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BACK TO "BASICS"



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Slashing the cost of high-end cable performance... The Supra Sword Loudspeaker Cable

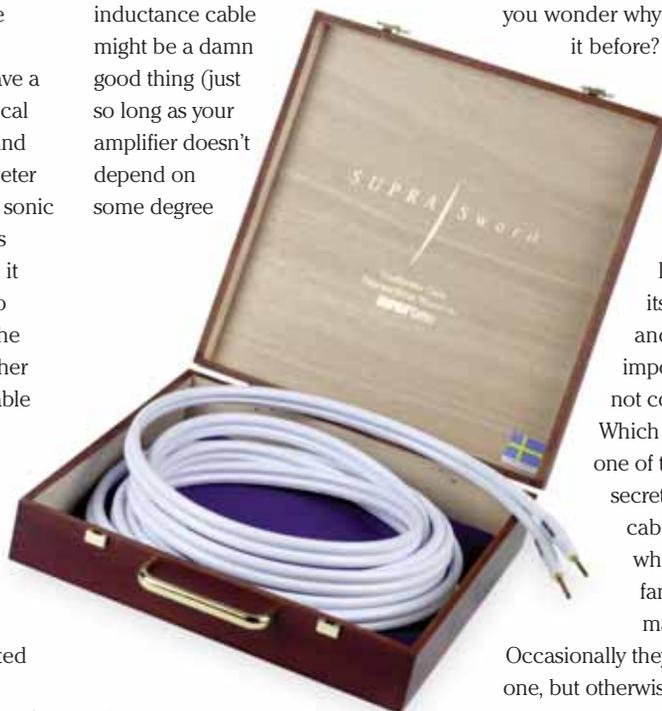
by Roy Gregory

There's nothing the audio sceptics and DIYers love to hate more than expensive cabling: it's all snake-oil, over active imagination and over developed profit margins as far as they're concerned. Which makes the new Supra Sword loudspeaker cable as interesting a challenge to the nay-sayers and curmudgeons as it threatens to be to the committed cable-peddling establishment. You see, here we have a cable with a sound claim to technical superiority in a readily measured and easily understood electrical parameter that should confer unquestionable sonic benefits. In short, the Sword offers virtually zero inductance, making it theoretically the next best thing to identical in performance across the audio bandwidth. Yes, there are other considerations, but as far as this cable goes, that's the biggy.

What's better still is that the cable comes from Supra, a company best known for budget cable product. Admittedly, the Sword is their new flagship design, but even so, a three-metre stereo pair, terminated in either Z-plugs or spades (and delivered in a rather nice wooden box) will set you back a mere £700, a sum which, whilst it isn't exactly chicken feed, barely registers on the radar usually used to detect high-end loudspeaker cables. But if it's so clever and potentially so good, how come it comes from Supra? No disrespect, but surely one of the boutique cable brands would have got there first.

Well, actually no. In fact, this cable could only have come from Supra – and therein lies the tale.

Audio nut and ex-telecoms designer Johnny Swärd (yup, you guessed – it means sword in Swedish) had a bright idea. Given that signal transmission was his thing, it dawned on him that a zero inductance cable might be a damn good thing (just so long as your amplifier doesn't depend on some degree



of cable inductance to keep it stable – a la Naim Audio). More importantly, he figured out that you could make one by winding each conductor in two, closely coupled layers, one twisting clockwise, the other anti-clockwise. That's exactly what the Sword consists of. Cut open one of the pale-blue, 9mm thick conductors and inside you'll find a layer of 12

individually insulated copper solid-cores, twisted clockwise and separated by a thin layer of PE from an identical layer laid in the opposite direction over a solid PE core. Combine two such conductors into a classic 'Figure-Eight' lead (a la Naim NACA5) and there you have a speaker cable. Simplicity itself, you wonder why nobody thought of it before? Well, the answer is

two-fold: things always seem easier with hindsight, but more importantly, most cable plants took one look at the design, its limited applications and declared it if not impossible then certainly not cost-effective to produce. Which is where we come to one of the industry's best-kept secrets. Most of those 'audio cable manufacturers' whose names are so familiar don't actually make cables themselves.

Occasionally they might actually specify one, but otherwise, they simply go to a cable plant and buy reels of stock product that happens to be useful for audio applications (or so they think). If they buy enough they might actually get it screen printed with a brand name, otherwise nylon webbing covers a multitude of sins. Terminate it, stuff it in a box and there you go. It's astonishing how many popular audio cables feature in the pages ▶

► of the RS catalogue!

Which is what sets Supra apart. Not only do they manufacture all their own cables, but they *ONLY* manufacture for audio and AV use. Offered the Sword design, owner Tommy Jenving was quick to appreciate both the advantages and the difficulties involved. But with total control over the manufacturing process and a commitment to the audio industry that made the cable's unique qualities a bonus rather than an obstacle, he undertook to develop a method of manufacturing the product.

Watching Jenving Technology make cables is a genuinely impressive process. A far cry from the hand-built, craft-like procedures more familiar to audio enthusiasts, a cable 'line' might be anything up to 100 metres long, with many individual stages and processes. Huge drums spin at one end, feeding multiple raw conductors into machines that wind them, extrude insulation, weave screens, add extra conductors or drains and finally add an external jacket. The options when it comes to materials and geometry are mind-boggling, but one thing becomes clear. Any cable in which one layer goes clockwise and the other anti is going to be a two-stage process – which makes it a very expensive and time consuming operation. The other thing that impresses is the precision that Jenving apply to their cables. Look closely at the lines and there's significant attention paid to the precise alignment and tensioning of each element, the speed of the process and the dimensions and tolerances of the extruded insulation. It's a factor perhaps best expressed by the fact that to-date, Jenving manufacture the only HDMI cable capable of operating over ten metre lengths – for most of the competition it's nearer two metres.

