Allnic Audio • Mu-7R Interconnects and ZL-5000 Speaker Cables

". . . reference 'low-loss' cables at sensible prices."

by Marc Mickelson | May 7, 2019

A few years ago, when I first wrote about a string of Allnic electronics, the brand was still in its infancy here in the US. Now, thanks to the efforts of distributors David Beetles and Albert Porter, it's an established adolescent -- one of the brands to consider if you believe, as I do, that the best portrayal of recorded music occurs with vacuum tubes somewhere in the signal chain. I greatly admired the L-3000 line stage, and thought even more of the H-3000 phono stage, which I followed up with coverage of the H-3000V phono stage and HA-3000 head amp. The former allows for tailoring of the EQ curve for LPs mastered with a curve different from the standard RIAA, and the latter is an audio anachronism -- a pre-preamp for low-output moving-coil cartridges. I praised all of these products for their amazing three-dimensional presence and natural rendering of tone and texture. But perhaps even more noteworthy, the products put Kang Su Park, the head of Allnic, on my radar, and since then I have followed his work, as he has rolled out more and more ambitious designs.

Prices: Mu-7R interconnects, $2300 per meter pair; ZL-5000 speaker cables, $3800 per three-meter pair.
Warranty: Two years parts and labor.

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I have yet to hear any of Mr. Park's newer electronics in my system, but I certainly want to. So it was with no small amount of surprise and anti-climax that I discovered he had turned his efforts to audio cables: interconnects, speaker cables, power cords, digital cables, even phono cables. Wha' huh? This seemed like a reach -- the equivalent of a car manufacturer deciding to make motorcycles. Such an about-face also has an effect on a company's place within the audio industry. Strategic relationships suffer when products that were once considered complementary -- amps and speakers, for instance -- are now made by companies that are competitors; and dealers who sell products in one category may decide to forgo products in another, especially when we're talking about cables, which are abundant and often aggressively priced to attract resellers.

So, when David Beetles asked if I'd be interested in giving some Allnic power cords a listen, I was hesitant, even a bit resistant. A new Allnic phono stage or preamp? Bring it on. But power cords? Not so much. Well, they *were* from Allnic and Kang Su Park, so I rationalized and then relented, making sure I was without obligation for coverage of any kind.

That you're reading this review obviously means that those power cords were a success -- to such an extent that a full set of interconnects and speaker cables, along with more power cords (see sidebar), arrived afterwards. The Allnic cables are unique for two reasons: for their no-nonsense design and materials, and for one particular detail of their construction that sets them apart from the vast bulk of competing designs.

First, the design and materials. Kang Su Park's electronics make use of technologies both old (rare and esoteric direct-heated triode tubes) and new (Permalloy transformer cores and GEL Tube Dampers, along with glass "chimneys" that dissipate heat). His audio cables follow this same something-old, something-new approach, while adding attention to detail that literally leaves no area of design untouched.

The overall goal of Allnic's cables comes from the company's Zero Loss technology, which aims to minimize resistance. This doesn't refer so much to electrical resistance, although this is surely considered, but rather to anything that impedes the signal. The goal is to eliminate loss, and this occurs through the choice of OFC copper conductors, which have an optimized thickness; through the contacts, which use various methods to increase surface connection; to the way in which the conductors and connectors are fused, via 1000-degree Celsius hot-melt welding -- no soldered or screw-on connections here. Regarding the welding, David Beetles relayed a story about the effects of this procedure on the AC feed of businesses near Allnic: because the welder sucks massive amounts of current, it causes the lights in nearby buildings to flicker. Allnic began using it only at night to lessen the inconvenience.

The cables also use a novel shielding material -- mu-metal, a soft ferromagnetic nickel-iron alloy. Mu-metal's high permeability makes it ideal for shielding sensitive electronics from static and low-frequency magnetic fields, and this makes its use as a shield for high-quality audio cables seem natural. Allnic uses a braided form, touting it as a "world premiere in [the] audio domain."

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Finally we come to Allnic's MRCT, or Midrange Control Technology. This addresses what the company calls a "protruded midrange," which I take to mean midrange emphasis. To combat this, Allnic uses plated conductors for its interconnects, and these, the company says, provide "slight midrange braking." A especially heavy gauge of wire is used to support low frequencies and control capacitance.

