

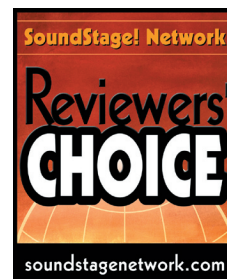
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Product Review

Crystal Cable CrystalConnect Ultra Interconnects & CrystalSpeak Ultra Speaker Cables

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*"How many cables can be considered the
cornerstone of an ever-changing audio system?
The Crystal Cable Ultras can."*

Review Summary

Sound

"The Ultras are among the most immediately correct-sounding cables I've ever heard, so acute is their balance between harmonic resolution and tonal color." "The clarity through the Ultras' treble and midrange has OTL-like directness, but never the hard angularity that can be a byproduct of such precision." "Their character [is] one of true neutrality, not a manufactured perception of such."

Features

"Interconnects and speaker cables that use proprietary [gold-infused-silver] conductors and bespoke RCA connectors." "All Ultra cables have individual serial numbers printed onto small discs clamped on each length, presumably to discourage counterfeiting."

Use

"I've become accustomed to interconnects and speaker cables that require some signal be run through them before they sound anything but awful," but "the Ultra interconnects and speaker cables sounded terrific—lithe and lively—right out of their cool boxes."

Value

"While Crystal Cable's Ultras are not budget priced, they do compete with the best interconnects and speaker cables I've heard. Add them to the short list of audio cables to audition when you want to hear *only the best!*"

New makers of audio cables pop up with great frequency. One has probably come into existence while you've read this sentence. Few, however, have debuted with the sort of polish of Crystal Cable, which appeared seemingly from the ether with thin, small-gauge interconnects and speaker cables that use proprietary conductors and bespoke RCA connectors. No off-the-shelf parts, just know-how that belied the company's out-of-nowhere origins.

But Crystal Cable did get some help. Gabi van der Kley, the friendly female head of the company, is married to Edwin van der Kley, who runs Siltech, the Netherlands-based maker of the finest audio cables I've ever heard. Siltech and Crystal Cable share an admiration of precious metals; both use gold-infused silver conductors to address what they believe is a deficiency in

pure-silver (and pure-copper) conductors: their crystal structure, which produces small distortions when current flows through. To address this, 24K gold is added to high-purity silver to fill the gaps between crystals, the building blocks of the metal, and thereby improve micro-conductivity. Crystal Cable goes one step further, using "a very new technique...to perfectly align the metal crystals." According to Gabi van der Kley, "the crystals do not appear in the normally random directions, but are aligned in parallel with the physical direction of the cable. The newly developed alloy is mechanically very strong and shows near zero distortion over an ultra-wide frequency response.(DC-500kHz)."

Physically, Crystal Cable and Siltech products look nothing like each other. Siltech Signature interconnects and speaker cables, for instance, are thick and bulky, sporting the traditional mesh outermost jacket and machined collars near the connectors. In stark contrast, Crystal Cable interconnects and speaker cables are small in diameter and nearly nude, having only a clear layer of Teflon as an outer jacket. The Ultra-series cables are the company's bulkiest, however, using two tightly twisted runs of the wire that Crystal Cable uses for its Reference line, each of which is fully balanced, presumably having three conductors. Interconnects and speaker cables use the same wire and construction. Insulation is thermally treated Kapton, which is said to improve further the cables' noise-reduction capabilities. Crystal Cable's RCA connectors are petite, which adds to the elegant, jewelry-like look of the cables.

Each set of Ultra interconnects and speaker cables comes packaged with its own warranty certificate in a chic acrylic-lidded box and velvet cinch sack. All Ultra cables have individual serial numbers printed onto small discs clamped on each length, presumably to discourage counterfeiting. I can't imagine it would be too difficult to make wire that looks similar to that used for the Ultra cables, so the added security seems like a very good idea.

Again, everything about Crystal Cable's Ultra interconnects and speaker cables indicates quality, which should be the case given their prices: \$3250 USD per meter pair for interconnects and \$6750 per two-meter pair of speaker cables. Extra meters add \$950 and \$1150 respectively. No one will call these cables cheap, but as high-end interconnects and speaker cables go, their prices don't seem outrageous when you consider their precious-metal conductors and custom touches. To quote musician-philosopher Billy Joel, "A buck three eighty won't buy you much lately on the

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street these days," and it will buy you exponentially less if you're an audiophile shopping for cables.

