

Review Shunyata Research Theta Speaker Cable



The topic of cables is extremely polarizing among audiophiles. Different audiophiles have different thresholds for what they consider an acceptable amount to spend on cables; and the opinions about which type of cables should be prioritized—speaker cables, interconnects, or power cables—vary greatly. Because I've found that speaker cables deliver the greatest sonic improvement per dollar, they would be my first choice for an upgrade.



Shunyata Research manufactures its cables in an 18,000-square-foot facility near Seattle, Washington. For their 25th anniversary in 2024, Shunyata released two new series of cables: the entry-level Gamma Series and the step-up Theta Series. Both series include power, XLR, RCA, phono, grounding, and digital (AES, S/PDIF, ethernet, and USB) cables. Shunyata describes Theta and Gamma cables as “performance-oriented,” slotting just below the reference-level Alpha series, and aimed at “reveal[ing] dramatic improvements in background silence, phase coherence, timing accuracy, and spectral balance.” Shunyata claims that “these performance traits rival some of the world’s most expensive cables.”

Description

When I think of Shunyata and its products, power cables usually come to mind—a sentiment shared by many audiophiles familiar with Shunyata, especially with their massively thick reference-line Omega-X power cable. However, the Theta speaker cables are a departure from this image. These flexible 8-gauge black-sheathed cables, woven with a slight sheen, boast a handsome appearance that exudes luxury. The tri-flex construction feels indulgent, and the outer sheath is easy to clean. The positive and negative cables, wrapped together in a twist, resemble a soft, elegant two-strand braid leading into a black-plastic cylindrical collar terminating the twist. The Shunyata logo and the series name, Theta, are affixed with a silver sticker on the collar, adding a touch of elegance to the overall design.



Shunyata's Theta speaker cables are not just about aesthetics; they also boast advanced technology that is shared with the power cords within the series. Shunyata technicians weave the conductors in a virtual tube over a hollow core; this design, which Shunyata calls VTX, aims to minimize skin effects and random eddy currents. The conductors are made of OFE (oxygen-free electrolytic) Alloy-101, also known as C10100, the highest purity of copper available, with a minimum of 99.99% purity and conductivity of 101% of the International Annealed Copper Standard (IACS). The fluorocarbon dielectric surrounding the conductors is used extensively in the aerospace industry. Shunyata's Kinetic Phase Inversion Process (KPIPv2) conditions the cables for four days to refine conductor metals and reduce burn-in time without cryogenics.

Setup

My reference components include Simaudio's Moon 390 streaming preamplifier (\$6400) and 760A power amplifier (discontinued, \$8500 when available). I use Kimber Kable KS 1116 balanced interconnects for the 390 and 760A, along with Kimber Kable 8TC speaker cables, used here for comparison with the Shunyata cables. My Innuos Zen Mk3 serves as a Roon server, connected with an AudioQuest Coffee USB cable, and I rely primarily on Tidal as my streaming source, with a few CDs ripped to the Zen server's internal hard drive. An AudioQuest Thunder power cable feeds my AudioQuest Niagara 1200 power conditioner. Shunyata Venom cables are used to power all the remaining components.



For this review, the Theta speaker cables connected my Klipsch Forte III loudspeakers to my power amplifier via Shunyata's STIS v3 cold-soldered interchangeable terminals. The supplied hex key enables users to swap between banana, 4–6mm spade, and 6–8mm spade connectors via a small set screw. My review pair was terminated in 6–8mm spades made from solid OFE copper and plated with pure gold to protect the copper from oxidation. Shunyata uses STIS v3 with all recent signal cables. I found the spade connections to be very snug when tightened to the WBT terminals of my Simaudio Moon 760A power amplifier. The clear labeling eliminated concern about directionality: "AMP" and "SPK" are printed on the shrink-wrap at the ends of the wires. The spades connected well to my Forte III loudspeaker terminals, but with slightly more effort to ensure a snug fit and less assurance of a secure connection. For my loudspeakers, I'd have preferred to utilize the flexibility of the STIS v3 system and switch out the speaker-end spades for bananas, but my review pair did not include these.

