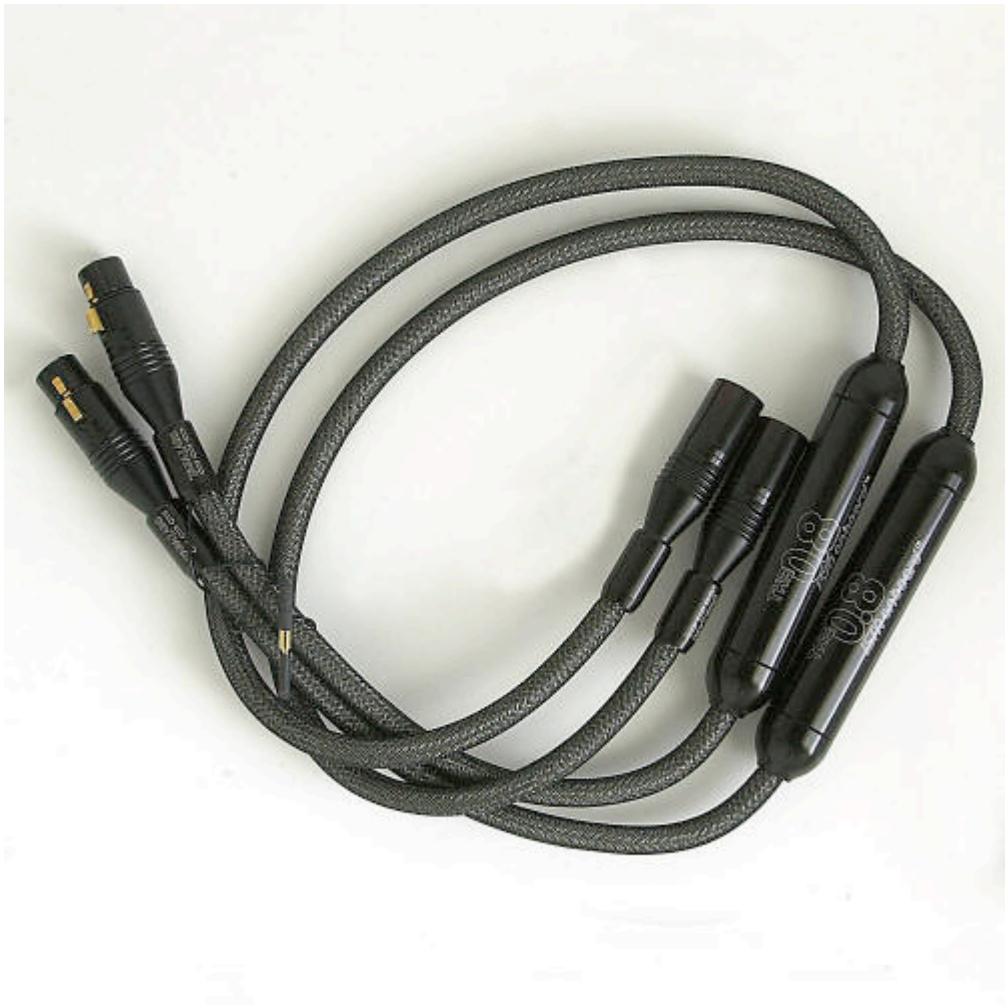
TARA Labs

the 0.8 Signal Wires with ISM OnBoard

as reviewed by Marshall Nack



Portrait of an Extrovert

MARSHALL NACK'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS
Kharma CRM 3.2 and Kharma Ce-Sb-10 sub woofer.

ELECTRONICS
von Gaylord Audio (formerly Legend Audio Design) LAD-L2 Signature line preamplifier, Kharma MP150 mono-blocks, and ART Audio Jota SET amp.

SOURCES
Linn LP12, LINGO, EKOS tonearm, ARKIV II cartridge, AHT Non-Signature phono preamp modified by Walker Audio, Extremephono Limited Edition and Graham IC-30 arm cables. CEC TL1X transport, von Gaylord Audio 2 chassis DAC.

CABLES
Interconnects by Kubala-Sosna, Kondo, Kharma Enigma. Digital Cables by Kubala-Sosna, and Kondo. Speaker wire by Kubala-Sosna, and Harmonix. Power Cords by Kubala-Sosna, Harmonix, Golden Sound, and TARA Labs.

ACCESSORIES
TAOC Rack and TITE-35S component footers, Golden Sound Intelligent Chip and Magic Rings, Walker Audio Tuning Discs and Valid Points for LP turntable, Harmonix RFA-78i Room Tuning Discs, RFS-66ZX Tuning Feet, RF-900, Acoustic System Resonators, Argent Room Lenses, Echo Buster & Sonex acoustic panels, TARA Labs PM/2 and IDAT power conditioners, and Ensemble Mega PowerPoint outlet strips. ERaudio Space Harmonizer component platforms.

In the world of fashion models, they say one can never be too thin. In the realm of high-end audio, it seems one can never get enough body mass. Some audiophiles like their images taut; others have a preference for a big, *zoftig* shape with a little bit of chub and shimmy. I'm sure someone, somewhere, has a taste for outright flaccidity, but this extreme I've yet to encounter. The super-model thin presentation is occasionally encountered, but less and less these days. (In the past, I've even been the proprietor of such. In my case, it was due to the single-minded pursuit of refinement. I've seen it also result from the blind quest for detail and imaging, to the detriment of everything else.) These profiles come and go out of style seemingly on a multi-year cycle. Right now the buzz from the grapevine tells me we're moving away from a lean period of resolution-Resolution-RESOLUTION, and towards more flesh and tone. Nowadays I shun the etched outline of an emaciated, cutout string section with all heads accounted for.

