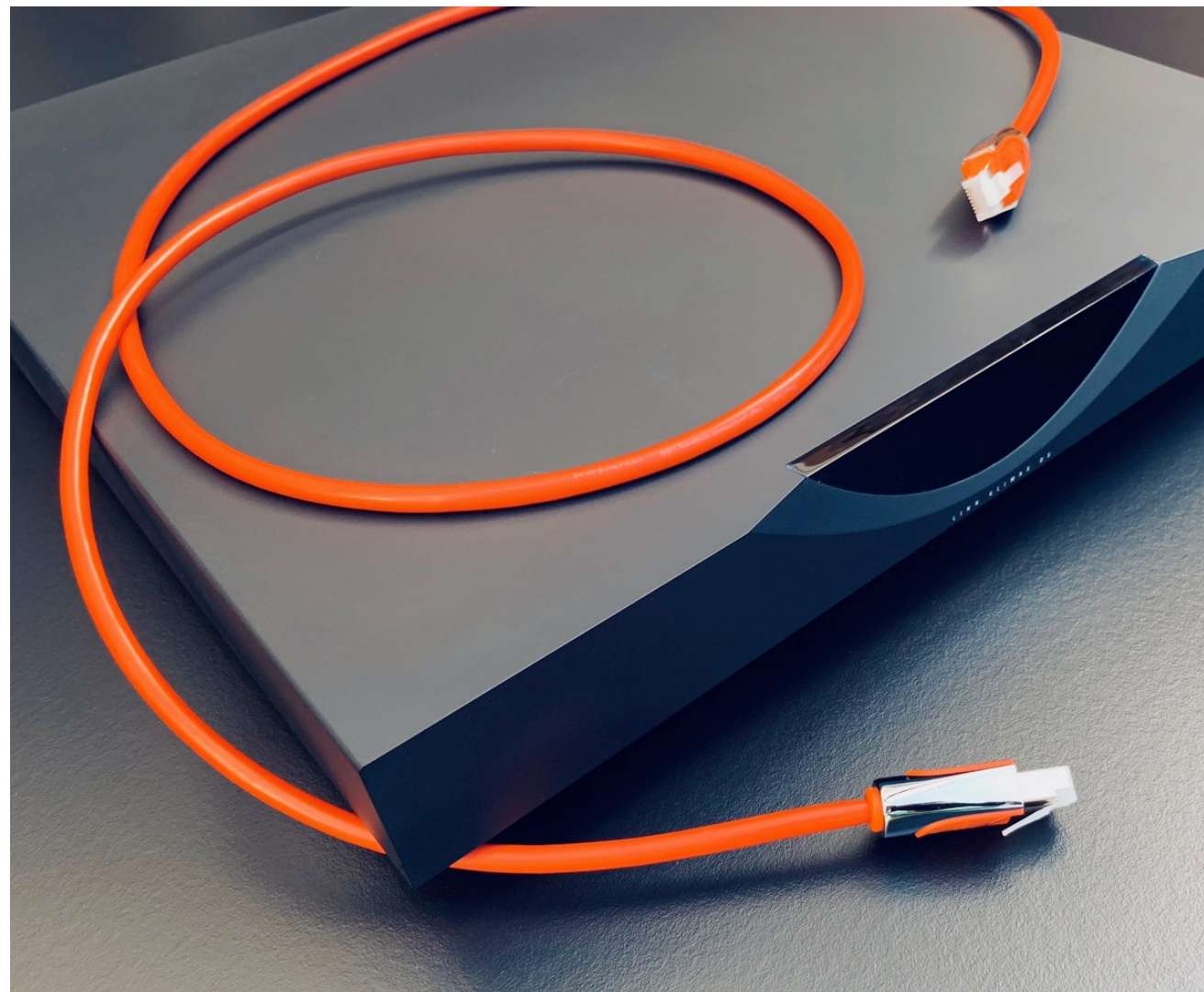


# Chord Company Streaming Cables

*Be prepared  
for a new addiction*



# Chord Company Streaming Cables

*The Chord Company is not a new cable brand anymore. Much has happened since their 'humble beginnings' in 1985, when company founder Sally Gibb started building cables in her living room. Today, Chord Company cables are sold worldwide, and consumers can choose from seven series of increasing price and performance. All these series follow the same - but increasingly complex - philosophy of conductors, geometry and shielding/insulation. And - arguably most important of all - sonic performance. Listening is an essential part of cable development at The Chord Company, so that is exactly what we did for this review. To make it a bit less easy for ourselves, we chose their Streaming Cables. Because - according to objectivists - there can't be any difference between them. Because of...well, we have all heard that mantra, haven't we? But for a subject that - according to some theories - holds so little room for expectations, we had a very interesting listening session. Read and judge for yourself...*





# Not Ethernet Cables

When The Chord Company talks about Streaming Cables, they mean 'network or ethernet cables', but not really. Because ethernet cables are



bi-directional, and The Chord Company's Streaming Cables are not. That is something to keep in mind, but we don't think that many people will attempt to use these instead of normal ethernet cables anyway. Six of the seven cables series offer such a Streaming Cable, only the 'first step up' Clearway series doesn't, which explains the relatively steep increase in price from the cheapest to the second-cheapest cable in this review.

