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Review Follow-Up

Crystal Cable CrystalPower Ultra Power Cords

by Marc Mickelson

The distinction between "different" and "better" is at the heart of audiophilia and audio reviewing, and, as a product category, power cords are more susceptible to it than others. Every piece of electronics comes with a power cord that does just what it's supposed to do, but replacing that cord with one built specifically for the purpose of delivering power to audio components can elevate an audio system beyond its purely stock form.



How far beyond? That's debatable, I suppose. Opinions on the sonic efficacy of power cords range from "impossible to explain and therefore simply not there" to "obvious, making them the most important lengths of external wire in an audio system." Like most audiophiles, I'm somewhere in the middle of these extremes. The obvious differences I've heard among power cords prove to me that they are doing *something*. Furthermore, some power cords help produce clearly *better* sound, and therefore they are an essential part of any carefully assembled audio system.

"Different" certainly describes the subject of this follow-up review. It's part of Crystal Cable's Ultra line of cables, which includes the Ultra interconnects and speaker cables I wrote about late last year. Those won our Best Product Debut award for 2006 because of their "true neutrality," which made them "the most universal audio cables of the bunch." [Read my review](#) for the full picture.

The Ultra power cords use the same gold-infused silver conductors as the Ultra interconnects and speaker cables, the same thermally treated Kapton insulation, and the same clear Teflon outer jacket. To fill the gaps between the microscopic crystals that make up the conductors and thereby address a deficiency -- small distortions that occur when current flows through -- in pure-silver and pure-copper conductors, Crystal Cable adds 24K gold to high-purity silver to improve micro-conductivity. They also go an extra step, using what company president Gabi van der Kley calls "a very new technique" to align the metal crystals. "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."

Ultra interconnects and speaker cables both use two 16-AWG conductors, while the Ultra

power cords have four 18-AWG coaxial conductors. When you look at all of the slim Ultra cables next to each other, you will see that the power cords are clearly the thickest of the three, and this also shows in their price: a robust \$4065 per two-meter power cord. The Ultras use tight-gripping rhodium-plated Furutech plugs and IEC connectors, and I'm sure these add to the substantial price as well. Clearly, these are power cords for audiophiles who have the means to assemble no-expense-spared systems, and they certainly look the part, the clear jackets showing off some sparkling wire.



"Sparkling" also describes the sound that these power cords help produce. Connect them between your preamp, amp or CD player and their power supply and buckle in, because you're going to hear your music with newfound speed and agility. They don't achieve this by somehow brightening up the sound, but rather, my ears tell me, by stripping away the fine-grained noise that rides along with the musical signal. There is less grunge and more apparent signal, giving the music a sunnier, more nimble quality.

Given this, you might think that the Ultra power cords sound their best with dark-sounding -- even veiled -- electronics. I thought this would be the case at first, but I then used one of the cords with the Aurum Acoustics Integris CDP CD player/preamp, whose sound is definitely not dark or veiled. The Integris CDP is very quiet, but during its months of use here I've come to understand that its preamp section doesn't sound as spacious as the Audio Research Reference 3, which, to be fair, is exemplary in this way. But with the Ultra power cord, the Integris CDP narrows the gap and puts even more distance between it and all of the other solid-state preamps I've heard. I consider the Ultra power cord an essential accessory for the Integris CDP.

But what about the Reference 3 and other Audio Research products? How do they sound with the Crystal Cable Ultra power cords? At the high end of the price scale, I've used Shunyata Research Anaconda Helix cords with the ARC Reference separates, which helped produce a sound that's rather different from that with the Ultras -- slightly darker in tone but lithe and just as quick. Here, the Ultras are a matter of preference: If you want your electronics to display a lighter touch, the Ultras will do it. Which of these views of the music is neutral? Your guess is as good as mine. I *prefer* the Shunyata cords with the Audio Research electronics, but not because they produce a less-colored presentation than the Crystal Cable Ultra power cords. The totality of the sound is simply more to my liking -- a little fuller and less insistent.

Given all of this, are the Ultra power cords more for special situations, smoothing out the disposition of certain electronics but not suitable for general use? I used the Ultra cords with a number of amps, preamps, and digital sources, and at no point did I think they just didn't

work. Their contribution to the sound was the same with every product. Still, I liked the Ultra cords most with the Aurum Acoustics CD player/preamp, the Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 amplifier, and the Ayre C-5xe universal player -- none of which, interestingly enough, uses tubes. I think that with all of them the Ultra power cords pile strength on top of strength instead of adding a bit of sonic spice to a sound that's distinctly different. When products reach the level of these, you don't want or need to re-engineer their sound. Just give them more of what they do well to begin with. That's what the Crystal Cable Ultra power cords did.

If your electronics are similarly quick and athletic, the Crystal Cable Ultra power cords may prove to be both "different" *and* "better." With some components here, they certainly sounded that way.

...*Marc Mickelson*

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Crystal Cable CrystalPower Ultra Power Cords

Price: \$4065 USD per two-meter length.

Warranty: Lifetime.

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