

The Audio Beat

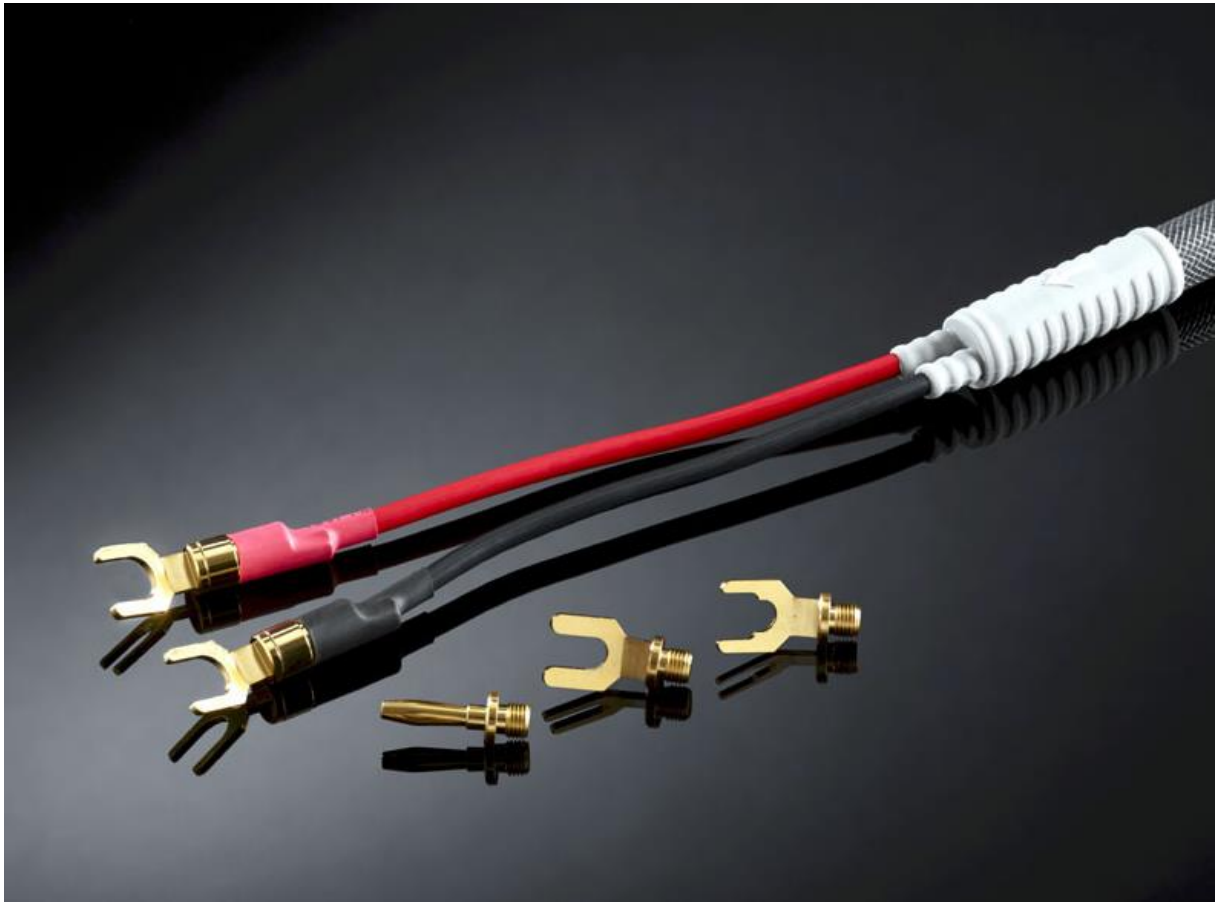
Shunyata Research

Venom Interconnects, Speaker Cables and Power Cords

by Guy Lemcoe | March 1, 2016 © www.theaudiobeat.com



The products of Shunyata Research are no strangers to readers of The Audio Beat. As recently as last August, Vance Hiner waxed enthusiastic over the Zi-Tron Sigma power cords, calling them ". . . the best I have ever used." Such a view is by no means isolated. Over the years, Shunyata Research power cords, interconnects, speaker cables and power distributors/conditioners have been subject to the reviewer's gaze, and those products have received glowing assessments. And enthusiastic endorsement of Shunyata Research products has even come from outside the audio community too. In the fall of 2015, the Electrophysiology Lab at the Minneapolis Heart Institute, led by Dr. Daniel Melby, experimented with a variety of Shunyata power cords and power-conditioning products in an effort to improve noise reduction and thereby resolution of mapping computers used in monitoring heart procedures. Those trials were overwhelmingly successful, resulting in the Minneapolis Heart Institute adopting the use of Shunyata Research products, with more development to come in this area. In the pro-music field, Shunyata products are in use by, among others, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Skywalker Sound and producer Rick Rubin.



Located across Puget Sound from Seattle, the seventeen-year-old company has most recently introduced the Venom line of interconnects, speaker cables and power cords, applying its years of design and manufacturing experience to offering audiophiles a lower-cost alternative to its much more expensive products. For example, a one-meter pair of Venom interconnects costs one-fifth of the price of the same-length Python interconnects, and the same is true of the Venom speaker cables. And the Venom HC power cord is a small fraction of the cost of the Sigma HC. If the Venom line of "signal cables," as Shunyata calls its interconnects and speaker cables, and power cords perform as anticipated, they will represent outstanding value in a field plagued by the law of diminishing returns. Removing the Venom power cords from their pizza-box packaging, I had the impression, based on their heft and appearance, that, Here in my hands is something special. As it turned out, that first impression proved to be an accurate one. Robust in appearance yet flexible enough to use where space is limited, the Venom HC power cord consists of 10AWG oxygen-free, cryogenically treated copper conductors in a dark-blue sheath terminated in molded AC connectors with nickel-plated, solid-brass contacts. They were