

VINYL WORD

*The wonderful world
of analog playback...*



Back

July 2008

Furutech Ag-12 Phono Cable



There are opposing views regarding the importance of the phono cable in an analog playback system. Advocates for this unassuming length of wire point out the minute signals coming from a phono cartridge -- measured in fractions of a millivolt for low-output moving-coil cartridges -- and thus the opportunity for all manner of noise to muck things up. Naysayers will also point to those teeny-tiny signals, proclaiming that anything so small doesn't need a specially designed cable for transmission -- and, by the way, cables don't make a difference anyway.

Preconceived notions about what should and should not make a sonic difference are often debunked by a little thing we audiophiles like to call *listening*. From *my* listening, phono cables not only display audible characters of their own, the differences among them can be profound. The right phono cable can pull together an analog rig in ways that an entire set of interconnects and speaker cables do with digital gear, amps and speakers, letting the equipment be all that it can be. If I had to bet on what makes one phono cable sound different from another, I would put my money on the ways in which their makers address noise. Think about it: Infinitesimal signals *have* to be more susceptible to the deleterious effects of noise than the much more robust line-level signals, not to mention what your amplifier sends to your speakers. Thus, phono cables are often unique within a company's product line, designed specifically for their function and not simply a reterminated pair of interconnects.

After reading about the Ag-12, I am sure that Furutech would agree that addressing noise is especially important when designing a phono cable. The Ag-12 has a four-layer shield, and this, together with Furutech's own *a* (Alpha) silver-plated-copper conductors that have been cryogenically treated and demagnetized, make it one of the more deliberately designed phono cables you can buy. And it is surprisingly reasonably priced at \$429 USD per 1.2-meter length. Furutech doesn't cheap out on the connectors, using its own rhodium-plated DIN and RCA numbers. Construction is absolutely first-rate, the Ag-12 looking like it should cost at least double its price.

Yet amidst Furutech's immense product line, which includes many different cables, connectors and accessories, the Ag-12 can easily become lost, overlooked because the company's interconnects, speaker cables and power cords cast a long shadow. Fortunately, the Ag-12's performance sheds the light of extreme clarity on the musical signals that pass through it, the attention paid to addressing noise paying off in an obvious way. There is openness and expressiveness, the sense that the cartridge's signal is given concierge service on its way to the phono stage, where the heavy (signal) lifting begins.



In other reviews I've documented my luck in finding great music on LP at garage sales and thrift stores for next to nothing. However, just as important as these finds are the amazing brand-new albums for sale -- amazing because of their consistent high quality. In my previous analog life, I'd pay \$10 for a mass-produced LP that might be noisy due to poor vinyl quality, or scrapes that occurred during manufacturing or packaging. Today, most new records are pressed on thick virgin vinyl, even the equivalents of the mass-produced records of the past. They are generally free of defects and very quiet, but in the rare case that a scrape or scratch makes it past inspection, getting a replacement is easy -- all you have to do is ask. No more imploring a teenage clerk at K-Mart to believe your story that a new-looking album "has this scratchy noise throughout most of side one" and then to smile down on you.

In listening to some of the carefully made new releases -- Wilco's *Sky Blue Sky* [Nonesuch 131388-1] or Mark Knopfler's *Kill to Get Crimson* [Warner Brothers 281660-1] -- I found the Ag-12's clarity immediately evident, as the guitars jumped from the speakers and drums displayed ample stick and skin. Wilco's music is dense and busy, but the Ag-12 sorted everything out, making the included CD sound a little ragged -- noisy -- and less focused by comparison. If these two albums had been released in 1978 instead of 2008, they wouldn't have been double-LP sets pressed on 180-gram vinyl that's as quiet as that used for the best European pressings.

Review Summary

Sound "The Ag-12's performance sheds the light of extreme clarity on the musical signals that pass through it, the attention paid to addressing noise paying off in an obvious way. There is openness and expressiveness, the sense that the cartridge's signal is given concierge service on its way to the phono stage, where the heavy (signal) lifting begins."