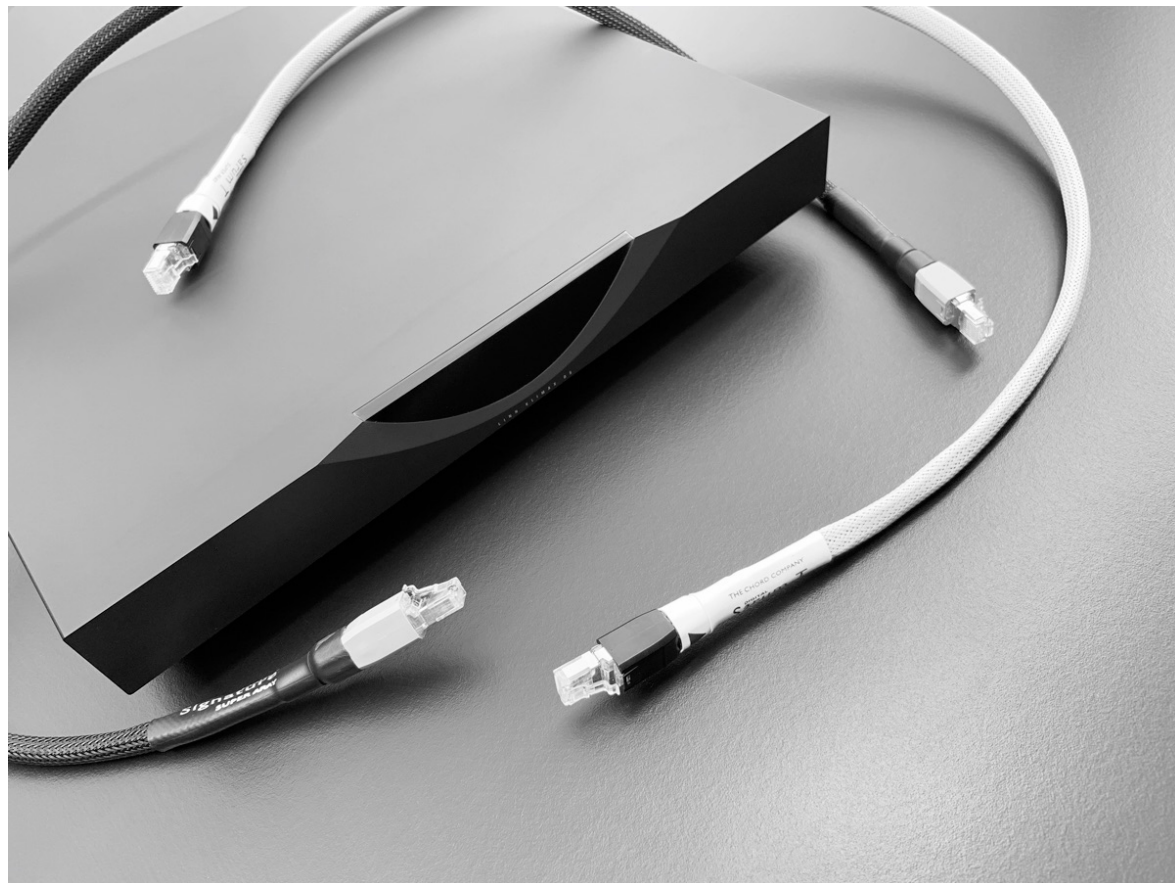
## Tuned ARAY en Super ARAY

In a Chord Company cable review, there is no way of getting around an explanation of Tuned ARAY. The Chord Company 'invention' - according to The Chord Company but also most international hifi-reviewers - has a profound effect on sound quality. How it works is a little hard to explain, but we can tell you what it is and what it does, according to The Chord Company. It is a bit technical, so if that isn't for you, just skip to The Setup below.

The origin of Tuned ARAY lies in the coaxial digital interconnects of The Chord Company. The biggest challenge for designers of coaxial digital cables is that the entire chain must have a  $75\Omega$  impedance. But making that a constant in cables is tricky, and because of that you can get signal reflections from the coaxial input on the da-converter that ultimately decrease the sound quality. The Chord Company's own 'cable doctor' Nigel Finn came up with the idea that it might be possible to reduce these reflections by adding a short piece of conductor to the connector. The theory behind it is that this 'flying lead' would 'catch' the reflections because of its lower resistance. If that really happened was difficult to determine, but it actually worked. By experimenting with the length of this flying lead (the 'tuning' part) by ear, the ideal length in relation to the rest of the cable could be determined. This was called Tuned ARAY. Later on this technology was improved for the (then) top model Sarum, and that upgrade was called Super ARAY. Now this technology has been applied to the Chord Company Streaming cables as well. At the moment, it is only applied to 'digital' cables.



# Listening



To be able to hear potential differences in sound quality as clearly as possible we chose the familiar setup of the Linn Klimax set with AudioQuest Water interconnects and the Wilson Benesch Trinity loudspeakers. This time the Linn Klimax DSM would be our source, controlled through Roon, with the Streaming Cables between the Netgear GS108 gigabit switch that had an iFi iPower power supply. All cables were put to work elsewhere in the network (where non-directionality was no problem) to give them some run-in time. Whether that is useful or not is a matter of fierce debate on its own, but we will fight that battle another time on another field. So we're not taking sides here, we simply did it 'just in case'.

Comparative listening tests are difficult enough to begin with, so we limited our musical menu to two tracks: Re:member of the eponymous album by Ólafur Arnalds, because we like its balanced mix between acoustic and electronic instruments, and Jesu Meine Freude of the album The Other Side by the Tord Gustavsen Trio, because it is such a gorgeous acoustic recording. Both albums were played in uncompressed AIFF file format with a 24/96 resolution. To kick things off, we first listened to a standard unbranded ethernet cable we bought at a local computer store.

