

Chord Company Sarum Tuned ARAY analogue & digital interconnects

by Jason Kennedy

A few months ago I took a trip to the Chord HQ in Amesbury to see how they go about the business of cable building. I had a go with a soldering iron and discovered the delights of the canteen, but the purpose of the trip was to find out what Nigel 'the cable doctor' Finn had been getting so excited about. I had a brief dem of Tuned ARAY at the Bristol show and it was unusually convincing and I was keen to try the stuff at home, so the visit was a way of finding out more and persuading Nigel to lend me some of his new white cables. At that point Tuned ARAY had only been applied in the range topping Sarum interconnects, it has been subsequently employed in three more digital coax cables with prices starting at £220 for Anthem Digital TA. The dem that Nigel gave me in Amesbury involved a straight comparison with standard Sarum via a system with Spendor D7 speakers and electronics from Sony and Naim among others. It was very convincing and pretty loud, but the change to Tuned ARAY brought about an increase in musical coherence the like of which I've not previously encountered. Splashy, hard, messy sounding recordings turned into a group of musicians playing together in perfect time, it was uncanny. I had to have some of that.

The first example I got hold of was Sarum TA digital coax, which I believe was the first example of Tuned ARAY that Chord Co put into production. It costs £100 more than its predecessor but looks just the same, so what gives? That's the tricky bit, Chord Co won't

say, it's one of those secret ingredient type things that they'd rather not share. You could buy some and dissect it for analysis I guess, but from the few hints I've garnered this would not necessarily tell the whole story. Suffice to say that the clue is in the name, this is a tuned cable, but how do you tune a cable.

Sarum Digital Tuned ARAY is a very stiff cable with silver plated conductors, insulated with air foamed PTFE insulation and a very high density silver plated spiral shield. The stiffness is to provide mechanical damping which Chord considers to be more important in digital cables than it is in analogue ones, the white cable jacket is PTFE, also for damping purposes. The plugs are silver plated as well and have acrylic surrounds in a further effort to minimise vibration.

Sarum TA analogue interconnect is very similar in appearance to the digital but costs half the price (you get two metre lengths for your £1,600), so I asked Nigel what it was that differentiates them. They are both coaxial types, apparently, but the digital has a solid conductor and the analogue stranded. Both use micro polished silver plated copper conductors, but the analogue has a foil screen with a silver plated braid, while the digital has a very high density spiral shield, also silver plated. That, according to Nigel, is what costs the money and provides the extra noise protection that digital cables need. ▶

▶ I got a similarly stonking result with Sarum Digital TA at home; in fact, it was the cable I used when discovering just how remarkable the MSB Signature Data CD IV was in issue 104. In that instance, it provided a sense of drive, dynamics and power that brought the sound to life. Other cables have a similar sense of pace and power but seem to lose coherence when you throw something hectic at them. With simple singer/songwriter stuff, the value of this cable is not so obvious what you need are large symphonic works or high energy rock bands, music with plenty going on. The stuff that systems tend to struggle with in other words. Put on the TA digital after any other competing product and the band/orchestra starts playing cohesively. The rhythm and timing are the key to this, it's a case of when the going gets tough it's gotta stay tight. You need to be able to hold onto the groove to be able to fully enjoy the material. If that's difficult then your brain will be working too hard to relax. This is one reason why live music works better than reproduced, there is no processing going on between the source and the sound.

That was what I heard with a BNC to RCA adaptor at the send end of the cable, when connected between a Naim Unitiserve and the Cantata DAC. Nigel realised that this was a compromise and sent over an appropriately terminated length. Now the presence became phenomenal and the bass was pulled into line, with the result that Sting's bass on 'So Lonely' was now dubworthy. I know, hard to believe, but for a while there the Police were a great band, they did after all have Stewart Copeland on drums and there was plenty of animosity between them. A recipe for success or failure but one that can make the difference.

Getting the Sarum TA analogue interconnect into the system produced a less immediate result in truth, initially it just seemed to emphasise the upper mid which benefitted timing and propelled the music more emphatically. Then I put on 'The Immigrant Song' from Led Zeppelin's *How the West Was Won*, not a great sounding performance under normal circumstances and one that gets very messy at full tilt – the level it has to be played at. Shifting to the Sarum TA analogue under that circumstance was revelatory, again the coherence was wound up to 11 and the mess disappeared to leave the world's greatest rock band throwing it down in unstoppable fashion. Jimmy's guitar solo comes through in double mono, presumably for a bigger sound but this doesn't undermine his performance one iota.

I highly recommend that other cable manufacturers investigate what Chord Co has done here. This is a genuine step forward, a sea change in revealing just how important cable is. Despite what the hype says, you don't get this much progress in one step very often. If you like your music to sound really real, you owe it to yourself to check out Tuned ARAY and preferably in the PTFE sheathed guise of Sarum. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Sarum Tune ARAY stereo RCA pair

Topology: coaxial 50 Ohms

Conductors: micro polished silver-plated copper

Insulation: foamed PTFE

RCA plugs: ultra low mass, precision-machined acrylic

Shield: foil & silver plated braid

Price: £1,600/1m pair

Sarum Digital Tuned ARAY digital interconnect

Topology: coaxial 75 Ohms

Conductors: micro polished silver-plated copper

Insulation: foamed PTFE

RCA plugs: ultra low mass, precision-machined acrylic

Shield: high density silver plated spiral helix

Price: £1,600/1m

Manufacturer: The Chord COmpany

URL: www.chord.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1980 625700