

kubala-sosna

research

Expression cables

as reviewed by Larry Cox

Audiophilia presents issues to argue about regarding value more than any other hobby I'm aware of. Most of the sensitivity and ire arises from the price of gear. For some a "bargain" amplifier with world-class performance costing "only \$10,000" is like a low-cut blouse after a few beers in a bar; for others a \$1000 amplifier with excellent, nearly world class performance is like a punch in the gut, just way too expensive.

Much of the ire seems to spring from those who can't or don't want to afford expensive stuff, which no doubt is exacerbated by the smaller group who buy expensive stuff, at least in part, simply because others can't afford it. Nothing like a club that naturally excludes others to make you feel "special." And aren't such special people a pleasure to be around?

My experience is that there is a lot of great stuff for a low price, performance that many could be happy with but for the existence of something a bit better and much more expensive. Counterpoised to that, with a disappointing frequency, is expensive stuff often does perform "better" in delightful ways that many cannot or do not want to afford.

Within the insanity of a subset I'll call "organizing your audio money," there are the intolerant *madrasas* that believe there is a singular hierarchy for how to allocate your audiophile dollars. For these type "A" personalities, and I do mean "a" as in six more letters to spell the name, a drum beat different than their ideology isn't different, it's a declaration of war! You may recall the Linn school of thought that argued if it doesn't

come out of the source it can't get to the speakers. Well, I do find that argument hard to rebut, but it's the implementation of that dogma that's problematic for me. If one bold stroke is good this line of thinking suggests, then, two bold strokes are better. This camp's second, defining, stroke of boldness then posits you should spend the bulk of your money on your source equipment, even with distinctly "unbalanced" spending on other equipment.

I seem to recall a *TAS* issue in which at least one writer's "recommended system" extolled getting the best table, arm and cartridge even if that meant not buying "regular" speakers. Just belly up for a pair of Campbell's soup cans hooked up by twine to the amplifier, that, hopefully in jest, would lead to the best sound possible. Yeah, er, ...right! Or... not so much.

There is, of course, what I'd call the entry-level thinking, oddly enough championed by mega priced Wilson Audio. This viewpoint argues the speakers are the most important component and the rest of the system just doesn't matter as much, so you should allocate most of your money on speakers. And, Wilson demonstrated a system at CES with another equally unbalanced expenditure, starting with an iPod as a source that many found a compelling performance.

The problem with both of these lines of thinking, is that they are just that, lines of thinking, and how many times have you heard an all-star lineup of gear that sucked? Utilizing a "correct" paradigm or dogma is no *fait accompli*. "There is many a slip betwixt cup and lip," where design-dogma is the cup and enjoyment occurs on the other side of your lip and the dogma simply fails to deliver pleasure to your taste buds.

Those who listen and judge with their ears rather than decide based on ideas notice that there are many roads to Rome. Some roads look *Linnish*, some *Wilsonish* (neither are to my taste, FWIW) and some look completely different. The point of this note is that arrival in Rome is the gig, not the path.

So, I will acknowledge at this point that I have my own prejudice. We all have prejudices, yes? In putting together a system, I think you need to start with the speakers that perform in the way you value, which also means that you have selected an appropriate amplifier to power those speakers. The amplifier speaker interaction is absolutely fundamental to your results. The source should provide the natural color to shine, and

the preamp should get the hell out of the way. Lastly, the cables should not get in the way of what came before it in my hierarchy (the irony of competing conclusions here is not lost on me).

Why spend a lot on cables, power cords and the like? Really, it just doesn't make sense. My line of thinking arises thusly: how can a simple cable cost as much as something bigger, heavier and seemingly more complex in construction like a DAC? Let alone an amplifier, turntable or cartridge, etc. Consider the clearly exceptionally greater mechanical tolerances in spinning a CD at continuous speeds or with a cartridge that tracks within minute tolerances? Moreover, how could a cable possibly cost as much to create?

You can imagine my real disdain when I read Bob Levi's review of the Benchmark DAC wherein some if not all of the individual digital, interconnect, and power cables were more expensive than the DAC. Absurd! Obscene! What, Bob, what have you been smoking? Heard of Betty Ford's little place in the desert? You might benefit from a thirty day vacation! Perhaps Bob, we should not have turned away the men in white coats? And hey, Bob is a nice guy, in other matters he's more than just sane he's got keen insight.

