

Group test

CABLE LOOMS £480-£635

Wired for sound

Choosing the right set of wires for your hi-fi system can bring significant sound benefits. **David Price** auditions six mid-priced cable combinations

CABLES ARE A major part of any hi-fi setup, carrying the audio signal lifeblood from source components to the amplifier and then on to the loudspeaker. Let's face it, most of us probably have a mix of interconnect cables from different brands hooking up the ins and the outs of our hi-fi components, partnered with a set of speakers that come from another manufacturer altogether. In terms of getting a system to perform at its very best, we all seem to understand the importance of synergy between

different electronic components and loudspeakers, but many of us don't pay nearly as much attention to the cables connecting the components to one another that carry those all-important audio signals.

The merits of cables having any kind of influence on the sound of a hi-fi system is a controversial topic, but the six cable 'looms' here have been carefully chosen to work together. After all, manufacturers tell us that for best results people should use a single make of cable across a hi-fi

system to fully appreciate a brand's voicing or 'house sound' that one company may have compared with another – although all claim complete transparency, of course.

Following this logic, we asked six manufacturers to supply a 3m pair of loudspeaker cables matched to a 1m RCA phono interconnect up to a mid-price point of around £550, plus or minus £100 or so. The differences between the combinations are quite pronounced, proving once again that cables don't always sound the same. ▶



ON TEST



**Atlas Cables
Hyper Integra/
Hyper 3.5 £484 p27**

The first of two Scottish-made looms and one of the least expensive in this test, this high-quality copper cable combo puts the accent on power and punch.



**Black Rhodium
Tempo/Foxtrot
£555 p29**

This distinctive silver-plated copper wired combo may not appeal to all with its lavender hue interconnect, but it is highly satisfying in a musical sense.



**Chord Company
Shawline £480 p31**

Another great mid-market combination from Chord. Its down-to-earth finish means your eyes will never mistake it for a high-end loom – but your ears will think otherwise.



**Ecosse Cables
Maestro/MS2.3
£600 p33**

This Kilmarnock company has a wealth of clever technology, much of which is deployed in this interesting cable loom – as you'll hear.



**KLE Innovations
gZero1/gZero2
£635 p35**

Arguably the most obscure company in the group, there's a famous name behind it and this loom is highly individual – in both looks and sound.



**QED
Signature Audio 40/
Genesis Silver Spiral
£570 p37**

This iconic British brand has pulled out all the stops to produce a highly competitive cable loom that is beautifully presented.



Atlas Cables

Hyper Integra/ Hyper 3.5 £484

Nevermind the gimmicks – this well-engineered, British-made cable really delivers the musical goods

DETAILS

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- Interconnect: copper conductors; FEP dielectric
- Speaker cable: copper conductors; PTFE dielectric
- 1m interconnect £144/3m speaker cable £340

DISTRIBUTOR
Atlas Cables Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01563 572666

WEBSITE
atlasables.com

Known for its no-nonsense cables, Atlas' Hyper Integra interconnect wins no prizes for looks – many will regard this as a plus. Its pliable FEP dielectric comes in a discreet black finish, which feels quite rubbery – so should damp external vibrations. Inside is a high purity OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) copper conductor. The design is said to provide excellent resistance to RFI. The gold-plated RCA phono plugs are claimed to be self-cleaning, every time they're removed and re-inserted (other termination plugs are available) and use a solder-free, so-called 'cold-weld' connection for a continuous signal path that comes with a five-year guarantee.

The Hyper 3.5 loudspeaker cable is a neat visual match for its Hyper

interconnect cousin. Its black outer sleeve has something of an eighties minimalist look and is satisfyingly well damped, thanks to an anti-vibration filler. Inside are 72 0.25mm² high-purity OFC (Oxygen Free Copper) strands, coated by a PTFE dielectric. Standard terminal is with the Atlas Tin Cobalt-finished metal Z plug and once again, other terminations are available. Together, the Atlas loom feels like good, old-fashioned no-nonsense fare – suggesting less show and more go.

