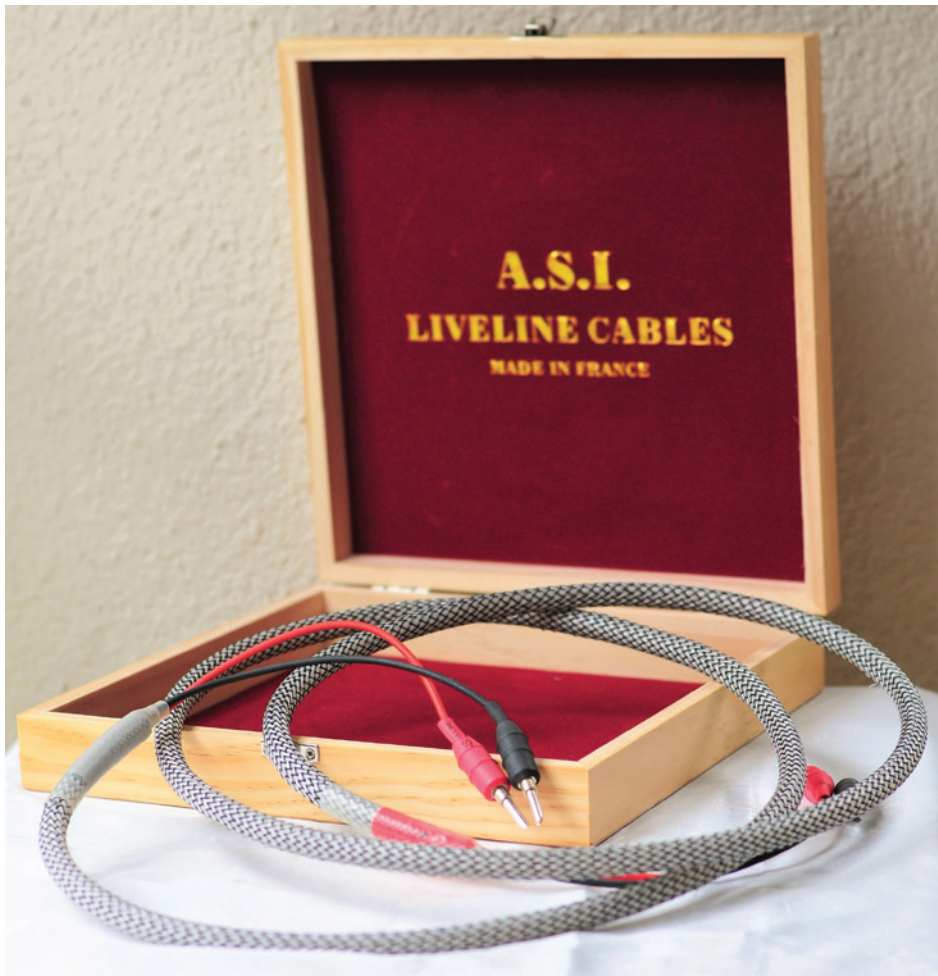




Acoustic System International Liveline



Franc Tchang is a controversial figure in high-end audio. The Paris-based proprietor of Acoustic System International produces bespoke cables and interlinks, as well as high-end loudspeakers. There's also an array of audio-enhancing accessories that are, if anything, unconventional.

Tchang's focus appears to be on the relationship between sound, air and resonance — including the way sound quality is affected by its passage through the air of a room, and the impact of the resonant properties of materials.

Resonance is usually addressed by damping, but Tchang believes that this blunts the music itself, robbing it of acoustic energy, tonal modulations and fine harmonics. In his words, it dumbs down the music.

Tchang's solution is more specific, non-intrusive resonance control, employing his

knowledge of precious metals and their resonant properties. It's an approach that reeks of dark magic and alchemy, but one that appears to have merit.

Controversial he may be, but those who've been exposed to Tchang's products hail him as a genius, and there's a long list of positive reviews to underscore his credentials. You may not subscribe to his philosophies, but the products he makes speak for themselves, it seems.

On review here are two of ASI's Liveline cables — a single-ended, RCA-terminated Liveline Reference interconnect, and a 2,4m set of Liveline speaker cables, furnished with banana plugs. Both come in nicely finished wooden boxes.

The cables themselves appear unremarkable. The accompanying leaflet warns that they employ solid-core conductors and that unnecessary bending or manipulation

should be avoided. The termination is by Neutrik, ensuring good quality without excessive price tags, and there are no fancy in-line filters or devices.

