

FURUTECH

The Audio Beat (USA) Furutech Phono Cables
Review



July 2011

Furutech's Phono Cables: Master Class and Beyond

by [Marc Mickelson](#) | July 20, 2011

Of the lengths of wire that connect the various parts of our audio systems, the phono cable is the most specialized, and this makes it the easiest to muck up as well. The infinitesimal signal coming from a phono cartridge, which is measured in fractions of a millivolt for low-output moving-coil cartridges, is far more susceptible to the harmful effects of noise than more robust line-level signals. This isn't just theory -- experience bears it out. From my listening, phono cables not only display audible characters of their own, but the differences are considerable, the right cable pulling together an analog rig in the same way a cartridge or phono stage can.

I suspect this variation occurs primarily because of the methods cable makers employ to address noise. In this regard, Furutech goes to absolutely heroic lengths with its two phono cables, the Ag-12 and Silver Arrows, which cost \$528 and \$1996 per 1.2-meter length, respectively.

The Ag-12, for instance, has a four-layer shield and air-foamed polyethylene dielectric. It uses Furutech's own *a* (Alpha) silver-plated-copper conductors, which have been both cryogenically treated and demagnetized. Furutech never compromises when it comes to connectors, one of the company's areas of expertise. The Ag-12 uses Furutech's own finely made, tight-fitting rhodium-plated RCAs and DIN.



Construction is absolutely top-shelf; the Ag-12 looks like it should cost much more than it does.

I wrote about the Ag-12 a few years ago, believing at that time that it was perhaps the finest-sounding phono cable I had heard. If anything, my esteem for it has grown in the intervening time. Its obvious clarity underscores the importance of addressing noise head on. The Ag-12 reveals a great deal about your records, differentiating 33 and 45rpm pressings, for instance, with ease. "Clarity" here is not a euphemism for brightness. There is also richness and body to the Ag-12's sound, the music's corporeal foundation as solidly portrayed as the fine details of any instrument. I always turn to piano to determine what any electronic component or speaker is about, and with the Ag-12, faves from Thelonious Monk to Alexander Brailowsky were well defined in terms of the physical presence of the instrument.

I suppose it's true to say that the Ag-12's presentation is well balanced, keeping everything in proportion -- or doing everything exceedingly well. Both are true, so take your pick. This is a reasonably priced phono cable that can truly hang with cost-no-object tonearms and cartridges.

Which raises a few questions about the Silver Arrows. What do you get for nearly four times the price of the Ag-12? As its name implies, the Silver Arrows uses Furutech's *a* (Alpha) pure-silver conductors that are cryogenically treated and demagnetized, along with a three-layer shield and four-way grounding. Its dielectric is a "special-grade" air-foamed polyethylene. You can see one of the biggest differences between it and the Ag-12: the use of Furutech's top-grade carbon-fiber/stainless-steel-housed RCAs and DIN. These are not only more substantial than the connectors used for the Ag-12, but their rhodium-plated all-copper body is trickier to manufacture as well. Copper is soft, so few connectors are machined from it. Furutech obviously feels the effort is worthwhile in sonic terms. Like the connector's body, the center conductor is also rhodium plated.

Fresh out of the box, the Silver Arrows had a distinct personality. I did a full round of listening with it, and even wrote out all of my impressions, thinking in the end that while it certainly had its high points, it didn't quite measure up to the Ag-12. I then decided to do something that only we reviewer types will undertake: breaking in a phono cable. The Ag-12 I received had obviously been played -- there were use marks on the RCAs and especially the ground lug -- but the Silver Arrows appeared to be factory fresh.



How does one break in a phono cable? If the connections are RCA to RCA, you can do it with one of the various cable-break-in devices. However, I used the Silver Arrows (and Ag-12) with my Graham Phantom II

tonearm, which means it had DIN connectors. Thus, playing records was the only way to run a signal through the cable, and it made sense to use a higher-output moving-magnet cartridge than a low-output moving coil to do it. Like most vinylphiles, I have a small collection of old-but-working cartridges, so I pulled out a Shure M95ED that came mounted on a Dual turntable I bought a few years ago. Its 4.7mV output is almost twenty times greater than that from my Dynavector cartridge, and that surely must help with break-in of a phono cable. I also used a different phono stage -- a Creek OBH-18 MM -- to preserve the tubes in my Audio Research Reference Phono 2. I even used different records -- no need to wear out Music Matters 45rpm reissues when garage-sale LPs will do.

I played a variety of records, including some of the many test LPs I've accumulated. I figured the test tones wouldn't hurt the process. I estimate that I played 60 sides, which would equal about 20 hours of playing time, but I honestly did very little listening during this process. I doubt I'm alone in not wanting to listen to 1kHz tones or noisy records. For electronics, those 20 hours would be a paltry amount of break-in, and it might be for a phono cable too. But I have only so much patience.

After those 60 sides, with my Dynavector XV-1s remounted and the Audio Research Reference Phono 2 warmed up, the Silver Arrows wasn't transformed into a different cable. Instead, it bloomed to its full redolence. First and foremost, there was incredible spatial and harmonic resolution. Each recording was further differentiated by the signature of the instruments and the sonic fingerprint of the recording venue. If you listen to enough Blue Note LPs, originals or reissues, you know the sound of Rudy Van Gelder's two studios as compared to when he recorded on location, as he did for the pair of records he made from concerts at the celebrated jazz club Minton's Playhouse. Both albums are attributed to Stanley Turrentine, but Grant Green and Horace Parlan, two Blue Note leaders, were also part of the group that played in late 1960. Both titles have been reissued as double-45rpm sets -- *Vol. 1* by Analogue Productions [Blue Note/Analogue Productions BST-84069] and *Vol. 2* by Music Matters [Blue Note/Music Matters BST-84070]. Before you ask, I can't say which one is better. Instead, I'll offer that they are both first among equals.

More important for the discussion of the Silver Arrows, the venue was obviously not Van Gelder's Englewood Cliffs, NJ, studio, where he recorded at that time. Minton's actually sounds smaller and more intimate. The boundaries are well defined and the musicians are closer, facts that the Silver Arrows made plain, along with the fleet attack of Turrentine's sax and Parlan's excited right-hand runs.

Tonality was the thing in the beginning that made me think some break-in was necessary. Right out of the box, the Silver Arrows sounded leaner than the Ag-12 and, more distressing, rather blanched -- devoid of tonal color. By this I mean the sort of thing that differentiates the voice of two saxophones, for instance, not the euphonic cololations that are clearly additive, pleasing though they can be with some recordings.

While I would still say that the Silver Arrows sounds lighter than the Ag-12, this has more to do with the spaciousness and speed it conveys, not its tonality. And this is really where the sound of these two cables diverges: the Ag-12 sounding solid, well balanced and slightly darker in comparison to the more vivid, quicker, and spacious presentation of the Silver Arrows.

This doesn't alter my belief that the Ag-12 deserves to be part of the highest-performance analog rig, even as the Silver Arrows mines more musical information. With either of these phono cables, you'll be living, as *TAB* writer Tim Aucremann has coined, "la vida vinyl." 🍷