkably coherent top to bottom with a notable sense of ease and natural tonality too.

It goes to the heart of home audio. It's not that important to me that I listen to systems with the highest resolution or the most striking soundstage, but it is vital that I feel some sort of connection with it and get some sort of emotional kick-back. Often, the right choice of a cable upgrade can enlighten those things that are personally subjective, along with the kind of musical involvement that might have once seemed just over the horizon and out of reach. I have heard million dollar systems that were impressive in their ability to move air and bristled with sensational detailing but were so emotionally sterile that they just never got me involved. The personal ingredients for a successful system are elusive because they go beyond the superficial and into our lives, our history and what makes us the way we are. There are so many ways in which we enjoy music and it's the meaningfulness of the experience that has kept me interested and coming back for more over all these years. A review can offer a personal view and opinion, but in reality its very limited compared to personal experience.

Your musical journey and tastes are different to mine, but if you're reading this, we probably share a love and even a need for music in our lives and a good audio system is a part of that. ChordMusic is very, very expensive, but so are all high-end cables. Some are priced in the stratosphere. As the means becomes available to improve your musical adventure and the potential for an upgrade looms, I would suggest you try and get a serious listen to the musical intrigue that ChordMusic cabling offers. Personally, I think they are extremely interesting and have raised The Chord Company's profile at this end of the market considerably. +



PRICES AND CONTACTS

Type: Audio cables

Prices

Analogue: 2xRCA–2xRCA 1m £3,800

RCA-Din 1m £3,800

Din-Din 1m £3,500

2xXLR - 2xXLR 1m £5,500

Digital: Digital RCA - RCA (or BNC) 1m £3,500

Digital Streaming 1m £3,800

Digital XLR - XLR (AES/EBU) 1m £3,800

Speaker: Speaker cable per metre

(terminated) £1,100

1.5m pair £3,300

5m pair £11,000

Manufacturer: The Chord Company

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