Home Audio
Equipment Review

SoundStage!
www.soundstage.com

June 2000

JPS Labs Kaptovator Power Cord

by Grant Samuelsen

Review Summary

Sound	"Unerring sense of frequency balance and spot-on reproduction of tonal weight" along with the ability to "lunk out room-shaking bass with the best cords that I've owned yet still manage to fit it naturally into the fabric of music."
Features	Eight-gauge conductors and good-quality IEC and plug; Kapton, an aerospace material, used as dielectric.
Use	Work very well on amps, perhaps because of their heavier-than-normal conductors.
Value	A high-cost power cord that Grant finds is more of a "power-delivery component" in the way it betters the sound of an audio system.

The recent dramatic growth in the popularity of power-line products suggests that we are all speeding along a steep learning curve in our search to quantify the AC signal's influence on musical reproduction. This new age of power-line awareness is not a fad or some media-concocted deception of our aural sensibilities. The reason so many audiophiles are talking power lingo these days is obvious to one who's been kicking the tires of power-line products as long as I have. The specific condition of an AC signal at its point of interface with an audio component can have as much of an impact on sound as any other part of the playback system. And if that heretical statement didn't raise a collective eyebrow, here's another: The choice of power cord one makes to transmit AC over the final feet to a component has the potential to be the most influential sonic link in a music system's power chain. Over the course of multiple evaluations, including this JPS Kaptovator review, it's become clear to me that there are select, audio-grade power cords capable of opening a more unadulterated window into music than most, if not all, of the LED-fronted *power tools* on the market. Yes, this is a controversial view to be sure, but one supported by numerous comparisons made with some of the most highly touted, all-in-one-box products on the market. If you've been waiting for a punch line, please be patient. I'm just getting started.

There are a number reasons why an intelligently designed power cord will effect an improvement in sound over the wire supplied with most equipment, but primarily it has to do with AC's protection from that which attacks it. The principal contributor of noise that clings

to an AC signal is not our personal computers, televisions, microwaves or the neighbor's cell phone; it's coming from the music system itself. The amount of EMI, RFI and digital noise generated by and hanging around audio equipment is staggering in scale and acts as the main impediment to the uniform transmission of clean power to our components. Not only are these fields of noise pervading the space surrounding equipment, the noise is also being fed back into the power line from the components themselves. Most equipment has noise-canceling and filtering elements built into their power structures, but *none* are sophisticated enough to handle the cacophony of high-frequency noise that forms a halo over our equipment. Where does it seem most likely that all this high-frequency noise will couple to AC? Who's spindly limbed duty it is to pass the delicate power signal as it finds its way to our equipment's power structure? Why am I asking rhetorical questions?

JPS Labs, whose new Kaptovator power cord appears here for critique, is the latest on a growing list of manufacturers who offer what could be termed a "power-delivery component" power cord. The "component" moniker owes in equal measures to the Kaptovator's intended performance, its component-like price of $1499, and its unique labor-intensive construction. JPS Labs produces an entire line of successful signal cables, power cords and power-line accessories for home music and entertainment systems, so these latest power cords were definitely not designed in a vacuum.

Contrary to cynical theory, many of the more expensive power cords on the market are designed at considerable expense and projected to deliver a substantial improvement to sound. In the case of the Kaptovator, the clear urethane jacket hides little about its distinctive construction. In fact, the uniqueness of the Kaptovator begins before you even get to the cable. Upon opening the shipping box I discovered a finely crafted, hand-made octagonal wooden box with the JPS logo laser burned into the top cover. No question, it's one of the finest-looking product packages on the market. Inside, a Kaptovator, resplendent in its clear Euro-chic jacket, rested atop its certificate of authenticity. In order to stave off pretenders, the Kaptovators are individually serial numbered and protected by this certificate with a hidden code that eliminates the possibility of successful imitation. However, the more I learned about the Kaptovator's construction, the easier it was to see that any attempt at copy would be futile. The extreme attention to detail paid every facet of this power cord's construction and production is very apparent.

This is not a power cord that a DIYer can crank out on his workbench of an afternoon. According to Kaptovator designer Joe Skubinski, there are over a dozen different processes that the Kaptovator passes through before he receives it for the final touches and termination. The most striking of the many innovative construction parameters used in these power cords is the use of Kapton as a dielectric. Kapton (the copper brown color seen through the Kaptovator's transparent sleeve) had been used exclusively in aerospace and military applications due to its extreme high temperature tolerance, high dielectric strength and low dielectric constant. The application of Kapton to a cable like the Kaptovator is no easy trick. The Kapton initially is wrapped around each conductor as a tape, and then sintered on to each at a temperature in excess of 1200 degrees. Youch! Skubinski tested numerous dielectric types and chose Kapton because in his words, "It has no sound of its own." There is a proprietary blend of metals used in the conductors, which, as with the less expensive Power AC cord, are 8 AWG in size, allowing maximum current delivery to even the most power-hungry beasts. The Kaptovator's conducting wire is stranded, but wound so tightly that it mimics the construction of a solid-core design. Skubinski feels this offers the best performance attributes of both construction types.

