

FROM A LADY'S MIND

CRYSTAL CABLE ULTRA SERIES SPEAKER CABLES ARE SHEER MAGIC IN THE RIGHT SYSTEM

BY ERNIE FISHER

OVER THE PAST 10 years or so, I have seen, heard of or listened to some very expensive cables, both interconnects and speaker wire; and I keep wondering where the cable industry is headed as some prices (including the cost of the cables under review) are approaching those of complete audio systems.

Crystal Cables are hand-made in Holland and the company currently markets 12 models, including HDMI, digital and AC cables, interconnects and a variety of jumper cables. The company founder, president and CEO is Gabi van der Kley, an accomplished concert pianist with a few recordings to her credit. Although I'm not sure what impelled her to get into the cable industry, I suspect it was her husband, Edwin van der Kley who heads Siltech, one of Europe's long-standing cable manufacturers. However, Gabi runs her company absolutely independently, with R & D and all manufacturing entirely separate from her husband's business. Apparently, Gabi's design goal was to produce a very flexible (thus thin and lightweight) but strong cable with which to connect those expensive audio components. The Ultra Series is part of the company's top product line which includes cables, interconnects and an AC power cord.

The Sound

EVERY CABLE MANUFACTURER has a design doctrine and, while everyone adheres to an established theorem, each company focuses on a different technical aspect, such as cable geometry, dielectrics, etc. As a critic, I find this somewhat amusing because, as I check out manufacturers' claims, I find that the voice of many high-end cables is, in actuality, more similar than one would expect. Of course, there are differences, but I suspect that they are more likely due to associated components.

Most high-end cables are made conscientiously, and this is certainly apparent with the Ultras. Although they arrived fully burned in, I connected them to one of my in-house systems and let them cook for an additional week of almost continuous operation. My usual procedure is to check the sound daily while the cooking goes on and, when I hear no further changes, I get down to my serious listening tests. As I like and know the sonic characteristics of several piano brands, I generally begin by listening to recordings of three or four different pianos, usually music played on a Steinway grand, a Baldwin grand, a Boesendorfer Imperial grand and a Yamaha grand. To me, it is important for a system, or any part of it, to reproduce the textures and tonal gradations of the various instruments.

Three systems were used for my auditions: the Weytech Labs Topaz amp (reviewed in Vol. 13, No. 2) with the Opal preamp (reviewed in Vol. 10, No. 2); the Simaudio Moon W8 amp/P8 preamp (reviewed in Vol. 17, No. 3) and the kW500 integrated amp from Musical Fidelity (reviewed in Vol. 17, No. 2). I switched between three pairs of loudspeakers: the System Audio Explorer and Sonus faber Guarneri Memento (both reviewed in this issue) and our in-house Ethern Vitas. The variety of system configurations involved in this review was astounding and completely justified my dislike of cable reviews. Nevertheless, I listened to the Ultras in no less than nine system configurations and found, not surprisingly, that in some systems they performed better than in others.

The Ultra cables are very neutral, allowing great imaging and bass resolution; an unrestricted, resolute midrange and equally resolute, clear highs. I especially enjoyed the control over the entire frequency range when the Ultras were connected to the Topaz (single-

