



JPS SUPERCONDUCTOR₃

Reviewer: John Potis

Analog Source: Rega P9 turntable, RB1000 & Hadcock GH Export arms, Rega Super Elys & Garrott Bros Optim FGS Cartridges

Digital Source: Accustic Arts Drive 1/Audio Aero Prima SE DAC

Preamp: Bel Canto Pre2P

Power Amp: Art Audio Carissa, Bel Canto e.One REF1000 and Canary CA 160 monoblocks, Musical Fidelity A5 integrated

Speakers: Tidal Audio Pianos, Hørning Perikles, Anthony Gallo Acoustics Reference 3.1, Ohm Acoustics Walsh 4 with 4.5 mk.2 upgrade, *Lamhorn 1.8* [on loan]

Cables: JPS Labs Superconductor and Superconductor FX interconnects and speaker wire, Furutech Digi Reference digital

Power cords: JPS Power AC, Analog AC, Digital AC and Kaptovator power cords, ZCable Heavies, Red & Black Lightnings

Powerline conditioning: Balanced Power Technology 3.5 Signature Plus with ZCable Cyclone power cord

Sundry accessories: Sound Mechanics Performance Platform, 2-inch Butcher Block platforms with Quest for Sound Isol-pads, Vibrapod Isolators and Cones, Ultra & Heavy Zsleeves, Viablue QTC spikes under speakers, Auric Illuminator, Gingko Audio Mini Clouds

Room size: 12' by 16' with 9' ceiling

Review component retail: RCA interconnect \$999 1-meter pair, \$1,399 two-meter pair; Digital IC \$599, 6-foot speaker cables \$2,799



Looking back over the years, I cannot begin to count *how* many times I have been asked about cables and wires. My response has always been the same. The fact is that while I've played around with different makes of wires, I've never put in or taken out a cable or wire where I thought to myself - *Wow*. For various reasons however, I've become a fan of JPS Labs and it's their products I've been recommending for years. One of the reasons is that they make what are quite possibly the best power cables on earth. At \$3,499, the Aluminata Reference AC Cable seems insanely expensive for a power cord - until you finally hear one like many people have, including Art Dudley as recently related in an enthusiastic Stereophile review. Fortunately, the much more affordable JPS power cords are effective as well. At \$499, their Power AC+ is likely to be a nice fit for many a system and at \$1,499, Kaptovator cords are terrific - I've been using them for years.

If you've ever used RCAs that deform and lose their grip or fit so tightly that they want to tear off the jacks from the back of your gear, you may understand one of the other reasons I've enjoyed using JPS Labs over the years. I like their connectors. Their more expensive stuff uses WBT locking connectors which are great but I've installed and removed even their least expensive connectors hundreds of times over the years and while they're finally starting to show their age, they still do the job. Unless you're a reviewer, their cheapest stuff will provide worry-free performance for years and years. As for the sound? I've been using their extremely affordable Ultraconductor cables for almost 10 years and I've never been disappointed. Again, I've had other stuff come and go but I've never felt the need to change.

Two years ago, fellow 6moons scribe Chip Stern came by for a visit, bringing with him the aforementioned Aluminata power cord (and damn him straight to hell for it!), as well as a pair of Superconductor FX cables. After being blown away by the Aluminata, we installed the FX cables. While I still did not react with a *wow*, I do recall a sustained *hmmmm*. When placed between the DAC and preamp, there was no question that it was an important step forward.



Over the course of the next two years, Chip was at me almost constantly to do something about what he refers to as my neurologicals. Chip refers to the cables that carry the tiny and all-important musical signal as *neurologicals* and the (usually) larger power supply cables as *gastrointestinals* (which I took care of long ago to his satisfaction). Anyway, eventually he succeeded in motivating me to contact Joe Skubinski at JPS Labs who expedited -- well, not really *expedited*, the Christmas and post-CES rush pretty much maxed out their production department -- but let's just say as soon as he could, processed my request for a soup-to-nuts set of their new Superconductor 3. He sent out a meter of their coaxial digital, a pair of meter-long balanced interconnects, a pair each of their single-meter and double-meter RCA interconnects and a pair of 6-foot speaker cables.

