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ISSN 1465-5955



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Studio Connections cables

by Alan Sircom

There are so many cable brands out there, it's easy to dismiss many as 'local heroes': brands that may have a national following, but seldom compete on a truly international stage against the big names. I hope this doesn't happen to Studio Connections, not simply to wave the local flag (next to Vertere, Studio Connections is geographically the closest cable maker to my house) but because Michael Whiteside of Studio Connections is one of those polymath guys who is genuinely on to something.

If there was a textbook on how to build an audio designer, it could very well just have a picture of Michael Whiteside. He started out with a degree in electronics, played professionally in bands, got interested in the recording side, became an engineer during the swan-song years of the great London recording studios, worked as lead technician for the likes of TEAC and Harman, then was pivotal in the design of some of the best studios in the modern age. This means he approaches the concepts of cable design with an engineer's eye, but a recording engineer's ear.

Studio Connections' ethos then is to start from first principles; understanding the application where a cable will be used, without 'well we've always done it that way' prejudice or bias. From here, Whiteside develops a kind of Platonic Form of the cable for a particular task, and then designs a cable that best matches those requirements within the realms of practical constructional limits (the best cable in the world for the task that was made out of solid gold and would take four weeks to hand build would be prohibitively expensive, even in the heady world of super high-end cables). This ends up with conclusions that might not seem

initially 'right' but prove out in the listening: for example, a single-ended cable that is designed more like a balanced cable, and a balanced cable that doesn't conform to the usual three identical conductors layout found between most XLR sockets. It also means going the extra distance and doing things like 3D printing parts of the connector because none of the standard components are made specifically for the task in hand. This might invite the question 'what else is a phono plug used for?' but the point is a lot of brands either modify their cable terminations to suit the cables they use, or they go ape crazy with heatshrink to fill in the gaps. A few brands (most notably, Nordost) refuse to compromise here, and the results speak for themselves. Studio Connections takes a slightly different path to Nordost, but at least they are both heading up the same mountain.

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▶ Whiteside is also keen to stress that audio design should not be a subjective art-form – a component either observationally performs its task convincingly and with fidelity, or it doesn't, which means he periodically challenges the listening of a cable with the physics underlying the technology, and occasionally the other way round, which is why Studio Connections is one of the few companies that not only discusses why cable 'burn in' might exist from a physics level (removing free electrons in a new-formed insulation material) but how to ensure your cables arrive ready to roll. This means the cables are all virtually made to order.

There are three ranges of loudspeaker and interconnect cable (Monitor, Reference, and Platinum), the top two of which also include digital cables, and there's also a Power Cable in the Reference series. We used Reference class loudspeaker and power cords, and a couple of pairs of the top and hand-made Platinum interconnects.

The cables have a thick outer shield (interestingly, the first thing Studio Connections does with the cable it custom-orders by the reel from a German maker, is strip it of its outer sheathing and replace it with a similar looking, but more resistive and conductive plastic shield, or shield and braid in the Platinum interconnects). This acts both as a filter and as a mild energy exchange, dissipating any ground plane interference as heat. They all share similar construction of oxygen-free copper conductors with an olefinic/nitrogen foam primary and solid polyurethane secondary dielectric (the Reference Power Cable also has a semi-conductive screen of carbon).

We were considering taking these three cables as separate entities and they certainly live up to being assessed as standalone designs, but it's as a complete family that they work so well together, and should be viewed as such. Yes, practically any of the cables here can act as gateway to the others, and if you are wanting to see precisely what Studio Connections is all about in a 'toe in the water' kind of way, I'd suggest possibly starting with the Reference Power Cables, because they show precisely what Studio Connections is describing in a fundamental manner. But it's best to perform a clean sweep and move across to Studio Connections stem-to-stern.

This might sound like understatement or faint praise, but the Studio Connections sound is that of a blameless reference point. That does make it rather hard to pin down from a review perspective, because descriptions of its performance end up being descriptions of the performance of the other devices

in the system. Other cables may colour the sound, add brightness or bass or some other aspect that might well prove alluring, but the Studio Connections cables don't do that. Instead, they seem to just move out of the way. What is surprising having spent some time listening to these cables is just how few cables do that, and it's perhaps no surprise that cable companies end up in the firing line. It's not that they don't make a difference, it's that many make the wrong difference. A cable that makes things appear clean and bright by slugging the rest of the system is undermining the performance of the whole audio chain. And this is what so many brands do.

That being said, I can understand why this concept is appealing, because it is an attempt to reconcile what many people want from good audio through wire. So, you might have cables that present a huge soundstage, or accent the separation of images within that soundstage, or have a big, rounded bass, or accented treble, or even just go after the midrange. And, if that's what you want from audio, that form of almost filtration may work extremely well. But what if you want less? What if you don't want to focus your attention almost exclusively on the separation of images, but want the whole Gestalt? This is not so easy a route, because it demands 'first do no harm' electronics. But then you need cables that don't do anything to the sound except transmit it as fast and as clean as possible: hence the 'blameless reference point' comment. Studio Connections is about as blameless as it's possible to get. ▶



▶ As a reviewer, your system seldom fires on all cylinders, because it's in a constant state of flux. Sometimes, though, the Audio Gods smile down and make it all just work together. And when it does, the usual musical references just become abstract and almost crass, because the equipment sings with everything. You begin to understand the ultra-objectivist stance that cartridge and loudspeaker are the only real agents of sonic change in a modern system, because they are the only ones that are colouring the system. The rest just gets out of the way, and it's fabulous! It doesn't matter what you play, but you tend not to play audiophile-test-discs and start to dig out that music you always loved. So, out came 'Burning Down the House' from *Stop Making Sense* by The Talking Heads [Sire]. Rather than taking notes, you nod along and just enjoy the music like you always did before the whole hi-fi thing got in the way. Studio Connections cables are basically letting your system do all the things it's supposed to do, and if that system sings, Studio Connections will help it sing in key.

In truth, you could probably lift this kind of sonic blamelessness from any review of one of a handful of top-class cables, but not all of them. To misquote Tolstoy: "All right-sounding cables are alike. Wrong-sounding cables are wrong in their own way." Studio Connections therefore has a lot in sonic common with Nordost and Crystal Cables, and a few others. And it's currently one of the cheapest ways to get into the true disappearing class of top-end audio. Highly recommended! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Platinum interconnect: from £2,000/m
for RCA-RCA

Reference Plus Loudspeaker Cable:
£980/3m pair 4mm plugs

Reference Power Cable: from £145/1m

Manufactured by: Studio Connections
URL: www.studioconnections.co.uk

Distributed by: Renaissance Audio
URL: www.renaissanceaudio.co.uk
Tel: +44(0)131 555 3922