The Kaptovator was made using no inductive or capacitive devices and uses no shielding elements that Skubinski feels would limit the uninterrupted and speedy flow of power to its destination. The Optimized Field Matrix designation on the Kaptovator's clear sleeve indicates that it was designed to be non-reactive to a wide variety of components and applications. Thus its sonic calling card, or lack thereof should remain constant from one system to another. The terminating IEC and male connectors are 15-amp hospital-grade connectors, again tested by Skubinski and chosen for their sonic neutrality. Finally, the clear urethane jacket housing the Kapton'd conductors was selected to absorb mechanical resonance and vibration, further calming the AC signal prior entering a component. The construction process from inception to termination is expensive and time consuming and is reflected in the price of the product. Whether the resultant sound quality it offers justifies the cost is, of course, in the hands of the consumer -- and in this case, in the hands of a reviewer.

Kaptive system

I have made no significant system changes since my recent Wadia 830 review. My music system starts at the AC panel where I use JPS Lab's Power AC to run from 20A breakers to Wattagate and JPS Labs outlets at the wall. I use PowerSnake King Cobras to power both my Mark Levinson No.39 CD player and Essence 200Wpc monoblocks. Signal and speaker cables from JPS Labs, Shunyata Research and Nordost spent time feeding components during the course of my Kaptovator evaluation. Speakers used are still the sublime Audio Physic Avanti Centuries. My room was built for the purpose of music using double 5/8"drywall, added insulation, solid-core doors, tight Berber carpet and sound-coated ceiling. DIY bass traps are used in corners and minimal Sonex at slap-echo junctions. To round out room edges, I use corner tunes from Michael Green Designs. Amplifiers rest on DIY Corian sand boxes topped off with 1/2" plinths. The source/preamp No.39 CD player rests atop a Black Diamond Racing plinth with added support from Walker Valid Points and bearing isolation from Aurios. I use AudioPrism Quiet Lines throughout my home. Toward the end of my review, a PS Audio P300 unit paid an enlightening visit. I review with, and enjoy, a wide variety of music consisting of equal parts jazz, blues, folk, rock and classical. These varying musical forms afford me a pleasurable and insightful vantage point from which to evaluate products that spend time in my system.

Kontext

Power-line-product evaluations demand familiar ancillaries, proper time for warm-up and break-in, and careful configuration. The three Kaptovator cords here for review were routed onto my equipment then allowed a week of continuous play for adequate break-in. Once I was familiar with the way the Kaptovators interacted with music, they were removed, replaced with my reference PowerSnake King Cobras for an equal length of time, then swapped out again. A wide variety of familiar music was used in the review as well as specific tracks selected to demonstrate a variety of frequency behavior. There were no quick, sound-check comparisons performed as I am convinced that it is an ineffectual way to evaluate most products, especially power-line components. To conclude the listening trials, the two power cords were mixed and matched on amps and source for extended periods while noting and transcribing their differences.

Kaptovation

Sometimes we forget that music listening is an intuitive process. It doesn't require golden ears or a sensitive psyche to discern fundamental improvements in sound and describe them.

Make no mistake -- the Kaptovator power cords will fundamentally improve the sound of reproduced music. I know, I know, *prove it.* Well, grab yourself a Kaptovator and a copy of Buddy Guy's *As Good As It Gets* [Vanguard VMD 79509], play the atmospheric "One Room Country Shack." Buddy Guy's guitar genius gets a lot of ink, but it's his plaintive, soulful voice that has always drawn me to his music. With the Kaptovators passing AC, I was immediately struck by the emotive power in Guy's vocal delivery. Framed by light cymbals and underpinned by weighty piano, Guy's voice came alive with the natural tonal hues and subtle color shades that immersed me in the performance. An enduring strength of these power cords is their unerring sense of frequency balance and spot-on reproduction of tonal weight. The lower midrange and upper bass especially sounded uncluttered, defined and neutral. In *my* audio glossary of terms, neutral defines as true to life, timbrally correct, natural. The Kaptovators are champs at capturing the signatures of music without calling attention to any one aspect of reproduction. *Very few* power-line products can do this as successfully as these do. If forced to make a hierarchical list and name a performance area that defines the Kaptovators, I would point to the way they pack low midrange magic in their back pocket.