Sound quality

Only the Chord cable loom works out cheaper (by just £4) than the Atlas combo, but you wouldn't know by listening. There's no sense that you're auditioning a cost-cut combination – this sounds strong, confident, assertive, detailed and engaging. I kick off with Saxon's *747 (Strangers In The Night)* – a hard-rocking morass of cranked-up electric guitars and a big, expansive soundstage. The Atlas loom tells me all of this, and more. I delight in the crunchiness of the guitars, the general bombast of the music and the seat-of-the-pants feel that it brings. It pushes the rhythms along nicely, and sounds fairly well balanced tonally, aside from an occasionally slightly leaden bass.

Moving to Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*, and one begins to get a more nuanced feel for things. It has a pretty even sound, perhaps just a little well lit in the upper midband, but this is offset by the strong bass. There is perhaps a slight haziness to the

QUALITY CONTROL

Atlas Cables is a long-established and highly respected brand whose products have won plenty of awards over the years for their well thought out design and sonic capabilities. The company sets great store by the fact that its products are almost exclusively designed and manufactured in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, in the West of Scotland. It has complete control of every component part of its cables from the core conductor itself to the insulating materials and terminations – rather than just buying in all the bits from overseas and assembling off-the-shelf parts – so all its products are unique. This also allows it to build special, bespoke versions for customers, should they so wish. Many of its cables use its 'cold-weld' termination technique, which achieves consistent metal-to-metal airtight terminations and comes with a five-year guarantee.

recorded acoustic, a feeling of it being a little opaque and lacking some inner detail. Instruments don't quite snap into focus in the same way that, for example, the QED loom does. Still, the treble is crisp and there is a decent amount of space around the sonorous hi-hat playing.

The Atlas combo manages to shuffle things along in an enjoyable way. It's not overtly dramatic in its presentation, but makes a great fist of Daft Punk's *Get Lucky*; it is clean and detailed and has an insistent rhythm. The same is heard on the beautiful classical Tony Banks track, *Prelude To A Million Years*. The instruments are well located, have reasonable room to breathe and sound solid. Although this isn't the group's most finessed, sophisticated or detailed cable combination, it still delivers a lot of music for the money ●

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Crisp, solid, muscular sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Some lack of detail; bass can sound plodding
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Solid, peppy sound with lots of energy, but lacks the detail and finesse of the more expensive looms here
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



SET THE TEMPO

With its more expensive Tempo interconnect cable, Black Rhodium has changed the thickness of the conductor insulation. This is because, says the company, when two electrical conductors carry a current, the magnetic field produced by the current in one conductor affects the resistance of the other – a phenomenon known as ‘proximity effect’. Transient phase distortion, it argues, is produced because the loudspeaker load is reactive and the current and voltage in the speaker cable are not in phase. This makes for a modulation effect, which in turn degrades the sound quality. Tempo’s conductors are further away, thanks to the thicker insulation, reducing the magnetic field which decreases inversely proportionally to distance. The end result is a cable that Black Rhodium claims is clearly better sounding than its popular but more affordable Coda interconnect.

Black Rhodium Tempo/Foxtrot £555

With names that allude to their musical nature – this loom is equipped for high levels of performance

DETAILS**ORIGIN**
UK**TYPE**
Interconnect/
speaker cable**FEATURES**

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper conductors; silicon rubber dielectric
- Speaker cable: copper conductors; silicon rubber dielectric
- 1m interconnect £280/3m speaker cable £275

DISTRIBUTOR
Black Rhodium**TELEPHONE**
01332 342233**WEBSITE**
blackrhodium.co.uk

Aptly named, the Tempo interconnect’s gaudy violet colour does it few visual favours but it’s obviously well conceived – the expandable outer braid is commendably unimicrophonic. It is a little stiff though, with a tendency to press into a back wall if your equipment is located close to one – which isn’t ideal. Silicone rubber is used for the dielectric, and there are 19 0.3mm 16-gauge silver-plated copper conductors; inner insulation thickness is 1.2mm. The cables are twisted together to minimise airborne radio frequency interference and the positive and negative cores are connected in opposite directions to lower the noise floor, says the manufacturer. Eichmann Bullet RCA phono plugs are fitted.