By the way, the Superconductor 3 replaces JPS Labs' wildly popular Superconductor 2. While I never used it, it's my understanding that the Superconductor 2 was a pretty stiff cable capable of suspending small DACs above the shelf due to the corrugated solid aluminum shell encasing the cables' entire length. While not exactly compliant, the Superconductor 3 is fairly ductile and pretty easy to use, far easier than the Super 2 from what I gather. The Superconductor 3 uses a new Quad Alumiloy conductor said to combine the finest shielding and cable topologies in audio, second only to the JPS Aluminata series. As I've already mentioned, they utilize premium WBT locking RCAs and are hand soldered.



The day the JPS packaged arrived, I'd already spent several hours in my main listening room evaluating the Navison 211 mono amplifiers. While the Navisons were still in the rig, I started the day listening to my Canary CA 330 monos with their 300B tubes. When I placed the Superconductor 3 speaker cables into the system -- brand-spanking new -- I was the only one in the room but I'm pretty sure I heard myself mutter yet another *Hmmm*. The system sounded good and I didn't have to strain to hear some added dimensionality in particular as things sounded a little more holographic. I observed a modicum more texture and detail, too. No question about it, the system had a little more attitude, a little more snap. Mind you, this was stone cold outta the box.

I next inserted the Superconductor 3 digital into the system. The Audio Aero DAC/preamp allowed me to compare the JPS against my reference Furutech Digi Reference Digital, which uses the XLR connection. I've compared the Furutech Digi to several other coaxial digital cables and while differences have always been slight, I've always leaned a bit toward the Digi Reference. Switching between it and the coaxial JPS Superconductor 3 not only provided a wider margin of difference but for the first time, I found myself leaning toward the RCA connection - for the JPS. There was no question that the music was more sharply defined and with better focus. Again, there was more snap and timing cues were sharper, with appreciably better microdynamics.

Nevertheless, I wasn't prepared for what I would hear when I inserted the Superconductor 3 between both DAC/preamp and preamp/power amps. From the next room and over the sound of the system, my wife heard a pronounced *Wow!* I know she did, I was there and I heard it too. Maybe Chip was on to something with this neurological stuff. It would seem that as I'd just completed my new neurological network, the system was coming to life in new ways.



One of the songs I listened to several times during that first day was Larry Carlton's "(It Was) Only Yesterday" from his *Larry Carlton* CD [MCAD-42245]. I'd started out listening to it over my Canary CA 330 power amps and the detail was stunning. I could hear every nuance of his Gibson ES335 as though the guitar were in the room. However, when I switched over to the Navison 211 amps, much of that detail disappeared. Gone were the steely tone, its inherent grain, its attack and its unusually lucid and articulated decay. Left behind was this glorious tone with a big round character to it instead that admittedly was inspiring and beautiful but not as intimate and real. Well, once I'd installed the Superconductor 3s, I have to say that I got about half of that detail back.

For several days I'd been using the Hørning Perikles loudspeakers and was trying to augment their bass with a Gallo TR2 subwoofer. The Perikles are 96dB efficient and come to life with little input signal. Hence it takes significant gain on the subwoofer's internal amp if it is going to keep pace with such low input voltage. I was having marginal luck with the gain control on the little Gallo sub that was almost maxed out. I felt as though I'd dialed in the crossover well enough and in the end I'd effectively matched the gain levels and it was all sounding pretty good - but not *great*. I'd resigned myself to the fact that I'd gotten as close to matching the speed and articulation of the Lowther-based Hørning as I was going to get; that if I wanted better, I'd have to look at a more sophisticated subwoofer. What I'm trying to say is that for a significant amount of time, I had the subwoofer and bass frequencies under a sonic microscope. Once the Superconductor 3s were installed -- and mind you, none of them were going to the subwoofer -- it's no exaggeration to say that I was stunned to hear the improvement in the bass both from the Hørnings themselves and through the little sub - and suddenly both were *blending* as never before. Ironically, I now found that I was actually getting a hair too much bass and I turned down the gain a notch or two on the Gallo, at which point the snap, texture and power I was rewarded with plain floored me. The power and speed from the Hørnings on their own reminded me of when Chip was here and we'd tailed my Art Audio Carissa amplifier with the Aluminata power cord, netting a very real and welcome increase in both bass power and articulation.