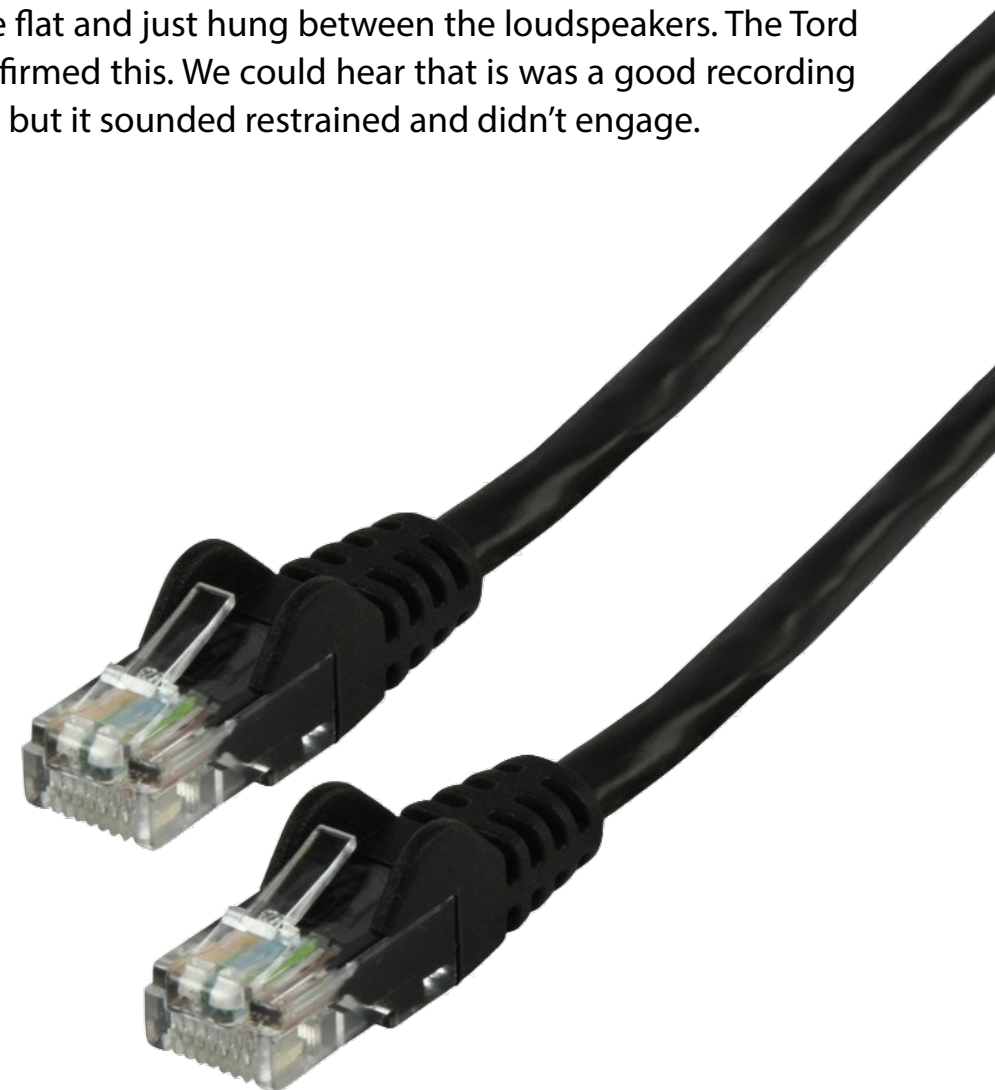
# Standard CAT5s (unbranded)

This cable looked like any other ethernet cable. Black outer sleeve and crimped-on unshielded plastic connectors. A fine cable for surfing the internet or to hook up your network printer. It simply works and it's cheap as chips, but will it hold up in music reproduction?

Err...No. Ólafur Arnalds' music got smeared quite a bit. Timing became hesitant and although we did get some detail, it all sounded rather dry and dull. There was no sparkle in the music, and the deep bass that starts at just over 2 minutes sounded like it didn't want to come out of the loudspeakers.



The image was quite flat and just hung between the loudspeakers. The Tord Gustavsen track confirmed this. We could hear that it was a good recording with great potential, but it sounded restrained and didn't engage.





# C-series

This Chord Company C-series is a well built and attractive looking cable, with OFC conductors that have a foil shielding for each pair. The twisted pairs are embedded in lightweight polystyrene foam, and also have a thicker foil as outer shielding, beneath a jacket of dampening plastic. Silver solder was used to mount the conductors to the gold plated contacts in the connectors, and the outer body of the connector is moulded on for longevity and stability.