When the uninitiated inquire, "What's so special about (this or that) after-market power cord," I'm never quite sure how to respond. With the *best* power-cord designs, every parameter of music reproduction is affected in such significant ways it's hard to pick one or two areas to highlight. Of course, the poorly disguised kid in me screams, "It's the bass man, the bass!" The Kaptovators can lunk out room-shaking bass with the best cords that I've owned yet still manage to fit it naturally into the fabric of music. They allow for piston-like speed while resolving and delineating the touch and pitch differentiation that many specialty power cords either exaggerate or ignore. Descriptors like taut, clean, deft and quick pepper my listening notes. Sonia Dada's self titled first album on Capricorn [42033-2] has tons of rhythm carrying electric bass and drum whacks that will both slap you around and surprise with their specificity in the soundfield. The kickdrum on "You Don't Treat Me No Good" was painted on the left front wall of my room so realistically that I could pick out the air pressure "whoosh" with the compression of the drum diaphragm. Talk about immersive inner detail -- wow!

More on the Kaptovator

Owing perhaps to their heavy-gauge conductors, the JPS Labs Kaptovator power cords were able to help any amp I used them with pound out bass like only one other cord in my possession: the JPS Labs Power AC, which also uses large conductors. Where the Kaptovator excelled down low over its cheaper sibling was in its ability to control and define the bass region more effectively. While both cords made you realize that your amp was holding back -- or perhaps being *held* back -- in the bass without them, the Kaptovator was able to portray subtleties and nuances better with any music that had enough detail down low to show off. The additional low-end power was also better integrated into the spectrum of sounds produced, making the music more satisfying in the long run.

I also found the Kaptovator to produce a slightly more nuanced and linear midrange, which was a welcome addition to the tube amps with which I used the cord. The Lamm ML2s, for example, sound just that much more seductive where they already excel, while the little Audio Electronic Supply AE-25 Super Amp (review coming) was leaned out just a touch in the mids, which was not at all a detriment to this amp.

If the Kaptovators have a weakness, it's their price; if you want to play in the big leagues, expect to take your lumps. The good news is that for those audiophiles who can't swing the freight of a $1500 power cord, the JPS Labs Power AC, at a more reasonable $449, is a fine second choice.

...Marc Mickelson

My greatest area of sensitivity to flaws in components and reproduced music begins where the upper midrange transitions to the low treble and travels through to the top octave. When something is wrong, highlighted or pushed forward in these frequencies, my average listening session can diminish from forever down to about three minutes, give or take 30 seconds. The Kaptovators are remarkably free from artifacts in the upper octaves save for a hint of warmth running from the uppermost midrange through the low treble. On the best 24/96 recordings and some remasters there occasionally emerged what I would term a lack of *bite* or brilliance in the low to mid treble. This in no way diminished or colored music to an unnatural degree; it was merely a hint of the Kaptovator's natural voicing in my system, a voice that I often appreciated in contrast to some of the more "highlighted"-sounding products on the market. When my system was cooking at dynamic limits with a spiffy recording, the Kaptovators gave nothing away and always did what their name implies.

When sitting down for a lesson in culture from my favorite classical music, it's important that overtones, inner detail and scale of an orchestra come to the fore without sounding strident, clipped, edgy or lean. Given the average quality of most classical recordings, this is a difficult balance to reach. Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto on Teldec [0630-15870-2], featuring Yo Yo Ma, Itzak Perlman and Daniel Barenboim fronting the Chicago Symphony, is a recording that will challenge system balance and bring out the voice of a new system addition. The Kaptovators impressed by avoiding the grit, grain and etch without exhibiting a noticeable loss of information. There are many cords on the market that make significant trade-offs in these areas. The incisive, delicate interplay between Perlman and the Chicago Symphony on the *Allegretto Mon Troppo* is stunning. The Kaptovator-driven system preserved as purely as I remembered the talent and artistry of Perlman trading blows with the Chicago.

Oh yes, almost forgot the audiophile stuff. The Kaptovators layer out exceptionally detailed, varied soundfields commensurate with products at their price point. The proportion and vantage point of the soundstage varied from one recording to the next, speaking to the Kaptovator's excellent handling of the AC signal. Instrumental characters and voice within the soundstage had convincing dimension and were layered front to back with burgeoning pockets of recorded space and ambient information separating the instruments. Depth and width of stage presentation was excellent but not among that of the top two or three power cords that I have used. All of the critical microdynamic shadings were supremely accessible with the Kaptovators; they exhibited none of the tipped or highlighted signatures that can distract focus away from this often-buried information. The Kaptovators are some of the most harmonically correct power components that I've ever had the pleasure to use in my system.

These were my impressions of the full Kaptovator system compared to an amalgam of my experience with many of the best power cord designs that have spent significant playing time in my system, including the best from NBS, Synergistic, Purist and ElectraGlide. The Kaptovators execute music in a manner competitive with all of these (significantly) more expensive AC cords. In terms of top-to-bottom coherence, tonal balance and musicality, the Kaptovators most reminded me of the twice-the-price NBS Statement AC cord. Yes, technology does move forward!