The Carlton music dates back to 1978 and is an analog recording. It's also awash in master tape hiss. The more subdued cuts, including the aforementioned "(It Was) Only Yesterday", are saturated with it to such a degree that it tends to obscure many fine musical details. The Superconductor 3 cut through that hiss and was able to flesh out and bring details to the fore as not witnessed before. No, it didn't reduce the hiss, it still was all there. However, the hiss became less dense, less obscuring and less opaque as if the clouds had parted to allow the sun to shine through on the instruments. 'Room 335" features low bass that has never come across as sharply defined or as detailed as I secretly wished. Even the Superconductor 3 couldn't completely resurrect it but it did a whale of a job of cleaning up and allowing details to emerge from the murk. That new and improved bass performance also had the effect of expanding the soundstage as good bass always does. It conveyed spatial cues as to the expanse of the venue -- real or artificially created -- that were previously missing. Not only did spatial expanse stretch out, inner detailing grew to the point where you could almost see the back and sidewalls of the hall.

I love it when pop recordings for which one ordinarily holds low expectations evince extraordinary gains in presence and resolution. Tears For Fears' *Elemental* [Mercury P2-14875] is one such recording and again, the most monumental gains came in the bass. The new JPS Labs cables brought texture and palpability that I would never have anticipated. The propulsive underpinnings on "Brian Wilson Said" became more rousing and even the piano sounded better balanced and more natural, with a little more continuity between the left hand and the right. There was also a rightness about the leading edge, the pluck, the onset of the vibrating bass strings as resonances swelled up in the body of the instrument that struck me as new. Of course, bass instruments only start in the bass. The real body of the bass is to be found in the harmonics and overtones and it was obvious that I was getting greater clarity and continuity there too.



There was also a new vibrancy throughout the midrange. When the cables were still breaking in, voices seemed more prominent and took on just a bit of an edge, which added appreciably to my almost supernatural first impressions. But as time wore on, that edge faded while the newfound prominence remained. I believe that some of this prominence is due to a lowered noise floor. That is to say, rather than the vocals being more prominent, I believe the effect is more of a byproduct of vocals being less encumbered, newly distinct due to the absence of smearing throughout the midrange. The midrange is slightly more coherent, significantly neater and more carefully laid out. Vocalists and instrumentalists alike are more finely delineated and come across with greater articulation and distinction as they maintain their place in space. I was particularly blown away when I auditioned Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* [RCA Victor/Red Label 090261673-26-2]. First, the double basses

and celli had much greater detail, sounding more like individual instruments playing in time than some big blurred mass. The individual voices from within the massive chorus of singers were much more distinguishable as well. In short, everything about the recording was rendered with an increased sense of focus and detail. Subtle gradations of texture and timing were delivered with greater distinction.

I recently read an online comment using my choice of music as an excuse to discredit my reviews. "How can you take this guy seriously when he listens to Green Day?" is a paraphrase of that poster's criticism. CDs like Green Day's *American Idiot* [Reprise 48777-2] can tell an open-minded listener a lot about what a system is doing - unless he subsists on a diet of chamber music and has no frame of reference for anything outside of it. Yes, this recording is all electric. No, it was probably not performed live in a genuine acoustic space. But, there's a helluva lot going on within the recording and how a system is able to sort it all out can be very telling. If a system is up to it. How distinctly does it sort out and maintain Bill Joe Armstrong's vocals within that savage electro-rhythmic din? If you wish to, could you block everything else out and focus only on his voice or is it too obscured for that? How about the big drums on the title track? Are they tightly focused and rendered in a taut and tuneful manner at the center of the soundstage; do their complex overtones expand in concentric rings outwards towards the sides of the stage? How well do they portray the opening transient, that thwack of wood on skin, followed by the resonant body of real drum tones? Or is your experience limited to a dull succession of amorphous thuds? Can you sense the volume of air resonating between the drum skins or is it without tone and body? How about the drums on 'Holiday'? Do they project into the room with bold authority? How distinct does your system retain the balance between the acoustic guitar and Armstrong's voice on "Boulevard of Broken Dreams"? Does your system allow his vocals to blank out the guitar's overtones and microdynamic textures? I could go on and on but the point is that the JPS Superconductor 3 neurologicals allowed me to answer each of these questions more in the affirmative than ever before.