FACTS

MODEL

Ultra Series
Speaker Cable

MANUFACTURER

Crystal Cable

RATING



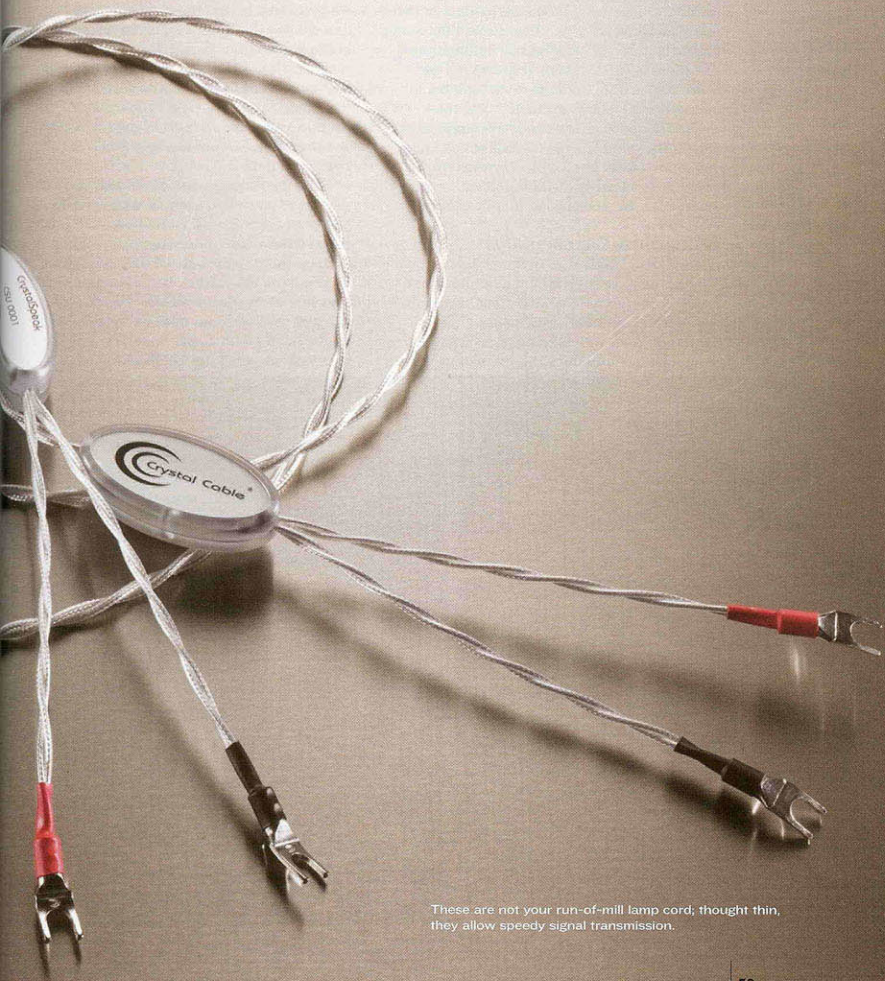
PRICE

\$9,100 Cdn
\$8,420 US
(two-metre pair)

CONTACT

Canada:
Audio Basics, Inc.
877.92AUDIO
905.303.9232

CrystalCable.com
+31 26 353 9045



These are not your run-of-mill lamp cord, though thin, they allow speedy signal transmission.

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ended tube) amplifier. Though tonal textures were good with all systems, the Topaz/System Audio and the Simaudio/Sonus faber combinations didn't reproduce sufficient harmonics to please this reviewer. In all systems the cables' voice was firm with good transparency at the top end. However, when I connected the Sonus fabers and the Ethernova Vitaes to the Topaz and the Musical Fidelity amps respectively, the Ultra cables truly lived up to their model name. These systems presented deep bass, sparkling midrange and smoother highs than any of the other system configurations. They also allowed me to enjoy the various piano recordings, clearly providing a life-like reproduction of the personality of each instrument.

Synopsis & Commentary

YOU HAVE LIKELY read my preaching about synergy again and again, and here is but one more opportunity to demonstrate its importance. Although the Crystal speaker cables held their own with all nine speaker/amplifier combinations I used for this evaluation, it soon

emerged that the best possible coupling was with the Sonus fabers. The sonic end results I achieved can't be rationally explained as having anything to do with either the cable construction or the Sf design parameters. Nevertheless, something quite magical was heard with the Crystal/Sonus faber combination; a harmonious partnership that rendered symmetry and balance better than with other high-end cables I had in-house at the time (including expensive cables such as the Nordost Valhallas reviewed in Vol. 13, No. 2 and the JPS Labs Aluminas reviewed in Vol. 17, No. 3).

I like the Crystal Cables' thin and unobtrusive appearance and their flexibility (only a lady would think of this). However, I also like their sonic achievements and believe they rank up there with some of the best cables currently on the market. Based on my listening tests, the Ultra speaker cables work exceptionally well with vacuum tube electronics and loudspeakers with a soft voice. Try them in your system; you'll not be disappointed.

TECHNOLOGY

THE OBJECTIVE FOR Crystal Cable was to build a cable thin enough to hide away and thick enough to allow signal to pass without hindrance or interference. The design employs a coaxial structure using gold-injected three millimeter silver conductors (actually two single conductors per cable) which Crystal calls a "fully balanced construction." The process by which this is accomplished is a closely

guarded secret.

The conductors are extruded from gold-injected ingots, coated with kapton and peek foil and then covered by a carbon layer and a silver-plated outer shield. A transparent outer jacket completes the assemblage, resulting in a loosely twisted dual coaxial cable.

Coaxial cable technology has been around for over 20 years, but the materials used in Crystal Cable's contemporary

design come from the aeronautic and space industry as well as the science of metallurgy. The use of thermally treated kapton as a dielectric is interesting. Made by Dupont, kapton is a superior dielectric and much more expensive than teflon (Trivia: the arm used on the space shuttle, the Canadarm, is entirely covered with an insulation system consisting of alternate layers of goldized kapton, dacron

scrim cloth and a beta cloth [fibre-glass] outer covering).

Another unconventional element is the cable's termination. About 10 inches from the cable end a small oval casing (box) allows users to choose between two methods of termination: spade lugs or banana plugs. I have no opinion regarding this box for, try as I might, I couldn't hear it. That's a good thing, as in this business, hearing is believing.