

# Equipment Report



## Crystal Cable Arabesque Minissimo Diamond Edition with Subissimo Subwoofer

Grace under Sound Pressure

Julie Mullins

**W**hen high-end audio manufacturers delve into the so-called “lifestyle” category they must tread lightly to avoid giving the impression that they’re prioritizing good looks at the expense of great sound. Sure, there are many approaches to product development and how budgets get divvied up, just as there are audiophiles who crave not only high-fidelity musical reproduction but also gear that’s a pleasure to have around—to look at and live with in their home, to enjoy interacting with it. Can’t one have the best of both worlds? Certain companies seem to think so (Sonus faber, Burmester, McIntosh, among many others), and this brings us to the inimitable Crystal Cable led by Ed-

win and Gabi Rijnveld, the husband-and-wife team who are the creative minds behind the Netherlands-based company. Crystal Cable stands out for its seemingly endless capacity for innovation, its high-end technology (thanks to Edwin’s engineering prowess), and its exquisite design across all product offerings, from loudspeakers and amplifiers to top-tier cables and accessories—and now a subwoofer too, the Subissimo, which I paired with the rather exotic loudspeakers under review here, the Arabesque Minissimo Diamond Edition two-way stand-mounts. Even their names are apt and clever.

First off, this isn’t a new speaker *per se* (see Andrew Quint’s review of the original Minissimo in Issue 256), but rather a major update, the centerpiece being a new namesake diamond tweeter. Other changes include an upgrade to Absolute Dream internal wiring featuring mono-crystal silver conductors, bi-wiring capability via a double set of solid-silver WBT NextGen terminals, internal cabinet damping refinements, and even more rigorously pair-matched mid/bass drivers (which use a strong neodymium air-optimized magnet structure and a carbon-fiber-reinforced sandwich paper cone diaphragm). A single Absolute Dream MonoCrystal Jumperset (JD-1) is also included.

If you’ve ever seen—and hopefully heard—either the original or the Diamond Edition model of the Arabesque Minissimo, chances are you’d remember or recognize it as much for its sweeping, curvy “comma”-shaped form factor and quartet of

unexpected high-gloss color choices—Aquamarine blue, Pearl white, and Solar orange (like a Dreamsicle)—as for its incredible resolution, musicality, dispersion, and “disappearing act”—which make this two-way an all-around standout that defies any number of category expectations.

Its cabinet, which is machined from a single solid piece of metal resin composite, looks modern and elegant but its smooth shape is more than just whimsical; it’s also functional, minimizing resonance and facilitating wider dispersion. Interestingly, the speakers can be placed—as a mirror-imaged pair—with the fuller, rounded parts of the enclosures facing inward or outward for different sonic results, depending on your room and preferences. Per the user manual, the former configuration is said to provide a deeper soundstage, while the latter, a soundstage of greater width. The Minissimos were designed to perform well across a variety of room sizes—from 110 to 1300 square feet or more.

The Minissimos are shipped securely connected to self-contained stands, but they can also be separated from these and placed on a special dampening mat for shelf or surface mounting. The stands’ heavy steel tubes are filled with fine-grain sand and their weight ensures mechanical and sonic stability—indeed, they are said to be resonance-free. Another striking design detail is the artfully and mathematically designed laser-cut grille that serves both to protect and further showcase the diamond tweeter. And yes, it’s acoustically transparent.