The accompanying Foxtrot speaker cable is based on the more expensive Thunder design. It’s well put together, featuring 16 0.2m copper-plated cores with an outer diameter of 6mm. These are encased in 1.2mm-thick silicon rubber insulation. The cables themselves are flexible and prove to be acoustically highly inert. They use RFI suppression techniques originally developed for its high-end designs, so Black Rhodium tell us. Termination as tested is by good-quality gold-plated Z plugs, although other connection types are available.

Sound quality

A little more expensive than the Atlas, it’s interesting to hear the difference. This company has made a name for itself making affordable yet musical sounding cables for decades, and this provenance is obvious here. There’s a lovely gait to the way the Black Rhodium combo handles music; although it doesn’t sound particularly muscular – (less firm than the Atlas in some respects, for example) – things seem to move along effortlessly. Indeed, it makes the likes of the QED sound a little uncommitted. The Herbie Hancock jazz track is lovely, and the music sashays along with heady abandon.

The Saxon piece is big fun too, with things sounding very animated and action packed as those cranked-up guitars almost sing to the listener. It’s a little easier to discern strands in the mix compared with the Atlas and the KLEI, but what really delights is the way it sets up a big groove in the

listening room – making Saxon sound more like Chic! Speaking of which, Nile Rodgers’ beautiful rhythm guitar playing on *Get Lucky* is a joy – the listener’s attention seems to be pulled away from the hi-fi aspects of the sound, and instead sucked right into the heart of the music.

Tonally, the Black Rhodium twosome is the sweetest of the group; it’s perhaps a little too sugary for some, taking the raucous edge off the Saxon track just a touch – yet still this combo makes the music soar, thanks to its rhythmic urgency nevertheless. I love the sweetness of the hi-hat cymbal work on the Daft Punk track for example, but those running silky valve amplifiers might find that things lack bite because you can have too much of a good thing. Metaphorically speaking, this cable combo is more of a lover than a fighter ●

HifiChoice**OUR VERDICT**

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Sweet, musical sound; nice rhythm
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** A little bass-light
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Tuneful and rhythmically satisfying sound, but lacks the guts of the best

FEATURES
★★★★★**OVERALL**

HI-FI HARMONY

When Sally Gibb (née Kennedy) launched The Chord Company in 1984, it was a small concern in an embryonic market. Since then the company has grown hugely, and moved premises several times. It now has a large factory just outside Salisbury, Wiltshire. A great deal of time is spent auditioning both its own and rival manufacturers' products in the listening room, which houses a lot of esoteric equipment. This has led to the development of what the company calls its Tuned ARAY conductor configuration, which it describes as a "revolutionary way of building audio interconnects." The first cables were developed using the company's then flagship Sarum range, a few years back. The Shawline analogue cables use the same specially developed conductor geometry to deliver a superior performance than would otherwise be possible, says Chord.



Chord Company

Shawline £480

From the pioneers of affordable hi-fi cables comes this sober looking but sweet sounding loom

DETAILS**ORIGIN**
UK**TYPE**
Interconnect/
speaker cable**FEATURES**

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper conductors; FEP dielectric
- Speaker cable: silver-plated copper conductors; PTFE dielectric
- 1m interconnect £200/3m speaker cable £280

DISTRIBUTOR
The Chord
Company Ltd.**TELEPHONE**
01980 625700**WEBSITE**
chord.co.uk

There's a reason for the unusual name – it commemorates former associate of The Chord Company, David Shaw. Indeed this looks and feels very much like it's a product of the Wiltshire company – right down to the so-called Tuned ARAY design (see boxout). It sports silver-plated copper conductors, encased in an FEP dielectric, with a composite shielding material that the manufacturer claims works over a wide bandwidth and also reduces mechanical noise. It's put inside a flexible plastic tube, then a protective outer braid is fitted – the result is a pretty inert mechanical cable to my ears. Silver-plated Chord VEE3 RCA phono plugs come as standard, although XLR and DIN terminations are also available to order.

The Shawline speaker cable is based on the old favourite Chord Rumour – whose 16-gauge silver-plated oxygen-free copper conductors it shares, insulated with PTFE and arranged in a twisted pair configuration. Chord has added a specially chosen PVC internal jacket to reduce mechanical noise, before applying the same high-density, dual-layer foil and metal-braided shield seen on the Chord Epic (HFC 388). It has an 8mm diameter.

