

Chord Sarum Tuned ARAY cable system

by Alan Sircom

In issue 107, *Hi-Fi+* regular Jason Kennedy enthused over Chord's Sarum Tuned ARAY cables in a digital and analogue interconnect context. But *Hi-Fi+* has by tradition determined the true potential of a cable in a full front-to-back context, also dubbed the 'coherent cable loom'. The Chord Sarum Tuned ARAY is an excellent example of this ethos in action, and demonstrates the importance of getting all your ducks in a row, from an audio perspective.

There's a commonality to the cables. They all use 'micro-polished' silver-plated multi-stranded oxygen-free copper conductors, with gas-foamed PTFE insulation, and heavy gauge foil shielding throughout. There are three conductors twisted around one another (two conductor sets for the speaker cable), with one send-two receive conductors in the inherently directional interconnects. The power cords are terminated with high-grade Furutech plugs and sockets, while Sarum interconnects use Chord's own low-mass silver-plated copper and acrylic plugs. The speaker cables can be terminated in 4mm or spade lugs, but – as with all products in the Sarum range – this must be performed at the Chord factory.

How Tuned ARAY came about was from Chord's digital cable models. One of the issues in a 75 ohm digital coax cable is it's very difficult to keep it consistent (BNC improves matters, but the standard RCA phono is almost perfectly designed not to maintain a consistent 75-ohm impedance across a cable). Chord tried to find ways to reduce reflections in the cable, and experimented with using a short additional tail connected at one end of the cable, not unlike a flying earth lead, only internal (so not 'flying'). This worked... and worked a whole lot better when the tail was 'tuned' to the length of the cable itself. And the subsequent improvement wasn't just applicable to the digital domain; it applies across the board. Well, almost... Tuned ARAY benefits apply to RCA and XLR interconnects, USB and 75-ohm digital interconnects, 'streaming cable' (it can't be called Ethernet cable because the Tuned ARAY is not bi-directional), and power cords, but the loudspeaker cables are not subject to the same demands, and Chord hasn't found a way to apply the Tuned ARAY technology to loudspeaker cables.

Taken individually, the Chord Sarum/Sarum Tuned ARAY cables deliver a sound more like a really well-thought-out component upgrade, than a change in a passive component. To be perfectly honest, I'm used to hearing very good cables, but the level of improvement these bring about is fairly substantial. You need to have very good equipment in order to benefit from Sarum/Sarum Tuned ARAY (because you stand a chance of highlighting



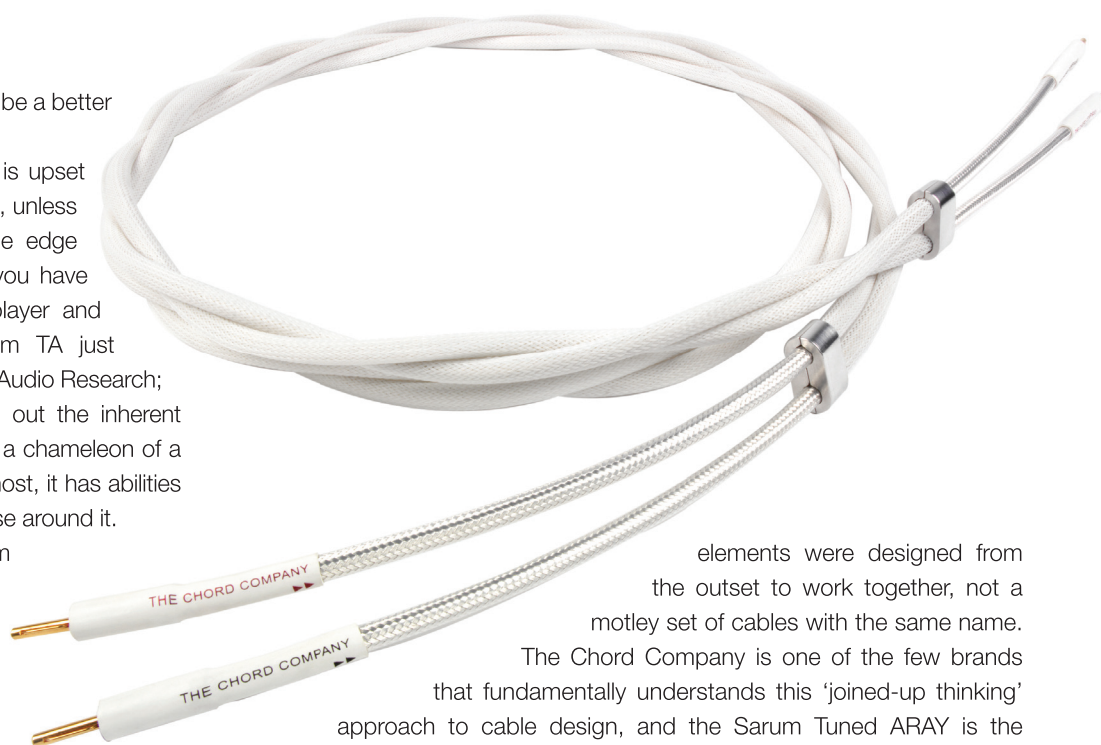
weaknesses in mediocre electronics), but that's fairly likely, given the price. As with pre-Tuned ARAY Sarum, it simply draws you into the music, leaving the reviewer with a note pad full of musician's names. Sarum shows you why you like music, and why you like given musicians. It's not a panacea – Sarum will never make me like Eric Clapton, for example – but it will make me want to run out and buy the next Kurt Vile album based on his last, so precise Sarum's musical insight. There's a greater sense of balance and order to the sound – the level of insight into the music could be mistaken for brightness with Sarum, and this is replaced here by absolute clarity. I didn't have a pair of Beryllium-tweetered Focals around for this test, but I'm convinced where the Sarum and Focal mix was not a good one (two insights making a ▶