Mind you, all of this has little to do with reality. Lord knows you won't find anything analogous to audiophile imaging or fulsome body in Carnegie Hall. But as audiophiles, we must have our 3-D soundstaging and pinpoint imaging. We want to perceive our objects of affection as solid, tangible bodies of decent size, something you can point to and grab hold of, so to speak. Their exaggerated presence in our living room helps to develop the illusion we crave.

Cables have profiles, too

The 0.8 signal wires from TARA Labs image with an almost perfectly cylindrical form.

Up and down the frequency spectrum, they are uncommonly consistent in their energy distribution and in the shape frequencies assume. Equal allotments of flesh are doled out, playing favorites only when it comes to the mid-bass, which becomes outsized by strong signals down there. This is a cable that goes to the gym—nothing is fat. So right away I can safely say if you're the one who digs a *zoftig* mass or has a yen for the anorexic, these are not for you. In this regard, the 0.8 comes closer than most to the fabled linearity of the measurement/objectivist-oriented school. There's much to recommend in this even-handed profile. But I'm getting ahead of myself. First things first: let's talk about their treble.

Whether accomplished through the space-age Ceralex noise absorption compound contained within the cables' ISM OnBoard module, the locking ground pins which creates a common, floating ground, or by some other means, the 0.8 treble has just enough visibility—I mean audibility—and extension to be satisfying, and no more. The treble integrates completely and appears no different than any other frequency in terms of fleshiness, texture, its surface on the soundstage, its tonal quality. (My *faux pas* in confusing these two senses was intentional. It never ceases to amaze me how the intense, purely auditory stimulation from good two-channel stereo is sufficient to trigger involuntary eye tracking movements, to trick the mind into thinking *there's something lurking out there*, just left of center, midway back, and the origin of the sound is large (or small), and has such and such a shape.)

Moving on to the midrange, it is present, otherwise there'd be a suckout, but there's not much else to remark upon, nothing that calls attention to itself. (This sounds rather like the depiction of the treble, no?) And that's the idea—you *shouldn't* notice individual frequencies.

It is the 0.8's bass that calls attention to itself. While it shares all of the qualities of the other bands, it is present in prodigious quantity. You will find it tight, rounded, fulsome, and noticeable, tending more to the plummy and smooth side, rather than

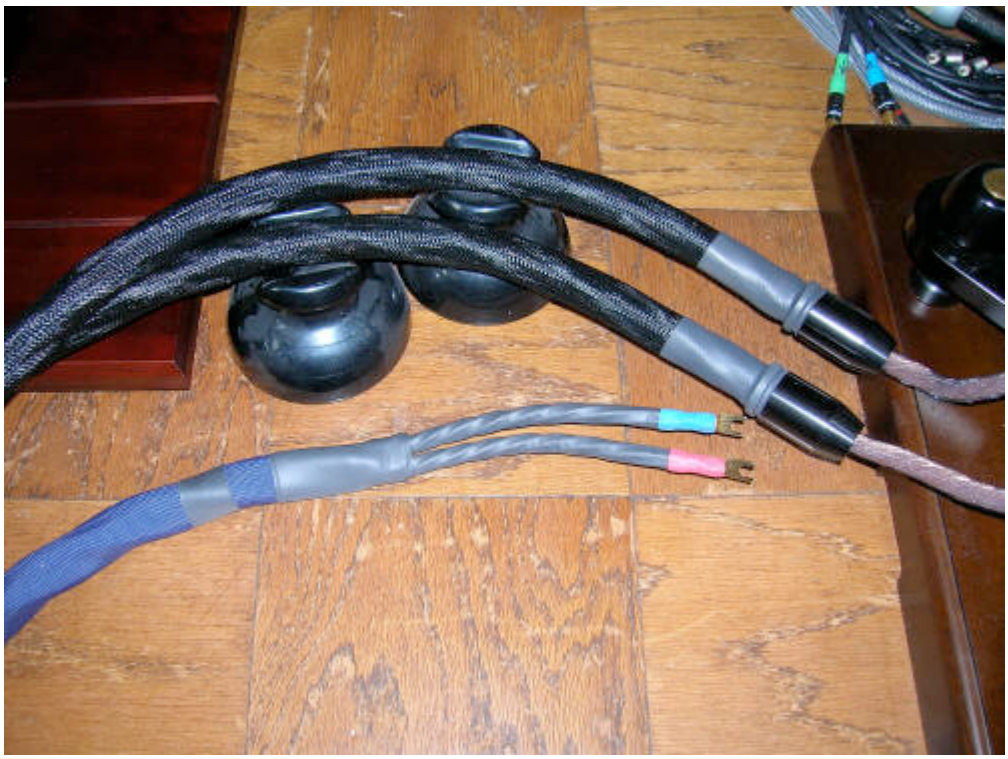
the textured and faceted. For an outsized low-end like this there's no indication of the timing issues often encountered. Wires with this profile tend to start late and end late, putting a drag anchor on the beat and slowing things down. In addition to affecting PRAT, usually these cables' low-end is what you hear last, and this imparts a heaviness, or ponderous aspect. A cable with a coherent finish avoids the drag anchor. The 0.8 carries carries its low-end well: led by the bass, it has outstanding drive and forward momentum. Thinking about its energy distribution graphically, it is the reverse of your typical high-end cable: the top images just like the midrange, which is like the bass, except in heavy passages, when there's more down below. This is a moderately warmish, full-bodied cable, with a rounded, smooth and soft surface that is more egalitarian in its treatment of frequency bands than most.