Komparison

Having experienced such enjoyable performance with the Kaptovators running the show, I was curious to make a comparison between the Kaptovators and PowerSnake's King Cobras

that I reviewed last September. Before comparison begins with any power components, they should be allowed two to four days to settle, re-acclimate and smooth out. After four days, I got down to the business of listening, covering the same musical ground that had been gone over with the Kaptovators and scribbling away.

No one would have any trouble picking out immediate differences in the way these two power-cord "systems" sounded. From 200Hz on down, either of these two cords can be termed state of the art in the way they bring out resolution, tonal grandeur and pitch-defining accuracy. That said, they arrived at their impressive stations in a different manner. The Kaptovators turned the corner of a bass note a hair more quickly than the King Cobras and achieved an effortless sense of rhythm because of it. The King Cobra reached further down into the range than the Kapton'd one and resolved more of the body of a double bass or the inner core of a deep piano note as it resonated in a close-miked Steinway. Both cords did everything well enough to be considered state of the art in this range and will *shock* anyone who replaces their stock cords with either of these thoroughbreds.

Midrange color and timbral cues with either power cord will disappoint no one seeking the best-performing power-line product money can buy, but again, these two AC artists differ in the way they go about their business. The Kaptovators reproduced low midband information with a lighter touch than the deeper, more saturated tonal presentation of the King Cobra. Don Byron's *Bug Music* [Nonesuch 79438-2] is loaded with a variety of midrange textures, cutting transients and dynamic shifts that will pop the lid off of any sound system that isn't well balanced or set up properly. My listening notes reflect that I was experiencing virtual reality with either cord, but a second trial with the track "Royal Garden Blues" in particular displayed differences in presentation that separated their respective performance. The Kaptovators reproduced the timbral signatures and incisive dynamic movement of the various brass instruments with alluring conviction and variation, but this time it was the King Cobras that cut into and out of transients with more alacrity, allowing for more air and harmonic recovery. The Kaptovators held on to transient edges for just a millisecond longer before releasing into harmonic decay. These were not large-scale shifts in performance, but musically relevant nuance that becomes apparent over time.

Music heavy with treble information, transient activity and timing elements favored the more expensive King Cobras, but not through any perceived flaw in the Kaptovators. On their own the Kaptovators are sublime at setting up pace and timing in the temporal plane and on balance are competitive with the best I've heard. However, it's in these upper registers that the King Cobras are set apart from other power line components. The brilliance and sparkle of cymbals and recorded space reproduced in and around an instrument or voice are clearly a province of dominance for these reference-quality power cords.

To finish with the comparisons of these two power giants, they were evaluated on the amps only, leaving one King Cobra in place on my CDP. The change this made to the Kaptovator setup was telling. More air, depth of stage and dimension, spatial cueing, etc. were added, approaching the performance of my reference setup in absolute terms. In fact, after attempting numerous combinations it became evident that exchanging the respective cables on the source made much more of a difference than either power cord switched from one to another on the amps. Both sets of power cords when used on amplifiers were really impossible to fault in their own unique sonic style of feeding AC to Essence's power-hungry amps. Yes, there were still discernible differences that caused me to have a preference, but they were noticeably less in degree than when used on the source. The King Cobras bring a revelation in performance along with their $2000 USD price point, but the Kaptovators give

very little away in absolute terms and bring their own special brand of magic that made me forget about power and concentrate on the music. What else is there?

Konclusive notes

The JPS Labs Kaptovators represent some of the finest power-line components I've had the pleasure of using in my system. They imbue all music with an organic balance, lifelike tone and natural frequency extension that are a rare combination among power-line products. The Kaptovators proved their worth in capturing the delicate equilibrium of the frequency spectrum. They never called attention to themselves by highlighting or pushing information forward in a contrived or artificial way. Their distinctive construction is optimal for passing unhindered current quickly and quietly to high-power-draw components. My listening experience confirmed that the Kaptovators sounded effortlessly dynamic, balanced and timbrally correct on a wide range of music. They were also musically convincing when used on my source only, but fell just shy of being considered an absolute reference.

The Kaptovators belong on anyone's short list when auditioning power-line components regardless of type or cost. Are the Kaptovators too expensive for the sound improvements offered? No. Far too many audio enthusiasts move through component upgrades like water, all the while scoffing in a non-experienced way about the horror of expensive AC accouterments. I am confident that if consumers take AC delivery seriously enough to explore a variety of the best AC cords, both expensive and not, they may be surprised at how clean, dynamic and pure their present equipment really is. Now how much money would that save? Experience gained through exploration costs nothing but a little of our time.

...Grant Samuelsen

JPS Labs Kaptovator Power Cord
Price: $1499 USD.
Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

JPS Labs
USA
Phone: (716) 288-9112

E-mail: info@jpslabs.com
Website: https://jpslabs.com