► brightness), the pair would be a better match now.

What this doesn't do is upset the balance of your system, unless it is more teetering on the edge rather than 'balanced'. If you have an Audio Research CD player and amplifier, the Sarum/Sarum TA just reminds you why you liked Audio Research; if you use Naim, it brings out the inherent properties of Naim. It's not a chameleon of a cable, but like the perfect host, it has abilities to bring out the best in those around it.

Use a complete Sarum run, however, and, these properties increase significantly, coupled with a clarity that takes on a depth and physicality leaving you hungry for more music. It's like you started taking lessons in music theory; the sounds you hear just become that much more understandable and correct--not simply tonally, or even temporally, but in terms of melody, harmony, counterpoint, and form. And the really weird part is that the Sarum helps you 'get' musical interval in a way that normally requires a lot of ear training. This suggests a system whose

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elements were designed from the outset to work together, not a motley set of cables with the same name.

The Chord Company is one of the few brands that fundamentally understands this ‘joined-up thinking’ approach to cable design, and the Sarum Tuned ARAY is the company's ultimate expression of that approach.

Paradoxically, this does not in any way undermine the findings of Jason Kennedy in issue 107. The process of getting all your musical ducks in a row is not an easy one, and many find it a hard concept to fathom. They will be drawn to reviews of individual cables to find ‘the best’ for their system. And Chord Sarum Tuned ARAY will, in many systems, be that ‘best’, in the ways intimated by Jason Kennedy in issue 107. But this is also a beachhead for that global concept. The Chord Sarum Tuned ARAY interconnect delivers the sort of coherence and insight that makes you able to listen into music at all kinds of volumes and gives you the ‘wow’ factor a really top-class interconnect can bring to the table. But, when you begin to hear the same things happening to the same extent and in the same direction by adding Sarum Tuned ARAY loudspeaker cables and power cords, it starts to push the hodgepodge random assemblage of cables formerly used out, and the global approach takes over.

The naysayers will dismiss this as so much audiophile folly. They will suggest that input and output impedance alone define any possible differences in the electrical connection between two devices. They will also say there is no magical properties imbued by one cable that can be transferred across the entire system. Finally, any suggestion that a power cord can make any difference to the performance of a component will be met with a series of guffaws. They might be right to think there is no way that Chord's Sarum Tuned ARAY used in a complete systemic context can have an effect that makes the sum of the system sound greater than its component parts. But I don't think so. I think most people who listen to their system for enjoyment instead of point-scoring will like what Sarum Tuned ARAY does between individual components and they will like the results even better as a more complete set of Sarum Tuned ARAY cables is inserted into the system. In part, because what the Tuned ARAY concept seems to bring to the table is a sense of consistency, levelling the differences in input and output impedance

between products. As a result, I think they will like what the whole 'ducks in a row' cable system does so much, that they will look upon the arguments of the naysayers with incredulity.

Normally, the kind of cable systems that demonstrate this level of systemic performance boost have the word 'monocrystal' in the description; and typically that means recabling a system in a global context represents a major financial investment. Chord Sarum Tuned ARAY is not a trivial investment if you think of it in whole-system terms, but that investment is in line with the kind of top-end equipment with which it works. In other words, it's the cost of a new car, rather than the cost of a new house. That doesn't make it a bargain, but it does make it attainable over time... and given that the performance of Chord's own Indigo Tuned ARAY and Signature Tuned ARAY are in the same 'groove', it *is* possible to make a full Sarum Tuned ARAY cable system a goal to be attained over time, in a structured upgrade path, should you wish.

Finally, for owners of pre-Tuned ARAY Sarum; Chord can upgrade your cables. It makes a huge difference, in all the ways that made you buy Sarum in the first place, without any downsides. Just do it. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Conductors: Precision polished, heavily silver-plated, multi-strand copper, three conductors per cable (RCA, power), two in loudspeaker system

Shielding: High density heavy gauge foil dual system

Dielectric: Internal foamed PTFE
Ultra-lightweight contact acrylic damped RCA plugs (interconnects), Furutech power connectors (power), custom 4mm, spadelugs of BFA connectors (loudspeakers)

Price: £1,600 (2x1m, RCA interconnects), £1,650/1.5m pair (speaker cable) + £550 per additional mono metre, £1,100/1m (power cord)

Manufactured by: The Chord Company

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