the Secret Noise Reduction Ingredient: Ceralex

It was obvious there was some form of noise reduction going on. The 0.8 series interconnect and digital cable utilize a newfangled, proprietary noise absorption material developed by TARA Labs called Ceralex. Ceralex is a tuned, bandwidth controlled and absorption limited form of ceramic/metallic oxide—it absorbs noise and dissipates RF/EMI. It is sintered like clay, and looks like clay, and shaped into sleeves. These are fitted within the ISM OnBoard modules. In principle, Ceralex is similar to the popular ferrite cores that we clamp onto power cords. In practice, ferrite is nasty and crude—the sledgehammer approach—affecting a wide frequency range, even messing with the higher, audible, part of the spectrum. And no two ferrite cores absorb identically. Ceralex stays far outside the audible band and is carefully tuned for specific usages.

Products that advertise noise reduction often have unwanted side effects, performing a form of sonic highway robbery. They rob Peter, giving you less low-level detail, less texture and less bloom, to pay Paul, removing glare and brittleness and artifacts. Their effects are largely subtractive. Was the 0.8 guilty of this?

It seemed like the same level of information was coming through. The 0.8 is as good a detail sniffer as any of my refs—if anything, better. But there was less texture, the lack most evident in the soft-edge of transients. Coherency was excellent: from silence, there was instantly sound, and it arrives *en mass*, without lagging frequencies and without the sliding dynamic ramp-up of some cables. But the texture that should have been present in the leading edge was covered over by an overall smoothness. Consequently, it had a blunt edge and some loss of nuance. The sustain part of the note followed suit, and gave no inkling of the little "sound-pixels" texture I sometimes hear with selected gear, and always in real life. I felt the decay to be quite true to the source—sometimes it was noticeable, sometimes not, depending on the program. Note that the smoothness was not partial to one band or another, and was applied equally across frequency bandwidth. There was a payoff to this, though: The 0.8 will never, ever sound brittle or edgy. (Keep in mind this criticism is relative to the best performance I've heard in other Class A cables.)



Body & Bloom: the Kubala-Sosna Emotion and The 0.8

There is a difference between body and bloom. My reference Kubala-Sosna Emotion cable (which doesn't incorporate noise reduction technology) has bloom. The K-S has more activity, more things to hear, in a harmonic aura surrounding the fundamental note, especially in the lower mids down through upper bass. You will unmistakably hear a piano's resonant, wooden cavity, or the vibrating air in a violin's hollow body. These complex overtones are put on display for your aural enjoyment.

TARA Labs' The 0.8 plays down the separate display of harmonics. Imagine a large sound image on the 0.8s stage. If you inspect it from edge to center-of-note to opposite edge, you will find it amazingly homogeneous—a firm chunk of sound. The image is a concentrated solid of thoroughly integrated overtones and fundamental: it's not comprised of variegated tonal parts, with the edge different from the center. Mind you, the harmonics are all there, just wrapped together and blended. The bloom, or aura, around instruments evaporates. Comparatively, the piano's case resonances are lacking or, put another way, you don't notice the case resonances. With the K-S, you do. So, how do you like your coffee?

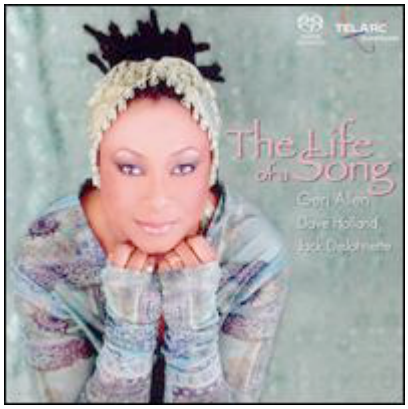
an Active Soundstage

What else is missing is noise. If all other things are kept constant, when you lower the noise floor you get a big boost in signal to noise ratio. And notice that there is a degree of spotlighting going on, nothing too bothersome, but it's worth mentioning here. Roll these ingredients together—along with the cables' excellent dynamics—and you get wham-bam, pop-out imaging and animation, which gives the impression of an active stage, of more layering, more 3-D. (I'm not so sure if it's really any more: when I hone in on this aspect, it actually seems a bit flatter than my refs.) But it definitely commands your attention. Depth is about equal to my references—the width

is what you notice. The entire lateral span is occupied by borderless, large images, which pop onto the stage from out of nowhere.

The Ceralex does a very good job, but curiously, its compromises were more noticeable with digital source. When I flip over to analog the smoothness was hardly bothersome.

A lot of the surface noise from LPs disappears—the analog noise floor becomes almost as low as with CD. This is something new. (I have to give equal credit here to the TARA IDAT line conditioner. With every other power conditioner I've tried I could not escape occasional AC surges coming through the highly sensitive phono stage. The IDAT is the first that completely cancels out the very loud pops caused by appliances turning on.) Can it be that the texture is missing from digital because it is interpreted as noise by the Ceralex, and hence swallowed up?



Let's put on Geri Allen's rendition of Lush Life (*The Life of a Song*, Telarc CD-83598, with Dave Holland, bass and Jack DeJohnette, drums). My, oh my, the piano has morphed incredibly from where we started out. There's no doubt it's a Steinway Grand, a huge, resonating physical object: judging from its dimension on the soundstage, it's probably the largest the Astoria, Queens factory ever produced.