Sound quality

Were you to put the muscular Atlas sound together with the more romantic and finessed Black Rhodium, you'd lose half the strengths of both, but half the weaknesses too. The result would sound something like this – a really good all-rounder that doesn't excel in one particular respect, but is nevertheless a strong force to be reckoned with. As the Daft Punk track shows, The Chord Company loom can thump out solid tracts of bass – it's up with the Atlas in this respect – but it also has a good degree of sophistication. You couldn't call it Neanderthal, whatever else you say. That makes this a great 'real-world' combination for those looking for a do-it-all design.

The Tony Banks track is a superb modern recording, and the Shawline combo really captures its essence. The fundamentals are correct; the soundstage is wide and drops back better than most here. Instrument location is pretty accurate, and there's

a good sense of the recorded acoustic inside which the orchestra is playing. The Chord Company loom conveys the rhythmic flow of the music skilfully, getting the foot tapping with the pleasing way it signposts dynamic contrasts, for example. It's when you really try to listen in, though, that this combo becomes unstuck; it doesn't have the crystalline clarity of the QED pairing – although some may find the latter just a bit too stark and cold. Again, it's all up to synergy and system matching.

The headline point about this dynamic duo, however, is that you can put any type of music through it and it's still enjoyable. Hi-fi considerations seem to slowly ebb away, as you get into the music. The Saxon track has me on the edge of my seat, offering just the right combination of power and pace ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Nicely built; strong, musical and smooth performance
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Unspectacular looks, but who cares?
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Excellent all-rounder with a natural, organic way of making music; it's smooth too
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Ecosse Cables

Maestro/MS2.3 £600

A complex combination bristling with features, there is much to recommend this Scottish-built loom

DETAILS

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
● Interconnect:
Monocrystal copper
conductors;
polyethylene
dielectric
● Speaker cable:
Monocrystal copper
conductors;
polypropylene
dielectric
● 1m interconnect
£150/3m speaker
cable £450

DISTRIBUTOR
Ecosse Cables

TELEPHONE
07580 691803

WEBSITE
ecossecables.co.uk

Despite its relatively modest price, a good deal of design work has gone into the Maestro interconnect. This fine-looking cable has UHP-OFC conductors, also called Monocrystal – said to be ultra-pure grain-free copper, with tight double braiding and an additional polymer screen. The company boldly claims “100 percent protection from environmental noise pollution” which I can’t verify here, but it is certainly acoustically pretty dead. Polyethylene and gas-foamed polyethylene are used as a dielectric. Proprietary shielding is fitted, designed to form a Faraday cage to eliminate RF interference. Ecosse MACH2 RCA phono plugs are specified, with Monocrystal copper contact points, direct silver hard-plated and with a copper alloy body.

With the Ecosse loom we’re running a slightly less expensive interconnect than average, and a pricier loudspeaker cable. As tested the MS2.3 is fitted with 4mm plugs. Like its interconnect cousin, it boasts Monocrystal copper conductors, here in a concentric stranded, rope-lay weave. The strands are 3mm² twisted copper with polypropylene dielectric, cotton fibre and paper acoustic damping, plus soft PVC sheathing with an overall outside diameter of 8mm. This looks and feels like a deeply serious product, and can be terminated with either high-quality banana plugs or spades.

Sound quality

As the second most expensive interconnect/speaker cable combination in the group, the Ecosse has much to live up to – and it comprehensively proves able to do so time after time. This loom serves up a large and detailed sound, really eking out the finer points of the music. The Tony Banks piece, for example, proves really vibrant sounding with loads of information coming off the disc. Yet despite this, there is no sense that the Ecosse is showing off, or suffering ‘analysis paralysis’ where it falls over its own feet trying to signal precisely how forensic it is.

