

Actinote Aria Cables



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actinote

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as reviewed by Paul Candy



While in operation since 1993, French cable firm Actinote (often spelled actinote) is relatively unknown in North America and its Web presence has been spotty at best. From scanning Actinote's revamped website and a design philosophy statement that was sent to me, I was able to piece together reasonably detailed information. According to the North American distributor, actinote uses a number of proprietary techniques in their designs and is thus a tad vague on specifics.

The design of all Actinote products is the result of scientific research, and relies on an undisclosed patent filed in 1990. Actinote offers cables for all audio applications: analog and digital, asymmetric and symmetric interconnects, speaker cables, power cords and power strips. All Actinote products are designed and manufactured in Europe using European components.

According to Actinote, "Any cable used in audio/video is disturbed by the electromagnetic interactions produced by itself on the one hand, and on the other hand, by its surrounding environment."

"High-fidelity components are simultaneously affected by all of these parasites. It creates inter-modulation distortions deteriorating the performance of the system. Even untrained, the ear can easily detect these phenomena of inter-modulation."

With Actinote audio cables you can be assured of the following advantages:

- Protection of signals by a highly immune structure
- Suppression of micro vibrations
- Accurate selection of the type and diameter of conductors
- Specific high quality connectors

"The combination of these elements creates a synergy-functioning system. Their combined actions produce successive anti-parasite barriers. The signals are thus preserved and protected from the electromagnetic interactions throughout the whole sound reproduction process."

Our key objective is to transcend musicality, so we have focussed on the functioning principles of the actinote cable:

- Optimal rejection of electromagnetic effects
- Perfect elimination of peripheral parasite streams
- Full management of vibrating phenomena

Over its entire new generation of digital and analog cables, Actinote now uses a proprietary connector built on its own specifications. This plug has rhodium plating for Aria and Sonata series and 24 carat gold on Forte and Mezzo. This connector has exceptional mechanical strength for perfect contact. The contact resistance is ultra-low. Balanced mass of the central pin and of the collar greatly reduced capacitance. The one-piece design ensures a high mechanical integrity and the body natural wood a total absence of

resonance".

Actinote offers cabling in four product families; Mezzo, Forte, Aria and Sonata. Mezzo is the entry level, Forte the next and so forth. For today's review I was given the Aria RCA 83 interconnect, Aria Digit XLR 130 digital cable, Aria LS 317 speaker cable, Mezzo Power Cord 150, Power Cord 150 Plus and Power Cord 150 Signature. The model number of each cable refers to its length in centimeters. Other lengths are available.



All Aria cables are sheathed in a soft white textile sleeve and are quite flexible and easy to route in tight quarters. Directional information is indicated by arrows on moveable wooden cylinders on each cable.

The Aria interconnect features Actinote's proprietary RCA connector which uses a minimal metal mass similar to the Eichmann connector. The central pin is hollow, and its surface is longitudinally cut by parallel curved ridges that act as a spring when the plug is inserted into a chassis jack. All metal parts are rhodium. Instead of using the typical a metal barrel, Actinote opted for solid wood primarily for its more benign resonance properties. Internal

wire is copper and the cable is fully shielded and appears to sport some sort of internal damping as the cable felt relatively inert when handled.

The Aria speaker cables uses copper conductors divided into two groups (separate runs for positive and negative) each with of 20 individually insulated strands of unspecified gauge and purity. They are arranged and terminated by an undisclosed proprietary process. The connectors are rhodium bananas encased in solid wood cylinders. The speaker cables were quite heavy and inert, again suggesting significant attention was paid to vibration control. The cables also feature wooden barrels that apparently assist in mechanical damping.

Apart from the Neutrik XLR connectors, the Aria Digit XLR 130 AES/EBU cable appeared to follow the same design methodology as the interconnects.



The North American version of Actinote's Power Cord 150 Plus uses carefully tweaked Oyaide C-079 and P-079 connectors while European models feature Actinote's proprietary wood encased connectors. The Power Cord 150 Signature sports Oyaide's top-of-the-line M1 and F1 connectors that retail

over \$750 on their own. Both cables are shielded and use copper wire of unspecified gauge and purity.

I was also sent a Power Cord 150 from Actinote's entry level Mezzo line which was terminated with generic North American connectors instead of the more upscale Oyaide ones.



I firmly believe that cabling should be utilized as a complete coherent system

rather than a hodge-podge mix of several brands especially with interconnects and speaker cables. Thus I was given enough Actinote to fully outfit my system. With the power cables I started with the two Oyaide 079 terminated cables on my amp and DAC and used the Mezzo on my CEC transport. Later I tried the Signature on my amp and swapped the Mezzo on the transport for a 150 Plus.



All cables were fully burned-in prior to the review. My first reaction upon firing up my system was underwhelming. I really didn't note much of anything. The clouds did not part and light did not shine down from on high. But that's generally a good thing when it comes to cables. Often something that initially sounds spectacular can later result in fatigue or irritation. During three months of listening, several characteristics gradually emerged, namely, balance, a sense of rightness and coherence plus a remarkably low noise floor. Instruments and vocal timbre was spot on. No part of the spectrum seemed highlighted or deficient in any way. The sense of scale, soundstage width and depth was not quite as voluminous as with the MIT or Sablon cables I had on hand but then again I was only aware of such things

when swapping cables. Otherwise everything was apportioned appropriately and naturally. The quiet nature of these cables and absence of the subtle mask of low-level electronic noise certainly allowed for greater insight into nuance and inflection. Musicians often say that the *space between notes* is more important than the notes themselves. If you listen to BB King, for example, it's the notes he doesn't play that create the tension and emotion in his playing. With the Actinote Aria I was more aware of this phenomenon. It's not that this was necessarily missing from other cables but simply I observed it to a higher degree with the Aria.