When the drums and bass come in, there's lots of separation and space between them, even though they are also large (the spotlighting accounts for this). I'm noticing some quiet notes from the double bass I hadn't heard before, and I'm struck by its power (although it still has more flesh and punch than texture—there's that smooth surface again). It has thrust and prominence, and is a little warmer, rounder, but far from loose. The high-hat presents a potpourri of events, made evident by heightened micro-dynamics and tonal variations. Following crisp transients, there are wonderful waves of resonance rippling off the ride cymbal. All of these have more flesh on them. These characteristics—warmth, fleshiness and the integration of the treble—help keep the cable from sounding analytic.

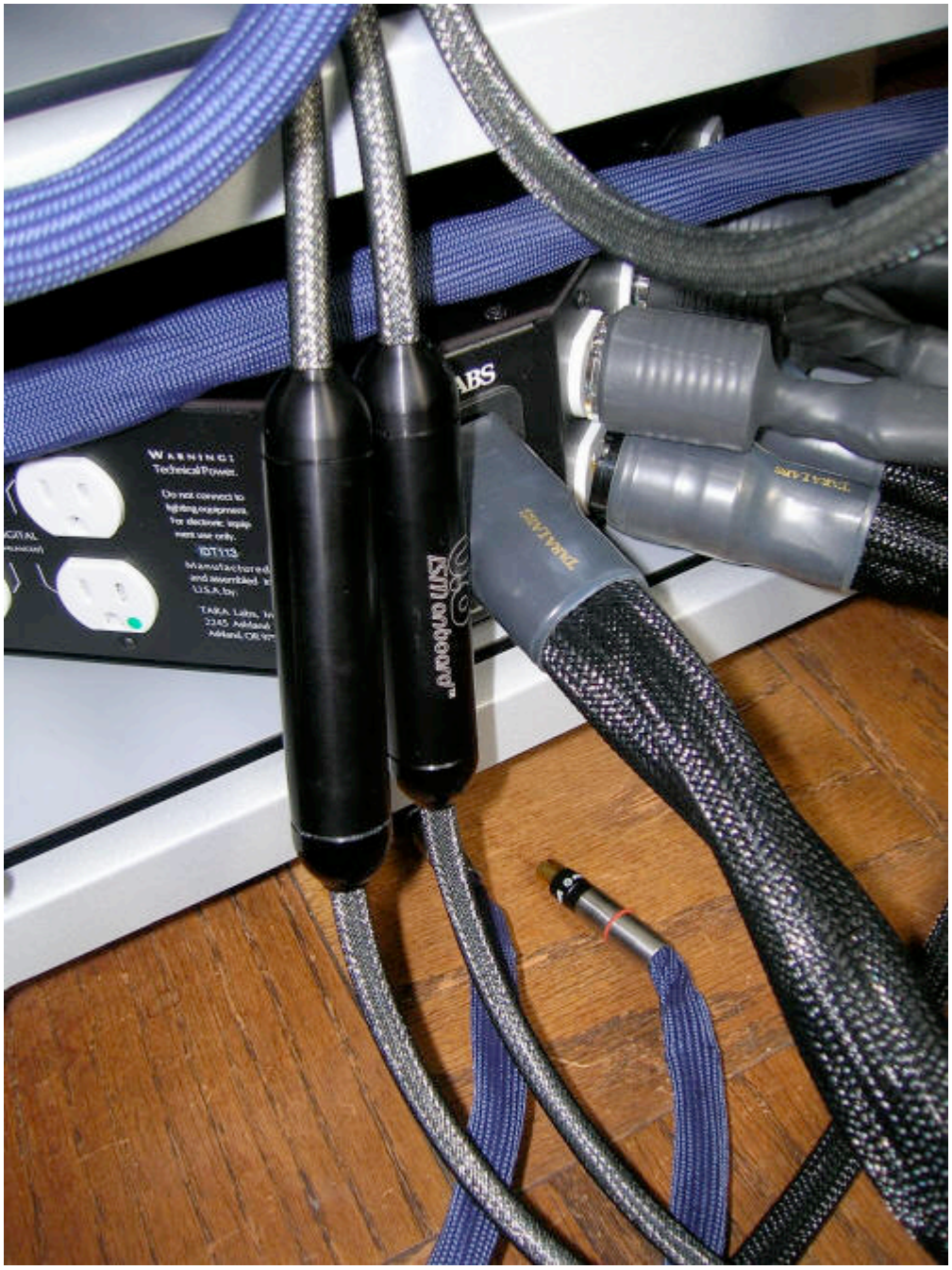
You get the impression it has lots of control, it's placing sounds around the stage, and managing them. The overflowing basket of audiophile goodies in the 0.8 are targeted squarely at mainstream audiophile tastes and are just what John Q. Public is looking for. You'll laugh, but this had me concerned at first. With the 0.8, my sound began to resemble "the Big Systems" at audiophile shows. I wasn't sure I liked this, at first.

