After having used a bi-wire configuration of XLO Pro1200 speaker cable for past decade or so, I decided it was time to revisit cables. I had been using a hybrid home theater/2 ch system for a long time and realized after my son had grown we weren’t watching movies with thunderous bass to vibrate our butts any more, and the 2 channel sound of the system, while clean and distortion free, wasn’t being listened to much. On top of that my late 1980s Sony ES CD player had a tray that was moving slower than I am these days (of aging). So I did what most old stereo lovers would do. I went all in and bought a new (store demo) CD player (Esoteric K-07) and another demo Hegel H300 integrated amp. These are paired with a pair of Kef 104.2 speakers (also soon to be replaced). But asmuch as I was pleased with the sound using the XLO speaker cables, the wiring is VERY stiff and the spade connectors would sometimes come lose if a speaker were moved. In short, the cables had some undesirable qualities!

Years ago, I was convinced speaker wires did make a difference and even more so regarding interconnects (had purchased some homegrown Audio all silver interconnects years earlier). ButI started reading and discussing and realized there is a lot of snake oil being rubbed onto these peripherals. And snake oil is NOT inexpensive. This review is NOT to stir up the passions associated with these topics. Ultimately, it comes down to each person, their equipment, their ears, and whether or not they can hear a difference and in same breath whether or not said difference is better, worse, or just different. And their comfort levels with any associated cost.

First and foremost, I do believe quality counts for something, even if just longevity and looks. Really cheap anything overall has never resulted in high quality returns. But it does beg the question of how much does good really cost, and how much does one need to spend to get the sound quality they desire. There are numerous articles on the internet showing why speaker cables make absolutely no difference in how the music sounds. Same for interconnects. And there are equally numerous articles/reviews stating the opposite. One thing I do believe in is that quality does add cost, BUT adding cost does not necessarily mean adding quality.

So I went into this wanting to believe normal inexpensive 12 gauge Oxygen Free Copper (OFC) wiring was about as good as it gets, and the connections could only worsen the sound quality not enhance it. I also talked myself into believing a bi-wire speaker cable was a waste of money and that using copper jumper plates would be fine. It was difficult to see that a bi-wire setup in truth would make any difference other than to add cost (again, not to stir that debate).

After some research I purchased some relatively moderate priced cables, consisting of 4 strands of 13 gauge OFC copper. I upgraded the terminations to higher quality locking bananas. Cables arrived and looked very nice. I paid about $180 for a 3m pair of regular cables (not bi-wire). I connected the new cables though my initial impression of the locking bananas was they did not have the feel of “high end” to them. I started a song I knew very well. It took about 3 notes and with me 180 degrees off to the side of right speaker to say “WHAT?”.Where was the lower bass registers in the midranges? Vocals were more edgy, mid bass was lacking and the soundstage had shrunk. This was 4 strands of 13 gauge OFC copper combined to make a very thick OFC copper cable with upgraded connectors. Was burn in for real after all? I gave it several cds and a few days before I finally gave up and returned the cables. Maybe on a different system they would have been perfect whereas on mine they were lacking. Maybe the XLO cables were simply a much better cable. Whatever, the sound quality was immensely different and to my ears cables DO make a difference. Even if I do not understand the causes or reasons why.

I decided I needed to try a little harder to decide what to purchase. Or just live with the ultra stiff XLO cables and have them terminated to a banana. I stumbled upon information about James Schmitt’s speaker cables ([www.schmittcustomaudiocables.com/](http://www.schmittcustomaudiocables.com/)) and contacted him to discuss the cables he made along with some general questions. His email impressed me. It was a thoughtful reply with detail with the products he used to make them, how he made them, etc. We even discussed at great length possibilities using Cat 5 cables. After several emails I decided to purchase a 10 foot pair of bi wired speaker cables using 12 gauge 99,97% oxygen free copper, terminated with Nakamichi BFA banana connections, sleeved in black. These cables are referred to as Schmitt Standard OFC Bi Wire speaker wires.

When the cables arrived I was impressed with the construction quality. BFA connections were very well mounted and used nice shrink wrapping to designate the positive and negative terminals. IThis was my first experience using BFA type connectors and my initial impression was they were made with quality. 24 carat gold plated copper plugs, and they fit very snuggly in both speakers and amp banana connections (so much for the need to use locking bananas). I decided to listen to 3 different CDs carefully via the XLO cables before going to the newly arrived Schmitt cables. These cds were:

* Dave Matthews/Tim Reynolds Live at Luther College
* Patty Larkin – A Go Go (Live)
* Bruce Cockburn – Dancing in the Dragon’s Jaw

I selected these 3 discs because (a)I knew some of the songs very well and (b) the quality of recording and details in the music would help show any differences. I am not a huge Dave Matthews fan but this particular recording is simply wonderful and the guitar details are incredible.