Listening to the C-Series was a completely different affair to the standard cable. Ólafur Arnalds' track revealed a lot more structure and there was more pressure in the sounds, which made the music more tangible. We also heard more timbre, and the image was more open and had more flow. Because of that the music sounded more relaxed and it was easier to listen to. Because of greater detail, the spaciousness also got bigger. There was more attack in the piano, and overall dynamics were better. The bass sounded fuller and tighter, and drum sounds became more lively. The piano sound in the Tord Gustavsen track revealed more 'string and mechanics', and the track sounded opener, with more timbre and spaciousness. The brakes were off, in a manner of speaking. Cymbals shimmered longer and the attack of the tip of the drum sticks on the cymbal was brighter and more precise. The sound of the double bass gained so much pressure that it appeared to play louder.



# Shawline

The brightly coloured Shawline is the first cable in this review to feature Tuned ARAY technology. Its conductors are made from silver plated OFC, and each twisted pair has its own soil shielding. The Shawline uses FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene) for insulation, a material that is comparable to PTFE (also known under its brand name Teflon®). Silver solder was used to mount the conductors to the 24-carat gold plated contacts in the connectors, and the outer body of the connector is moulded on and shielded with a zinc casing.

Let's not beat around the bush; this cable is a lot more expensive than the C-Series, and because of that it will probably attract most of its attention from audiophiles. But goodness gracious! What a difference! The Tord Gustavsen track dramatically gained in openness and timbre, cymbals finally got their brassy shine and the piano had so much more pressure that it sounded like we had moved our seats towards it. The Shawline sounded more neutral than the C-Series, but without loss of timbre. The extra amount of information was a bit overwhelming at first, but we got used to

it very quickly. In the Ólafur Arnalds track we heard more texture from the instruments, which added to their tangibility, and we also heard more space around the piano, which made the experience more intimate. There also was a smidge more timbre, and it all sounded more relaxed. Small details in the strings became more clear, as if the bow had been resined again. Because the music became more 'fluid', it was easier to listen to. The performance became, for lack of a better word, more musical. At this moment we started to realise that it would be hard to go back to a cheaper cable.



# Epic

The Chord Company Epic Streaming Cable comes in a standard Tuned ARAY configuration of 1 meter, but other lengths are available on request. According to The Chord Company, its silver plated OFC conductors are of better quality, and individually shielded with thicker foil. This is the Streaming Cable in which The Chord Company successfully applied their Tuned ARAY technology - that was initially developed for 75Ω coaxial digital cables - for the first time.

The Epic dished up a double dose of Shawline. Told Gustavsen and his fellow trio members suddenly became much more present in the listening room. There was increased musical detail, without getting too 'white' sounding. The double bass sounded deeper and gained power, and overall the sound became more 'audiophile' (which is not, by definition, more musical. With Ólafur Arnalds we heard more texture, but also a little less weight in the bass. As a whole, the presentation became more spectacular, but somehow we found the Epic more convincing on electronic music than on acoustic music.





# Signature

The Signature Super ARAY was originally developed from the Epic, but has seen many upgrades since. The gauge of its conductors has increased and the geometry has changed. Besides that it now uses a more effective shielding material and - hence the name - it has been fitted with the SuperARRAY technology that was developed for the Sarum.