the Sum is Greater than the Parts

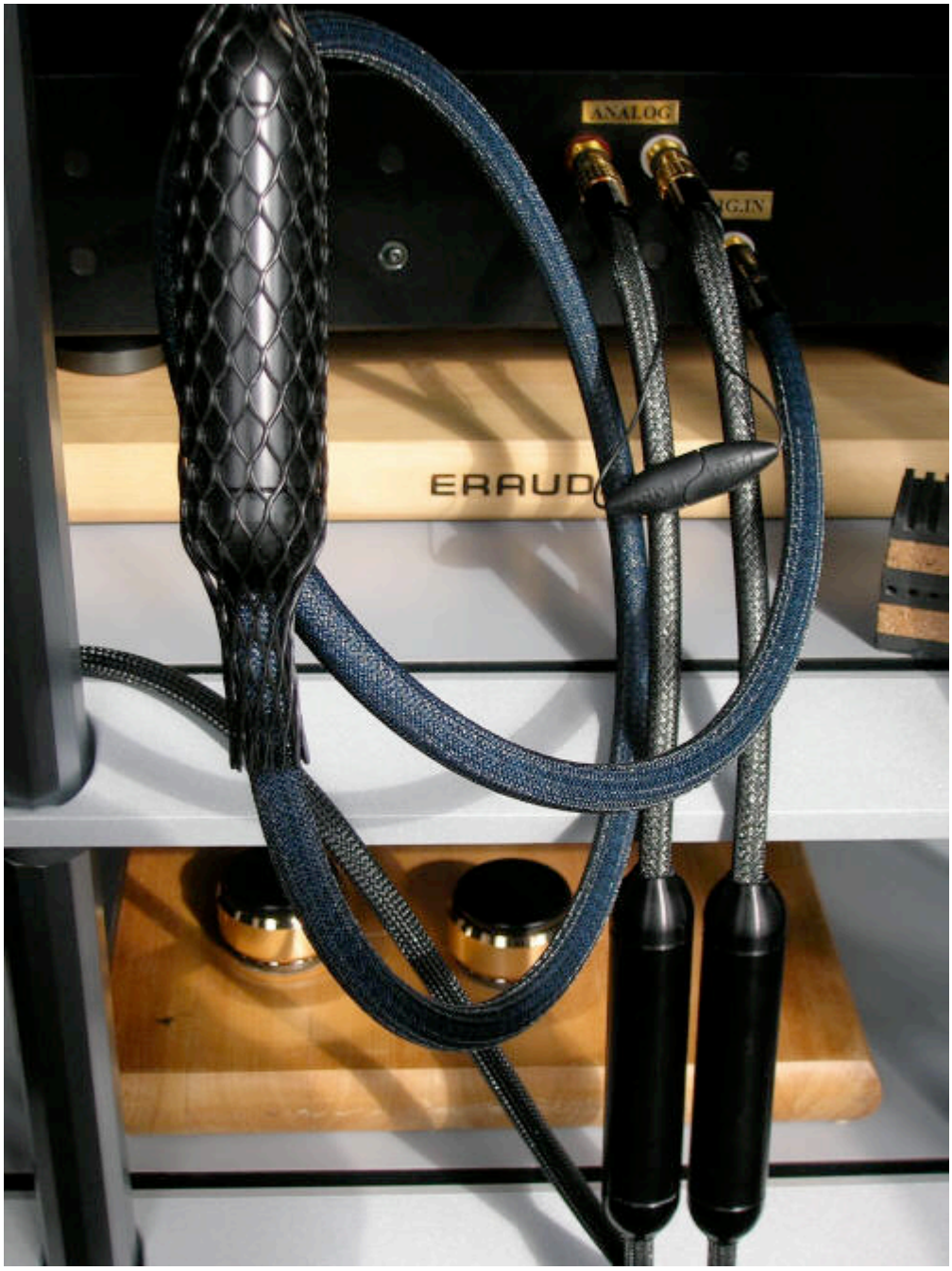
The 0.8 digital cable arrived first and I listened to it for a week or two A/B'ing with a couple of others. I never came to an unequivocal conclusion—sometimes it seemed to exceed the strengths of one or another of my refs, sometimes it came out the lesser. The personality of a single piece of The 0.8 seemed ephemeral. This back and forth persisted until a bunch more came in, and I was able to dress three-quarters of the digital signal path with The 0.8—then the results were unambiguous.

The same happened with The 0.8 on the analog side. Analog playback was suffering. It was transparent, but too thin. It needed more solidity and weight to ground it—just the things I thought a 0.8 interconnect between the phono stage and the line stage would be good for (there were no TARA wires on the analog at this time). I connected one—and was deflated: it was worse than before.

Be careful not to judge ambience and the "recreation of the recording venue" based on a single length of The 0.8. Where one or two pieces of The 0.8 wires (or TARA AC products) have the effect of vacuuming up the air and the sound of the hall, a full complement puts it back again—decay is then fully realized.