My initial impression of the Schmitt Standard OFC Bi Wire speakercables was the lower mid range bass (absent from the previous cables) was fully intact. I did NOT do any A/B tests against the XLO Pro1200 cables because they are a pain to connect. Every song I played using the SchmittStandard OFC Bi Wire speaker cables sounded crisp, details were very evident and the soundstage was both decently wide and deep. I would add (based upon memory) the XLO soundstage may be a bit wider but certainly was not worth the trouble to verify. Vocals were clean, instruments were well placed and the detail was never edgy. The mid range was slightly forward of the speaker plane. I listened to several songs from each of the above CDs and never once felt I was missing anything. Without going into explicit detail of what I heard or didn’t hear, I emailed James and simply told him I was happy with the cables, felt they offered a lot of sound quality especially for the money, and the BFA banana connections were simply out of this world nice. They fit very snuggly and make very good contact with the speaker terminals.

At this point I was left wondering what made the difference. The first cables I had purchased (from different manufacturer) were very well made and used quality parts. They were not, however, bi wired, and they used fairly well made locking banana connections versus the BFA type. But sound wise they fell far short. Again, not to stir controversy, but I walked away from this believing once again cables can and do make a difference in the sound. But, different does not mean better and I also believe the term “better” may depend equally on the equipment used, the music preferred and the ears of any particular person.

So James responds and then lets me know he had received new wiring that he believed was an upgrade to the wiring used in the cables I had just purchased. But he had been hesitant to use it for my cables given he had not had much time with it. I thanked him for the teaser especially given I had just purchased the Standard OFC Bi Wire speaker cables. But, I was happy with them and for most part just let go of it.

Few days later James sent me another email along with a proposal. He wanted an honest test of his new cables, wanting to make sure he was not biasing himself to something that wasn’t there. From our conversations, he knew my thoughts on snake oil and the ability of the human brain to believe what it wants to believe. This is very similar if you ever host a wine tasting party where people drink various wines without knowing what the wine is and then provide their comments and ratings. If you allow the bottles to stay visible you almost always bias the results based upon price paid. You can further prove this point by taking an $80 bottle of wine and fill it with $10 wine and see what your friends think. Then have them compare what they just drank to the true $10 wine as well as the original $80 wine now stored in the $10 bottle. It is common for people to be fooled based upon price.

I digress. James offered to send me a pair of his new cables at no charge and did offer to let me keep them if I felt they were indeed better. I would not otherwise be compensated for my time or for the evaluation. But I did want to disclose that aspect for anyone reading this article and wondering if I were a paid prop. I would never do that and told James I would write this review regardless of how it turned out. He was completely okay with that and gave me full reign to conduct my review as desired.

The new cables arrives and looked very similar to the original pair I had bought with exception the new cables were sleeved in gray versus the black of the original. I had asked for this to make sure I did not confuse the pair. Otherwise they looked identical to the Standard OFC Bi Wire speaker cables I had purchased. James refers to this product as theSchmitt Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire speaker cables. The BFA connections were the same Nakamichi, 24 carat gold plated copper used in the cables I had previously purchased.

I selected the same three discs to listen to and this time did the fairly time consuming ordeal of doing A/B comparisons between each song.I would listen to a song using the Schmitt Standard OFC Bi Wire cables followed by listening to same song using the Schmitt Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables.This took time and I sometimes had to go back and repeat the evaluation to be sure.

The first track I compared was from the Dave Matthews/Tim Reynolds Live at Luther College CD, Disc 1 track 1, One Sweet World. This song offers a lot of detail in the guitar work where you can easily hear fingers going across strings, soundstage is wide and deep and instruments can normally be located via listening. The original Schmitt Standard OFC Bi Wire cablesdid very well with this song. At the 57 second mark distinct guitar work appeared in the left channel while the vocals remained centered and distinct. Similar things occurred at the 3:20 mark, 3:47 mark and finally the 4:47 spot. Overall, the Schmitt Standard OFC Bi Wire cablesdid very well with balancing details with smoothness.