Perhaps it is obvious where this is all going. Bring on the jacket with the long sleeves that tie in back, Bob's got company. Me. Oy. Prejudice, mine in particular, was standing in the way of performance. How annoying to be wrong.

This long-winded preamble brings me to the subject of this review, the Kubala-Sosna Expression wire that I feel awkward about being so enthusiastic about. It's expensive. Quite expensive, even if it's now only a "midline" cable in the Kubala-Sosna line. And yet, it really did move my system to another level of satisfaction, to the point that I forgot that this was a review (the HSU ULS-15 subwoofer certainly added to my satisfaction), I was blissfully listening to music, movies etc. without pondering my system one whit for a long time.

The genesis of my interest in Kubala-Sosna was all of the commentary on how power cords make a difference. I'd been given some DIY cords and sampled Supra's Low-Rad cable, and while there was some difference for the better, it didn't rock my world better. Dave Clark mentioned he had some Kubala-Sosna Emotion power cords and so I inquired, can I give them a listen. You should know that this was a "just

listen" sort of peek, I wasn't committing to a review. Writing reviews, you should know, takes a lot more time than you'd think

So, why my interest in power cords? Well, my powered speakers don't let me experiment with different amplifiers or speaker cables, so I thought to see what exotic power cords might do. It's hard to give up playing around, and truth be told, part of the pleasure of being a reviewer is playing around with new stuff that is sometimes pretty cool. Much to my surprise, and I really do mean surprise, the Emotion power cords made a significant difference. So, I asked Joe Kubala about listening to something from their line, something a bit less dear, too. He suggested the Expressions and here we are.

The cables arrive in cute fabric pouches that conjure up an experience of a tailor made product. It's smart thinking as the pouches punctuate the excellent fit and finish of the cables. The experience reminds me very much of a Nordstrom's clothing experience where the look and feel of the product (suit/jacket/shirt) made *ME* feel special. A well-tailored suit drapes beautifully and makes you look really good when the same body that hops out of the shower might not be such a hot looking item. The Expressions drape more like silk than the typical expensive cables, draping very nicely, easily fitting into jacks and around racks. They are relatively light in weight, especially compared to their stable mates, the Kubala-Sosna Emotions. The Expressions are about half as thick as the Emotions though both "lay" nicely.

The Expression's fit and finish are appropriate for the cost, that is to say very good. While more expensive than some well made relatively expensive cables I'd used before, I was surprised to have an experience that the cables seemed better made. I suppose it goes without saying that industrial design can create an experience of rising levels of quality even at these price levels.

A single meter of Expression interconnect or speaker cable will run you \$1800 (\$600 for ea. extra meter), a two meter power cord will run \$775 (\$210/ ea. extra meter), and \$1000 (\$200/ ea. extra meter) for a digital interconnect. That's steep territory. Of course, there are much more expensive lines out there, just as there are even more inexpensive lines out there.

I spent a month with a set of Kubala-Sosna Emotion interconnects and power cords and about six months with the Expression cables. The more

expensive Emotion line and Expression line have something of a "house sound." Did the little audiophile in your head belch out "WHAT? An expensive, colored cable? That's bad! Who'd want that?" Clearly, you might think "house sound" and "colored cable" are synonymous? I certainly would have before I started this review..

Listening to the first three or four tracks from three or four artists I thought there was plenty of bass, rather than over damped or over blown bass, it was just a goodly amount. The midrange was natural and warm sounding, the first thing I really noticed. Male and female vocals were richly human in their nuances, rather than thin, edgy or too exactly drawn. Stringed guitars evidenced some attack, but were more characterized by their full sustained tones. The top end, however, seemed a bit rolled off.

Hmm. Of course reviewers will like them, I thought, they do no harm because they don't extend very far up the range and they have a pleasing midrange. If I were to call in a comparator here, I'd say the Expressions were the cable equivalent of Michael Buble. Warm, rich, and inviting with emotional communication present, but perhaps they were a bit too relaxed. To check my initial impulse, I pulled out Sonny Rollins' *Big Brass* CD. The upper mids and top end on this CD are explosively dynamic, extended and very open, so I figured I'd see what the Expressions could do with this CD. About five seconds into that CD, my prejudice was hung out to dry. Highs splashed unencumbered and unrestrained in any direction, not only in frequency response but in dynamic expression. (hmmmm? Could that be where the name came from?)