Visually, the Allnic cables are as nicely finished as any. They use a braided outer sleeve, and their connectors are heavy, custom parts. The RCAs and XLRs have split pins for greater surface contact and tight connections, and the patented "double-blade" spade features tines that are bent back toward the rear of the connector, so they are not flat, offering some spring to ensure better connection. The interconnects are flexible; they won't lift light components into the air. The speaker cables have nicely styled transition points and are easy to position on cable risers. All in all, the Mu-7R and ZL-5000 don't look like the products of a company whose core business is tube electronics.

How do you -- or I -- go about evaluating cables? Do you add a pair of interconnects here, a power cord there, and then assess the sonic differences with each addition? Or do you go whole hog and swap out all of the cables at once and then listen? Of course, the answer is that audiophiles do both, in addition to adding and removing incrementally along the way. It's the same when you're reviewing a full set, or loom, of cables. If you really want to hear what they're about, if you really want to understand them, you have to be systematic, adding cables one at a time and also the entire set all at once. You then remove them incrementally and all at once. From all of this swapping, you bring your various observations together and create a description of the sound. Slow, steady and deliberate win when it comes to reviewing cables.

Thankfully, Allnic distributor David Beetles was patient with me during my evaluations. I not only inserted and removed the cables he supplied many times, but I also used them both as a complete set and à la carte -- with different speakers, amps, preamps and sources. Break-in also had an outsized effect with the Allnic interconnects, speaker cables and especially the power cords, and that necessitated a longer-than-normal evaluation period. Manufacturers who submit products for review are rightly anxious for coverage to appear, so I was especially grateful that I could use, and not use, the Allnic cables in ways that provided greater insight into their performance. If I had rushed, my evaluation

And power cords, too

As mentioned above, the first Allnic cables David Beetles sent to me were two power cords. Allnic actually has two different models: the ZL-3000 ($1400 per 1.8-meter length) and ZL-5000 ($2000 for 1.8-meter length). Beetles sent a pair of the ZL-3000s, thinking perhaps that keeping expectations on a realistic plane was more prudent than sending the top cord

would have been incomplete, and this review would be different.

In my earlier reviews of Allnic electronics, I noted certain sonic qualities that I found both obvious and appealing. These included a three-dimensionality that gave the music an almost physical presence. I also praised the overwhelming sense that performers inhabited the space the products conjured. This was equal parts in-room density and from-the-recording resolution. All of this made for "spooky presence," a phrase that still defines the Allnic sound for me.

Well, the sound of the Allnic cables -- as a whole and individually (with some slight variation for the power cords) -- if you can call it "the sound," was both familiar and unfamiliar. The tonal signature was extremely even-handed, neither warm and full nor cool and lean. Perhaps this was due to Allnic's technology, aimed at evening out the midrange, but it meant that the equipment and recordings sounded distinct, without any sort of artificial flavoring that can enliven in the short term but create fatigue over time. And as with the various Allnic electronics I've heard, the Allnic interconnects and speaker cables presented performers and space in a distinct way: focused, corporeal, roomy. But what was most distinguishing was how the Allnic cables seemed to concentrate the recording's personality, portraying the music with a singular sense, its own intrinsic character. Time and again the variation from one cut to the next belied any sort of overt personality, the recording and its particular ratio of presence to space conveying the most about the music and the sound.

I have heard Dire Straits' self-titled debut LP [Warner Bros. BSK 3266] or CD [Warner Bros. 9 47769-2] on every system I've owned since I was a teenager. Even over forty years after it was released, it is still considered stunningly well recorded -- sounding better, I would argue, than *Love Over Gold*, which is so often cited as the best-sounding Dire Straits album. I pulled out the debut LP to hear with, first, the Allnic interconnects between phono stage, preamp and power amps, and it was all there: the bell-like clarity of Mark Knopfler's guitar work on "Down to the Water Line," the nearly endless decay (and tape bleed-through) of the wood block that open's "Water of Love," and the lilting chorus of "Wild West End." It wasn't so much that the Allnic cables simply resolved all of this; instead, they preserved its singularity within the fabric of very busy music. Knopfler's voice had its distinct husky nasality, his vocals spoken as much as sung. The Allnic cables secured the recording's uniqueness while enhancing the band's presence and the space around it, although "enhancing" may be overstating the issue. It may rather be a matter of preservation, of hearing this recording in all its true, naked glory.