It displays a pretty even tonality, which is not quite as lively as the QED or as silky as the Black Rhodium – rather it sits on a well-judged line that’s just on the bright side of neutral. It’s never veiled or cloudy sounding – instead it takes apparent delight

CRYSTAL CLEAR

Ecosse makes much of its proprietary Monocrystal copper conductors. Each single crystal of copper is a vast 1.7km long, so this delivers ultra-pure, grain-free runs. In speaker cable form, it has an unusually large cross sectional area – and would, claims the company, previously have been prohibitively expensive to bring something like this to market. It says that the Monocrystal configuration is particularly suitable for long runs of loudspeaker cable, such as in high-end home cinema applications, or multi-room installations. The Scottish company – also based in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire – offers the MS2.15 solid core alternative, to allow different runs of loudspeaker cable to each drive unit via bi-wiring. Ecosse Cables first launched its patented Monocrystal copper and silver conductor products in 1996, and has given the brand a distinct identity ever since.

machine gunning fragments of detail at you that are missed by the likes of the cheaper Atlas. Spin up the Saxon track and you’re in for a stormy ride; it gets very animated sounding and isn’t reticent to really get your flares flapping in the breeze. The Ecosse puts out lots of punch and has a satisfyingly solid low-down bass.

The clever thing about this cable combo is that no matter what type of music you present it with, it still makes a Herculean effort to deliver it to you in all its glory. The louche jazz strains of Herbie Hancock’s *Maiden Voyage* are an unalloyed pleasure, giving a wonderfully rich atmosphere that makes me want to put on my black polo neck and get lost in a smokey haze. Yet this cable loom breezes along to the scratchy funk of Daft Punk; it seems completely agnostic about the music and instead just has fun ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
LIKE: Expansive and transparent sound

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
DISLIKE: Price

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
WESAY: Gutsy performer that majors on rhythms and dynamics that many will love

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



SONIC BULLET

Although KLE Innovations is not a household name in the UK, the man behind it – Keith Louis Eichmann – is rather well known in audiophile circles around the world for his well-regarded RCA phono connector. His obsession with sound quality lead him to designing the Eichmann bullet plug in 2001. This is now fitted to many high-end hi-fi interconnects, and is widely regarded to be one of the finest RCA phono connectors available. His concept was to enhance the electron flow, and this is carried through to his eponymous range of KLEI cables, incorporating the so-called Eichmann Ratio, in which the return conductor has a carefully calculated greater cross-sectional area and mass than the signal conductor area. Distributed in the UK by Divine Audio Ltd., the company now has a vast range of products of which the gZero lineup is but one.

sound – yet seems to lose a certain tonal lustre that some others here are able to preserve better. Call it stark or clinical, as ever the truth depends on your subjective taste alongside the system you're running. I find that such matter-of-factness is better suited to the Tony Banks classical piece, which sounds so tight that it could have been bolted to my wall. Again I find myself concentrating on the phrasing and the majesty of the musicianship, rather than the sweetness of the recording.

The Daft Punk track is wonderfully sinewy; this loom isn't the most powerful performer in the bass, but is still pleasingly supple down below. Vocals are tightly located, but don't have the same body as the Chord or Ecosse. Depth perspective isn't as good as its rhythmic ability either and things don't fall quite so far back ● ▶

Hi-FiChoice**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Rhythmic sound; imaging accuracy
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Some lack of tonal warmth; price
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Brilliantly propulsive sound that's pleasingly musical

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



KLE Innovations

gZero1/gZero2 £635

This obscure Australian cable company has a growing fan base in the UK, but how does this loom compare?

DETAILS

ORIGIN
Australia

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
● Interconnect:
hand wound
conductors; KLEI
Copper Harmony
RCA plugs
● Speaker cable:
hand wound
conductors;
4mm plugs
● 1m interconnect
£190/3m speaker
cable £445

DISTRIBUTOR
Divine Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01536 762211

WEBSITE
divineaudio.co.uk

KLE Innovations has quite some way to go to achieve the fame and brand recognition of most of the other contenders here. It's very much an outsider – but has excellent provenance (see boxout). The modestly priced gZero1 interconnect is a pretty conventional-looking design from the outside at least, and very well finished given its cost. The design philosophy is to maintain a zero voltage low noise/ground state to enhance electron flow in the signal conductor, says the manufacturer. The precise materials used are not specified, other than that they are “complimentary”, and the hand wound conductors are “more conductive than pure copper or pure silver”, the maker claims. KLEI Copper Harmony RCA phono plugs are fitted, but there's a

choice of other terminations. I absolutely love how light and pliable this interconnect is.