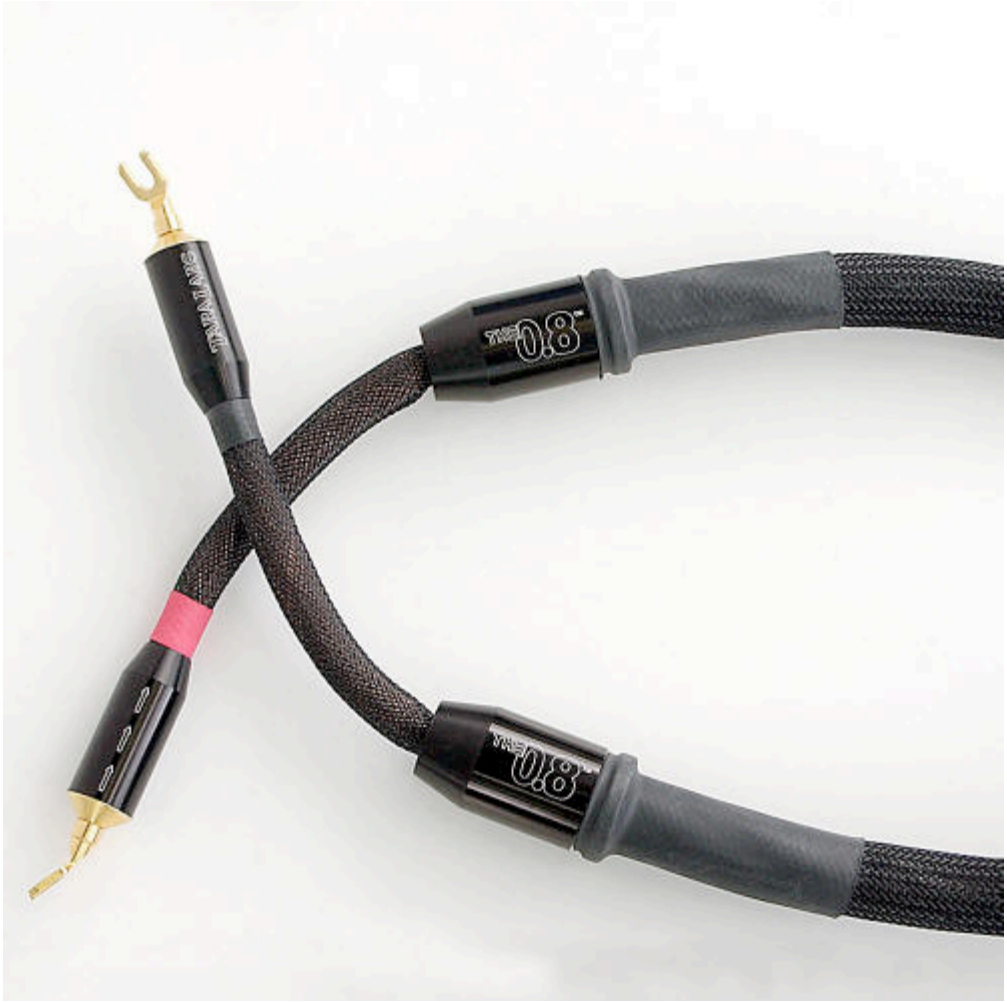
The moral of this story is: don't audition a single run. You need a couple of pieces to hear what its capabilities. With The 0.8, the more the merrier.



Design & Construction

Fit-n-finish are in line with the high pricing. The interconnect has a black mesh overlaying silver outer jacket, with black terminations and black ISM OnBoard modules—a black-tie affair, in more ways than color scheme alone. The quality and neatness of the finish also suggest a kind of no-frills formality. (The 0.8 digital IC has navy blue over silver dielectric.) They look normal—aside from the black aluminum ISM module. These are about 5" long and 1 ½" in diameter, located near the source end, and account for the concentration of weight. The interconnect itself is of average diameter, light and flexible, easy stuff to use. Inside, there's a single positive and

negative (and neutral for XLR) Rectangular Solid Core Gen 2 conductor riding on the edges of a Teflon air-tube. Ninety-eight percent of this air-tube is empty space—an air dielectric. The outside of the tube is covered by a PTFE dielectric and an anti-corrosion-coated shield. All conductors and the shield are SA-OF8N copper. (The Super Annealed™, Oxygen-Free Eight Nines process creates one long, unbroken single crystal, or mono-crystal, structure. All TARA Labs wires use this metal.) It does look normal—except for the skinny 8" ground leads coming out of the source end. These terminate in mating mini-banana plugs to create a floating ground. The black, anodized aluminum locking RCAs are newly designed for ease of use. The balanced cable has black XLRs and made secure connections.



The speaker cable has two runs per channel—positive and negative are kept separate—and each run looks about the size of Purist Audio Colossus, maybe a little bulkier. These are thick, heavy and black. Heavy-duty spades screw into a metal termination casing, easily interchangeable with screw-in bananas. Each run has three bundles of 36 RSC conductors around a Teflon tube, no shield and no Ceralex. Do the math: each of the bundles is equivalent to 24-gauge; multiply that by three; then double it. The 0.8 speaker wire totals slightly greater than 4 AWG.

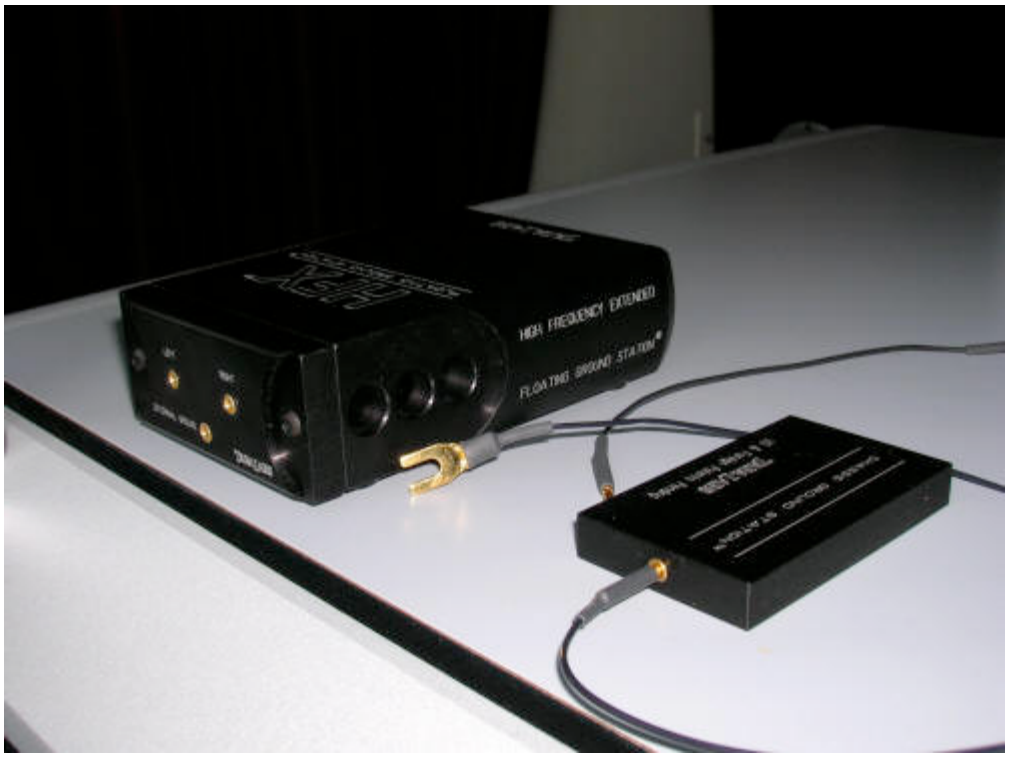
The purpose of the Isolated Shield Matrix™ OnBoard capsule on the IC and digital cable is to house a Ceralex sleeve, spacing it at a distance from the conductors. If it