The sense of space these cables conveyed was often stunning, although, again, the recording has to oblige. Here, I was back to listening to Suzanne Vega's great *Close-Up Series* CDs [Amanuensis 2507], these intimate, deeply felt, nearly unplugged reinterpretations of her previously recorded songs never failing to impress anyone who hears a few of them. With the Allnic cables in the system, it wasn't so much that I could pick out musicians in space, which was surely the case, but that the space itself was so, well, spacious -- side to side and front to back. "Blood Makes Noise" has some growling bass, presumably to mimic blood coursing through veins, but it never overwhelms the work of the other musicians, never muddies to the point of congealing everything. The recording's venue and its unique atmosphere were fully intact.

In terms of the overall balance -- the relationship of tonality to dynamics to resolution -- the Allnic cables were true to the recordings, neither emphasizing nor recessing any region. "Honest, the real thing" is how I summed it up in my listening notes, meaning that there wasn't any fake leanness that can give the illusion of transparency without it actually being the case, no leading-edge emphasis that can impart excess speed or air. There was, instead, an endearing sense of rightness, a fundamental and attempting to begin with a bang. Little did he know that as far as I knew at the time, the ZL-3000 *was* Allnic's top of the line.

Why power cords have an effect on musical reproduction is still a controversial subject, though the controversy comes mostly from people who don't believe that six feet of cable at the end of a long power-delivery system not designed specifically for the reproduction of music can amount to a hill of beans, sonically speaking. However, from the component's perspective, the power cord is actually the first six feet, not the last. Good power cords do their thing right before the AC enters the component, proximity making for the maximum sonic effect.

Like Allnic's interconnects and speaker cables, the company's power cords address every aspect of design in order to minimize loss, with nothing left to chance. Each of the two power cords has a custom plug with split tines and an IEC with "box-like clips" for firm connection. Connections are hot-melt welded at 1000 degrees Celsius, not crimped or soldered. The wire is different for the ZL-3000 and ZL-5000, with the latter being of a heavier gauge but still optimized in terms of its thickness. Mu-metal shielding is also used.

With this entire review hinging on a pair of the ZL-3000 cords, I used them first with my Lamm M1.2 mono amps and moved them around the system once other Allnic cables arrived. Break-in was crucial, with the power cords sounding liquid but dull right out of the box but gaining top-end sparkle -- and then some -- after a week of burn-in. I was impressed with not only the quiet the ZL-3000s brought to the amps, but also the sense of poised energy, transients displaying more snap and drum strikes greater leading-edge pop. Before the ZL-5000 cords arrived, I thought I had a full understanding of the sound of the Allnic AC approach, but I was only at the beginning. The ZL-5000s are easily among the best-sounding power cords I've ever heard, adding enhanced midrange immediacy and expression, a certain single-ended-like directness, to the sound, while never sounding dark or cloying.

It initially occurred to me that a prudent audiophile could assemble an all-Allnic cable loom by mixing and matching power cords, instead of relying on just the ZL-5000. After experience with both, I found that this was true up to a point, with the ZL-5000 proving itself to always be the choice if cost is no consideration. I could hear its contributions, and the extra $600 always seemed well spent. However, for lower-power components like phono stages or DACs (not counting Allnic's own top-of-the-line models, which use some serious tubes), the ZL-3000 would not be so much a compromise as a shrewd choice. This goes for the turntable too (if you've not tried a really good power cord on your turntable, you don't know what you're missing).

-Marc Mickelson

honesty that let the components and recordings dictate what was heard. And when the recording is outstanding, as is Telarc's SACD of Stravinsky's *Firebird* [Telarc SACD-60039], another oldie but goodie, the results can be as good as I've heard my system sound -- vivid, impactful and just plain exciting. Conversely, there was nowhere for grit, strain or chalkiness to hide. I haven't had a piece of Allnic equipment in my system for years, but it would have been interesting to hear something from the company with its own cables. I suspect that I'd be even more enamored, even closer to adding one of the company's preamps or phono stages to my system.

I do wonder, however, if in some way what I'm describing gives the impression that these interconnects and speaker cables (and power cords) are par for the course, unremarkable, when, in fact, I think they are something special -- for their inherent tonal evenness, their spatial definition, their ability to convey presence and space in seemingly equal amounts, their honesty to whatever signal passes through them. I began to wonder what was the cause of what I was hearing -- more signal or less noise? Or both? Whether all of that means the Allnic interconnects and speaker cables are what you consider something special is a different matter, but these are reference "low-loss" cables at sensible prices, nothing you have to settle for, even if you have a full system of non-Allnic electronics. Never mind that Allnic is best known for its electronics, there are very good sonic reasons to not only consider these cables but buy and treasure them.