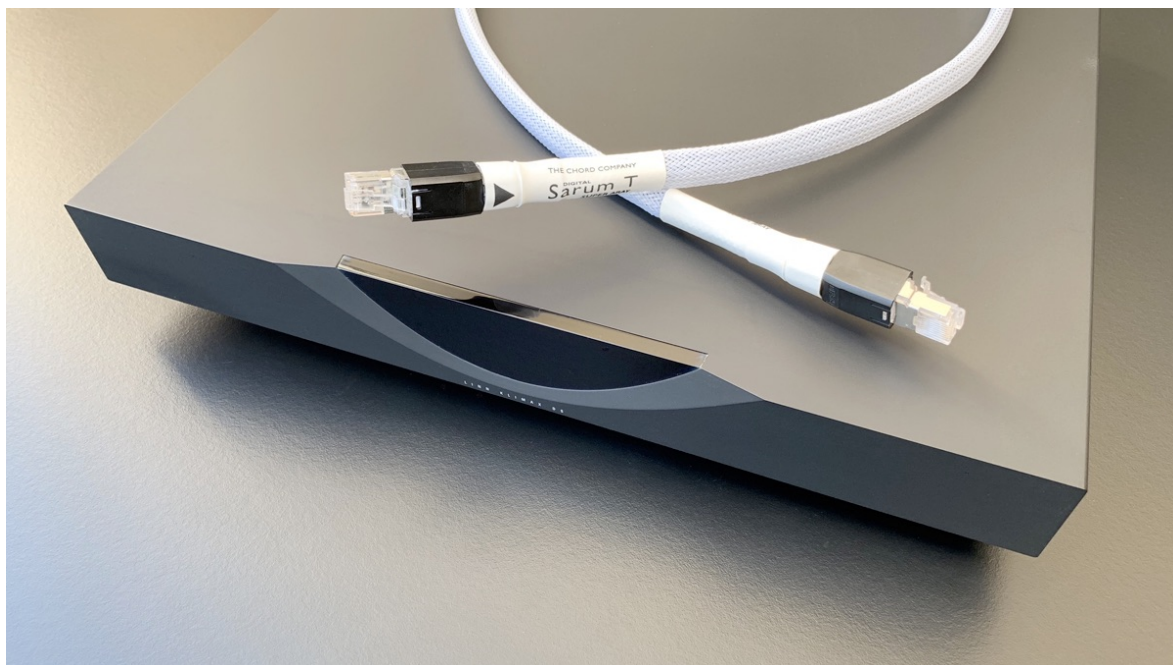
When we started the Ólafur Arnalds we looked at each other and said: “wow!” The increase in tranquility and timbre was significant. We got much more information, without a trace of sharpness. Sounds had longer decay, and a certain graininess that can be present in the ‘tail’ of the decay when you listen to cheaper cables was completely gone. The Signature Super ARAY sounded very transparent and clean, like looking through freshly

polished pair of glasses. Now this was a completely different level! The sound image became more tangible and credible and there was more texture and an almost holographic spaciousness. We were so absorbed by the music that we forgot to cue up the Tord Gustavsen track, but simply kept listening to Ólafur Arnalds. When we did switch to Tord Gustavsen we heard a very delicate but at the same time very ‘determined’ musical presentation. More realism and tranquility, micro detail that we didn’t know was in there, and more speed and focus. Separation between sounds was better, more realistic. They all had their own space now. And there was more energy. Not in an oppressive way though, we could play at a higher volume without the feeling of overdoing it.



# Sarum T

Okay, listen...this may be the right time for some safeguarding... We will now address the two most costly Streaming Cables in the Chord Company's catalogue. And no matter how you look at it, they cost a lot of money. Whether someone has to spend so much money is not up to us. We were



just lucky that we had the chance to listen to them and give an opinion about their sound quality, compared to more affordable cables. And we will definitely need some hyperbole to describe their performance.

The Chord Company Sarum T Streaming Cable was developed from the now legendary Sarum cables. These remarkable cables are entirely built by hand and it takes several people to do it. Its conductors were originally developed for military purposes. Some manufacturers (not The Chord Company though) will tell you that as a somewhat dubious quality stamp, and there is some legitimate cynicism about it, but the fact remains that parts and materials for military purposes often have to meet extreme specifications. The conductors in the Sarum T are still made of high quality silver plated OFC. The big difference with the previous version - for which The Chord Company developed their Super ARAY technology - is the new insulation material. That was also developed for military purposes and it's called Taylon®, hence the added letter T in the name of the cable. Taylon is very expensive and very hard to obtain, so originally it was only used for the absolute top model ChordMusic. But now it has been made available in less costly series as well.