designed based on the patented DTCD (Dynamic Transient Current Delivery) analysis, a protocol developed by Shunyata Research that measures how well power cords or power devices provide instantaneous current delivery. Continuing the tradition of artistry and quality of construction, the Venom speaker cables use certified CDA 101, cryogenically treated copper conductors in an exclusive design Shunyata calls VTX. This geometry features a conductor whose core is hollow, so that all current travels through the circumference of the conductor ". . . eliminating skin effects and random eddy currents." The conductors are encased in an elegant braided sleeve terminated in gold-plated interchangeable spade (two sizes) or banana ends. The cable is surprisingly flexible, considering its heft, and directional (marked). The business ends should accommodate any installation requirements.



The Venom interconnects come in the same velvet bags as the speaker cables and are quite attractive and flexible. They are built from 16AWG pure OHNO Continuous Cast Copper incorporating Shunyata's exclusive VTX conductor geometry and enclosed in silver-plated OFE, braided shield. The highly polished RCA connectors are 1 1/2" long and require at least 2" clearance behind components for easy connectivity. Balanced interconnects are also available.

There are two schools of thought regarding the review of audio cables. The first posits the notion that each cable should be put into the system piecemeal, while the second espouses taking the plunge and putting them all in the system at once. My approach was a combination of both: I put in each type of cable separately -- power cords, speaker cables and interconnects, in that order -- and listened, then listened to them all in the system together. My observations below were gathered throughout my time with the cables, both in isolation and used together (and in comparison to my reference cables), and I note in a few cases which cable seemed to have the greatest sonic impact.

One of the CDs I used throughout this review was Lucinda Williams' compelling 2007 release *West* [Lost Highway B0006938-02]. Without a doubt, after installing the Shunyata cables, there was an across-the-board improvement in sound. Not only was the volume greater at the same setting, there was a noticeable lowering of the noise floor. Bass became an organic entity, with greater extension, texture, heft and power. The increased transparency I became aware of reminded me of when I went from behind the glass of the control room onto the floor of the recording studio at a Chesky recording session I attended years ago: a whole new layer of information and emotion in the music was uncovered.