## Specs & Pricing

### Minissimo Arabesque Diamond Edition loud-speaker

**Type:** Two-way, full-range stand-mount

**Driver complement:**

Diamond tweeter, neodymium magnet structure with carbon-fiber-reinforced sandwich paper cone diaphragm for mid/bass

**Frequency response:** 47Hz–50kHz (–3dB) near-wall position

**Impedance:** 8 ohms nominal

**Sensitivity:** 83.5dB @ 2.83V

**Weight:** 56 lbs. each, including stands

**Price:** \$19,999 without stands; \$21,499 with stands (Scala stabilizing accessory, \$1199/pr.)

### Subissimo subwoofer

**Type:** Powered

**Driver complement:** 2 x 13" long-throw paper cone units in a force-canceling configuration

**Integral amplifier power:**

2 x 600W power amps (one per driver)

**Frequency response (low point in-room):** –6dB @ 16Hz

**Crossover frequency range:** 35Hz–70Hz @ 12dB/octave; 35Hz, 70Hz, 120Hz @ 24dB/octave

**Inputs:** Stereo low-level RCA and XLR; stereo high-level 4mm banana

**Dimensions:** 16" x 32" x 22.8"

**Weight:** 159 lbs.

**Price:** \$13,999

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Partway through my review timeframe, Crystal Cable sent me a pair of Scala weighted forms to be placed atop the speakers to enhance stability, reduce resonance, and improve dispersion. These beautifully machined solid-aluminum accessory pieces with wavelike, textured, 3-D layers follow the Minissimos' curvilinear forms and rest like "hats" on their tops. There's a rubberized coating around the perimeter of each to secure placement and block the transmission of vibration.

Crystal Cable's Subissimo subwoofer was developed concurrently with the Minissimo Diamond Edition speakers and designed to "integrate simply and seamlessly" with them (or other speakers). For my review purposes I was provided with a single Subissimo, a hefty unit in the same Pearl White color enclosure as my speaker samples. Also, like the speakers, for more natural sound, lower distortion, and diffraction-free dispersion the sub cabinet has no corners, only curves. The sandwich cabinet, reportedly resonance-free and highly stable, was designed using the Comsol Multiphysics software platform for physics-based 3-D modeling and simulation. As the Subissimo is a powered

sub, each woofer has its own dedicated amplifier and is mechanically coupled within a special frame designed to cancel resonance. The top and bottom plates of the enclosure are made of 2-1/4"-thick solid aluminum that serves both to build up the sub's structure and to help cool its powerful internal amps. The sub rests on six adjustable feet that come fitted to the base. There's a toggle switch for polarity that can be set to 0 or 180 degrees. Conveniently, the Subissimo can be left on, as it has auto-on/-off detection and will enter standby mode after 20 minutes without signal. Of course, a pair of subs will provide greater dynamic impact as well as drive the room more evenly, but as you'll see in my comments below I was very pleased with the results of a single sub.

The way the Minissimo and Subissimo work together is a bit like a pair of Olympic figure skaters—an all-around aesthetically pleasing combo displaying a blend of power, strength, and technical abilities tempered by effortless grace and gorgeous musicality. They gain points for both technical prowess and overall presentation. One partner supports the other, and they must interact seamlessly as a unit, while minding the laws of physics.

### Setup and Sound

The Minissimos were quite easy to set up and readily maneuverable (even by li'l ol' me) so long as you pay attention to their weight distribution on their connected stands. Just a tiny bit of toe-in adjustment did the trick to get the sound to my liking. Happily I didn't need to shift

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the subwoofer much at all, as it's a fairly heavy beast weighing roughly 160 pounds. Based on my listening room dimensions (approximately 18' wide by nearly 35' deep with over 12' ceilings), I kept the speakers in the "tail out" configuration (as opposed to the inverse placement mentioned above). The Subissimo was located between and equidistant from the Minissimos, at a distance of approximately five feet from each.

But let's talk sound and listening experiences. As far as musical interests and tastes, I'm very much an omnivore across genres. Perhaps like many of you, what I choose to play depends upon my mood at the moment. It's often been the case that during many a loudspeaker review (or electronics review, for that matter) I've come to the conclusion that some gear just seems to perform better when playing back certain types of music. (This depends on the source recording and other system factors too, naturally.) What struck me most with the Minissimos (with and without Subissimo, but especially with) was their amazing versatility—how hard they could rock out in addition to excelling with classical and acoustic fare. Although I had heard this Minissimo/Subissimo combo at a couple of shows, I realized I had

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listened to—and enjoyed tremendously—mainly classical and some chamber music along with jazz through those demo systems. So I wasn't expecting to be hankering to listen as much to heavy-hitting pop and rock.

