

the absolute sound



Shunyata Research Theta Cables

Category Busting

Neil Gader

Who doesn't love a deal? So, no mincing words here, Shunyata Research's new Theta Series cable is one of, if not *the* most musical, affordable, and ultimately consequential cables I've evaluated to date. It's *that* good. And in a world of costly *to infinity and beyond* competition, Theta's pricing—which hovers in the \$1–\$2k range (depending on lengths)—makes it a must-audition, especially for enthusiasts on the lookout for that next critical system upgrade.

Theta series is part of Shunyata's midline “performance-oriented” series, which also includes the less costly entry-level Gamma Series. Three other cable lines, Alpha-X, Sigma-X, and Shunyata's cable flagship Omega, fill out its current crop of offerings. Theta Series cable features 16-gauge ultra-pure continuous-cast Ohno copper wires. These are hollow core wires, also known as VTX™, made in the shape of virtual tubes. The principle here is that when the core of the conductor is completely hollow, skin effects and random eddy currents are minimized. What follows is an extrusion process with a fluorocarbon dielectric and custom-shielding elements. It employs Shunyata's own PMZ (Precision Matched Impedance) process, normally available only in its top-tier offerings.

As Shunyata points out, “this form of conductor tempering reduces the extrusion-speed of the conductor by 75%—thereby eliminating inherent imperfections and striations in the conduc-

tor, dielectric, and shielding elements... This extrusion method tightens the tolerances of the conductor surface, dielectric, and precision placement of the shield. To achieve these finely drawn tolerances, the extrusion and braiding machines must be run at one-quarter normal speed during the manufacturing process.”

Shunyata's founder and chief designer Caelin Gabriel also improved the Kinetic Phase Inversion Process, which, over a four-day period, “conditions the conductors at a molecular level using high-energy pulsed frequencies that heat the conductor mass.” This results in less burn-in time, allowing the wire to reach its performance potential sooner.

Theta power cords feature VTX-Ag™ (pure silver center) conductors, both with an outer layer of ultra-pure OFE copper. They are constructed with both an inner center conductor made of pure silver and an outer concentric ring conductor made of pure copper. The Theta power cords use the finest fluorocarbon insulation to minimize dielectric absorption and re-radiation, which translates to an improvement in resolution and clarity.

Theta Series cables are terminated with Shunyata's custom-designed connectors and cold-soldered terminals.

The look is unpretentious in a braided Black Flex mesh cover and richly gold-plated interchangeable (banana or spade) OFE-copper terminations. The shield is a tight braid of silver-plated copper. To the eye and touch, construction-quality end-to-end appeared top-notch. Theta is available in speaker, interconnect (XLR or RCA), digital, and power cords. For this review I was supplied with Theta speaker cable, RCA interconnects, and for my second system, XLR interconnects long enough to drive my active ATC loudspeakers, as well as Theta power cords for the ATC on-board amps.

Sonically, Gabriel and the Shunyata team brought their high-resolution A-game to Theta. Transparent across the board, the Thetas had impeccable spectral balance, nimble transients, and smooth warmly lit harmonics. They produced an ineffable muscular midband energy that rippled up from the lower reaches of acoustic bass and seemed to strengthen as it rose through the octaves and sweeten in the upper ranges of violin. Tonal balance was essentially neutral, but if I were pressed, I would say that its signature leaned ever so slightly to the warmer side, but like a chameleon, this was truly hard to pin down.

More significantly, Theta produced an open and uncongested sense of spatiality within my listening rooms. Orchestral section layering of strings, winds, brasses was very, very good. A favorite recording of mine is the theme to the film *The Cowboys* from John Williams' *AT the Movies* (with thanks to RH for this tip). This 24-bit/176kHz Reference Recording is brilliant at

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Specs & Pricing

Price: Speaker, \$1998/2.5m; interconnect, XLR \$1198/2m, RCA \$998/1m; power, \$998/1.75m

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describing the broad Meyerson soundstage thrown by the Dallas Winds and is overflowing with back-of-the-hall depth cues from the percussion section, and the long reverberant decays sustained throughout the auditorium.

Theta's performance in the upper mids and treble octaves were among the most liquid and natural that I've heard. My conclusion was validated through two distinctively different loudspeaker systems—the Raidho X2.6, a small floorstander equipped with a superb ribbon tweeter (review forthcoming), and the redoubtable stand-mount compact MBL 126 Radialstrahler, a personal all-time fave—a magical omni whose musicality continues to stun every listener who passes through my home. In their own unique ways, these speakers reproduce the top octaves in the most revealing and natural manner of any I've heard. For that reason alone, they don't suffer poor or middling speaker cable. In this instance, Evgeny Kissin's upper-octave keyboard trills were bell-like and harmonically extended and bore all the hallmarks (openness, expanse, and air) of the live concert hall experience. Alison Krauss' rendition of "Slumber My Darling" from *Appalachian Journey* was beautifully expressive, her soaring, almost ethereal vocal a luminous delight to my ears

Transient information was excellent in its naturalistic clarity. The Thetas easily caught the leading-edge snap and "pop" from Stewart Copeland's high-pitch drum kit in The Police's 1983's *Synchronicity* disc, their final studio album. And not just the pop but the actual tonality that each of these skins produced. Equally superb were dynamics on both micro- and macro-levels, e.g., the thundering tympani and bass drum impacts and suspend-

ed decays during Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man." But of all my reference recordings, "Autumn Leaves" by the Manhattan Jazz Quintet afforded one of the most vivid illustrations of Theta's charms as regards dynamic contrast, transient behavior, and piercing pyrotechnics. From the gritty alto sax to the forward, stinging, wall-paper-shredding blasts from Lew Soloff's trumpet solo, to, perhaps most of all, the deep, thick resonances and sustains of the acoustic bass and piano solos, Theta covered all the bases.

Other properties that most stood out were image focus and stability. Theta tracked and positioned the smallest and lowest-level musical cues with a degree of precision that I can only describe as dogged. This was exemplified during Peter, Paul and Mary's "All My Trials." When properly reproduced this simple all-analog track (tape hiss included) reveals the nuance of vocal timbre and texture with the best of them. Paul's beseeching tenor is panned to the left of the soundstage and Peter's growly baritone to the right, bracketing Mary's plaintive vocal in the center stage position. What became ever more clear with Theta in the system were the timbral qualities of their delicate vocals, the harmonizing interplay, and the specific emotional

character of each singer.

As for the harder to define sense of overall "musicality," the liveliness factor, the pace, the jumpy rhythmic cues that get toes tapping and heads nodding, Theta hardly takes a back seat to any contenders. When jazz singer Melody Gardot sings "Who Will Comfort Me," and her crack band enters with a vamping guitar and finger snap intro, slowly filling in the track with kick drum and toms accents and a bubbling double bass line, until seemingly out of nowhere comes the wail of a Hammond B3, joined by trumpet, sax, and back-up voices, well, there was no moving me from the listening sweet spot until the final fade.

Every component in a high-end system has one mission: to allow the component ahead of it to operate to its full potential. In other words, to get the heck out of the way of the musical signal. I've heard cables that edge out Theta in minor ways, my own references (pricier to be sure) like Audience frontRow or Matthew Bond Insight (Issue 355) among them. But nothing I've heard matches Theta anywhere near this price segment. At least, not yet. Kudos to Caelin Gabriel and Team Shunyata for bringing to market such a top-notch, category-busting wire for the rest of us. My highest recommendation. **tas**