However, never judge by appearances. They cables may look conventional, but there is some very unconventional thinking behind them. The construction isn't straightforward either.

Tchang distinguishes between the 'hot' and 'return' runs of the cable, and creates a specific design for each. Thus, the former is made of solid-core OFC copper, while the latter employs pure solid-core silver. Silver conductors, he claims, achieve a quicker signal transfer rate, which improves the response and coherence of the sound.

But that's not all. In addition, tiny 2 mm sections of precious metals — gold, silver, platinum among them — are soldered onto the conductors at specifically designated intervals. There is no obvious pattern or sequence to these spliced-in sections, although it's clear that the pattern isn't random.

The conductor gauge, as well as the type, number and sequence of precious metal inserts, also differs between the interconnects and the speaker cables produced by ASI.

Tchang produces the cables personally, using his expertise as a former jeweller (which also explains his metallurgical knowledge) to perform secondary conductor extrusions, and to hand-solder the tiny 'tails' of precious metal into the cable, using silver solder.

The Neutrik termination is modified by drilling small holes into the connectors, reducing mass and further addressing resonance.

If all of this sounds more like hocus pocus than hi-fi, bear with me. I'm happy to acknowledge that a good-quality cable or interconnect with quality conductors is always going to sound better than a generic patch cord, but in my experience, the differences between well-constructed cables from different brands are often subtle.

So it was with a measure of scepticism that I replaced the regular cables in my review system with the ASI Liveline wires.



That system comprised a PS Audio Direct-Stream DAC, Vivid Audio V1.5 loudspeakers, and an Avid Diva II SP turntable linked to a Sutherland 20/20 phono stage, with a Line Magnetic LM-518IA amplifier taking the place of an Ayre AX-5 integrated amp.

Later, I also tried the same cables in conjunction with our office system, comprising a Synology NAS and Olive One network player, Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite CD/SACD deck, Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp, and Parasound Halo A21 power amp powering KEF R500 floorstanders.

If you read my review of the Line Magnetic (in the October 2016 issue), you'll know that I really enjoyed the amp's feisty, lively soundscapes, its speed and timing, and the overall accessibility of the sound. What difference could the ASI cables make?

A significant one, it turns out, although it's not so easy to define the change. Perhaps most noticeable was an improvement in timing, in the rhythm and flow of the music. The music was no longer projected, but simply filled the room with a sound that was, well, real and engrossing.

The tonal palette was fuller and the musical information more believably contextualised, so that instead of listening to hi-fi, I was now *experiencing* the music – as if the cables had made access to the full harvest and intent of the performance an intuitive and purely pleasurable affair.

Yes, bass notes seemed deeper, trebles

more lucid and staging more generous, but cherry-picking those individual aspects was no longer necessary – it was the cohesion, the momentum and the emotive intent of the music that benefited most, drawing a sonic picture that was more engaging, and more realistic, than before.

Thus, Melody Gardot's fragile, tender and yet compelling vocals on *My One And Only Thrill* became more present, more focussed and more enthralling, creating a real sense of immediacy and involvement. There was more microdetail and more air, and greater clarity, too – but it was the integrity and musicality of the overall delivery that mattered more.

Not surprisingly, the best results came from running both the interconnect and the speaker cable in the system – removing either robbed the sound of some of that delicious coherence, immaculate timing and insight. That said, just adding the interconnects already made a significant, positive difference.

Hi-fi is supposed to be about music, but it often digresses into an analysis of specific sonic attributes in the quest for an 'ultimate' truth. The ASI Liveline cables remind us that it's the music that's paramount, and that true, thrilling musicality is an audio system's real objective – an objective that these cables unequivocally achieve.

Deon Schoeman

VITAL STATS

ConstructionSolid core OFC copper and silver runs, with precious metal 'inserts'. Teflon dielectric. Techflex braided sleeve.

Directional.....Yes

Connectors Modified Neutrik

Verdict

A cable that doesn't sound like a cable. Wholesome and effortless, with no specific sonic signature, but an ability to extract and present the full musical picture.

Price

ASI Liveline Reference RCA..... R18 900
(1,2 m pair)

ASI Liveline speaker cable R21 300
(per 2,4 m stereo run)

Supplied by Ricata

e-Mail trishend@ricata.co.za

Website www.ricata.co.za

OUR RATING: 87/100

