

AUDIO REVIEWS

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# CRYSTAL CABLE ULTRA

Reviewer: Srajan Ebaen



## Parallels

There's parallel universes. If you believe in the theory. Such universes are naturally peopled with parallel Johns. They're having hot extramarital sex with parallel Jills. Which begs a question. Do your wife's parallels frolic with *your* parallels? Do they occupy a shared reality? Are her parallel lovers the same multiple blokes you clone off into the great parallax of the big Max in the sky? Are these parallels as real as their originators on earth? Or is the you in this life merely a faint echo, of the original and *real* you which is elsewhere and which you've never even met yet? Much teeth gnashing and nail biting while you figure your way out of this mess. It's an old dilemma. Taoist Chuang-Tzu dreamed that he was a butterfly. Upon waking, he wondered. Was he really a butterfly dreaming to be Chuang-Tzu who remembered dreaming to be a butterfly last night? Like I said, parallels can be messy business.

Then there's ordinary parallels. Their lines will never meet. Like the poor dawg chasing the rainbow. Save in infinity. Another messy business. Infinity and dawgs in pursuit of it. There's parallels between politics, religion and audio. More messiness if those lines should intersect. While we're on the audio subject, there's of course parallel output devices too. Which is how amplifier power beyond mid two-digit values is usually arrived at. Single-ended or push-pulled. Simply add devices evenly on each side and presto, more power. Just match them properly so both channels and phases are truly identical. In digital, we see the paralleling of DAC chips. Parallel processing. That's claimed to reduce measurable distortion. It's nearly always implemented in cost-no-object designs. They could feature as many as 4 chips per channel (double if balanced).

In cables, Serguei Timachev of Stealth has applied the same rationale to his 75-ohm Sextet digital cable. That's simply six paralleled Varidigs spiraled around each other in a gentle twist. Now Crystal Cable enters that fray with their new Ultra Series. It seems to double up two of their silver/gold Reference conductors for a common leg. In parallel, naturally. In series, you'd have the same cable as before, simply double in length. What you want is double the girth. Or so it seems. What you get as well is a higher sticker price. Naturally.

But what else? Cynics of course will scoff that Crystal Cable needed a top-priced entry to flesh out their offerings. That they went the easy route: "Twice the Reference, twice the price". Without first posing the question to Crystal Cable's leading lady Gabi Van Der Kley, I didn't know what else Ultra offers over Reference.

I *had* read Fernando Andrette's Crystal Cable Reference review for the Brazilian audio magazine he runs. "In relation to the background silence, the cables that get closest (even in an obvious way) are Siltech's Generation 5 and 6. However, we found the Crystal Cable silence deeper and superior still. Yet regarding harmonic body, things weren't as clear-cut. Depending on the instrument and the recording quality (more distant microphones for example), we found the Siltech to be harmonically more correct. However, on close-mike'd recordings, the differences decreased drastically." Andrette summarized by awarding the Crystal Cable 79.6 points out of a possible 80.



While assisting in the preparation for this release, I have enjoyed many hours of listening to the colourful sounds on MA Recordings.

The only chance for small, specialized companies such as MA Recordings or Crystal Cable to go forward, regardless of the so-called competition, is to create something unique - something peculiar - something beautiful.

I am proud to be part of this "musical miracle" by supplying cables, compiling the music for this CD and assisting in other ways.

We hope to give you more than just 3 hours of pure pleasure!

Enjoy the music!

Gabi van der Kley  
Crystal Cable

Crystal Cable  
www.crystalcable.com

MA on SA  
100 minutes of 100 Stereo  
700 minutes of PCM Stereo  
... released in association with Crystal Cable

In Gabi's parallel life not as a formidable business woman but mother of four, she's married to Edwin Van Der Kley of Siltech. "Aha!" we think excitedly to ourselves. "A bit of domestic competitive spirit at work here. Gabi is throwing down the gauntlet by way of her new Ultra." To get still farther off track, Gabi's got yet another parallel life - as a Hungarian concert pianist. She has hinted that one of these days, we might hear her perform on a Crystal Cable recording done by none other than Todd Garfinkle of m.a. recording fame. Before we get completely lost in all these parallels, it's clearly best to let the lady tell us in her own words about the new Ultra cables. They were launched at the recent Moscow show which, incidentally and quite separately, also awarded her with a "Best of" for her previous Crystal Cable offerings [Gabi with that award above].