were right on the conductors the effect would be too powerful and damaging. Further, adjusting the gap between conductors and Ceralex is useful for tuning the sound: the same conductor wire will sound darker with an ISM OnBoard capsule than if the Ceralex were housed in an external box. Only the shield braid is in proximity to the Ceralex…

the Three Lives of The 0.8 IC

…which segues beautifully into a discussion of the three versions of The 0.8 IC.

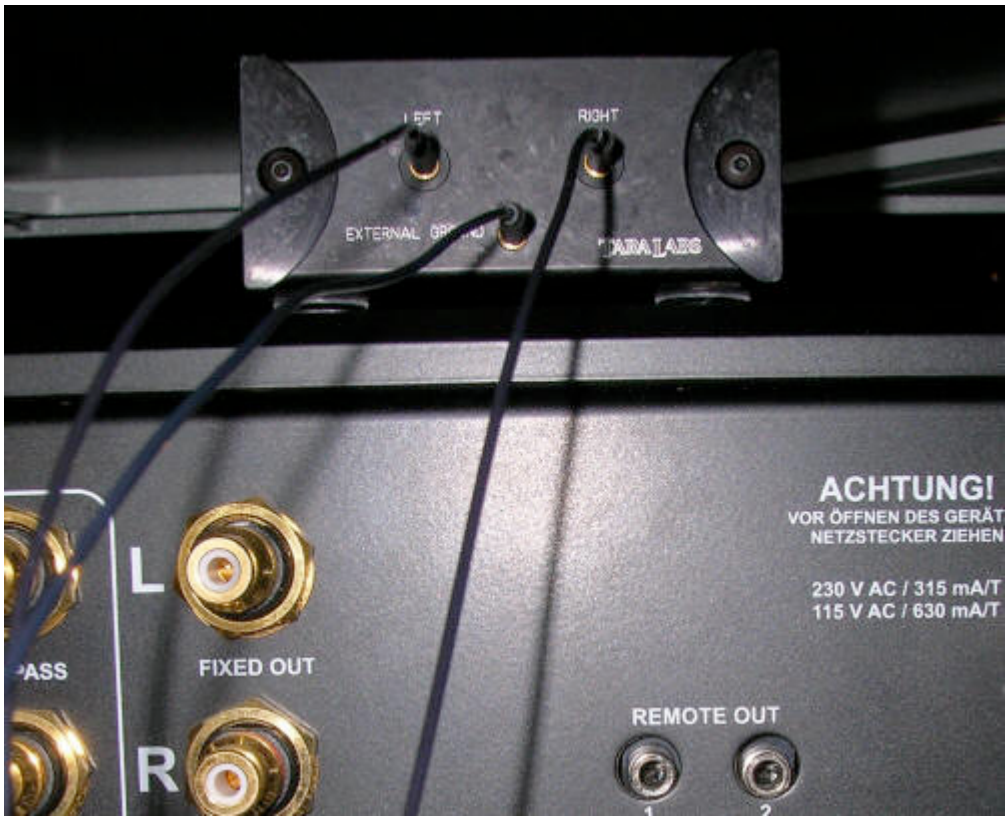
First, there's The 0.8 with ISM OnBoard. This has pigtail leads from the cables' shield at the source end to create what's commonly called a floating ground. This is the version used for all of my testing above.



Second is The 0.8 with ISM Outboard, utilizing a "Chassis Ground Station" at the source end. The Chassis Ground Station is a small, black aluminum block into which the mini-banana pigtails from each interconnects' ground are connected. So far, it's the same as above, but then another lead from the CGS is tied to a components' ground post (ideally a preamp or other component with lower electrical potential). At the load end another set of male and female ground leads connect. This gives you a floating shield at BOTH ends, but with a difference. Because all of these pigtails only connect to the cables' shield and the shield does not touch the negative conductor, you have the much-wanted "star-grounding" configuration. (Most implementations of floating ground have the shield touching the negative conductor, and the external grounding touching the shield—not a true floating ground.) The 0.8 with Chassis Ground Station has the same MSRP as with ISM OnBoard.

Inserting one length of this version took me back a step. Certainly, the treble was allowed free reign and my issues with the soft transient and texture evaporated. But

the missing Ceralex was audible in (comparatively) high noise levels. The sound was like many other good, "accurate" cables on the market.



Third is the last word in performance; The 0.8 with the brand-new and improved ISM HFX FGS (Floating Ground Station). This Cadillac of a ground station is beyond even the one supplied with the current top-of-the-line Zero IC. Ground leads at the source end plug into the ISM HFX FGS, a beautifully constructed, even luxurious, external ground station containing a revised Ceralex compound. A single lead from the ISM HFX FGS box connects to the preamp or other ground source with lower electrical potential. At the load end male and female ground leads connect together, as with version two above. The shield is truly floating at both ends, effectively star-grounding the cable. And the Ceralex is remotely absorbing RF/EMI from the cables' shield.