I was hearing minute performance details unmasked for the first time. On "Mama You Sweet," the variety of unique instrumental timbres was presented magnificently. Gia Ciambotti's background vocal on the next track, "Learning How to Live," never sounded so clear and spatially localized. A pedal-struck bass drum, now easily identified as such, reinforces the irony of the next song, "Fancy Funeral," conveying the emotion with ample body and weight.

Until this time, I had never fully "got" Dead Can Dance's enchanting album *Spiritchaser* [4AD 9 48230-2]. With Shunyata's revealing Venom cables in place, it now made a lot more sense, as the smorgasbord of percussion, electric guitar, vocals and studio wizardry drew me deeper into the passion, energy and emotion of this unique music, as performed and assembled in a nineteenth-century church in Ireland.

This revealing nature aided Hans Zimmer's music for the movie *Black Hawk Down* [Decca 4400170122], which is full of musical and aural surprises. "Vale of Plenty" is a poignant, sparse cut with the array of unusual instruments spread broadly across the stage, all made even more obvious with the change to the Shunyata cables. "Chant" raised goose bumps with its intensity and scope. The entire ensemble was spread out before me in Cinemascope fashion as the pulsing rhythm took control of the listening room. The Breton song "Gortoz A Ran - J' Attends" gave me chills as the voices carried the luscious, melancholic melody over the accompaniment. "Leave No Man Behind" starts as a whisper off in the distance and gradually builds into a rip-roaring anthem that Joe Strummer sings. I have never appreciated the full measure of the depth and complexity of this tune before. I also put John Barry's sumptuous but predictable score to *Dances With Wolves* [Epic ZK 46982] into the CD tray and pressed Play. What emerged from the speakers was a believable, scaled-down representation of the entire 95-member orchestra and 12-member chorus. On the track "Pawnee Attack" especially, the increased dynamics, speed and detail brought to life the terrifying sound of

the slapped drums. Turning to Sia's 2004 album *Colour the Small One* [Astralwerks ASW 48103], I was stunned by the clarity of this Bob Ludwig-mastered recording. Track nine, "Moon," especially caught my attention with its sparse instrumentation and boundless soundscape.

Up to this point, I was playing CDs only. Moving to analog, I cued up a favorite Jackson Browne LP, *Late for the Sky* [Asylum 7E-1017]. I have listened to this album many, many times and thought I knew it well. Wrong! With the Shunyata cables in place, I was hearing subtle layering of background voices only hinted at before. This discovery made me sit up and take notice. Additionally, each song had a richness that I found compelling. The twenty-six-year-old Browne's voice still had the angst of youth and projected a youthful innocence as his songs documented the self-doubt and mystery of growing up. It now projected a maturity surfacing out of that innocence.

Another favorite LP of mine (and of many other audiophiles) is the Hungaroton recording of the List Ferenc Chamber Orchestra's performances of Antonio Vivaldi's *Lute Concertos & Trios* [Hungaroton SLPX 11978]. This is noble and magnificent music, captured in one of the finest recordings of its kind. This music took on new life -- richer, with instrumental timbres more clearly defined and the sense of venue enhanced -- with the Shunyata cables in the system. Listening became a luminous, highly enjoyable experience. The only thing missing was a glass of toney red wine and some artisan cheese.

Finally, I grabbed my Bob Ludwig-mastered copy of Keith Jarrett's *Survivors' Suite* [ECM-1-1085] and cued it up. "The Beginning" flooded the room with all manner of percussive sounds scattered across the soundstage captured in typical lean ECM fashion. In addition to crystal-clear rendering of the instruments, the Shunyata cables allowed me to visualize the interior of the studio and the musicians within.