The very last stage of the review process involved removing the Superconductor 3 speaker cables and interconnects, then replacing them with my sundry other cables to observe the cumulative neurological effects more through their absence than presence. When I fired up the system sans Superconductor 3, it didn't sound bad. My world didn't collapse. But to a disappointing extent, the soundstaging on Peter Gabriel's *Secret World Live* [GEFD 2-24732] did. "Washing of the Water" had shrunk in size and was considerably less dimensional and airy than what I'd been hearing. I was prevented from joining the audience in the same way I previously had. I felt almost as though I was now viewing the event from the other side of a pane of glass. It was much the same on "Kiss That Frog". Much of the charm of this song had been the increased definition of Tony Levin's bass line, which, of late, had been sharply focused and very reminiscent of the croaking of a big fat bullfrog. An important aspect of that bass tonality - its smooth decay -- was now missing in action. That distant through-the-glass musical perspective was now pervasive throughout the midrange. I felt as though I was being excluded from the party entirely. I just wasn't hearing into it as deeply as I had been before.

Review or not, I wasn't having fun and now it was time to shut everything down and replace everything with the Superconductor 3 cables again. Five minutes later I'd regained entrance to the festivities. The soundstage? It was huge, airy and dimensional. Midrange? Clean, detailed and richly layered, with expressively illuminated and stable imaging. Bass? Palpable in a manner I'd never heard it in my room.

Treble? Now that the Superconductors were fully broken in, I was able to observe subtle aspects of high frequency performance as never before. To a greater extent than ever, I experienced the top end without grain, grit or glare. In my case, the process of treble sweetening was taking place slowly in the background and somewhat below my level of consciousness. Through the process of switching back and forth between neurologicals, I came to realize that the treble had taken the same forward strides as everything else. However, there wasn't more treble. Things were not appreciably brighter. While the Superconductor 3s had most definitely contributed to a larger, more detailed and airy soundstage, it wasn't so much that there was more of anything. What was there simply sounded *better*. Everything was cleaner; more relaxed and extended, less artificial, more natural; less fatiguing, easier to listen to.

I suppose a few thoughts on the question of value are appropriate now. While far more expensive cables exist, the JPS Labs Superconductor products aren't cheap. As always, value will ultimately be in the eyes



and ears of the consumer and I suppose that the manner in which two different buyers will allocate their budget resources may differ wildly. But if you've already assembled a sophisticated high-resolution system, then you've probably spent enough money to dwarf the asking price of the Superconductor 3 products. You've put together a system comprised of pricey high-end components that are probably not operating at peak efficiency and would truly benefit from the enhanced levels of resolution which the JPS Labs Superconductor 3 products can so effortlessly and transparently deliver without imposing a signature of their own. These are superb components in their own right and when you think about it, your system is really only as good as its weakest link. If you are presently listening to your signal chain with lesser cabling, you may have no idea just how good your system can sound.

Conclusion

It's at this point in the review where I sum up the overall character of the cables under review. But cables are passive components. How can they really have a character of their own? For that matter, *should* they really evince any character of their own? To me, it doesn't make sense that they would or should - not ideally, anyway. It seems to me that what's really happening is that while the JPS Labs Superconductor 3 cables are effortlessly revealing and resolving, on the whole they simply get out of the way of the signal, not



hindering it but preserving it and propagating it as it were, thus helping to optimize the performance of my components. It's as though I'm not hearing the cables but instead my components at their very best beyond any previous benchmarks.