System

I received a full complement of Crystal Cable Ultras a little over three months ago, which gave me the opportunity to use the cables with a plenitude of audio goodies. Speakers were Wilson Audio Sophia 2s, Verity Audio Parsifal Ovations, Magnepan MG20.1s, and, just as I was finishing the review, Thiel CS7.2s. Amplifiers were my reference Lamm ML2.1 SET and M1.2 Reference hybrid monoblocks, along with Audio Research Reference 110 and Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 stereo amps. Digital included an Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP CD player/preamp (which has become my go-to digital source), an Ayre C-5xe universal player, an Audio Research Reference CD7 CD player, and the Esoteric P-03/D-03 transport/DAC combo for CD and SACD playback. I also used an Audio Research Reference 3 preamp—another go-to component. Power products were all from Shunyata Research: Hydra Model-8 power conditioner, Anaconda Helix Vx and Alpha power cords, and Python Helix Vx and Alpha cords.

The Lamm amps sat on Silent Running Audio Ohio Class XL Plus² equipment platforms, while the rest of the electronics were aided in being all they could be by Silent Running Audio's formidable Craz 4 Reference rack. The Esoteric digital separates, however, had sand-filled Bright Star Audio Big Rocks underneath—not enough SRA stuff to go all around. I used both single-ended and balanced Crystal Cable Ultra interconnects, often with the same equipment. For comparison I had Siltech SQ-110 Classic Mk 2 interconnects and LS-188 Classic Mk 2 speaker cables.

An apparent contradiction in terms is the fact that none of Crystal Cable's products is directional, but the crystals in the conductors are "aligned in parallel with the physical direction of the cable." Whatever the case may be, the Ultra interconnects and speaker cables sounded terrific—lithe and lively—right out of their cool boxes. I was so surprised by this that I wrote Gabi van der Kley to find out what her company does to break in the cables. "We give them a kind of burn-in treatment, but they still will improve while listening." I've become accustomed to interconnects and speaker cables that require some signal be run through them before they sound anything but awful. Whatever "burn-in treatment" the Ultras get, *it works*.

Ultra Sound

If initial visual impressions are difficult for you to overcome, the Crystal Cable Ultra interconnects and speaker cables will challenge you like no others. While they aren't exactly thread-thin, they certainly don't have the girth of other top-of-the-line cables. Still, there is nothing thin or insubstantial about their sound. The Ultras are among the most immediately correct-sounding cables I've ever heard, so acute is their balance between harmonic resolution and tonal color. There is purity without ruthlessness, smoothness without obscuring softness. While it's easy with some cables to say that they sound obviously warm, fast or full, the Ultras' performance embodies all of these things to some degree, making their character one of true neutrality, not a manufactured perception of such.

I've made my interest in the piano trio well known in my equipment reviews. The combination of piano, bass and drums can be magic in the right hands. Bill Evans, Scott LaFaro and Paul

Motian made up the best-known piano trio, followed closely by Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette. However, trios like Brad Meldau's, with Larry Grenadier on bass and Jorge Rossy on drums, and Jacques Loussier's, with Benoit Dunoyer de Segonzac on bass and André Arpino on drums, have pushed the boundaries in terms of repertoire while always making approachable music. Above all, the piano trio has remained *accessible* in the 21st century, ensuring its musical relevance and commercial success.

A piano trio that has gone against the grain in some interesting ways is fronted by pianist Tord Gustavsen, with Harald Johnsen on bass and Jarle Vespestad on drums. They record on ECM, a label whose atmospheric sound serves their music, which is infused with Gustavsen's cool Scandinavian intellectualism, well. The Crystal Cable Ultras also serve this music well. The quietude and air that are so vital to it are conveyed with easy precision—never highlighted, which can cause problems in the treble, or obscured, which can make everything sound slightly, or greatly, woolly. The clarity through the Ultras' treble and midrange has OTL-like directness, but never the hard angularity that can be a byproduct of such precision. If I have a guiding audio maxim, it's that the very best products capture all of the detail and emotional content—all of the truth and beauty—of the music. This is exactly what the Ultras do, sounding clear, sweet and highly resolving in the process.

Some cable makers will have you believe that portraying deep, powerful bass is the domain of thick, heavy wire, but the Crystal Cable Ultras dispel this notion. While their bass isn't quite to the same standards as that of networked cables from Transparent and MIT, it is certainly in the neighborhood and, more important, not obviously deficient in any way. Speakers like the Thiel CS7.2 have what is seemingly an extra bass gear; they continue to go lower when other speakers, some that cost considerably more, give up. It was with the CS7.2s and the Crystal Cable Ultras that I fully understood the contribution of the acoustic and electric bass lines on Greg Brown's *The Evening Call* [Red House RHR CD 198]. If you've heard Brown sing, you know that his dusky baritone comes from down in his chest. The bass on his songs acts as counterpoint to his vocals, never letting his voice define the low end of his music. The combination of the Crystal Cable Ultras and Thiel CS7.2 portrayed this music with just the right amount of vocal and low-end growl. On "Treat Each Other Right," a pulsating kick drum was clearly delineated from the bass. "Where did that come from?" I wrote in my listening notes. I hadn't heard it before. In this case, high-resolution, full-range speakers and high-resolution, full-range cables were in impressive harmony.