I attributed much of what I describe above to the Venom power cords, especially the Venom HC. My head bobbed to the music more after I swapped power cords than at any other time. I could not get over how much of an improvement these power cords made in my system. The music had assumed new meaning and urgency. I've come to believe there is a lot more music embedded in the pits and grooves than one would expect, and the Shunyata power cords allowed the upstream components to extract it.

Things were nearly as vital with the Venom speaker cables, which instantly alerted me to a level of detail, energy and finesse similar in scope to what I heard from the power cords. Back to the Black Hawk Down soundtrack, on "Still," Baaba Maal's voice was suspended on a cushion of reverb as various low-level ambient sounds come and go. I could easily hear this powerful, organic music-making with the Venom speaker cables. The music became more compelling and much less "flat" with the upgrade. I felt connected to the music more intimately than ever before. "Bakara," was especially stunning in its immediacy and presence. We regularly have helicopters fly overhead in the evening and it was the house-shaking sound of the rotors that was evoked by the soft bass notes at the beginning of "Ashes to Ashes." On the stunningly beautiful "Gortoz A Ran - J' Attends," first the flute and then the harp are heard clearly behind the vocalists weaving poignant counterpoints. Lisa Gerrard's inimitable voice became even more heartbreaking. Finally, on "Minstrel Boy," the separation of the voices of Joe Strummer and the members of the Mescaleros was tangible and localized. Toward the end of the track, as the song picks up intensity and volume, there was no congestion or distortion.

I find abstract electronic/dance music often quite stimulating and a good elixir to clear the psyche after too much instrument-derived music. British musician Richard D. James -- aka, Aphex Twin -- released his first album destined for these shores in 1993 under the moniker Polygon Window. Titled (*Surfing On Sine Waves*) [Warp CD7] and falling into the category loosely labeled IDM (intelligent

dance music), it can easily serve as a test disc. The variety of electronic sounds, effects, textures and timbres James draws out of his synths, sequencers, samplers and drum machines is staggering. Unraveling them and reassembling them into coherent music can pose challenges for even the best systems. Before I installed the Shunyata speaker cables I was totally enjoying the experience of "surfing on sine waves" with Mr. James. After, my journey took on new meaning as each electronic bleep, blip and blat was revealed with crack-of-the-whip speed, enhanced character, texture and spatiality.

With that revelation, I was getting antsy to give the new cables a listen in the biamped, DSP'd system, so I pulled more boxes of cable out of their shipping carton. I was soon looking at two more Venom HC power cords and another set of Venom speaker cables -- it would only be a matter of minutes before I had them connected. With the svelte strains of the Byrds' Sweetheart of the Rodeo LP [Columbia CS 9670] cascading around the room, my ears quickly told me my system had reached a new plateau of excellence and sophistication. What had been a convincing presentation of the music on a believable soundstage suddenly became holographic. When the music warranted it, images left the confines of my not-so-diminutive Emerald Physics speakers and took up residence at various locations in the room. This was especially apparent on electronic dance music such as track "Kein Trink Wasser" from Orbital's 1994 album Snivilisation [FFRR 8285362]. Mesmerizing.

Inserting the Venom interconnects between my turntable and preamp brought about an immediate improvement in vinyl playback. Images, whether generated vocally or instrumentally, seemed more fleshed out and believable. The performances took place on vinyl with a background that was darker and quieter. I also thought I heard deeper, tighter bass but would not swear to it. The stunning 2015 reissue of Jennifer Warnes' cultish Famous Blue Raincoat [Impex Records IMP 6021] has always sounded superb, but with the new cables it now came to life with nuance and texture I hadn't heard so clearly before. I then cued up "Heart of Gold" from Neil Young's classic Harvest [Reprise MS 2032], and this Sterling Sound-mastered LP brought me analog bliss. Each element of this cut was rendered beautifully, from the taut yet ripe bass, the "snap" of the guitar strings, to the clarity of backing vocalists James Taylor and Linda Ronstadt. Inserted between the CD player and preamp, the Venom interconnects brought equally stunning results. For example, on "Quoth," from Polygon Window's aforementioned (Surfing On Sine Waves), I was never more aware of the complexity of the soundscape Richard D. James created for this aggressive piece of IDM -- there are reverb fields inside reverb fields, all anchored to an ominous background drone.