These are quite high-resolution transducers that (once set up and tweaked properly) pull off a marvelous disappearing act, sounding natural and steadfastly musical across genres. As the Minissimos are pretty efficient speakers I did the majority of my critical listening with a relatively low-powered Air Tight ATM-1S stereo tube amplifier driving them (it sounded far better than a solid-state amp I tried). For my phono stage and preamplifier, I shifted between a Soullution 520 phono/pre and an Audio Consulting Silver Rock phono stage in front of the 520. My analog source was an Acoustic Signature III turntable and TA-1000 tonearm fitted with an Air Tight PC-7 cartridge. As recommended in the owner's manual, I initially set the Subissimo to cross over at 70Hz at 12dB, though I also shifted it to 65Hz later, which seemed to work better in my room, for critical listening.

I started off with an obscure LP recently given to me, a fantastic recording of the Shostakovich cello sonata on the Czech label Panton. The playback of the cello and piano was so crystal-clear, natural, and gorgeous, it literally stopped me in my tracks while I was taking care of a mundane household task before taking a seat. Such a true sense of life was conveyed through detail and dimensionality that I felt I could visualize cellist's upper body shifting and moving in time as he played his heart out. Magnificent!

Speaking of standout strings, I gave a listen to an old favorite, Leonard Cohen's *Live in London* LP set, where Bob Metzger's gorgeous guitar intro on "Bird on a Wire" resonated throughout my room nearly as believably as if I were at the O2 Arena. Ditto the mandolin on "Dance Me to the End of Love." And "Ain't No Cure for Love," boasted an impressive chucking bass line nicely differentiated from the kickdrum. In fact, all the instruments, also notably Hammond B3 and clarinet, were rendered with remarkable dimensionality and reasonably accurate placement in space, although the soundstage didn't feel particularly deep. The detail on the individual vocalists' separation and enunciation—from Cohen and backup singers Hattie and Charley Webb—was realistically portrayed, down to their imperfect unison. All aspects of this great recording were presented with palpable presence, lifelike energy, and effortless neutrality. The speakers and sub really allowed the music to shine.

To really get down with the sub and experiment with its filter I needed to bring some more bass into the mix, so (of course) I pulled out El Vy's *Return to the Moon* LP. The only options for the subsonic filter are either "on" or "auto-filter" mode. There is no "off" per se. With the Subissimo's subsonic filter on, the sound seemed clearer, more focused, and at times, even more detailed. When the filter was in auto mode, the sound was more homogenized but also more bloomy and expansive. As you might expect, some material (perhaps even the majority of my selections) was more ear-pleasing and tended to be more neutral with the filter on.

Returning to El Vy, the title track felt a bit thick and even slightly congested with the filter on auto mode. With it fully on, the funky bass line was well articulated and maintained solid



presence without getting overblown. However, I was surprised that I preferred the ironic antics of "I'm the Man to Be" with the filter in auto mode, because it unleashed a greater sense of spaciousness and swagger. It also occurred to me once again that I didn't expect such in-your-face muscle and raw power from these elegant little speakers (recall the skaters metaphor).

An LP that really blew me away—via the Minissimos and Subissimo with the filter on—was Buena Vista Social Club's eponymous debut. This soundtrack features a cornucopia of instruments in deliciously complex arrangements—almost like a layer cake. All the ingredients were there, ordered and measured in artful (and delicious) balance. On "Chan Chan" various parts gently came to the foreground and then receded in turn—a laúd here, trum-

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pet there, now fiddle, then mournful steel guitar. Yet there was a wonderful sense of urgency in the presentation, with rapid-fire transient response keeping everything exciting and realistic. More than ever before, I was keenly aware of Compay Segundo's "second" vocals—his last name is said to reflect his trademark bass harmony second voice—just beneath Eliades Ochoa singing lead.