As for the competition, Shunyata's Sigma line comes quickly to mind, but I've not heard those interconnects and speaker cables in my system. The set of cables with which I'm most familiar, and the last set of cables I reviewed, were Nordost's mighty Odin 2. I said about Odin 2, they present "the truth of the musical signal, the electronics and speakers with unequaled fidelity," which sounds similar to what I'm saying about the Allnic cables. Yet, in my listening notes on the Allnic cables, I called them "the anti-Odin 2." What I meant by this seems easily understandable -- the Allnic cables are not like Odin 2 -- but that's not what I was getting at. It's not that the Allnic cables sound completely different from Odin 2. Instead, while they sound broadly like Nordost's top of the line, with some variation, there is still one huge difference: price. You can buy an entire set of Allnic cables, power cords included, for the cost -- $22,499 -- of one pair of Odin 2 interconnects. Cost being equal, Nordost's proprietary process for creating Odin 2, along with the cables' outrageously high resolving power, would give the nod to Nordost. But for some systems and most budgets, the Allnic cables will be just the finishing touch.

Yes, Nordost offers other cable lines that cost less; I've also reviewed Valhalla 2, which are still much more expensive than the Allnic cables. But when all possible competition has been considered, the Allnic interconnects and speaker cables still stand their sonic ground, offering "the truth of the musical signal," price difference or not.

Kang Su Park has elevated the Allnic brand on the depth and breadth of his electronic line, which continues to evolve at a pace that makes me wonder if he is actually two or three people. His enterprising nature is all the more on display in his cables, which are no cookie-cutter designs using off-the-shelf wire and connectors covered in an obscuring mesh wrap. They are from-the-ground-up designs for which Mr. Park has left no aspect unaddressed. The professed philosophy behind them -- eliminating signal loss -- is on display in their sound, or lack thereof, while the use of mu-metal for shielding and hot-melt welding for connections is unique in the cable market. Given all of this, the prices Mr. Park is charging seem out of line with not only the market in general but his manufacturing care and costs. This is my way of saying that these cables seem positively cheap, given what they offer.

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In general, the Allnic interconnects and speaker cables sound more like the electronics and speakers with which they are used than some innate character of their own. And if you think about it, that's really what you want from cables: to get out of the way, to neither add to nor subtract from the music. Throughout my time with them, and the many system iterations with which they were used, they always imparted an authentic sense of the music, as though the system was in a purer, more direct state.

Even so, I couldn't remove one nagging desire as I listened: to hear the Allnic interconnects, speaker cables and power cords connecting some of Mr. Park's latest and greatest electronics. To go all Allnic, all the way, in other words.

Associated Equipment

Analog: TW-Acustic Raven AC turntable; Graham B-44 Phantom Series II Supreme and Tri-Planar Ultimate U12 tonearms; Denon DL-103R and Dynavector XV-1s (stereo and mono) cartridges; Nordost Odin 2 phono cable; Lamm Industries LP2.1 phono stage.

Digital: Ayre Acoustics DX-5 DSD "A/V Engine"; CEC TL1 CD transport; dCS Rossini DAC, Transport and Clock; Timbre Technology TT-1 digital-to-analog converter; Genesis Digital Lens; Toshiba Satellite laptop.

Preamplifiers: Convergent Audio Technology SL1 Legend, VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference.

Amplifiers: Kenwood L-07M and Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference monoblocks, Krell Showcase 7 multichannel amp, Sonance Sonamp 260 stereo amp.

Loudspeakers: Wilson Audio Alexia 2 and Alexx.

Interconnects: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Odin 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Cobra and

Anaconda.

Speaker cables: AudioQuest William E. Low Signature, Nordost Odin 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Cobra and Anaconda.

Digital cables: AudioQuest Diamond USB cable; Nordost Valhalla 2 S/PDIF, AES/EBU and USB cables.

Power products: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference, Nordost Qkore grounding system, Quantum QB4 and QB8, Quantum Qx4, Shunyata Research Denali 6000/T and 2000/T.

Power cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence Reference and MusicCord-Pro ES, Nordost Odin 2 and Valhalla 2, Shunyata Research Zi-Tron Cobra.

Equipment rack and platforms: Silent Running Audio Craz³ 8 equipment rack and Virginia Class Reference platforms (under Lamm M1.2 amps), Harmonic Resolution Systems M3 isolation bases.

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