Features "The Ag-12 has a four-layer shield, and this, together with Furutech's own a (Alpha) silver-plated-copper conductors that have been cryogenically treated and demagnetized, make it one of the more deliberately designed phono cables you can buy."

Use "While you may choose interconnects and speaker cables to contour the sound of your audio system, you don't want that with a phono cable. The Ag-12 is a conduit, an unbending path from cartridge to phono stage."

Value "It's one of the phono cables to beat, and it's affordable to boot."

And if the Ag-12 were made by a company with a less diversified product line, I have no doubt it would cost double or triple what it does.

Associated Equipment

Loudspeakers – Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 Series 2 and MAXX Series 2.

Power amplifiers – Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference and ML3 Signature mono amps, Luxman B-1000f mono amps, Audio Research Reference 110 stereo amp.

Preamplifiers - Audio Research Reference 3, Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP, Zanden Model 3000.

Analog - TW-Acoustic Raven AC turntable, Graham Engineering Phantom B-44 tonearm, Dynavector DRT XV-1s and DRT XV-1s Mono cartridges, Audio Research PH7 phono stage, Lamm LP2 phono stage, Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP phono stage.

Interconnects – Shunyata Research Antares Helix, Crystal Cable Ultra, AudioQuest William E. Low Signature and Sky.

Speaker cables – Shunyata Research Orion Helix, Crystal Cable Ultra, AudioQuest Volcano, AudioQuest William E. Low Signature.

Power products – Shunyata Research Anaconda Helix and Python Helix (Vx and Alpha variations), Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference power cords; Shunyata Research Hydra V-Ray power conditioner, Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference power distributor.

While clarity, especially due to reduced noise, is a significant characteristic for any audio component, it can't overcome a skewed spectral balance -- one that leads to a hot treble region, recessed midrange or bloated bass. While it would be news if the Ag-12 could, in fact, effect such anomalies, it can't. With it, I was able to discern even better the *completely* engaging character of my Dynavector XV-1s cartridge -- or should I say *cartridges*, now that I've mounted a Dynavector XV-1s Mono on a second armwand for my Graham Phantom tonearm. *Mono y mono* -- mono record *and* cartridge -- is a completely new and totally satisfying analog world. When the cartridge only has to track the lateral modulations of a mono record, the presentation takes on a new level of purity and immediacy, a primal directness that you have to hear to appreciate. Surface noise of all kinds is reduced as well, a welcome byproduct. So many of the mono LPs you can buy are older, which means more chance of mistreatment.

Back to discussing garage-sale LPs. I was lucky enough to find a Columbia six-eye copy of Miles Davis's seminal *Sketches of Spain* [Columbia CL 1480] in mono. Total cost: 50 cents and the time needed to give it a good cleaning. The LP was stored in the jacket without an inner sleeve, but after a few whirls on a VPI HW-27, it looked good and sounded quiet, thanks, again, to playback with a mono cartridge.

I've heard *Sketches* dozens of times, all in stereo, but after playing side one in mono, I was a believer. While there was a soundstage that stretched from the inner edges of both speakers and displayed some layering, it was the spot-on

tonality and copious texture that struck me immediately as new and improved.

The strings and muted trumpet were well delineated, and retrieval of detail was very high, but nothing was etched or spot-lit. I could actually hear the contribution of the Furutech Ag-12, though there was nothing overt about it. The Ag-12 was simply passing along that teeny-tiny signal with utmost fidelity. While you may choose interconnects and speaker cables that contour the sound of your audio system, you don't want that with a phono cable. The Ag-12 is a conduit, an unbending path from cartridge to phono stage.

I see that Furutech makes a number of cables for home-theater use, where more channels are considered mo' betta'. For me, it was 1.0, not 5.1, that pounded home the sonic splendor of this Furutech cable, old school

trumping the new math. I don't know if the Furutech Ag-12 is the best phono cable on the market, but it's the best I've heard, a fact made all the more meaningful by its mid-level price. It's one of the phono cables to beat, and it's affordable to boot.

...Marc Mickelson

marc@soundstage.com