Lest you think the Ultras will be everything to everybody, there are areas in which other cables perform differently. The Ultras don't have the resolute edge definition of Nordost Valhalla, for instance, or the consistently open, detailed presentation of Shunyata Research's Helix interconnects and speaker cables. Missing also are the last bits of tangibility and color of the Siltech Signature cables. However, I'm talking about percentage points of difference here. A case could be made for the completeness of each of these cables, with slight differences in their performances here and there. This is nothing new, but it does speak quite a bit about the company the Crystal Cable Ultras keep. Any lesser comparisons would be inappropriate.

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In fact, the Crystal Cable Ultra interconnects and speaker cables may be the most universal audio cables of the bunch. There isn't a system or component that I can remember hearing with which they would not jibe. That, more than anything else, is the achievement of these cables. So canny is their performance that they will allow products to sound like themselves without highlighting their bad habits. This comes at a very stiff price, but how many cables can be considered the cornerstone of an ever-changing audio system? The Crystal Cable Ultras can.

Ultra vs. Classic

A little over a year ago, I wrote about Siltech's SQ-110 Classic Mk 2 interconnects (\$2600 per meter pair) and LS-188 Classic Mk 2 speaker cables (\$5800 per eight-foot pair), the most expensive cables in Siltech's Classic line but by no means the most expensive cables that Siltech makes. That honor would go to Signature Generation 6 Compass Lake and The Emperor, which reside in "you don't want to know" territory. The Classic Mk 2 cables are far less costly—yes, even at their prices—but offer an amount of Siltech's Signature performance. "As with the Signature cables," I wrote, "the sound of Classic Mk 2 simply made sense and discouraged analysis. It may be trite to say, but the music was primary, the sound secondary." Siltech's new S.A.T.T. process—whereby the cables are frozen and then heated—is said to wring a Signature-like level of performance from the Classic Mk 2 cables. I will be reporting on this sometime in the future.

Even though Crystal Cable Ultra and Siltech Classic Mk 2 cables both use silver-and-gold conductors, there are some sonic differences between them. I described Siltech Classic as "full and sweet while displaying a detailed and spacious presentation." Crystal Cable Ultra interconnects and speaker cables have the sweetness, detail and space, but I wouldn't characterize their sound as particularly full and weighty. Their presentation is evenhanded—neither forgiving, which the Siltech Classic cables are to a small degree, nor merciless in their presentation of musical detail. As mentioned, this gives the Ultras a vast envelope of applicability. They allow you to hear what your components do without accentuating or attenuating any of their sonic qualities. There are cables that will do the former and latter with ample byproducts—leanness, excessive lead-edge energy, a soft

presentation, murkiness—but the Crystal Cable Ultras avoid these things while addressing each sonic parameter with fidelity and an ever-pleasant demeanor.

Neither of these cables would be effective tone controls for reshaping an audio system's sound. Both are like components: You pick them for their synergy with everything else. If cost weren't a consideration, I'd still choose Siltech Signature for use in my system, but the Crystal Cable Ultras nip at their heels for a much lower price.

Conclusion

Yes, the audio landscape is abundant with cables, and new ones hit the market with regularity. Amidst this free-for-all, the products from a company like Crystal Cable can get lost. However, based on what I heard from the Ultra interconnects and speaker cables, Crystal Cable need not worry. Gabi van der Kley and company have created a distinguished top-of-the-line interconnect and speaker cable that do everything well—a rare feat. While I admired the Ultras for what they contributed to the sound of my audio system—their ability to pass a great deal of detail in a wholly natural way, their direct midrange, their deep bass—it was ultimately their impartiality to the signals they pass that impressed me most. These are some of the most composed-sounding cables I've heard—never too much of this or that. While this may not be the sexiest thing to write about any audio product, it is something that will make the Crystal Cable Ultras satisfying for a very long time, so well will they work with any components that come and go around them. Often audiophiles begin building their systems around speakers, but Crystal Cable's Ultra interconnects and speaker cables make an argument for starting with cables.

While Crystal Cable's Ultras are not budget priced, they do compete with the best interconnects and speaker cables I've heard. Add them to the short list of audio cables to audition when you want to hear *only the best*.

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P r o d u c t R e v i e w

Company Info

Crystal Cable

CrystalConnect Ultra Interconnects & CrystalSpeak Ultra Speaker Cables

Prices: Interconnects, \$3250 USD per one-meter pair;
speaker cables, \$6750 per eight-foot pair.

Warranty: Lifetime.

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