The KLEI gZero2 loudspeaker cable uses the company's new architecture, which is said to be an evolution of Eichmann's previous Ground Nulling Circuitry (GnC), which reduces and controls the effects of the ground on the signal. It also helps protect from interference of various types and static charges. Termination is standard banana plugs, and the manufacturer recommends a maximum length of 5m. It's light, pliable and doesn't appear to be in any way microphonic when connected to my setup.

Sound quality

Arguably the most distinctive sounding loom in the group, where the KLEI really stands out is its deftness with rhythms – it's very good at imparting the music's natural starts and stops, thanks to absolutely lightning-fast transients. It really shines with the jazz of Herbie Hancock; instead of focusing on the lush sound of this classic Blue Note recording, it hones in on the phrasing of his sublime piano playing, and how well it syncopates with the rest of the band. It pulls the listener in, and the effect is quite mesmeric. The Chord and Ecosse offerings are able to do this to an extent, but are more subtle about it while the KLEI is more like a laser targeting device, highlighting the gaps between the notes.

It works the same magic with the hard-rocking Saxon track too, giving a wonderfully supple and incisive





QED

Signature Audio 40/ Genesis Silver Spiral £570

An impressive looking cable loom from an established UK company, but how does it compare?

DETAILS

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
● Interconnect:
silver-plated
copper conductors;
Teflon dielectric
● Speaker cable:
silver-plated copper
conductors
● 1m interconnect
£220/3m speaker
cable £350

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home
Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qed.co.uk

Affordable audiophile' is very much QED's mantra, and the Signature Audio 40 interconnect sums it up perfectly. It is beautifully presented – not just the packaging but the cable itself, which feels like fine jewellery. The conductors are silver-plated oxygen-free copper (99.999 percent pure), housed in a Teflon dielectric, in an asymmetric twisted pair configuration, with a Zn/Mn ferrite jacket – all of which is deep cryogenically treated for superior sound. The company's classy rhodium-plated Analoc RCA phono plugs are fitted, and sure look the part. They feature an outer locking cylinder that needs to be screwed forward before the plug's 'blades' can be locked onto the RCA phono socket, then the locking cylinder needs to be

tightened back up for a (very) secure fit. They're a low-eddy current design featuring small high-purity copper conductors, as opposed to the brass that's often used in such applications.

Genesis Silver Spiral takes care of speaker duties. It sports nine bunches of 10-gauge silver-plated OFC copper (99.999 percent pure) conductors, in a special triple concentric spiral geometry. These are arranged around a central core of polyethylene, to reduce inductance by around half, the company claims. Outside diameter is a chunky 16.6mm. The QED combo looks the most expensive of all six looms tested, because the quality of finish is so good, but the price is sensibly competitive.

Sound quality

I can't help but think this cable has been designed by a focus group; I don't mean it in a disparaging way, it's just that its sound ticks all the boxes. The result is a jack of all trades and a master of some, at a highly appealing price. The QED doesn't quite have the character or romance of some of the others here, but is a real class act – no mistake about that.

The Tony Banks classical piece shows what great focus this loom has. It's like someone has shone a floodlight on the recording and suddenly everything is clear to hear – from the grain of the strings to the breathy concert hall. Things snap into line in a way that leaves the Atlas, for example, standing. It's a good deal 'better lit' than the Black Rhodium too, and has even more space than

SYSTEM STARTER

One of the United Kingdom's most long-established cable companies, QED shot to stardom with its 79-strand loudspeaker cable introduced in 1978. It wasn't revolutionary, just of very good quality and extremely keenly priced – and it hit the spot with audio fans starting out. Indeed, QED 79-strand became the staple of audiophiles on a budget in the eighties, and arguably changed the way many thought about cables in a hi-fi system as listeners first began to understand that they can make a real difference to listening enjoyment.

Since then it has refined its products and expanded its range – but still appeals to the budget audiophile market as always. Using computer-aided design techniques and more than 40 years of experience, the Signature 40/Genesis Silver Spiral is a carefully engineered combo pitched right at this market sector.

the more expensive KLEI – boasting great depth perspective. Still, the Ecosse pairing gives it a run for its money, serving up a deeper, slightly darker rendition of the music – with even more sense of a three-dimensional acoustic space.

