

ably more transparent and, especially, more dynamic and detailed. Through a leaner-sounding, all-solid-state phono preamp, I have no doubt that, say, AP's reissue of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, with Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony (LP, RCA Living Stereo LSC-2201/Analogue Productions AAPC 2201), might sound monochromatic and dry, but through the Phono 3 there was enough color and warmth to produce tonal depth and rich instrumental harmonics. Yet my original pressing, too, was compelling, and not swamped by excess tube warmth. In the Reference Phono 3, ARC has achieved a fine balance of tonalities and textures.

A well-known recording engineer

who's a friend of mine called a few weeks into the review. He told me that he'd sent his solid-state phono preamp back to the manufacturer—it had developed a hum—and that someone had loaned him a Phono 3. "Am I crazy?" he said. "This thing gets the instrumental harmonic structure exactly right. So believable. My [xxxxx] can't do that!"

My friend concluded what I had about the Phono 3: No, it didn't produce the dynamic slam or resolution of detail or transient speed of his solid-state model, which costs more than twice as much as the ARC. Nor did it approach in those areas the sound of my reference phono combo of Ypsilon MC-26L step-up transformer (\$6200) and VPS-100 Silver phono preamp

(\$52,000), which together cost more than *four times* the price of the Phono 3. But what the Phono 3 did right, it *nailed* in ways that neither of us have heard from any other phono preamp (though the tubed Ypsilon gets close).

Both of us enjoyed the hell out of the Reference Phono 3, for its convenience of operation and especially for its harmonically convincing tonal balance, its believably silky and delicate way with instrumental attacks, and its overall transparency. It checked all of the usual audiophile items, including imaging and soundstaging. And, like the Reference 6, the Phono 3 worked with every type of music. If \$14,000 is within your budget, the Reference Phono 3 is a must-listen.

TARA LABS AIR EVOLUTION BALANCED INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES WITH EVO GROUND STATION

To properly review Audio Research's Reference 6 and Reference Phono 3, I felt both should be run in their balanced modes. But I don't have a full set of balanced cables of any brand, and I have only a single long run (preamp to power amp) of original balanced Zero Gold interconnect.

My reference single-ended interconnect is TARA Labs' Zero Evolution (\$18,000/meter). To my ears, it's the most open, spacious, well-focused, transparent, nonbright, nonwarm, nongrainy, nonsounding interconnect I've heard in my system—and, over the years, I've wired my system with *many* brands of wire. I asked TARA if they'd supply me with their less expensive Air Evolution balanced interconnect (\$1895/m, \$250 each additional meter), with optional EVO Ground Station (\$2495), a passive noise filtering system supplied in an aluminum-alloy enclosure.

Like the Zero Evolution, the Air Evolution has rectangular-core conductors of solid, 99.999999%-pure copper for its positive and negative legs. Each leg is sheathed in a Teflon tube, designed and made with predetermined spacing between conductor and sheath, creating an air dielectric. TARA Labs claims that this construction produces a superlow capacitance of 2.5pF per foot, to result in ultrawide high-frequency bandwidth.

Also as in the Zero Evolution, TARA floats the Air Evolution's shield, instead of connecting it direct



Like the Zero Evolution, the Air Evolution has rectangular-core conductors.

to ground at one end. At the source end of the cable, mini-banana plugs are used to connect the shield to the EVO Ground Station, which is itself connected, via another cable, to ground (there are various grounding options). The Ground Station shunts any noise present in the cable's shield due to electromagnetic and radio-frequency interference (EMI and RFI), to ground. It's easy to demonstrate this system's effectiveness by disconnecting the cable from the Ground Station.

When I compared the balanced Air Evolution with the far more expensive single-ended Zero Evolution, the Air didn't sound quite as resolved on top

as the Zero—not quite as open, transparent, or see-to-forever. But it was close. I heard the same small difference when I compared balanced with balanced—*ie*, that long run from preamp to power amp. But once I'd acclimated to the far less costly Air Evolutions in that long run, I forgot what I was missing.

All of my positive impressions of ARC's Reference 6 and Reference Phono 3 were heard with the Air Evo-

lution in circuit. TARA Labs has been my favorite brand of interconnects for more than 10 years—ever since I first heard that single run between phono preamp and amp. ■

Michael Fremer (MFremer@enthusiast-network.com) is a self-described analog freak.

CONTACTS

Audio Research Corporation

3900 Annapolis Lane N.
Plymouth, MN 55447-5447
Tel: (763) 577-9700
Fax: (763) 577-0323
Web: www.audioresearch.com

TARA Labs, Inc.

716 Rossanley Drive
Medford, OR 97501
Tel: (541) 488-6465
Fax: (541) 245-9119
Web: www.taralabs.com