One might liken the experience to what you'd observe in the efficiency of a high-performance engine upon switching from 87-octane regular fuel to 93-octane premium. For instance, I observed no sweetening of the treble, no colorations or any fundamental changes. Rather than hearing the cables, I felt as though I was hearing at an absolute level what my components are actually capable of - and that's a truly thrilling experience. I mean, this is why we got involved in high-end audio in the first place and what the ultimate pay-off should be - a more compelling, involving, all-encompassing immersion in the experience of music.

If yours is a mature system and it's getting most things right, I can't recommend the JPS Labs Superconductor 3s more highly. As for my system, without question the Superconductor 3s have taken it to new plateaus of performance that I wouldn't imagine are easily surpassed. Alas, I vividly remember the day Chip Stern brought over the outrageously expensive Aluminata for which I still have lust in my heart. See the Aluminata speaker cable above. Is that an ache in my loins? Damn that Chip!

John Potis

Manufacturer notes - The Superconductor 3 review

Now that these 3rd generation JPS cable designs are approaching their 1st Birthday, through much feedback from many good customers around the globe we're finding out that we can dramatically improve upon the detail retrieval of just about any good component in a compelling and positively musical way. The Alumiloy conductor design and cable topologies have been tweaked out step by step over the years -- using experienced imagination -- to attain a very high level of clarity yet very smooth, linear sound - no 'bumps' or aberrations throughout the frequency range. Reducing environmental effects from interfering is important and must be done in such a manner that the design properly deals with the transfer of induced noise at any frequencies within and through the cable with consideration to connected components. It's then up to the internal design and layout of the electronics as to what happens next.

Here's where that experienced imagination comes into play again. The well thought-out, tweaked out internal layout of any

component not only effects the signal, or audio, but also has an effect on the transfer of everything that isn't signal, hopefully away from the music. High-end component manufacturers who have been around for many years tend to have individuals who have learned hundreds of tweaks, and hundreds more as variations - they've found unique ways to resolve the problems caused by interactions with the real world the less experienced yet have to know exist. This is not to demean anyone, we all have to start somewhere - any beginning may just turn out to be something great, something that prior to or without would not exist in the future. Just as with our cable designs, many of these tweaks are visually undetectable and incorporated as fine details into the design, adding to their ultimate refinement, even more so than the schematic or technology itself would predict - and adding to their cost.

It is through this process that a reputable high-end product manufacturer works its magic and if lucky touches your emotions with a product, and also such attention to detail that prevents imitators from being anything but just that. Not to say that you should only buy from the proven, on the contrary, if your present list of priorities will not allow for these finer things, there are always new companies with new designs that, like any work of art by an unknown, can be had for less and may fit your current needs. Then there are lower cost products designed by the proven that just might include enough of those tweaks to be nearly as good for your current system as their more expensive offerings. While we all have great pride in the products we work so long and hard to design and ultimately bring to market, those who have produced more than a few different products over time begin to realize that they can do better. The same holds true for most of us as consumers and our purchasing decisions over time- live and learn.

The closest analogy I've found to high-end designs would be cooking. You could give 10 people the exact same recipe and ingredients, say go, and in the end you would have 10 similar looking but nonetheless different tasting dishes. Add to that the ability for each to choose their own combination, type and quality of ingredients, or to use something unique, and all of a sudden things start getting really interesting. For everything there is a high-end.

One thing I've found. If one day a window of opportunity presents itself, say in the form of an audition from a local dealer, or that amp you always wanted -- whatever will increase your enjoyment of music, and life, just do it -- you may not get a second chance. And once you are satisfied with the results, share some sweet-spot time with others. The rewards make it all worthwhile.

Many thanks to John Potis for his kind words and wonderful review of The Superconductor 3s, to Chip Stern for spreading his wisdom, and to 6moons.com for being here to publish the same.

Take care,
Joe Skubinski
JPS Labs LLC

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