Flick to Daft Punk and the QED has a good time with those hypnotic rhythms, inducing much tapping of feet – yet it's not quite as naturally supple sounding as the Chord, KLEI or Ecosse for example. It's certainly no dad dancer, yet still you feel it's trying to cover too many bases, spreading itself too thin. Move to the Herbie Hancock jazz track, though, and it's surprisingly capable, giving a sparkling rendition of this slightly dull recording and really capturing the music's plaintive mood. This cable loom keeps on surprising me, just when I thought I'd got its measure! ● ▶

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Capable all-rounder; build; value
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Not quite as rhythmically engaging as some
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Another fine all-rounder with oodles of detail, fine focus, enjoyable musicality and great finish
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Group test verdict

Having spent hours putting each loom combination through its paces, HFC's very own cable guy **David Price** is ready to deliver his final verdict

THE ATLAS LOOM is without doubt a fine package, but the format of the *Group Test* delivers this harsh verdict because it's not quite up to the high standards of its pricier rivals in some respects. On its own terms, however, it's very satisfying to listen to, offering up lots of power and plenty of life. It's certainly well worth a listen if your budget is limited to £484.

The Black Rhodium loom comes next. It's the eccentric cousin of the group, so to speak – but what it does well, it does so very well. Sweet, open, lyrical and relaxed, it just seems to find the fun in whatever you play.

It's also surprisingly detailed and transparent too – keeping high standards up all round.

In some ways, the QED loom is the best all-rounder of the group, taking into account value for money considerations. It has a mature, clean and detailed sound that's fun to listen to and needs no excuses. Many will feel it's all they'll ever need; super sound, lovely build and finish – what's not to like?

In a sense, The Chord Company's loom is the QED's brother from another mother. It's another version of a great all-round package, but just

with a slightly different emphasis. It looks less expensive than the QED, but sounds a little sweeter and more organic. Music just flows better, even if the QED is fractionally more transparent.

Taking price out of the equation, the KLE Innovations loom could score even higher – it's an extremely enjoyable listen, just not quite the best value in the test. Those that love a grippy, sinewy sound might well rank it the winner – if they are prepared to pay for it. It just goes to show the difficulty of ranking these sorts of products.



WINNER

Although it's a close-run thing, Ecosse Cables' loom is a great performer that stamps its authority on the music, giving a powerful and engaging sound with a barrel-chested style and a cheery demeanour. Others come close, but this sings like no others.



Make/model Atlas Cables Hyper Integra/Hype 3.5



Black Rhodium Tempo/Foxtrot



Chord Company Shawline



Ecosse Cables Maestro/MS2.3



KLE Innovations gZero1/gZero2



QED Signature Audio 40/Genesis Silver Spiral

	Atlas Cables	Black Rhodium	Chord Company	Ecosse Cables	KLE Innovations	QED
Price	£484	£555	£480	£600	£635	£570
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Solid, peppy sound with lots of energy, but it lacks detail and finesse of rival looms	Sweet, tuneful and rhythmically satisfying sound that lacks the guts of the best here	Excellent all-rounder with a natural way of making music. It's just not the prettiest	Gutsy performer that majors on rhythms and dynamics, but isn't the subtlest	Brilliantly propulsive and musical sound. Tonally a little lean, and expensive too	Great performer with oodles of detail, fine focus, a nice finish and great musicality

Key features

	Atlas Cables	Black Rhodium	Chord Company	Ecosse Cables	KLE Innovations	QED
Copper	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Silver/copper	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Silver	No	No	No	No	No	No
Solid core	No	No	No	No	No	No
Multi core	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

TRY WITH THESE

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:

Roksan K3 **£1,300 HFC 396**
With five line inputs, an MM phono stage and aptX wireless Bluetooth, this is a versatile beastie. A muscular integrated with plenty of energy and a smooth, creamy sound.



LOUDSPEAKER:

Bowers & Wilkins 705 S2 **£1,800 HFC 430**
This compact B&W standmount is spacious, crisp, smooth and detailed while sounding enjoyably musical too.



CD PLAYER:

Audiolab 8300CD **£1,000 HFC 404**
This swish player sports a new slot-loading CD transport mechanism, preamp functionality and DSD playback via USB.