Well, I thought to myself, only on exceptional recordings like *Big Brass* would I get that kind of splash and experience while retaining the overall warmth that I first heard with the Expressions. Well, like other truly transparent products, the Expressions really exposed which recordings are truly extended. Poor, or truncated recordings are exposed as such while excellent recordings are given a full stage within which to perform. While some CDs have tracks that are extended, it becomes quite patent that frequency extension is not tested on every track and in fact isn't truly extended on many tracks. The Expressions were like a clinic on recording quality.

Imaging was simply excellent in my system. My ATC 20-2As are literally studio monitors. When I seat myself in a position of approximately the same distance that a recording engineer might sit (which is really, really

close), I believe I hear exactly what the engineer heard, and the sound quality is simply amazing. Of course, that seating position means I'm practically on top of the speakers, but what price glory? Imaging was excellent, a supple 3-D presentation if you will.

The Expressions both reveal a lot of information, perhaps as much as the hyper detailed cables and components that are commonly lauded, but they do it fundamentally differently. I am guessing that hyper focused products often simply have tipped up part of the range to "show you" that they are really great, without necessarily altering the timbre. I hear the Expressions as flat in frequency response, but in an unassuming way.

The Expressions present music without noticeable boundaries to a stage; sound stages don't erupt from a black background, but from an invisible and expanding one - expanding to whatever shape and size is necessary. I found I could focus on and remove focus from any particular part of the sound with ease. The dynamic relationships of instruments were like short, couplets of rhythm; instruments moved in and out of focus effortlessly. Again much in the way when listening to live music a listener can choose to focus on a singular instrument and then move on to another instrument without suppressing the first instrument's contribution.

And the proof in the design of the wiring is that all of the cabling presents itself the same way. I had a tonearm cable, two interconnects and three power cords. Removing one, no matter which, reduced the sense of calm, relaxed but powerful, full-bodied and extended qualities.

To compare the Supra EFF-I cables I lauded last year was a disappointment for me. I own the Supras, and for the money they are good, but now sound brighter in my current system than when I first heard them. Near the end of this review period I reluctantly started removing first the power cords. Hmm, the sound became not only a bit brighter in overall timbre, but also a bit more pinched and peaky sounding. By pinched I mean that the sound was an emphasis of individual frequencies that might have been replayed slightly louder, or the frequency anomaly was simply highlighted.

As the interconnects from preamp to powered speakers were removed, the same sensation occurred again, only this time, this listener started to feel sour as the fundamental quality of the sonic experience became more mundane. Now, don't get sucked into reviewer excess here. Many

people would still be quite happy with my system wired with Supra, but comparatively speaking, the sonic tapestry was not the same. Music lost some of its natural suppleness and the easy "draping" of dynamics, much as a well cut suit of exquisite materials drapes nicely on your body and a cheap one doesn't. What's the phrase, he wore it like a "cheap suit?" Yeah, I knew that experience..

It was rather remarkable how the affect of the removal of the Expressions changed my system from the kind you can effortlessly relax into any sort of music, to having me search for better recordings, like Ry Cooder and V.M. Bhatt's *A Meeting By the River* Reference Recordings' Twenty-fifth Anniversary Collection and my collection of silky smooth vocalists to retain the relaxation and emotional, expressive qualities that I seemed to have with virtually all of my recordings.

For those who are shopping, a full compliment of Expressions is the way to go, or at least the destination. Who wanted to hear that? Not me, I know, I'd prefer a silver bullet, but that's only good with cowboys and werewolves. The good news is that one length of Expression starts the ride up, and each successive one pushes you along. Again, the "sound" of the Expressions are consistent throughout the line, whether the tonearm cable, the digital cable, etc.

You might be asking, where to start? Unlike the Linnies, for powered speaker owners I'd say the power cords are the place to start as that made the biggest impact in my system. However, after the power cords, I'd probably go to source wiring, but I'm wagging. Of course, you can steer your own course, that's why you're an audiophile, right?

The Expressions are at component level prices, at least for my system. I know some will squawk, as is their right, but a complete set of Expressions provided for me a component level upgrade. Contextually, I found myself reluctant to find the cables worth their entry price, and they remain a product of the domain of the well heeled or at least those that save well. And, in these times, it's hard to argue for expensive gear. While I really dislike that power cords, interconnects, and speaker cables are so expensive, in this case they made a large difference. I surrender my prejudice and line of reasoning. If it takes expensive cables to get the sound my system makes with the Expressions, then that's the price of glory. Highly recommended. **Larry Cox**

Kubala-Sosna Research web address: www.kubala-sosna.com