We could not determine how the Sarum T compares to the original Sarum, but compared to the Signature Super ARAY the improvement in sound quality kept perfect pace with the increase in price. We didn't know how it was possible, but the Sarum T was able to coax even more music from the recordings we used. In the Tord Gustavsen recording we heard so much more of the recording space that it 'looked' like someone had turned on the lights, so we could see the actual dimensions of the room. This cable revealed an extra layer of music that changed our perception of the music. There is no other way to say it. With Ólafur Arnalds we heard the same dramatic increase in spaciousness. The space around the piano was so much larger that it sounded like we were standing next to it and could look around to see the inside of the recording studio. The sound of the swelling strings was cleaner and more subtle and had so much more texture that they were easier to follow in the mix individually. In fact, that applied to the entire recording. Small details in certain sounds suddenly made more sense in the context of the music, and there was balance and tranquility.

# ChordMusic

ChordMusic is the new top series from The Chord Company. This is where they first made use of the Taylon® dielectric that is also available in the Sarum T series, and it also has the SuperARRAY technology. The conductors and the geometry of the Chord Company ChordMusic is identical to the Chord Company Sarum T, but it is much more complicated to build because it has 5 additional layers of shielding. A much costlier affair, both in material and man-hours.

With the Chord Company ChordMusic, Ólafur Arnalds sounded warm and (yes...) analogue. The word that popped into our heads was 'tubey'. The music got a unique sense of tranquility. It sounded completely effortless, with more energy and focus. Maybe the Sarum T was just a smidge more neutral, but we are not averse to a well-dosed touch of extra timbre, and the name of the ChordMusic actually says it all: it was all about one thing: the music. Our small reserve about the more neutral Sarum T quickly dissipated when we cued up Tord Gustavsen. Here, the increased focus on the music and the space around it made the experience almost lifelike. The timbre of the music was full and warm and felt completely natural. It may take some listeners a little time to get used to, but after that there is no way back.





# Conclusions

The Chord Company Streaming Cables surprised us. Built to a high quality standard, their sonic qualities are remarkably consistent. The Chord Company clearly aims for 'tone'. That is the attribute that stood out most with all the cables we listened to. And by tone we do not mean colouration, let us be perfectly clear about that, because when it comes to timbre, these cables do not get in the way of the music at all. The only pity is that the price gap between the entry level C-Series and the 'first step up' Shawline is a bit wide, but the step in quality more than makes up for that. Pound for pound, the Shawline may even have the best cost/performance balance of them all. Having said that, we also think that the more expensive cables are

better and worth their asking price, with an 'expensive but still affordable' sweet spot for the Signature Super ARAY. Our very positive experience with the two most expensive cables in this review will no doubt stir up some controversy, we are aware of that. But there is no way around it: these cables move the listener towards the heart of the music, and that is why they are in a league of their own. Loadsamoney? Absolutely. Expensive? That is in the ear of the 'beholder'. Give The Chord Company a chance, but be prepared for a new addiction.



# Music and Information

More information and prices about the Chord Company Streaming Cables can be found in our webshop:

[Chord Company streaming cables](#)

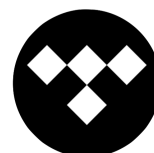
Spotify



[Ólafur Arnalds - re:member](#)