The end result of all this effort and attention to detail is, in the case of the Sword, a thick wire in the classical loudspeaker cable mould, set apart by its out-size dimensions and striking hue. Subtle the Sword is not, although its

relative inflexibility (at least in sideways terms) means that it lies in attractively sweeping, if not terribly compact curves. It only comes pre-terminated as listening has confirmed that the quality of the crimping used is critical to maintaining the cables' performance. Termination is via a proprietary Supra post, into which can be screwed a choice of either hollow 4mm plugs or heavy-duty spades (both were provided for review). My only other observation regarding what is otherwise an object lesson in product presentation is that I'd have liked clearer indication of the red and black conductors. That aside, open the wooden box in which the Sword arrives and I doubt you'll feel short changed by the contents.

This cable breaks our normal testing protocol by being solely available as a speaker wire. Cabling an entire system with Sword, my preferred approach, is therefore impossible, although I believe a matching interconnect is in development (what technology and configuration it will employ only the Lord and Tommy know). However, given the claims made for the Supra regarding its sonic invisibility, I decided to make an exception. In fact, I was sufficiently intrigued to present it with a worst case scenario, an entirely Nordost Valhalla system, with a pair of the Nordost wired Eben X-Babies on the end of it. Now, not only is the Nordost a horribly expensive cable, its benefits are cumulative. The more you use the better it sounds; the better it sounds, the less you hear it. Valhalla is the sonic invisibility cable champ as far as I'm concerned, so asking the Sword to step into its shoes provides a stern test indeed.

With the competing cables run-in and laid out, I started out on a series of detailed comparisons. I really shouldn't have bothered. Right from the first notes played through the Sword it was obvious that it was more than happy in this company. In fact, it quickly became obvious that it's a very special cable indeed. Compared to the Valhalla it lost

out a little in terms of the resolution of instrumental texture, the snap and immediacy of dynamics. It wasn't quite as transparent: the spaces between and around instruments weren't as easy to hear: the background wasn't quite as black. But I'm talking subtle differences here – and note that for the most part they're largely cosmetic and to do with presentation. Music? That's quite another matter.

When it comes to conveying the sense, the spirit and the energy of a performance, there's little to separate the Supra from the expensive Nordost cable. Pace and timing are both exceptional, the soundstaging is broad and stable, but above all there's an innate sense of rightness about proceedings. Instruments appear where they should, notes when they should, there's a place for everything and everything's in its place. One of the things that makes the Nordost so impressive is the coherence and sense of unforced organisation it brings to recordings and music. Well, the Sword matches it in this vital respect, which makes it more than a match for most of the highly touted (and highly priced) cables out there. The theory says that the Supra cable should deliver ►



● AUDIO SMORGASBORD

▶ information free from time delay or phase distortion and that's exactly what it sounds like. There's a natural life and pace about its sound, the way the various elements gel that makes music immediately engaging and attractive. There's no tendency for your attention to wander, no confusion about the music or its message.

The Sword isn't totally free of character. As the comparison with Valhalla suggests, it's a little more rounded, a bit warmer and fuller, especially at the bottom end. It can't quite match the absolute speed and dynamic discrimination of the Nordost cable, but makes up for it in terms of presence and solidity. Despite the warmth and weight at low frequencies there's no tendency to blur or smudge bass lines, confuse or obscure pitch or muddle instruments, which once again places it head and shoulders above most of the competition. It's also slightly more forgiving than the Valhalla, which is no bad thing. The question is, where does it draw the line?

The problem with putting the next best thing to a sonically invisible cable into your system is that it's not going to hide what went before. It's a problem

that has dogged Nordost; it's a problem Supra are about to discover. We've become adept at using cables to mask problems elsewhere in our systems, taking out a bit of brightness maybe, or injecting some life and dynamics. The Sword won't do that. What it will do is reveal your system in all its naked glory, which might well leave it looking a little like a one night stand without the alcohol and make-up (or after shave). You can wake up to reality, or go back to sleep and hope it will have disappeared the next time you open your eyes. It might be a bitter pill to swallow but the Sword will just have eliminated one of the two wrongs that was kinda, sorta making a right. Unfortunately, the rest is down to you – although you'll end up with a far better system in the long run.

So Supra's Sword is not a universal panacea. In fact, use it with a Naim or Lavardin amplifier and its zero inductance could result in the complete opposite, so make sure you check with your dealer first regarding suitability. But what it is, is by far the most impressive, remotely affordable speaker cable I've come across. Whilst it underlines the problems presented by most of the cables offered to audio enthusiasts,

at least it also delivers a solution.

can't wait to try it in a wider context, preferably with better plugs than those fitted. I wonder how much of the resolution gap to the Valhalla would be made up if the Sword was fitted with one piece rather than screw on terminations? Even as it stands its performance is jaw-droppingly musical and seems set to cut a swathe through the opposition. I've always said that coming across affordable kit that really does the business is far more exciting than just another cost-no-object assault on the state-of-the-art. The Supra Sword sums that up perfectly: It's Cuvee Winston Churchill on a Cava budget and I love it.



Price:
3m terminated pair - \$725
(\$100 per extra mono metre)

UK Distributor:
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