I switched thingsfor my first experience with hisCustom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables. The first thing I noticed was rather immediate. The new cables played louder, forcing me to try and adjust for that. Once sound level was adequately adjusted I started again and was struck by a sense the sound stage was both wider and deeper with the vocals being a little more forward of the speaker plane than the Standard OFC Bi Wire cables I had bought. Around the twominute mark there was guitar work which simply did not fade into the crowd cheering. The music seemeda bit more dynamic. The lower mid bass of the new cables was ever so slightly less than the original cables though with time I felt this was due to added detail and were simply less smudgy sounding.

Round one went to the newer Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables.

Next song was Stream, a guitar duet from disc 2 of the Dave Matthews/Tim Reynolds CD. This comparison was very similar to the first, with the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cableshaving a wider and deeper soundstage, more detail without any added harshness. They had a lot more guitar detail at the 4 minute mark and again at 4:47 as the guitars began in far left channel and merged toward the center.

Round 2was won by the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables.

Time to switch discs and I went with the Patty Larkin Live CD, which is also very acoustic in nature with detailed guitar work but this time with smooth female vocals. I started with the final track, “Good Thing”. The Standard OFC Bi Wire cables did well overall with this song though the vocals were somewhat laid back and seemed parallel to the fronts of the speakers. Guitar was well defined without much noticeable blurring with vocals. Once I switched to the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables, however, the soundstage widened and deepened, very similar to what it had done with the Dave Matthews CD. Her vocals were now about 2 feet in front of the speaker plane and the guitars at times extended beyond the edges of the speakers. In many ways the speakers seemed to disappear and the stage was laid out in front of me.

I then played the third track, “Tango” on both sets of speaker cables. This proved to be more of the same as the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cableshad a larger soundstage while also having added clarity such that guitar strings and vocals were easily separated. While the Standard OFC Bi Wire cables were clear, defined and detailed, the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables made the speakers disappear and the guitars were sharper.

Rounds 3 and 4 were also won by the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables.

This was becoming a pattern, though both recordings were live recordings. Next up would be a studio recording and I chose Bruce Cockburn’s Dancing in the Dragon’s Jaws. This is a very good remastered recording and the only song I chose was Wondering Where the Lions Are. For a mostly acoustic recording it also adds some very strong bass elements. Using the Standard OFC Bi Wire cablesI noticed the bass was tight, instruments were clearly defined and separated, no edginess noticed in the vocals and the soundstage was nicely wide, though the vocals did seem to originate from the speaker plane. I switched to the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cablesand sat down. The bass was just as tight as the Standard OFC Bi Wire cables but had more impact. The soundstage was not significantly wider than before but was very much deeper. The vocals again were well in front of the speaker plane and had greater height, providing more detail without any added graininess.

At this point a pattern had emerged. While the Standard OFC Bi Wire cables provided good overall sound quality, there was no question the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cableswere “better” to my ears. The added detail was easily heard but more surprisingly was the added width and depth of the stage. All of this without any undesirable artifacts creeping in or fatigue.

Since that time, I have been listening to music exclusively with the new “evaluation” Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables, and have not returned to the Standard OFC Bi Wire cables. I have been reacquainted with Josh Ritter and Amazon thanks me for that. I never did really enjoy his music when I had my hybrid HT/2ch system. However, with the new equipment and now the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cables I am finding his music highly enjoyable. I ended up buying several Bruce Cockburn CDs with similar impressions. While I would not hesitate to recommend the Standard OFC Bi Wire cables, I have to say on my system the Custom Audio Reference 100 bi-wire cablessound substantially more musical.

This will return me to my starting point. I remain a doubting Thomas about how much some charge for speaker wires and the snake oil claims they often make. Spending more money does not guarantee better sound. And while I now believe speaker cables do indeed make a difference, I still subscribe to the thought different and better are not always one and the same. One set of cables may well do better with one system than another, and the same for different sets of ears.

These cables are very well made and perform very well. Most of the music I now listen to is acoustic in nature and with my components, these cables shine. I have never auditioned cables that cost $50 or $100 per foot and therefore I cannot say these are all covered in snake oil. However, it is difficult to imagine they are that much better than what I am listening to as I type this. No snake oil is needed to know these cables do a great job.

The quality of these Schmitt cables is very high and the cost is very affordable. The BFA banana connections are very nicely made and they work wonderfully I wholeheartedly recommend the Custom Audio Reference 100 cables for anyone who wants quality speaker cables at an attractive price. In same breath if your system is sounding overly forward or bright, you may want to try the Standard OFC cables first. James offers a very lenient evaluation period so the risk is low while the quality is high. I hope that something here has helped to describe these cables. Lastly, James did say I could keep these cables if I desired (after evaluating them). This was an easy decision! I do not expect to be paying for postage any time soon!

Regards!

John B.