Music sounded pure and clear with excellent delineation of instrumental and vocal lines and exceptional rendering of musical textures. Bass was solid, suitably weighty and natural, but not over hyped or deficient in any way. At the other end of the spectrum I noted similar overall neutrality—no underlined top end nor was it rounded off or euphonic.



The Aria loom was not as dramatic and forward when compared to the MIT's Magnum M1.3 or quite as silky smooth as Sablon Audio's Panatela but in terms of conveying the musical message and intent, the Actinote was as good

as any other cable I have tried and better than most.

While music via the Aria was rich and colorful with suitable drama and flow, the MIT offered deeper more saturated tonal colors and greater texture while with the Sablon Audio Panatela, music was a tad more open and airy and tonal colors were more pastel but all three cable lines were equally good at communicating musical intent and flow.

Also of note was the Aria's dynamic stability. Even during big energetic moments with wild dynamic swings, the Aria maintained consistent perspective without music sounding compressed or pinched. Music simply ebbed and flowed with a compelling sense of ease.

I slowly drove myself completely batty by swapping from one loom to another. I was thoroughly exhausted and perplexed with the whole enterprise. The truth is the cable loom I preferred was whatever one was currently hooked up to my system. All three are excellent and possessed a wide range of strengths and little if any weaknesses and I therefore wouldn't presume to know which would be best in any one person's system. The MIT was bigger, more visceral and colorful--nothing in my experience presents music as big and boldly tactile as the Magnum M1.3. The Sablon possessed a decidedly more laid back, silky smooth open translucent feel with an excellent sense of the micro. The Actinote sat right in the middle. Again balance was top of mind. Although I'd say the Actinote was probably the most neutral and honest of the three. I was also slightly more aware of interpretive nuances in my recordings with the Aria. Neither of these looms are what I'd call inexpensive and any value judgments are up to you. While not always true, spending more tends to get you more.

When it came to the power cables, I tended to prefer each brand with their respective cabling i.e. the Gran Corona with Panatela cables, MIT Magnum AC1 cables with the M1.3 cables and Actinote with Actinote. When I mixed and matched, for example, using Sablon Audio power cords with the Actinote interconnects and speaker cables, I thought some of the magic disappeared.

Leading edges were slightly rounded off, transients dulled and tonal balance shifted to the warmer side a tad too far. Yet connecting everything with the same brand, those observations completely disappeared. This only continues to reinforce my belief that sticking with a single brand is probably a sound route to follow for overall coherence and musicality. At the very least, interconnects and speaker cables should be from the same brand and product family. But then again we audiophiles are a crazy bunch and many enjoy mixing and matching cables to obtain a desired balance. Who am I to stop you from having fun? But as I get older and hopefully a bit wiser, things like coherence and simplicity are becoming increasingly important to me.

Compared to stock power cables, the Actinote 150 Plus was on a whole other plane. On occasion I have tried some aftermarket power cables that seemed to offer little or no real benefit but with the Plus, it was a no-brainer. I heard significantly lower background noise, less grain, greater transparency, greater focus, greater dynamic contrast and a more natural sense of flow. However, no one trait stood out among the others. Again balance kept coming to mind. While not as tonally rich and dynamic as the Sablon Audio Gran Corona or crystal clear as the MIT Magnum AC1, the Plus offered greater articulation particularly noticeable on acoustic and electric bass. It's a fine all round power cable that was equally at home on amps and sources, be they digital or analog.

While the Mezzo power cable was superior to stock models, it didn't perform anywhere near the more expensive cables, thus I quickly replaced it with the Plus on the CEC transport and then installed the Signature on the Opera Reference amp.



The Power Cord 150 Signature was a madman. Talk about opening up the proverbial floodgates. The Signature was in a whole other realm of musical truth and transparency compared to the 150 Plus. Music playback was more vibrant and colorful with excellent transient attack, speed and articulation. This was vivid adrenaline-fueled, edge-of-seat stuff. The flipside was that it was not as forgiving as the Plus. A poor recording or any less than copasetic component match was clearly audible. If I switched out an Actinote interconnect for any other brand, it was clearly audible and rarely an

improvement. It was a notable difference over the Plus and considering it's roughly 50% higher asking price, it had better be.

The Sablon Audio Gran Corona & Quantum Gran Corona were both significantly bigger sounding cables with a richer, warmer tonal balance which was something I wasn't really conscious of within the context of a full Sablon cabling loom. As I have stated before, mixing and matching cables can produce wildly varying results. It can be difficult to pin sonic characteristics on a specific cable as it depends on what other cables are in the system.

They don't quite stand out at first but gradually over time the Actinote Aria and associated power cords revealed all kinds of musical riches but communicated them in a natural easy flowing manner. They are what I would call a Goldilocks cable line--not too bright, not too dark, not too aggressive, or too reticent, too analytical or too euphonic but just right. They help to create an ideal environment that allows a system to speak truthfully. If you are looking for a natural, unobtrusive and coherent sounding cabling set, Actinote's Aria line is certainly worth considering and might be the proverbial icing on the cake for a carefully selected system. If I wasn't suffering from the usual post-Christmas cash crunch, I would have purchased a set myself. **Paul Candy**

Check with distributor due constantly fluctuating exchange rates. However, expect to pay \$1000 to \$2000 per pair of interconnects and speaker cables, under \$1000 for digital cable and \$500 to \$2500 for power cords.

Actinote Aria Cables

www.actinote.com

CDN distributor

Mutine

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