If -- as the usually unusually astute Andrette claims -- the Siltech cables are harmonically just a bit richer than Crystal's previous best while using similar conductors, would more conductor *mass* in the Ultras bridge that gap? I recently asked John Stronczer what he thought made his e.One Ref 1000 monos sound denser than the S300, both being based on Danish ICEpower technology. "The Ref 1000 has significantly more capacitance in its power supply which translates into greater perceived tonal density." Would his greater capacitance in the power supply have parallels in cable conductor mass when it comes to harmonic density? After all, Crystal Cable is famous for its exceptionally *skinny* conductors. Do the Ultras signal a minor change of philosophy then? Here now is Gabi with the real -- *unparalleled!* -- explanation.

"For the Ultra Series, Crystal Cable has developed new ways to seriously improve audio performance in the areas of metallurgy/crystal structure, insulation and construction. The two balanced cores are made from very pure silver and gold. A new technique is used to perfect alignment of the molecular crystal lattice. This means that the crystals (the building blocks of the metal) do not appear scattered in the normally random directions but are aligned in parallel with the physical direction of the cable. This newly developed alloy is mechanically very strong and shows near zero distortion over an ultra wide frequency response (DC-500kHz).

"The high-tech insulation is made with a thermally treated Kapton, improving the measured characteristics of the dielectric. The fully balanced construction cancels out external noise. Compared to ordinary cables, the improvement is over 60dB (1000 times) from 1Hz-50kHz. For matching aesthetics, Ultra Series cables use elegant acrylic barrels to show type and serial numbers and, with the speaker cables, to hide the adaptors. The packaging is adjusted to reflect the look - the box covers are made of acrylic as well. Our "thickest" cables are still easy to route, beautifully designed and surprisingly thin with superb performance."



Clearly Crystal Cable wasn't content to merely *double up*. As an engineering-driven outfit, there'd have to be more. And there is. Would the Ultra turn out to be a cable sans pareil - *without parallels*? Crystal Cable reviews on 6moons and elsewhere have been surprisingly agreeable over their essentially neutral character. Crystal Cable's isn't a corrective sort. These cables won't appeal to folks who view cables as color-between-the-lines tone controls or tonal tweaks. Crystal cables won't rectify perceived shortcomings on your electronics or transducers. Rather, they'll do less to brush over them.

Cable design in general seems to occur between two distinctive poles. There's additive plastic surgery and there's subtractive allopathy. One asks how much more bass and air, dynamics and speed it can generate. More expensive and ambitious plastic surgery offers more tuck and heavier augmentation. These are deliberate deviations from what is considered imperfect (the output of the system at the listener's ear). Improvements become a cocreative solution.

The other approach frets over doing the least damage. Minimally intrusive actions follow the Hippocratic Oath - first do no harm! This concept still incurs non-deliberate losses from that which is deemed perfect and untouchable (the raw signal). In short, two methods and value systems for two very different kinds of customers.



[Side note: In the context of signal fidelity, only the subtractive approach is conceptually correct. Fidelity to the signal and all. In practice and considering room interactions and pleasure listening rather than recording studio mastering, however, the give-and-take of synergy interactions becomes valid to optimize results. It's simply that the do-no-harm approach -- somewhat selectively -- believes one should season only with components and speakers, never with cables. The tuning approach views especially cables as devices of interpretative liaison. The fundamental credo of both sides is expressed by "this cable doesn't *do* a thing" vs. "this cable *sounds* fantastic".]

A serious engineer like Edwin van der Kley naturally believes in the Hippocratic sanctity of his patient. What goes into one end of a cable must come out the other end *exactly* the same. Twisting, bending, shaking or stepping on it shouldn't alter a cable's geometry nor disturb its electrical parameters. Exposure to strong EMI/RFI fields shouldn't cause measurable effects. Each model should avoid current restrictions for its intended applications. It should avoid propagation velocity losses, phase shifts, timing differentials of frequencies within the audible spectrum, harmonic skewing, timbre shifts and tonal balance drift.

It's a long list of what *not* to do, scope at the ready to quantify insertion losses. Pushing this obsession to the limit could eventually rely on extreme scenarios (excessive cable lengths, for example; unusually heavy radio frequency interference; peak resolution systems of rare cost). As such, certain successes might become brilliant and hard-won engineering feats whose relevance to the average consumer is questionable. But such is the usual small print of statement efforts. It's about ultimate performance under the most adverse of conditions. Amplifier makers call it load-invariant behavior.