Replace the length of number two with this third type and you get to hear the violin's tremolo instead of a bunch of cats scratching on the roof. If your system doesn't need all the weight of the ISM OnBoard, a length of The 0.8 with ISM HFX FGS will give you treble extension without the noise and a snappier transient with realistic edge. The ISM HFX FGS upgrade will set you back an additional $800.

TARA CCI digital vs. The 0.8 w/ ISM OnBoard.

Granted, the price tag is not for the faint of heart. Then consider that The 0.8 is presently two rungs down from TARA's top-of-the-line IC, The Zero. Whew! Give me some oxygen. What does it sound like at the top?

With one length of the TARA Zero CCI digital wire in place (their top-rung digital cable, the equivalent of The Zero, except with RCA termination, $3,800/meter), that

little bit of artificiality in The 0.8's transient, the soft, too-smooth edge, which ultimately felt blunted, is gone. Instruments come and go oh-so-naturally now, with nothing suggesting less than perfect articulation. (In my experience, almost no cable is capable of reproducing rapid instrumental articulation, but the CCI gets it.) Additional layers of musical information come through; in comparison, the 0.8 seems congested. Texture, timbre, body and detail all combine to up the realism ante, and resemblance to mechanical processes is pushed far from your consciousness. The bass has firmed up, although it's not as powerful sounding as The 0.8, so there's less slam; the CCI is tonally lighter; and staging extends to the extreme horizontally. These differences between the CCI and The 0.8 will be modest in most systems. I can even see The 0.8 preferred in some because it addresses weak bass and strident treble. But in a top-rank rig, the CCIs' rarified contribution became more important. Very few cables get to the level of The 0.8—then the CCI leapfrogs it, and puts you on another playing field.

An Important Sidebar about Cable Burn-In

Matthew Bond told me his cables burn-in very fast, in a matter of hours, because there's very little plastic or dielectric around the conductors. Huh? What does plastic around the conductors have to do with burn-in? Every discussion on the topic I've come across mentioned something changing in the structure of the metal—curing it, healing it, etc. I was puzzled. After extended back and forth with Matthew, he sent this example, which made the case for me:

Make up a pair of bare-naked interconnects, just plain solid core copper wire attached to RCA plugs. Listen to it today and listen to it tomorrow. You'll hear the same thing. (Certainly within some weeks or months the copper will oxidize and this will affect the sound slightly, but not before you have determined that there has been no change in the sound in the first few days and weeks.)

Now, make up a second pair of interconnects, but this time use wire with any plastic insulation and you will put the "burn-in" question to rest. Using insulated conductors is when you notice changes within hours and days. There is an audible change when plastics are used to insulate the copper conductors.

Definition of Burn-In: The phenomenon of a cable's sound changing over time as the electrostatic field in a cable slowly stabilizes the insulation materials (dielectrics) around and between the conductors.

The 0.8 cables' break-in occurs in stages. Initially the cable is dark, dynamic and powerful, but a bit dull. Within a couple of hours, you'll notice it begin to open up. After 24 hours the last of the veiling disappears.

Conclusion

Major cable manufacturers usually have a "house sound." In the case of TARA Labs, that sound is VERY EASY TO LISTEN TO. They get the main business accomplished, clearly and unambiguously, with less BS editorializing than most.

With The 0.8 ISM OnBoard series, I hear a boatload of the things Joe Audiophile, who lives at Main Street and Solid-State Avenue, is looking for. Among them are its splendid tonal balance and equanimity regarding frequencies. The 0.8 has an unusually flat frequency response, except for an extra dollop in the bottom end, which I rather like. Images tend to be on the large side, with a small degree of spotlighting.

They have a lot in common with the TARA Labs power products. Apart from the sound, which is slightly warm, weighty and full-bodied, these product lines both share conductor metal (six-nines copper), topology, dielectrics and strategic use of Ceralex noise absorption compound.

Their noise reduction technology is real—you'll hear how quiet it becomes—and it is done less obtrusively than most products that advertise this feature. No information is lost. The compromise extracted is in the form of a bit too much smoothness, with a trickle-down sacrifice of some texture and bloom. If you're searching for more bloom, don't look here. The smoothness does have a side benefit though: the total absence of transient harshness or stridency. In fact, you'll be hard pressed to make them sound edgy, thin or brittle. The noise reduction, the spotlighting and the great dynamics add up to frequent involuntary "WOW" reactions.

If you're a fan of Shunyata, Wireworld or Cardas cables (among the most popular of the full-bodied, "accurate" wires), you'll have a natural affinity with the TARA Labs The 0.8. Personally, I like The 0.8 better than these brands because it passes more information and is more musical. When you put The 0.8 into your system, most likely you won't have to spend time re-voicing it—it will just sound better. And chances are it may also start to remind you of those "big rooms" at Hifi shows. Just make sure your audition includes several pieces—one length is liable to give equivocal results.

On balance, the surplus of audiophile goodies supplied by TARA Labs' The 0.8 series cables far outstrips its minor shortfalls. In my opinion, this cable rockets into Premier Class.

TARA Labs The 0.8 Interconnect
Retail: $3495, 1.5m $3930

ISM HFX FGS upgrade $800

TARA Labs The 0.8 RCA Digital 75 ohm
Retail: 1m $2395 1.5m $2695

TARA Labs The 0.8 XLR Digital 110 ohm
Retail: 1m $2595, 1.5m $2895

TARA Labs The 0.8 Speaker
Retail: 8' pair $6495, 10' $7495

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