Sound



After forcing myself to stop listening and actually take notes, the first thing I wrote was: "crisp and clear, like fresh morning air after a nocturnal springtime rain." I'd started my listening with "Breathe" by Dinner Party from their 2023 album *Enigmatic Society* (16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC, Sounds of Crenshaw–Empire / Tidal). The difference in presentation in Arin Ray's vocals, from what I remember having heard when listening to the track a thousand times before, was immediate and visceral. This "wow" moment was especially profound because I hadn't touched the volume knob on my preamp—it was still at its power-on volume setting of 30 (100 is the max). Despite the low volume, through the

Theta speaker cables, the sound was full-bodied in the midrange, imaging was holographic, and there was a wonderful sense of air. As I increased volume to about 45, the clarity remained, but the soundstage expanded well beyond the confines of my Forte III loudspeakers.

I was eager to listen to a live recording and went straight to “Porgy and Bess Suite (Live)” by the Theo Croker Quartet on Jazz at Berlin Philharmonic XII: Sketches of Miles (24/96 FLAC, ACT Music / Tidal). Croker’s trumpet on this track is magical. It allowed me to test the clarity of the Theta cables, which rewarded me richly with natural midrange timbre. The double-bass sections were quick, deep, and articulate, with excellent texture in the decay. Magnus Lindgren’s flute was exceptionally layered within the soundstage, casting a tall impression with no hint of shrillness in the upper frequencies, even when played at high levels.

On “Iron Hand” from Dire Straits’ sixth and final studio album, On Every Street (16/44.1 FLAC, Warner Records / Tidal), John Illsley’s bass guitar combined guttural impact and excellent articulation. Mark Knopfler’s melodic vocals were focused in the center, and I had no issue placing instruments on the soundstage because of the excellent separation. The reverb of Mark Knopfler’s vocals when he sings “skies so blue” gave me chills. I was impressed with the natural timbre of the guitars and replayed this track several times.



I find electronic music a great test for speed and dynamics. I wanted to test the Theta speaker cables on a complex, demanding track, so I turned to Underworld’s “Schiphol Test” on Drift Series 1 (24/48 FLAC, Smith Hyde Productions / Tidal). The Theta cables

passed this test with flying colors. The drum-machine bass line was punchy, quick, and full of texture that balanced well with the electronic keyboard. The soundstage was expansive in height and depth, with exceptional air between vocals, keyboard, and bass. I had no trouble delineating each within the soundstage, even at party-level volumes. The Theta speaker cables allowed my reference system to reproduce music with a greater sense of scale than I am used to hearing.

Released in 2017, Amber Mark's debut album, *3:33 am* (16/44.1 FLAC, EMI / Tidal), was inspired by the loss of her mother, Mia Mark, four years prior. Each song reimagines one of the six stages of grief. The opening track, "Regret," is three minutes and 24 seconds of palpable emotion. Mark's vocal approach is an extraordinary test of dynamics, scale, and deep bass, and I was eager to hear how the Theta cables performed. Her raspy alto voice had a clearly defined center focus within a tall and wide soundstage filled with the reverb of John McDowell's piano keystrokes. The reverb was the most telling example of the Theta speaker cables' ability to deliver convincingly natural sound. And I was highly impressed by the air and delicacy of Alex Epton's flute on the far left of the soundstage, well behind and above Mark's singing voice.



I gravitate to indie electronic artists with a jazzy influence, and Jacob Allen, stage name Puma Blue, is a prime example. Puma Blue released his first album, *In Praise of Shadows* (24/96 FLAC, Blue Flowers Music / Tidal), in 2021, and each track is magical. "Oil Slick" is my favorite for Ellis Dupuy's drum performance, especially the speed with which he plays the snare and hi-hat, which anchor the entire song. The Theta cables presented the fast-paced drums crisply and effortlessly. Cameron Dawson's bass had definition and punch, with significant separation from Jacob Allen's delicate guitar strumming. The low noise

floor of the Theta speaker cables gave the guitar a more significant emotional presence. The expansive soundstage allowed each instrument to have its moment in the sun.