To ends like these, Siltech, with a few commercial partners, has long since assembled what could be Europe's most ambitious R&D cable lab. It houses instrumentation and measurement gear far too advanced and hence expensive to be in the sole possession of a lone small cable house. Add Edwin's special expertise in metallurgy plus sufficient commercial success to make his own conductors. It's only reasonable to assume that for Gabi's Ultra -- Crystal's best effort yet -- the theme of neutrality would be sung by a veritable chorus line. Viewing today's assignment from this perspective, my question became whether my rig would be dialed enough to perceive advances over Crystal's Reference line; and whether these advances would seem commensurate with the increased cost.

Conceptually, stop for a moment. How could a cable already neutral (say the Reference) become more neutral yet in a more advanced model? Wouldn't that equate to more or less dead when you're either dead *or* alive though perhaps not wanted? With the subtractive approach, it's about minimizing losses. There's an inherent assumption that by dealing with matter rather than a vacuum, losses are unavoidable. You simply want to contain the scope of these losses. Advances here operate in the negative. Smaller losers. They often cause the common "until" exclamation. "I didn't know how much my system was still covering up until I heard..."

To avoid fraud -- reports of faux Siltech being hawked to unsuspecting bargain hunters have made the rounds -- all Ultra cables carry a registered serial number permanently captured inside the acrylic marker riding in an ovoid on the cable. There's also a life time warranty. For kicks, enjoy the black satin drawstring pouch inside a black box with a thick acrylic lid that contains your cable, said box tucked inside a black cardboard box for the full-on jewelry treatment.

Even coming off premium-choice Stealth Indras for single-ended low level and Zu Cable Ibis for high level, Crystal Cable Reference XLR leads to and from the balanced Rane and Crystal Reference power cords all around, transitioning to nothing but Ultra nets a completely unexpected but very real drop in noise floor. This manifests as a lower sweet spot on the volume dial. Things lock in sooner. The music turns flesh and blood earlier. Higher S/N ratios mean higher resolution. To the ear, this translates as more clearly resolved tertiary data. Take woodwind key clacks for example, with the same transient brilliance and percussive effects as primary noise makers in the rhythm section. Take how certain tones played simultaneously interact through summing for the briefest of moments. It's as though the light shone deeper into the recesses of the finer information that was partially obscured by the primary material earlier to now bring it forward.



You'll also hear microphone placement given away by what feels like audible pressure differentials in the musical textures. You can further sense whether a singer like Enrique Morente on Omar Faruk Tekbilek's new *Patience Tree* [Alif Records 828767595320] was physically present with the core ensemble or recorded elsewhere and subsequently patched in. You'll see how with a cracked instrument or buzzing reed, certain notes create a resonance within the instrument's body that rides on the crack to add a very faint harmonic that clearly telegraphs its origin. These are pretty subtle affairs. Nobody in their right mind listens for them. When they *present* themselves without volition, as something that's unimportant but patently obvious nonetheless to simply become part of the observed and absorbed, you're processing more information.

How to be more neutral than neutral? Resolve more micro details without otherwise tilting the tonal balance; without shifting the triptych of transient, sustain and decay; without skewing the fundamental-to-harmonic distribution. Nothing about what you heard before inserting the new cables changes. You simply hear more of the tiny stuff for a more all-encompassing summation of what this neutrality will include. Unless you deliberately *track* this little stuff, your hearing mechanism very quickly adapts to simply incorporating it in the big picture. The easiest way to then quantify what this *more* consists of is to turn down the volume. If you're not imaging things, you should indisputably arrive at volume settings lower than normal while the music remains intelligible and fully satisfying.

Then return to your old cables with the gain setting untouched. Note how the compulsive old itch to prime the pump reasserts itself. If moving through sonic vistas had an automotive equivalent, you'd now feel like driving slower, being less involved in carving the corners. Your progression on the road would seem a bit black and white compared to the color of driving faster and closer to the edge just a while back.