Not all systems have fully delivered this album's infectious stream of energy. I was going to try just a few tracks, but couldn't resist listening to the whole thing—and I insisted JV hear it too. You could really sense, almost feel, the effort of fingers plucking guitar strings, palms snapping on drum skins, all of which brought an engaging and authentic intimacy to the performance.

I also gave a listen to the Willie Dixon/Memphis Slim *Willie's Blues* LP from Analogue Productions. In this stripped-down session, percussion and guitar were placed a bit forward in the mix, particularly cymbals, on "Nervous" and "That's My Baby." With the subsonic filter on auto, the piano registered just a hint of brightness and the bass was more subdued, with a backseat feel on "Good Understanding" too. The differences with and without the filter read more

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subtly here; with it on, instruments seemed more separated in space yet still part of a whole. Upright bass had more presence, energy, and definition—all good things.

No speaker or system is perfect, so I'd be remiss not to mention a couple of minor quibbles. In spite of experimenting with speaker placement, soundstaging wasn't always the deepest around, yet instrumental placement seemed quite on-point, even if not always pin-point; spaciousness mattered more. However, the Minissimos' big sound and wall-to-wall dispersion combined with incredible dimensionality and realism more than compensated for any such shortcomings.

JV and I also discussed some possible suckout within the power range to achieve greater transparency, resolution, and speed, but throughout all of my time listening to these speakers and sub I can't say I ever felt bereft—I enjoyed every minute.

## Summary

All told, the Minissimo and Subissimo proved to be a winning combo—and a highly addictive one. The pair strikes all the right chords among beautiful aesthetics, top-tier construction, and truly sound engineering driven by Crystal Cable's ongoing desire for innovation. The Minissimo Diamond/Subissimo offer a wholly pleasing balance

of structure, substance, and detail retrieval (without skewing analytical), alongside a generous dose of openness. The combo finds and delivers unflagging musicality in whatever material you throw at it. Call it a speaker and sub for all occasions, and a system I am loathe to let go of. Be warned: If you audition these—as with anything else involving the word “diamond”—be prepared to part with a rather princely sum of cash; the Minissimo and Subissimo are easy to love and rather habit-forming.

## JV comments:

As was the case the last time I paired up with Ms. M for a review (of the Magnepan .7), I don't have much to add. Ms. Mullins' thoughtful take on the aesthetics and sonics of this strikingly cool-looking and excellent-sounding mini/sub combo is precisely on target. Thanks in part to their clever, diffraction-free enclosures, the Minissimos pull off a truly superb disappearing act, and thanks to their diamond tweeters their transient response and resolution of fine detail are audibly superior to that of most other minis.

Of course, some of this apparent speed and resolution is bought at the price of a bit of suckout in the power range and the absence of low bass (as JM noted), both of which tend to lean out tone color, draw attention to midband detail, and spotlight upper-midrange transients, thereby heightening the illusion of “transparency.” I also detected a touch of added sparkle in the topmost treble, though the Minissimos are nothing like “hot-sounding.” In fact, with their little hats (the Scalas) in place, they are very open and bloomy.

Much of the Minissimo's slight power-range suckout and all of its inherent (for a two-way) low-bass issues are solved by adding the fast, clear, deep-reaching Subissimo woofer. Though I wish Crystal had thought to include a continuously variable phase control on the unit to dial-in the sub/sat blend, even without precision phase-matching between the Minissimo's mid/woof and the sub's woofer, the fusion of sub and sat was near seamless.

My only real reservations about the Minissimo/Subissimo, in so far as I have any, aren't sonic; they're fiscal and aesthetic. Yes, both of these highly engineered *objets d'art* are uniquely stylish. High style is part of what Crystal is selling here. Still, at roughly \$35k for sats and sub, you need to make damn sure that you (and your significant other) are completely satisfied with their distinctive looks. That said, their exceptional sound quality speaks for itself. **tas**

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