I could go on and on citing examples of music I felt drawn to anew with the Shunyata interconnects, speaker cables and power cords. I'll spare you all of that and just state that it soon became clear the more I listened, the more I was convinced of the positive effect of these cables.

My sincerest apologies to Abraham Maslow whose "hierarchy of need" paradigm I've borrowed and twisted to suit my own mandate for these products based on what I feel are their contribution to the listening experience. At the highest level and, in my opinion, the most important are the power cords. Their effect on my system was profound, immediate and unmistakable. At the next level are the speaker cables, which carry over the signal integrity set by the power cords into the domain of the loudspeakers and, ultimately, your ears. They contributed an immediate and audible improvement. The next level is occupied by the interconnects. These can be the most problematic for some, as it is tempting to use interconnects as tone controls, altering the sound at the whim of the listener. I prefer a clearer view of the music and thus preferred the copper Shunyata interconnects to my reference silver interconnects. I grew very accustomed to the sound of my system with the Shunyata cables over the course of this review and took great pleasure in the music they so faithfully conveyed. Before beginning to write, though, I wanted to return to the pre-Shunyata configuration to

confirm my listening impressions. So, with some hesitancy, I replaced the Shunyata cables with my previous reference wires. After the recabling was complete, I played Black Hawk Down again. As I expected, the sound suddenly lost degrees of palpability, depth, transparency and dynamic range. The menacing tone of "Hunger" was lessened, and there was a reduction in the microdynamics swirling around within the mix and a damping of the energy and drift of the music. I concluded that my reference silver interconnects in particular homogenized the sound, making it pleasant instead of right. But I didn't expect a sudden lack of involvement in music I was immersed in just a few minutes earlier.

And this last component of the listening experience is, to me, the most important. A system that connects me to the music at a level beyond science and technology is a system I can appreciate and try to replicate. Given my modest front-end, the addition of the Shunyata power cords, speaker cables and interconnects transformed what was a merely a good-sounding system into a good-sounding and emotionally involving system. That was all I could have asked for.

If it sounds like I'm gushing over Shunyata Research's Venom cables, I am. Rarely have I used products that had such immediate, profound and long-lasting sonic impact. Stereophile contributing editor and close friend Tom Norton said recently that ". . . the most important part of any great recording, apart from the performance, will always be the engineering behind it, not the format." With Shunyata cable products, the truth behind that statement is easily grasped.

I urge all audiophiles with even a fleeting interest in improving the sound of their systems to grab a handful of Shunyata Venom cables and listen for themselves. Shunyata has 44 dealers in the US and 10 in Canada, along with 36 international distributors, so that should not be hard to do. The cables are quite reasonably priced by today's standards, and I guarantee you will come away from an audition with a new appreciation of what improved signal and power conduction can do for the sound of your music system.

Associated Equipment

- Analog: Pro-Ject RPM 6.1 turntable, Dynavector DV-20X cartridge, MAC Ultra Silver+ Sound Pipes phono cable.
- Digital: Sony DVP-NC685V CD/SACD player.
- Tuner: Adcom GFT-555.
- Preamplifier: Emotiva USP-1.
- Digital Signal Processor: Emerald Physics DSP2.4.
- Power amplifiers: Emerald Physics EP100.2SE and EP60.2, Emotiva UPA-200.
- Integrated amplifier: Peachtree Audio nova125.
- Loudspeakers: Emerald Physics CS2P.
- Interconnects: Better Cables Silver Serpent, MAC Sound Pipes, Synergistic Research THC.
- Speaker cables: Synergistic Research Alpha.