



hardware

kubala-sosna

You ain't heard nothing yet, or agog at Kubala-Sosna's Elation cables

as reviewed by Jim Merod



A Sonic Journey towards the Sublime (and Its Other)

So much of life's inner meaning emerges as we confront personal blindness and limitations. That's the nature of our beastliness. The Good Book says so and Socrates made a career out of irritating fellow conversationalists with that awareness.

Take for example my incorrigible audio-oriented acquaintance, Horace "Hound Dog" Poacher, who does his best to get in people's faces with wild eyed claims of superior audio discernment so that one (yours truly) is left speechless at his verbal inflation... precisely the sort of consternation that turns any sober person back upon himself in quiet humility, secure with the recognition that no sane and honest bloke can credibly invoke infallibility.

Hound Dog's self-referential ascendancy sets a boundary on audiophile gymnastics. Think about it for a moment. Both the sage and the mad man reveal the blindness of our journey. At least, in Hound Dog's case, the lesson is offered with clownish purples so ludicrous one laughs with appreciation for his example of absurd self-confidence. Go gently into night, toward your alluring holy grail, or go not at all.

I've been thinking of good ol' Hound Dog as I approached my self-generated assignment here: to break the news that I've now encountered a set of audio cables that have gained my respect to such an extent that they earn that risky ultimate designation as The Best.

The risk for an audio writer to make such an assessment is clear enough. Virtually (perhaps literally) no one is fortunate enough—read "burdened"—to hear, carefully assess, and review each and every cable brand and cable formation "out there" in the audiophile market. One sobering aspect of that sprawling, ever changing commercial world is not merely the glut of products and the blur of claims and opinions, but the constant emergence of "boutique" and sometimes quite interesting (truly impressive) audio cables that circulate within niche markets beneath the glaring lights of "big market" publications, review assessments, and expensive advertisements. Over the years I've listened to several remarkable (on occasion, odd looking but ear engaging) "off brand" audiophile cables that demanded serious respect. But my point here is merely this. Hound Dog's self-certainty that he's "heard 'em all" and knows what he hears better than anyone on the planet puts in bold relief the simple truth that this listening business is, in fact, a serious and humbling enterprise since each of us who writes about sound, and the equipment that delivers music into the listening room, owes personal and professional integrity the honor of getting it all as accurately as we can without fuss or self-inflation.

None of us know it all. Not even my well-connected but deluded acquaintance, since no one has a corner on "listening acuity" and/or absolute coverage of turf. Most of all, technology has a way of offering new wrinkles to old expectations. Today's "ne plus ultra" becomes tomorrow's "close but no cigar."

Having Seen That Often

I'm religiously skeptical of any claim to perfection regarding anything... a studied reservation that makes me an anti-Platonist. Why not? Plato was a fascist and his fortunate student, Aristotle, got a strong leg up in his own career by tacking against the blustering wind his teacher left behind. That cautionary nuance now established, I'll accept the risk of my enthusiasm for Kubala-Sosna's new Elation cables... less an enthusiasm, perhaps, than stunned surprise which relegates my critical vocabulary to an almost adolescent stammering.

How do you describe the set of nearly infinite sonic nuances? With great difficulty.

How do you delineate, intelligently and articulately, the most subtle and the most walloping impact of music at its sublime height? Same answer: with great difficulty.

Thus, my joy and my agony as a listener and reviewer... and as a recording engineer. For decades, I've been obsessed by the nearly ineffable beauty and surprise that music delivers. No less, I've seen, almost maniacally devoted to capturing great music in performance. That mania holds several sub-manias within it. Try this one. How do you record a live musical event so that the full, absolute sonic impact of the performance—with all of its minute sonic elements imbedded within its macro-orgasmic sonic (and emotional) elements—is captured thoroughly? Not "sort of," but completely?

The answer? You got it: with difficulty.

Recording, if nothing else, induces humility upon its eager and committed practitioner. Live sound is an elusive quarry. So many parameters impinge on its capture. Thus my quest for better microphones, better gear, more acoustically-friendly venues, enhanced techniques... and better cables.

Perhaps no improvement in the recording chain is more significant than improved cables. Why is that the case? Think about it... because the majority of the extremely short temporal life of a live sonic wave (a musical note or timbral cluster) resides within the cables that deliver it as a mic feed, carrying that signal down the sonic line to a waiting recording device (once tape, now a hard drive). Recorded musical sound "exists" for the vast majority of its brief inaugural lifetime as complex electrical pulses racing through wires. The more acoustically accurate the cables used to record (and then represent) music, the better its sonic delivery to listeners.

Compounding Hope with Elation

I've used many cables as a recording guy and many more as a listener and reviewer. I'm fascinated by the world of "audio cable art" because that art deeply influences another world I'm dedicated to with even greater intellectual and emotional commitment: the endlessly alluring world of music. I cannot claim (or will not, as my bleary eyed acquaintance Hound Dog does) that I have it all under scrutiny to a maximum. But I can share my amazement and sincere respect for the most stunningly remarkable audio cables I've ever spent time with.

Kubala-Sosna's Emotion cables have accompanied me on numerous recording sessions. They were in the network, first to last, when I recorded Kenny Barron with Buster Williams and Lenny White on one of my most memorable weekends of recording across nearly thirty years of such. The Emotions also sit in the mastering studio where my work in the field comes to conclusion. They reside in my main listening rig, too. In sum, over the last few years I've spent a great deal of time with those cables on both ends of the musical journey (in and out: recording and listening). They are great cables, and I have no problem saying that the Emotions are just about as good as you can get.