The final track I auditioned using the Theta cables was “Lisbon” by the London-based techno artist Moiré, from Brainfeeder X (24/44.1 FLAC, Brainfeeder / Tidal). Released in 2018 to commemorate the label’s tenth anniversary, this compilation includes multiple genres, such as alternative R&B, contemporary jazz, and rap. “Lisbon” begins with a synthesized cymbal in the upper left, with a constant radio-style “hiss” coming from below across the entire soundstage. “Lisbon” is my fun track from this album, but that hiss can be overwhelming if the soundstage does not have sufficient depth to create the necessary space and delineation; but that wasn’t an issue with the Thetas. I heard no harshness or shrillness from the cymbal and found the track well-organized and detailed when the bass line began. The Theta cables created an exceptionally tall soundstage, similar to my reference cables but with greater width and depth, giving me more fun on this busy track.

Comparison

My reference speaker cables are the Kimber Kable Ascent Series 8TCs, which cost \$650 for a 2.5m pair. I was delighted with them until I listened to “Porgy and Bess Suite (Live)” through the Theta cables. Compared to the Thetas, the quick midrange through the 8TC cables was slightly labored, and the upper frequencies were slightly veiled. The soundstage was more restricted in depth and width, and the midrange was warmer. The neutrality of the Theta speaker cables was obvious after I returned to my reference 8TCs. On “Lisbon” by Moiré, the radio-style hiss sounded slightly shrill through the Kimber cables, motivating me to turn the level down.



Furthermore, the reintroduction of my Kimber speaker cables increased grain and raised the noise floor. While not alarming, the elevated noise floor was noticeable on Chantal Chamberland's rendition of "I Put a Spell on You" from her 2019 album Temptation (16/44.1 FLAC, Evosound / Tidal), especially during the electric-guitar solo. The Kimber 8TC cables added some midrange warmth to Chamberland's vocals, and the cymbals had less vibrancy. The Theta speaker cables maintained the rasp of Chantal Chamberland's smoky vocals with no coloration. With their added warmth, my Kimber cables sounded less neutral. The soundstage height on my Kimber 8TC cables was comparable to the Theta wires, but the width and depth were more constricted, causing a loss of air and space.

Before hearing the Thetas, I'd never considered spending more on speaker cables than I paid for my Kimber 8TCs. Now my threshold has stretched \$1300 higher. Excluding cables, my reference system cost \$26,000, so the Theta speaker cables would represent seven percent of my overall system cost, which I consider entirely reasonable.

Conclusion

Throughout my listening to Shunyata Research's Theta speaker cables, all genres of music flowed with transparent immediacy that rivaled a live performance. Most impressively, the sotto voce portions of the music I auditioned were audible and clearly defined. The Theta speaker cables provided nuanced detail, clarity, and focus, along with exceptional dynamics. I had a preternatural sense of hearing deeper into all the music I auditioned without feeling overwhelmed with information. I was extremely sad to see these cables leave my system. I recommend Shunyata's Theta speaker cables to enthusiasts who want exceptional performance without needing to take out a second mortgage.

Killain Jones - Soundstage.com

Associated Equipment

- Speakers: Klipsch Forte III
- Streaming preamplifier: Simaudio Moon 390
- Power amplifier: Simaudio Moon 760A
- Music server: Innuos Zen Mk3 Music Server 1TB
- Turntable: Pear Audio Blue Captain John Handy with Cornet 1 tonearm and Hana ML moving-coil cartridge
- Cables: AudioQuest Coffee USB cable, Kimber Kable Select KS 1116 balanced interconnect
- Speaker cables: Kimber Kable Ascent Series 8TC
- Power conditioner: AudioQuest Niagara 1200
- Power cords: AudioQuest Storm Series Thunder (for conditioner), Shunyata Research Venom NR-V12 (for preamplifier), Shunyata Research Venom NR-V10 (for power amplifier), Shunyata Research Venom V14 (for music server)