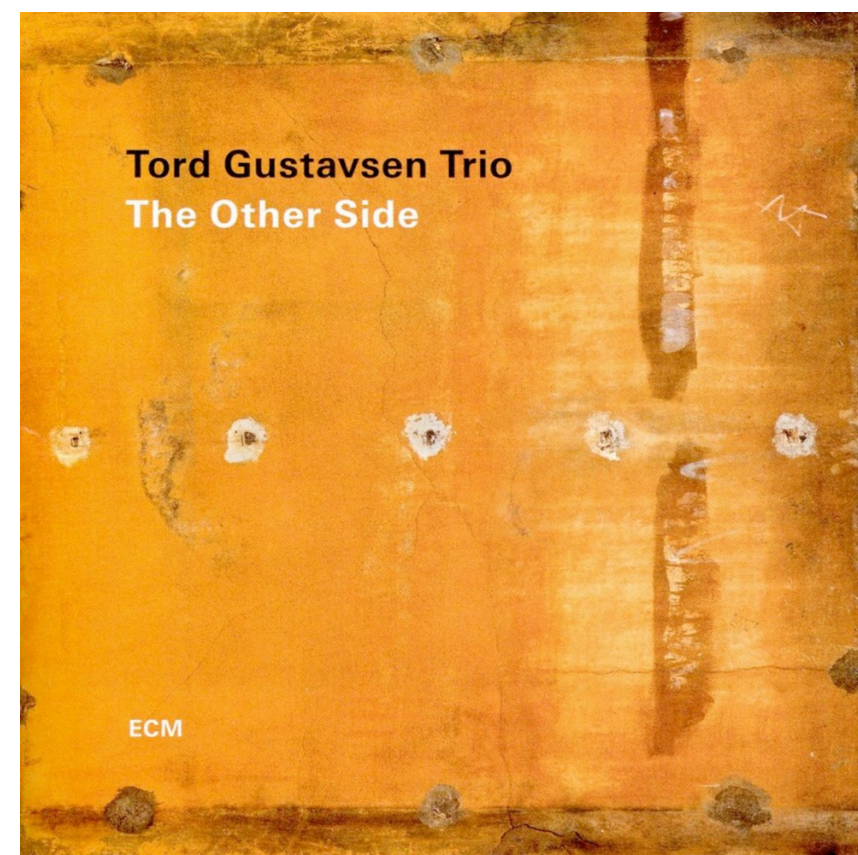
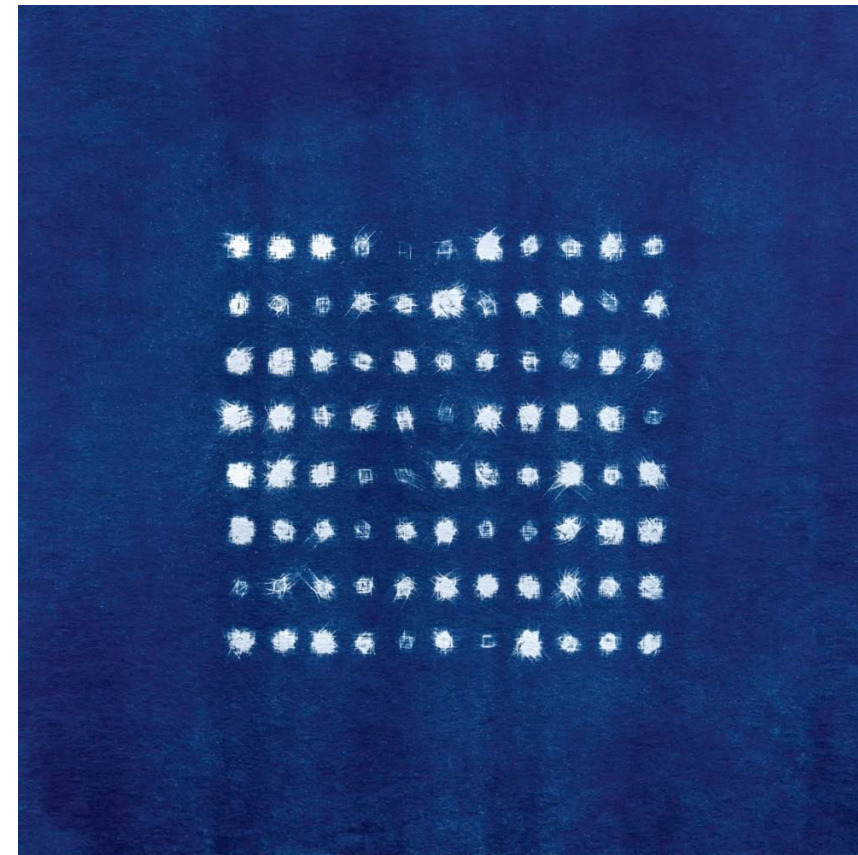
[Tord Gustavsen Trio - The Other Side](#)

Tidal



[Ólafur Arnalds - re:member \(MQA\)](#)

[Tord Gustavsen Trio - The Other Side \(MQA\)](#)





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