The "just about" there is defined exactly by Kubala-Sosna's new Elation cables. I have never heard "nothing" so clearly. Elation cables, counter-intuitively, demonstrate graphically how, in the world of sound, "less is absolutely more."

Here's what I mean. When a single one meter pair of Elation cables was inserted in my system between an original "recording master" and my custom made (the "Lady Day" version of the McCormack VRE-1) preamplifier, more detail appeared in spades: more vividness; more clarity; more three-dimensional ambiance; more slam; more micro-detail and musical subtlety... more proximity to the original place and occasion. The stunning

addition of individual sonic and musical details appeared as an immediate result of the diminution (or erasure) of "recorded reproduction."

Linger for a moment with that. A very good set of cables came out and a single pair of unbalanced Elation cables replaced them. Bang. Less sense of being in the presence of a "recording." More reality, vivacity. More musical immediacy and sonic texture.

These words are inadequate, but I must attest to the happy shock of that change. If your goal is to record so that the actual event—the real experience of "being there" when and as music is created—erupts before you on playback, then whatever moves directly towards that goal to achieve that experience is shocking but affirmative.

That delighted surprise was soon compounded by a second pair of Elation wires (balanced) linking the VRE-1 preamp to a turbocharged McCormack DNA 125 amplifier.

Never before that moment had my sound system simply disappeared so that "the sound of nothing," except the sonic truth of a master recording, stood within the vast open time and space of music on its own—unhindered, unobstructed and uncolored.

If you believe that you've come to the end of the line in tweaking and refining your audio system, you may be in for a profound surprise... if you manage to get your paws on a pair of Elation cables. One set transformed my system as never before. Two pairs destroyed all sense of distance and detachment that previously intruded between the original recording and my newly startled audition.

I cannot emphasize precisely enough how (i) I was not expecting such a radical sonic transformation; and (ii) I now find myself utterly incapable of articulating adequately the amazing arrival of an "original moment"—music delivered as if one's hearing were now in the place and in the unfolding musical moment when and where the recording was made.

That, ladies, is not an illusion. It is the FACT of musical immediacy. Except on those many occasions when I've listened with fully engaged attention in the face of music and its creators, I've never once found myself so thoroughly immersed in the immediate joy and aura of music. Hearing my own recordings through two sets of Elation cables, I was delivered back—to The Jazz Bakery; to Zinno's; to the creaky stage at The Blue Note—where I recorded those gigs.

The Sound of Nothing

I took the balanced set of Elation wires to a recording session soon after my initial audition. They were inserted in the place of honor in the recording chain—at the point of maximum importance: between the mixing board and the recording device (between the Yamaha N-12 and the Korg high-resolution hard drive).

The result: fantastic resolution. Incomparable resolution.

At \$6000 a meter pair (and \$1200 per added meter), I do not know how I'll soon afford Elation cables in my recording work. I'd be improved as a listener to my own recorded work if my playback rig were decked out with Elations. Though comparison is often invidious, I have no difficulty reporting that Elations have given me a closer, fuller, and more accurate "look" into the heart of my recorded work than even Nordost's Odin and Valhalla wires (as good as they are). That discrimination obtains with other high priced, high performance cables I've spent considerable recording and audition time with. For example, I've long known van den Hul's all carbon cables to own a neutrality and sonic temperament that's both beguiling and useful in "on location" recording work. Those high pedigree cables do not come close to Elation's "blow the doors open" resolution. I have no difficulty saying definitively that I've not heard or used a better cable than Elation wire.

That puts it somewhat obliquely. The larger fact is that I've not heard any cable that equals the Elation. They are the top of the top in my experience of sublime sonic and musical height. Six words sum up that experience: amazingly ridiculous, jaw-dropping sonic delivery.

I've seen Hound Dog stagger across fancy Las Vegas lobbies in pursuit of his private holy grail, a region of experience I've never approached but have on occasion been told about. My personal and professional holy grail has to do with vivid acoustic subtlety. I'll not argue with anyone, expert or aficionado manqué, but I'll attest here in calm (if somewhat stymied) language that Kubala-Sosna's Elation audio cables are not only all I've heard them to be, but less than that: which means they achieve the audio and musical "more" that essentially defies description. Elation cables are, to my witness, the most advanced "Zen" in the evolving art of musical signal reproduction.

I'll conclude with notes from my listening sessions:

* These cables transform everything for the better...no other cables I've heard approach what they do with master recordings!"

* "Against my guarded skepticism, Elations have no obvious weakness. I'm literally in the presence of genuine musical slam and delicacy as well as in the room with the bar and twenty exuberant musicians in front of a packed audience—recorded @ Birdland three years ago... holy shit!"

* "Extraordinary cables render several things exceedingly well, but fall short somewhere else; [Elations] are completely open—vividly and staggeringly transparent... immense revelation of each detail of sound, music and ambiance (including clinking glasses, a squeaky kitchen door and gurgling trombone valve moisture)."

* "K-S's new cables out do every cable I've spent serious time with, impossible magic made real."

* "These bloody expensive wires are what every astute cable designer dreams of crafting. Elations change the audio game forever."

And I'll add this. I never thought I'd encounter cables so absolutely revealing of musical glory and sonic truth. **Jim Merod**

Elation

Retail: \$6000 a meter pair (and \$1200 per added meter)

Kubala-Sosna

web address: <http://www.kubala-sosna.com>