Playing in these leagues doesn't leave much room for *linear* breakthroughs. Or so any rational person with proper

exposure to good expensive cables would think (which doesn't imply that good mandates expensive). I frankly didn't expect that I'd notice a whole lot. My usual cable salad is of very fine quality already. It's quite common for tubophiles used to highish noise floors to do backwards flips when they suddenly encounter a friendly transistor amp that uncovers that much more information. Some can never go back. Others accuse the new-found detail of obscuring their earlier holistic vision and return to tubes more convinced than ever that they're in possession of a special pile of dirt in the Holy Land. But what if that detail didn't mess with their organic involvement in the music? What if it simply made the music more profound, by including morsels that fell between the cracks before?

Because the Ultra doesn't do *anything* different from my usual wires except dig deeper into the noise floor -- apparently the balanced cable configuration does work as claimed -- the process of discovering what this review would be about wasn't dramatic. It was a simple quiet "Aha" - *that's* what this cable is doing. I didn't feel suddenly compelled to revisit prior sonic flames in the software library for old time's sake, to score an illicit smooch or, forbid, even more. I simply listened deeper into the night without feeling self-conscious that my wife would be disturbed by bleed through.

Full-presence low-level listening is an aspect of the hobby unfortunately not talked about enough. The urge to go louder is invariably prompted by a lack of resolution. By resolution we should mean making audible the stuff that creates fullness, suspension of disbelief, color, density and conviction. It's reportedly how King Solomon passed a challenge. It involved distinguishing between real flowers and silk versions done up by a true master of the craft. Not allowed to inspect them up close, they looked indistinguishable from his throne. Asking a servant to open a window and watching an entering bee disregard one flower in favor of the other is how Solomon settled the argument conclusively yet inexplicably to the onlookers.

The audible aroma and fragrance that makes the difference between silk flower music and real flower music is the invisible stuff which we sense just like the bees who always know where the honey is. To stay with this imagery a wee bit longer, the Crystal Cable Ultra *amplifies the honey*. Musical realism hides between the cracks in the tiniest of details. Compared to my customary wire harness, going Ultra all the way as Gabi intended for this review stuck to the overriding theme of neutrality which I was already acclimated to. It simply reset its outer limits, allowing me to enjoy the same visibility at lower levels or more visibility at customary ones. And let's not equate visibility here with the penchant for accusing higher resolution of being counterproductive to musical persuasiveness. As far as I can tell, what Crystal Cable has done is attack whatever remaining noise floor the Reference suffers by comparison - which seems bloody improbable when you've heard the Reference to know just *how* quiet it is.

The Ultra is even quieter yet, by enough of a margin to be obvious without efforts. It's thus an ultra resolution cable in the neutral class. More micro cues mean more signal and color, more believability. This cable pushes data retrieval beyond boundaries that seemed to have been set in stone a while ago by the best I'd previously encountered in this regard. It does so without tweeky construction, without practical usage restrictions or qualifications and avoids anything smacking of high-end excess. Well, except for pricing. Ultra is unapologetically expensive, using twice the conductor mass of the Reference and even more sophisticated metallurgy. I didn't *want* to hear that it was better than the Reference to somehow justify itself. Expensive cables are one of the least comfortable areas for audio reviewers to get cornered into. To regain the open, we simply state that yes, this stuff really does cost the long green and then refocus on performance.

That's it. The moral of this story? The design team around Edwin and Gabi van der Kley has done their home work to push the basic coaxial silver/gold/Kapton/Teflon Crystal recipe to the next level. The results are real and there for anyone to hear who takes the trouble. Going by the linear volume display of my preamp, I'd say that the *fullness zone* of an "ultrafied" system is at least 6dB lower than what you might have had before. And if your cabling harness is rather complex, the performance delta might stretch significantly since your lower insertion losses now add up logarithmically through the various gain stages. Mind you, I'm not saying that Ultra plays 6dB or more louder. That would be ludicrous. I'm simply saying that I can *easily* listen 6dB lower without feeling that I'm giving up any detail or fullness. And that is significant when you're a late-night listener. Needless to say, it works just the same the other way. Twist the throttle and there's more life factor and realism at what equivalent loudness levels offered before. Because no other factors are impacted or altered, this increase in micro detail is all gain, no caveats. So score another success for Crystal Cable's leading lady. Rest assured that in this case, it's not a marketing ploy but an audible advance. How you'll relate to your wallet's reaction is your own business. How your system and music will react is rather predictable. Very happily...



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