

the ear

HI-FI MUSIC GEAR

hardware review



Atlas Hyper Z 2-4, Element and Ailsa Achromatic

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Chris Kelly

There are cable buyers who purchase in the hope that new wire will somehow improve a system in which they find fault, and cable buyers who purchase in the hope that the new wire will let them hear the benefits of the wonderful new components for which they have parted with their hard earned cash. If you are in the latter camp, dear reader, then stay with me, for I have some excellent, wallet-friendly news to share with you.

For some reason, although I have been aware of Atlas Cables for many years, I have never had the chance to sit down and listen to any of their offerings, so when I was asked if I would be able to review their new Hyper loudspeaker cables, along with their Element and Ailsa interconnects, I was more than happy to fill this gap in my knowledge.

If I was a trendy young internet 'fluencer I would doubtless have filmed the unboxing ceremony, but as I am not I did not. However, as my late mother was wont to say, first impressions matter, and as I took the Element RCA interconnects out I was impressed by their straightforward design and build quality. The Ailsa followed and my reaction was similar. These are not flashy cables – they just look good. The Elements, which are the less expensive of the two RCAs, have a pale almost pearlescent outer sheath, while the Ailsas are a tad thicker and are finished in a dark grey material. The Hyper speaker cables are finished in a dark cloth weave. All three pairs looked well finished and fit for purpose with little in the way of bling.

About a week into the review period I was able to have a Zoom call with Kevin Kelly, the managing director of Atlas, and it was a most illuminating discussion during which he shared with me his motivation in cable design, and the idea behind not just these relatively affordable designs but for the whole Atlas product catalogue. Kevin is an engineer by profession, with a degree in electrical and electronic engineering from Strathclyde University, so no fanciful hobbyist he – all his thinking is based on sound engineering principles. His decisions are based upon objective criteria, not subjective fancies.

Talking of which, we spent several minutes discussing the new Achromatic plug which is used on these new cables. These are low mass, non magnetic devices, developed in house at Atlas, because Kevin felt that commercially available examples had too much metal and that this gets in the way of sound quality, an idea that was originally promoted by DNM who went so far as to create smaller banana plugs to use with their amplifiers and notably skinny solid core cables. Atlas cables don't solder their plugs to cable but use cold-welding because in Kevin's words "OCC copper doesn't like soldering". The plugs are also self-cleaning, meaning that Atlas recommend regularly plugging and unplugging them from the sockets to which they are

attached to keep them free of the nasties which can prevent a proper connection being made. No more contact cleaning sounds good to me.

Kevin has spent a lot of time on getting the mechanical and electrical properties of the cables just right, and Atlas has invested heavily in machinery to ensure the maximum possible consistency of build quality across the whole product range. He has also arranged a tie-in with Strathclyde University (his alma mater of course) to have students as well as the teaching staff participating in product development and research.

Of course, all this would count for nothing if the finished products did not deliver. Happily, I can report that all three of these pairs of cables performed admirably, by being totally transparent conductors of signal, from source to amplifier and from there to the loudspeakers. First of all I deployed the Elements RCAs between a visiting iFi Zen phono stage and my



Lyngdorf TDAI 3400 amplifier. The Elements replaced some far more expensive cables from another well-respected British manufacturer and to be honest, I could detect no loss of sound quality or musicality in the performance. That such a relatively inexpensive cable can perform so well served to make me think again about price/performance and the law of diminishing returns. Switching in the more expensive Ailsa, I did feel that the music had a little more weight, a slightly rounder sound, but it was not a night and day difference if I am to be honest. I then switched the cables to my Yamaha CD-S3000 player and played the same albums on SACD and heard that same subtle difference. In both cases I was very happy with the sound and felt that Atlas had achieved the goal of getting the cables out of the way of the sound.

I then turned my attention to the Hyper speaker cables. I really liked the look and feel of these – they have a premium feel and finish to them that is belied by their relatively modest price. The cables they replaced are an order of magnitude more expensive, so I was braced for some diminution of sound quality. What I got instead was an extremely even-handed



presentation, with no obvious emphasis or indeed de-emphasis of any part of the frequency spectrum. Bass was fast and tuneful, the mid-range felt well-weighted and articulate and the higher frequencies from my Harbeth C7ESXDs was light and airy. This was genuinely both a surprise and a delight. The Hypers more than held their own against their predecessors and made long listening sessions both enjoyable and fatigue-free. I also noticed that they showed absolutely no signs of wear and tear despite the repeated plugging and unplugging. Some of my other cables are beginning to look decidedly the worse for wear from their life in a reviewer's hands, but the Atlas ones still look as they did new out of the box.

During the weeks of the review I switched back and forth between my usual cables and the Atlas and I never felt disappointed by what I heard from the Atlas. I believe that anyone starting out on their hi-fi adventure owes it to themselves to audition these cables. Be sure to try and hear them before you hand over your money for anything else.



Specifications

Element Achromatic

Type: analogue interconnects with Achromatic RCA connectors

Topology: coaxial, 4 core plus screen

Conductor: OFC (oxygen free copper)

Dielectric: PEF

Diameter: 7mm

Length: 0.5, 1, 1.5, 2, 3m

Warranty: 5 years

Ailsa Achromatic

Type: analogue interconnects with Achromatic RCA connectors

Topology: coaxial

Conductor: OCC (Ohno continuous cast) copper

Dielectric: PTFE

Diameter: 9mm

Length: 0.5, 0.75, 1, 1.5, 2, 3m

Warranty: 5 years

Hyper Achromatic Z 2-4

Type: bi-wire speaker cable

Topology: multi-core

Conductor: 4x 1.5mm OFC (oxygen free copper)

Dielectric: PTFE

Diameter: 6.4mm

Length: 2m, 3m, 5m, 7m & custom lengths

Warranty: 5 years



The ear is all about great music and great sound. It is written by hard bitten audio enthusiasts who strive to find the most engaging, entertaining and great value components and music of the highest calibre. This really is what living is all about.